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Freemasonry in Turkey: a by-product of Western penetration

A document preserved in the public library of Arles mentions the existence in Istanbul, at the very beginning of the XVIIIth century, of a section of an Order called “Ordre de la Grappe”, an association organized in the South of France and seemingly dedicated to the celebration of good food and good wine. But the Istanbul section of the “Ordre de la Grappe” was not merely an association of jolly companions. It pursued also esoteric objectives and consequently, seems to have been one of the earliest organizations of masonic character in the Ottoman Empire¹.

Later on, other groups will be heard of from time to time. However, as far as can be deduced from the scarce sources at our disposal, the groups in question were but isolated endeavours and did not live long. This is the case, for instance, of the lodge created in Smyrna under the name of “Nations Réunies” (United Nations). Affiliated to the Great Lodge of Marseilles, this lodge remained active only for a few months and in 1819 was forced to request a new foundation act. This was not of any use: its members were forced to interrupt their work again some time later².

It is only towards the middle of the XIXth century, some fifteen years after the proclamation of the 1839 Reform Edict, that freemasonry began to be really successful in the Ottoman Empire³. Under the reigns of sultans Abdulmedjid (1839-61), Abdulaziz (1861-1876) and Abdulhamid (1876-1909), various european masonic obediences created dozens of lodges throughout the country. This remarkable phenomenon is related to the new trend of receptiveness to western influence: receptiveness to economic penetration and political influence, receptiveness to ideas prevailing in Europe, and also receptiveness to individuals coming from the West. For sure, had there not been the thousands of European adventurers who flocked to the Ottoman *eldorado* from the 1850ies onwards, Ottoman freemasonry would have developed on a much lower scale. Another factor that explains the blooming of freemasonry is the wide range of guarantees granted to Ottoman subjects as well as to

¹ Thierry Zarcone, “Francs-maçons et Bektachis : analogies rituelistiques et philosophiques”, *Table ronde sur l’Ordre des Bektachis* (Strasbourg, 1986).

² Jean Bossu, “Les débuts de la franc-maçonnerie en Turquie”, *Juvénal*, 30, May 1969.

³ See for instance P. Dumont, “La Turquie dans les archives du Grand Orient de France : les loges maçonniques d’obédience française à Istanbul du milieu du XIXe siècle à la veille de la Première Guerre Mondiale”, in Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont and Paul Dumont (eds.), *Economie et Société dans l’Empire Ottoman (fin du XVIIIe siècle-début du XXe siècle)*, Paris, CNRS, 1983, pp. 171-202.

foreigners in the wake of the imperial edict of 1856. From then on, Ottomans and in particular non-moslem subjects” of the sultan, felt themselves much less dominated by an arbitrary power and could make plans such as the creation of philanthropic associations without fear of legal proceedings and punishment. Up to a point, Ottoman freemasonry of the 1850ies and 1860ies can also be considered as a by-product of the Crimean war. Indeed, British and French soldiers that came to fight in the East seem to have largely contributed to the introduction of masonic lodges in this part of the world.

The masonic network

Many of the lodges were situated in Istanbul. Towards the end of the 1860ies, there existed in the Imperial capital about 15 lodges, all of them connected to various European obediences. Four of them were dependant on the Great Lodge of England, four others on the Grand Orient de France, at least five on the *Grande Oriente* of Italy⁴, one on the German Great Lodge of Hamburg, one on the Great Lodge of Ireland, one or two on the *Meghali Anatoli* of Greece⁵.

Another important masonic centre was the city of Smyrna. At the time of the French revolution, this important commercial city had witnessed the creation of a lodge bearing the highly significant name of “Nations Réunies”⁶. Under the reign of sultan Abdulaziz, it sheltered at least six lodges: the “Stella Ionia”, set up in 1864 and attached to the Italian *Grande Oriente*; the “Mélès”, which had been founded in 1868 under the roof of the Grand Orient de France⁷; one “Great Provincial Lodge” created in 1865 and connected to British freemasonry⁸; and three more Italian lodges, the “Fenice”, the “Orkhanié” and the “Armenak”, set up respectively in 1867, 1868 and 1872⁹.

