

The Italian Post Office in Smyrna

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The Mail in Europe and the Levant in the First Decades of the 19th Century

The events are well known: the Napoleonic era saw a radical change in the postal organisations of the *ancien régime* in Europe, with regular, simplified and much more widespread systems, with fixed costs and a range of ancillary services. While there remained some cumbrousness in the rates (which depended on both weight and distance, and were preferably paid by the addressee) the postal services of western European countries by the 19th century were truly almost universal services.

Then, towards the middle of the 19th century, there was a new revolution in European postal services: the cost of the service for users was lowered, it became independent of the distance travelled by the mail (as it had been until then) and was paid by the sender instead of, as it had been, the addressee. International traffic remained cumbersome: dispatches were only exchanged through bilateral or multilateral conventions, with different and complex rules and high costs.

This great expansion of services meant that in the 19th century the mail had a great social centrality in Europe: it shaped the habits and relationships of citizens, influenced commercial activities, changed urban spaces and gave a sense of space and time.

While all this was now consolidated in Europe, the problem still existed for the European communities in the Levant: present in the Ottoman Empire since the modern age, in the 19th century they grew larger and larger, in Constantinople, Izmir, Alexandria and many other smaller localities, dedicated to finance (the main European banks had branches at least in Constantinople, Thessaloniki and Smyrna), independent professions, trade, crafts and various occupations. A heterogeneous group, each with their own institutions, circles and meeting places, from Italy, France, Austria and various other European countries, of ancient Levantine settlement or recent arrival, who often retained personal or commercial ties with their homelands or other places in the Mediterranean. All of them were still excluded from this communications revolution while, thanks to their personal ties or commercial activities, they demanded a service for the transport of mail, men and goods as in Europe that the Sublime Porte – the Ottoman government – did not offer (the Ottoman Post Office would not be founded until 1841 as part of the Tanzimat, the westernising reforms begun in 1839, and only for land communications within its own empire, on whose reliability hardly anyone had any confidence).

The main communication services to Europe – the Austrian and the Russian – continued to be carried out in the traditional manner of the 18th century. The first dated from the early 18th century: the Habsburg Emperor Charles VI had begun to set his military and economic sights on the Balkans and the Middle East and, within this framework, Austrian couriers had begun to connect Constantinople and Vienna by a land route along the Balkan peninsula. In 1748, these connections took on an official character, with a collection point for letters in Galata, in the European quarter of Constantinople, and the opening of the service also to its merchants on the Bosphorus. It quickly became a service that was appreciated by the entire western community, so much so that it

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supplanted the traditional Venetian service, until then the most reliable. At the same time, the Russian Empire had also started to organise its own more or less regular overland courier service between Constantinople and its European border; the service became regular in 1781, with a fortnightly overland route between Constantinople and the Russian border. France, on the other hand, had organised a purely maritime service to and from Marseilles.²

The increasingly pressing communication demands of the Levantine communities were met by the European powers who, after the general introduction of steam navigation, opened regular shipping lines with postal boats (*paquebot*) from their ports to Constantinople and then on to other places: in 1837 France and Austria; in 1842 Great Britain; in 1856 Russia. The consequence of the opening of these shipping lines, used to transport passengers, goods and (in ever increasing quantities) mail was the opening of European post offices in the Ottoman ports touched by shipping lines. In general, these first post offices in large cities depended on the respective national postal administrations; they were run by staff from the mother country with national rules and procedures, in appropriate premises, which could sometimes be located in the respective consulates.

In time and with the expansion of European shipping lines, other subordinate offices were also opened in less important ports or inland locations, run by auxiliary and local staff. Thus, from 1837 until the First World War, the Ottoman and southern Mediterranean territories were dotted with a network of dozens and dozens of European post offices, of greater or lesser importance, of Austria, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Romania, Sardinia and Spain. In common parlance they were called 'post offices abroad'.³

The Porte either accepted this by virtue of the regime of the 'capitulations' (i.e. the set of rules that granted special privileges to Europeans residing in the Empire's territories, in particular the application of personal law instead of territorial law),⁴ or did not care about it, considering this western service useful.

The maintenance and growth of this vast network of European post offices, which mainly interested the commercial and banking sectors (the main European banks had branches in Constantinople, Smyrna and other places, which communicated with the parent company via post) responded to technical needs for secure communications but also to direct or induced economic needs, i.e. the capture of ever larger volumes of traffic for profit and to favour national trade at the expense of others.

With time, however, the need to extend one's political influence and safeguard one's prestige, both towards the Sublime Porte and towards other powers, also became relevant: by the second half of the 19th century, these reasons now outweighed the economic ones and "our prestige, our influence" were the key words always repeated in the (numerous) diplomatic and consular correspondences concerning the offices.

All this had led to a very firm stance of the European powers towards the Sublime Porte. If at first these offices, it has been said, were viewed favourably, from the early 1860s, with the modernisation of its services, the Ottoman government sought the closure of the foreign posts in

2 For reference works on the Venetian postal service, see De Zanche, 2000; Dursteler, 2009. For the Neapolitan service: Pezzi, 2009. For Spain: Pezzi, 2012. For the Russian service and a very quick overview of all services with bibliography, see Crevato-Selvaggi, 2022, pp. 123–153.

3 The topic has not yet received much attention in historiography, and I am not aware of any comprehensive academic works on it. I refer to a brief mention in Shaw, 1997, vol. 2, pp. 229–230. I would like to refer to two of my recent works, which offer an account of the issue, represent an attempt at an initial summary and suggest the sparse bibliography available, which I will therefore not cite here: Crevato-Selvaggi: *Maison du consul ...*, 2021, pp. 135–173 and *Les postes européennes ...*, 2021, pp. 30–41. Also on the case of Russia: *Uffici postali russi nell'impero ottomano*, 2022, pp. 123–153. The most important works on the various countries, based on archival sources, were written mainly by philatelists. For Austria: Tchilinghirian & Stephen, 7 vols., 1962–1967, and Smith, 2013; for Egypt: Salam, 2019; for France: Langlois & François, 1924; for Germany: Friedemann, 1921; for Italy: Dal Negro, Serra, Zanaria, 2000; for Russia: Tchilinghirian & Stephen, 4 vols., 1957–1960.

4 There is extensive literature on the capitulation regime; a current and innovative text is Elden, 2006, pp. 283–335. See also Pedani, 1996.

order to increase its own traffic, its revenues and its control of the territory: the first application is from 1863, ignored as are the following two.⁵

The Ottoman services still had the technical difficulty of foreign exchanges, because they had no agreements with any other