A third important seat of masonic activity was Egypt. The construction of the Suez Canal and other major economic projects had driven several thousands of Europeans to settle in this country. As a result, one could find in the cities of Alexandria, Ismailia, Port-Said and Cairo, already in the 1860ies, at least six workshops of the Grande Loge de France, without counting a large spectrum of lodges linked to other European obediences. One can witness a

⁴ Concerning these Italian lodges, see Angelo Iacovella, *Il Triangolo e la Mezzaluna*, Istanbul, Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Istanbul, 1997.

⁵ See Ioannis Loukas, *Istoria this Ellinikis Masonias kai Elliniki Istoría*, Athens, Ekdoseis Papazisi, 1991.

⁶ J. Bossu, *op. cit.*,

⁷ P. Dumont, “La franc-maçonnerie dans l’Empire ottoman. La loge grecque Prométhée à Jannina”, *Revue de la Méditerranée et du monde méditerranéen*, LXVI (1992-1994), p. 106.

⁸ Reşat Atabek, “1861-1880 Yılları Arasında İstanbul ve İzmir Vadisinde Masonik Faaliyet”, *Mimar Sinan*, n° 53, 1984, pp. 4-14.

⁹ A. Iacovella, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

new boost of masonic fever in this part of the Ottoman lands at the end of the eighties, when Egypt came under British administration¹⁰.

Finally, we must mention three centers of lesser importance: Cyprus, where several lodges were set up in the years which followed the British occupation of the island; the Syrian-Lebanese center, especially Beyrouth, where the French backed the foundation of various masonic workshops as from the middle of the 1860ies; and the Macedonian center, with its capital, Salonika. Here, it seems that a lodge called “l’Amitié” existed for some time in the years of the Napoleonic expansion (before 1804); we know also that the Italian *Grande Oriente* had managed to set up in 1864 the workshop “Macedonia” which was going to give birth, many years later, to the “Macedonia Risorta”, famous for the role it played in the preparation of the Young Turk Revolution. By the beginning of the XXth century, Salonika, together with cities of lesser importance such as Cavalla and Janina, will totalize more than ten lodges representing a wide range of masonic powers, including the Italian *Grande Oriente*, the French *Grand Orient* and *Grande Loge*, the Greek *Meghali Anatoli*, the Spanish *Grande Oriente*, the Rumanian *Loja Nationala* and the *Droit Humain*, an international order created by Maria Deraismes and offering the peculiarity to be open to both genders¹¹.

It should be underlined that this geographical distribution of Ottoman freemasonry is in no way surprising. Quite logically, lodges were established in the main political and economic centers of the Empire. These cities had also close links with Europe not only in the commercial domain but also on the cultural level. Finally, it is easy to witness a strong parallelism between the masonic geography of the Empire and that of European imperialism. Obviously, it was not by mere chance that lodges were most numerous in regions most open to Western penetration (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Cyprus), or in places characterized by their political instability (Macedonia).

Ethnic and social structure of lodges

Thanks to enrolment lists preserved in various archives, the ethnic and social structure of lodges is easy to decipher. The existing material allows us to distinguish four types of masonic workshops from the point of view of their membership:

a) lodges that grouped only Europeans, with very few exceptions. Such was, for instance, the case of the “Etoile du Bosphore”, a French lodge set up in Istanbul in 1858. Nearly all the

¹⁰ On Egyptian lodges, see Jacob Landau, “Prolegomena to a Study of Secret Societies in Modern Egypt”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1 (1965), pp. 135-186; from the same author “Farmasuniyya”, *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

¹¹ See P. Dumont, “La franc-maçonnerie d’obédience française à Salonique au début du XXe siècle”, in *Turcica*, XVI, 1984, pp. 65-94.

brethren it comprised were French artisans who had settled not long ago in the Ottoman capital, attracted there by a market widely open to Western artefacts and ways of life.

b) “national” lodges, comprising members belonging to a single ethnic/religious component of the Ottoman population. Three of the “Italian” lodges of Smyrna represent good examples of this variety: the “Fenice” was reserved for Greeks, the brethren of the “Orkhanié” were all Turks, the “Armenak” was, as its name indicated, exclusively Armenian¹².

c) mixed lodges, characterized by the cohabitation, under the same roof, of a varied spectrum of Ottoman non-muslims, occasionally alongside with a couple of European brethren and a few Turks. For this category, The “Veritas” of Salonika constitutes a striking specimen. Founded in 1904, this workshop aimed at first at a Jewish audience, but, by 1908, it comprised also four Greeks, two Armenians and five Moslems, all of them belonging probably to the *deunmeh* community (Jewish converts to Islam)¹³.

d) mixed lodges comprising a large proportion of Muslims -Turks, as well as Egyptians and Persians. In the 1860ies, at least three lodges of Istanbul pursued very systematically a policy of recruitment of Moslem brethren. Set up by Henry Bulwer, ambassador of Great Britain, the “Bulwer Lodge” grouped, together with the usual clientele of non-moslem brethren, numerous Moslem “dervishes” and high officials of the Ottoman state¹⁴. In the same way, the “Union d’Orient” could boast in 1869, under the leadership of Louis Amiable, a brilliant representative of French freemasonry, of a membership adding up to 143 brethren, 53 of whom were high ranking Moslems¹⁵. The Greek lodge “I Proodos” (Progress) owed to one of its members, the banker Cleanthi Scalieri, the recruitment of nearly twenty important names of the Ottoman elite, the most renowned of them being Mustafa Fazil, a member of the Egyptian khedivial family, the Imperial Prince Murad, and the prolific writer Namik Kemal¹⁶.

It is to be noted that recruitment of Moslems seems to have been a problematic endeavour. Most of the Moslem elements who might be concerned by masonic activities were highly hostile to freemasonry. Especially, such was the case of Ethem Pertev Pasha (1824-1871), who served for some time as Governor of Kastamonu and left behind him a *Habnâme*, one of the numerous antimasonic pamphlets which Moslem readers had at their disposal. This booklet offers a good compendium of antimasonic thought. It insistingly maintains that Islam

¹² A. Iacovella, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹³ P. Dumont, “La franc-maçonnerie d’obédience française à Salonique”, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁴ *Le Monde maçonnique*, 1863.

¹⁵ P. Dumont, “La Turquie dans les archives du Grand-Orient de France”, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-181.

¹⁶ Constantin Svolopoulos, “L’initiation de Murad V à la franc-maçonnerie par C. Scalieri. Aux origines du mouvement libéral en Turquie”, *Balkan Studies*, V (1980), pp. 441-447.

and freemasonry are incompatible and that the sole target of freemasons is to convert Moslems to Christianity¹⁷.

The difficulty that freemasons experienced in working among muslims is underlined by Hyde Clarke, a prominent representative of the masonic high ranks, who was in the 1860ies Worshipful Master of the Great Provincial Lodge of Turkey. In a speech delivered on the 15th of December 1865 to the brethren of Smyrna, he stressed bluntly:

“Here it must never be forgotten that we are regarded by the mob, of high and low, with hatred, and by the charitable and intelligent with suspicion (...). Our learned Bro. Brown, in a recent correspondence, justly remarked that Masonry is not received as yet with favor among Musulmans in this country and the more ignorant consider it quite atheistic in its principles (...) Nothing can be worse founded, and nothing more unjust that the prejudices of ignorant Musulmans, because as the more learned and the more pious know, there is a very intimate association in principle, and a close ressemblance in practice between Masons and the more spiritualistic and devout Musulmans.”¹⁸

Whatever their ethnic/religious cocktail, most of the lodges looked very much alike as far as their social profile was concerned. Usually, the tune was set by a rather large group of traders and bankers who formed the basic core of the membership. Practically all the lodges comprised also a varied set of professionals: doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, journalists, writers... When workshops sheltered European brethren, these were often either craftsmen, or army officers and diplomats. The membership boards of Egyptian and Lebanese lodges mention the names of dozens of such craftsmen, all of them well established and feeling fully at home in the cities where they exercised their skills. Less numerous, the diplomats whose names appear in the sources played generally a major role in the foundation of lodges. Thus, Lord Rading and Lord Henry Bulwer, both of them British ambassadors to the Sublime Porte, are considered to be at the origin of the masonic trend in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish antimasonic circles still present them as the main responsables for Ottoman decay¹⁹. Similarly, the ambassador Caracciola di Bella is known to have contributed most effectively towards the creation of the “Italia”, probably the first Italian workshop in Istanbul²⁰.

¹⁷ K. S. Sel, *Türk Masonluk Tarihine Ait Üç Etüd*, İstanbul : Mimar Sinan Yay., s.d., pp. 47-61.

¹⁸ Reşat Atabek, “1861-1880 Yılları Arasında İstanbul ve İzmir Vadisinde Masonik Faaliyet”, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Several Turkish internet sites mention both names, displaying a particularly violent animosity towards Lord Rading.

²⁰ Thierry Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes et francs-maçons en Islam*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1994, p.212 ; A. Iacovella, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

As to lodges comprising Moslems, the social texture they display is highly impressive. In spite of widespread prejudices against freemasonry, this “faith” not only managed to attract a large number of Moslem clerics and “dervishes”, but also recruited among top level officers and members of the civilian ruling class. There are reasons to believe that the grand vizier Mustafa Reshid Pasha, one of the main initiators of the Ottoman reform movement, had been initiated into freemasonry by Lord Rading and frequented assiduously the workshop set up by the British ambassador in Istanbul. He is the forerunner of a long line of Ottoman high officials, army pashas and statesmen who flirted with freemasonry, regardless of popular prejudices against this impious practice. This trend will culminate during the years of the Young Turk revolution (1908-1914), when practically all the leading figures of the Committee Union and Progress in power will indulge into freemasonry without being mixed up about it.

What is going on behind the door of the workshop?

Thanks to the available documentation, we can partially reply to this question which stirred the imagination of several generations of antimasonic polemicists.

First of all, there is no doubt that quite a number of Ottoman lodges attached great importance to what French freemasons used to call “travaux de table” (table works), i.e., to lavish banquets, with a lot of drinking, convened in the trail of masonic ceremonies. The pre-masonic “Order of the Grape” mentioned in the first lines of this paper seems to have been devoted to celebration of wine, as it emerges from the action brought against it before the *cadi* of Istanbul, proceedings during which the “prior” of the Order considered necessary to declare that “Wine is a primary attribute of Muslim bliss”²¹. Similarly, in the 1860ies, the members of the British lodges of Istanbul, displayed a strong inclination towards eating and drinking. A. Schinas, a high-ranking freemason of the Ottoman capital, mentions in one of his letters (April 1863) this tendency to hedonism, doing nothing to hide his disapproval:

“Some years ago, an industrialist opened here a café, organizing in it, during the winter season, public balls, something like the “*Chaumière*” of former days in Paris, or even worse. He also set up there a lodge which I refrained from visiting though I was invited several times. (...) Later on, the British residing in Constantinople founded in a

²¹ Thierry Zarcone, *Rıza Tevfik ou le soufisme éclairé. Mécanismes de pensée et réception des idées occidentales dans le mysticisme turc sous le deuxième régime constitutionnel ottoman (1908-1923)*, Paris, 1993, pp. 132-133.

restaurant-confectioners' a lodge called the "Oriental"; in accordance with their custom, before and after workshop meetings, a lot of gin and cognac was drunk..."²²

One can easily imagine that in a city such as Istanbul, where possibilities of entertainment were scarce while the spirit of conviviality was highly developed, this kind of "table works" could not but contribute to the success of freemasonry.

It is probable that these banquets reminded a certain number of Moslem freemasons of the symbolic meal that followed the ceremonies of some heterodox religious groups, in particular those of the Bektashis or, their popular variant, the Alevis. Indeed, such ceremonies often involved consumption of alcoholic beverages, one of the virtues of which was to facilitate the contemplation of God.

Naturally, only a few lodges gave priority to "table works". Others preferred to devote their sittings to activities of a spiritual character, and more specifically to ceremonies of initiation. With regard to Moslem recruits, one of the problems that could arise at the occasion of these ceremonies was the part they reserved to Christian symbolism (for instance the taken on the Bible and the Gospel). In order to counteract the arguments of those who claimed that freemasonry was but another face of Christian crusades -such was, for instance, one of the major charges brought against freemasonry by Ethem Pertev Pasha in his *Habnâme*-, several workshops, especially those aiming at a Moslem clientele, hastened to introduce in their initiation procedure the oath on the Koran, simultaneously with that on the Torah and the Gospel. Some of them found also useful to translate into Turkish the masonic rituals. The British lodges of Istanbul were probably the first to opt for such a strategy. The French "Union d'Orient" followed their lead shortly after, and so did also the Greek "I Proodos" which had managed to initiate into freemasonry several Ottoman princes. On the way, it became a common place in Ottoman masonry to stress the similarities between the masonic rite and the modus operandi of various muslim religious orders, especially that of Bektashis. It should be added in this respect that quite a number of the persons presented as "dervishes" in the membership boards of the lodges were either Bektashis or Zealots inclined to heterodox practices.

Like freemasonries in other parts of the world, Ottoman freemasonry, when not busy with "table works" or ceremonies, dedicated itself to philanthropic activities. A considerable part of the annual income of the lodges was used to finance various charitable works (assistance to orphans, to brethren in distress, etc.) and to fund educational institutions;

²² Archives of the *Grand Orient de France*, Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), FM² 866, *Union d'Orient*, letter of April 1863.

Furthermore, when the circumstances so required -in particular in case of fire, earthquake, or famine- lodges did not hesitate to go to the rescue of men stricken by misfortune. It happened often that they bestowed their charity through relaying institutions which externally did not always present masonic features. Such was the case, for instance, of a society named “l’Amie du Travail” (Friend of Workers), set up under the reign of sultan Abdulaziz by the Greek freemasons of Istanbul, with the help of the French Grand Orient²³. At that time, only freemasons knew that this philanthropic society which operated as a credit institution was a masonic structure.

The lodges were also spaces of discussion and exchange of ideas. Unfortunately, the material at our disposal gives very little information on the topics discussed within the walls of workshops. It is obvious, however, that most of the lodges made their best to ponder over the various questions which monopolized the attention of public opinion -socialism, feminism, venereal diseases, progress of science, etc.- and spread out their own views on these fashionable topics. Some of them displayed also, without any reservations, a highly nationalistic discourse. Thus, foreign workshops like the “Italia” or the “Germania”, both of them established in the Ottoman capital, expressed with enthusiasm the expectations of Italy and Germany, two newborn states endowed with intense colonial ambitions. In the same way, it often occurred that Armenian and Greek freemasons took advantage of the secrecy granted by masonic shelters in order to promote national goals. In this respect, the case of the lodge “Ser” (a word meaning “love” in Armenian), is highly eloquent. Indeed, all the members of this “French” workshop established in Istanbul were Armenians and seemingly so much involved in local politics that they had to close down their lodge when, in 1894, the Ottoman government decided to suppress with violence Armenian activism²⁴.

However, this nationalistic trend coexisted, in most of the workshops, with a typically masonic discourse exalting, within the Ottoman context, the fraternal cohabitation of religions and nations. As early as 1865, Hyde Clarke gives the pitch:

“... Masonry will here help to unite the various nations, races and sects on a common basis of divine worship, charity, virtue and above all brotherly love carrying out here a great work as it does in India. We must not, as masons, be under the suspicion of having any connections with politics or be offensive to any man’s religious

²³ P. Dumont, *Osmanlılık, Ulusçu Akımlar ve Masonluk*, Istanbul, Yapı ve Kredi, 2000, p. 170.

²⁴ The information available on this question is ambiguous. However, the documents preserved in the archives of the Grand Orient de France (Bibliothèque Nationale - Paris Rés. FM² 157) hint at a connection between the brethren of the lodge Se and the Armenian national movement).

convictions, nay, we must be careful of offending the social prejudices of those whom we live among.

“We offer no man a new religion, nor do we interfere with his own. The only progress we are concerned in is the progress not of our own brothers only but of all mankind in true religion, in virtue and in learning. Masonry discountenances anarchy, atheism, irreligion and ignorance. Masonry strengyhens family ties, improves social relations, promotes patriotism at home and the fraternity of nations, peace, charity and good will.”²⁵

The masonic litterature of the XIXth century is full with similar bursts of eloquence. When they were not busy with plans of national emancipation, Ottoman freemasons, whatever their creed or ethnic affiliation, were fully “Ottomanists”, spreading out with delectation dreams of universal brotherhood.

Contrary to Hyde Clark, however, not all of them viewed “divine worship” as an intangible pillar of masonic ideal. By the end of the 1860ies, most of the lodges connected to the Grand Orient de France expressed positivist and anti-theist orientations. Naturally, this approach was highly criticized by traditional freemasons and did not fail to fuel antimasonic pamphlets. The fact remains, nevertheless, that part of the Ottoman intelligentsia was ready to step into such a path and that French workshops contributed significantly to the circulation of radical concepts and anti-religious feelings that flourished in some circles of the Ottoman elite at the beginning of the XXth century.

Freemasonry and politics

In his speech, Hyde Clarke put the stress on what was, at the time, a masonic commonplace: “We must not, as masons, be under the suspicion of having any connections with politics”. But in practice, things were quite different. Most of the lodges established in the Ottoman Empire expressed political aims, an especially that of defending the interests of the European power to which they refered. Thus, “l’Etoile du Bosphore” and “l’Union d’Orient” were forceful advocates of the French policy and finance, doing at the same time their best to push forward “French ideas”. Italian, British and German workshops acted in the same way. Feelings of masonic brotherhood did not prevent lodges from fiercely competing with each other. One aspect of this competition was the strategies developed in order to recruit high ranking Ottoman officials. On the morrow of the tanzimat reforms, the British had managed

²⁵ Reşat Atabek, “1861-1880 Yılları Arasında İstanbul ve İzmir Vadisinde Masonik Faaliyet”, *op. cit.*

to enroll the grand vizier Mustafa Reshid Pasha. A few decades later, the French had reasons to believe they had done much better by recruiting, among others, Prince Murad, a member of the imperial family destined to be the next sultan. The Italians could also boast with a list of Moslem notables, especially in Salonica where their lodge, the “Macedonia Risorta” displayed an active policy of cooperation with the local liberal establishment.

However, under the reigns of Abdulaziz and Abdulhamid, the relationship between freemasonry and politics did not slip out of the lodges, apart for some rare occurrences. It is only after the Young Turk Revolution (1908) that Ottoman freemasons started to feel self-confident enough to display publicly their political opinions. Thus, during the very days which followed the overthrow of the hamidian regime, the inhabitants of Salonica had the possibility to see, much to their surprise, Freemasons of all creeds marching side by side through the streets of the city under unfurled flags. The Worshipful Master of the “Macedonia Risorta” had even seized this opportunity to indicate, in a harangue addressed to the population, that freemasonry, and more specifically his own lodge, had played a crucial role in the organization of the revolution.

This spectacular coming out was but a first step. In the following years, the masonic workshops were to display an ever growing interest for the numerous problems the Young Turk regime had to cope with. As early as October 1908, in particular, the “Veritas” lodge of Salonica issued a manifesto condemning the Bulgarian declaration of independence and the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by the Austrian Empire, and inviting all the freemasons of the world to support the Turkish case. Many more manifestoes were to follow. The conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Italy in 1911, the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913, the various episodes which led to the Ottoman declaration of war in 1914 inspired all sorts of masonic initiatives: public lectures, fund raising in favour of the Ottoman army, banquets and ceremonies, appeals directed to governments or to international freemasonry. Of course, given the diversity of political interests involved, all these undertakings were not unanimously approved. During the war with Italy, especially, the lodges with an Italian connection such as the “Macedonia Risorta” could not but feel very uneasy, timidly approaching the central administration of their obedience in Rome, the so called “Palazzo Guistiniani”, in order to obtain its mediation between the belligerents²⁶.

A few years later, when the allied forces occupied Istanbul at the end of World War 1, local freemasons were to get even more mixed up in politics. After having supported during

²⁶ A. Iacovella, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-77.

several decades the ideal of Ottoman brotherhood, Greeks, Armenians and Jews suddenly change their plans and started to participate fiercely in the contest which would lead, they hoped, to the disintegration of Turkey. The Greeks were hoping that the moment had come to push further the borders of the newly established Greek Kingdom. Armenians dreamed of a Great Armenia, the Western border of which would connect Trebizond to Adana. Jews were involved in Zionist undertakings. Across the line, Turkish Freemasons, on their side, did their best to give assistance to the national movement which fought for the independence of the country²⁷.

The Young Turks create a national freemasonry

Quite a number of the Young Turks were Freemasons. Ahmed Rıza Bey, Mehmet Talat, Nazım Bey, Djemal Bey, Midhat Şukru, Hüseyin Hilmi Paşa, and many others. None of them tried to hide his ties with the Masonic creed. One of the consequences of the Young Turk revolution was that, from the summer of 1908 onward, there was an unprecedented rush to join the lodges. The “Macedonia Risorta” was the principal beneficiary of this sudden enthusiasm of the Ottoman elites for Freemasonry. But other lodges, especially the French ones, also had to face this multiplication of candidates to initiation.

The existing workshops were not the only ones that benefitted from the favour enjoyed after the revolution by Freemasonry. The revolutionary events of summer 1908 paved the way for the creation of a great number of lodges that started to recruit with all their might. All these lodges were attached, like their forerunners, to various European obediences. Soon however, the Young Turks began to organize their own workshops and their own obedience. It appears that one of their main objectives was to oppose by this means the proliferation of foreign workshops which were liable to bring about in a short time a real Masonic colonization of the Ottoman Empire. Freemasons, they were. But they were also Turks and considered that one of their major goals should be to free the Ottoman Empire from all aspects of foreign penetration.

This “autochthonous” Freemasonry born of the Young Turk revolution was in general coldly received by the great foreign obediences. In Great-Britain, the *Grand Lodge of Scotland* refused at the beginning to recognize the new Turkish organization, and several interventions were needed before things were straightened out. In France also, the *Grand Orient* and the *Grande Loge* decided to establish relations with the Ottoman *Grand Orient*

²⁷ P. Dumont “French Free Masonry and the Turkish Struggle for Independence (1919-1923)”, *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, vol. 3, n° 3, hiver 1985-1986, pp. 1-16.

only toward the middle of 1910, i. e. a year after it had been created. Similarly, the Italian *Grande Oriente* expressed “great reservations” before it accepted, after several months of bargaining, to recognize the Turkish obedience.

As a matter of fact, it was not only the Ottoman *Grand Orient* which was viewed with distrust, but also the new regime. In principle, traditional freemasons had reasons to rejoice that things had turned as they did in Turkey. Nurtured in masonic ideas, the revolutionaries of 1908 had put an end to Hamidian absolutism, re-established the constitution of 1876, and in conformity with their promises had laid the foundations of a vast program of reforms. For freemasons, and especially for those of French obedience, impregnated with the principles of the Great Revolution, there certainly existed reasons enough to rejoice. However, after the first months of euphoria that followed the events of July 1908, the evolution of the regime was disquieting.

The Young Turks had proved unable to effect a lasting reconciliation between the various ethnic and confessional components of the Ottoman Empire; extremely liberal at the beginning, the new rulers had turned increasingly harsh, displaying more and more a tendency toward authoritarianism. Liberties that had been generously granted in 1908 were gradually suppressed in view of the need to maintain order. All this caused discontent and had set to thinking people who were accustomed to go carefully into all matters.

Naturally there was also another reason for opposing the setting up of a national masonic obedience in Turkey. Indeed, foreign obediences knew that they would lose, in the process, to create, or even maintain, workshops in Ottoman territory. In the final analysis, all their strategy of cultural penetration was doomed to failure.

In spite of the displeasure indicated by major European obediences, the Young Turks had managed to set up the Ottoman *Grand Orient* and the *Supreme Council of Turkey* in several stages throughout the Spring and Summer of 1909. The new obedience counted among its members the principal politicians of the country. There were even those who whispered that the successor of Abdulhamid, the sultan Mehmed V Reshad, had joined it. Under the circumstances this national freemasonry could but enjoy tremendous success. Already in the summer of 1909, its lodges began to proliferate. Within a few months, more than twenty workshops were organized in various cities of the Ottoman Empire. Desirous to put to an end as soon as possible the development of lodges of foreign obediences, the leaders of the Ottoman *Grand Orient* had drawn up a concordat which gave them the monopoly on creating new lodges throughout the Turkish territory. This measure contributed substantially to the development of their institution.

The birth of the Ottoman *Grand Orient* had distressing consequences for many foreign lodges. The French “Renaissance” was one of its victims. In 1908, year of its creation, this lodge had hoped to draw under the banner of the *Grand Orient de France* “all the Turkish youth”²⁸. It was soon forced to realize that the new national elites turned their eyes elsewhere. In spite of the efforts of their leaders to develop the recruitment, it counted in 1910, in the second year of its existence, only 20 members: a majority of Greeks, some Jews, some Armenians and only one Turk. To better confine the activities of this lodge, the Turkish obedience had organized in August 1909 a lodge working in French. Called “Les vrais amis du Progrès et de l’Union” (True Friends of Progress and Union), this workshop proved to be, in the years which followed, very detrimental to French masonic interests.

The only possibility offered to foreign lodges striving to survive in the new political context was to join the Turkish masonic organization. Quite a number of them chose this path. Thus, the “Constitution”, a Spanish lodge which had managed to recruit key figures such as the sheikh-ul-islam Musa kâzim Efendi, the minister of Finance Mehmet Cavit Bey and the philosopher Riza Tevfik, was won over to the Ottoman *Grand Orient* in december 1909. Similarly, the Italian “Bizzanzio Risorta” decided in February 1910 to part from the *Grande Oriente* of the Palazzo Giustiniani and side with the Turkish obedience²⁹.

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The Ottoman defeat in october 1918 did not only provoke the collapse of the Unionist government. Indirectly, it also caused the subsidence of the Ottoman *Grand Orient*. This organization was born in a climate of suspicion. Its dislocation did not arouse much grief, chiefly because European obediences suspected some of its members of having been involved, in one way or another, in wartime massacres. But the history of freemasonry is full of ups and downs. In 1923, when Mustafa Kemal proclaimed the Republic, the Turkish masonic network had been already partially restored. Most of the members of the new governmental personnel were freemasons. In the decades which followed -except for a period of thirteen years between 1935 and 1948 when masonic activity was banned in the country- Turkish freemasonry was to flourish, recruiting adepts in all the groups of the republican elite: politicians (including scores of ministers and at least two Presidents of the Republic), high ranking officers of the army, academics, numerous representatives of the professional classes,

²⁸ P. Dumont, *Osmanlıcılık...*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²⁹ İlhami Soysal, *Türkiye ve Dünyada Masonluk ve Masonlar*, İstanbul, Der Yay., 1978, pp. 222-223.

bankers, engineers, etc³⁰. The dynamism of these new recruits was such that, inevitably, several splinter groups were to appear, representing the various masonic schools of thought and behaviour. Another inevitable outcome of this blooming has been the multiplication of anti-masonic pamphlets all along the XXth century. As from the 1960ies, in particular, nationalist and islamic political organizations were to multiply assaults against freemasonry, presenting it as a tool in the hands of zionist forces³¹. However, much of the secret influence attributed by these pamphlets to Turkish masons seems to have existed only in the imagination of the polemist specialized in this kind of literature. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that it is only for a very short while -during the Young Turk decade (1908-1918)- that freemasonry succeeded to become a kind of “church” of the new regime. And contrary to what is often asserted, the Ottoman *Grand Orient*, in the course of those years, has not served as a tool in the hands of Western powers, nor did it serve the interests of non-moslem minorities within the Ottoman Empire. Cynically, Young Turks used freemasonry to circumvent freemasonry, at least this specific type of freemasonry which expressed, within the Ottoman Empire, the certitudes of the conquering West.

³⁰ İ. Soysal, *Türkiye ve Dünyada Masonluk...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 376-401.

³¹ See for instance, on this theme, a pamphlet published in 1977 by M. Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Türkiye Masonlarının Gizli Tarihi*, Istanbul, Cihad Yay.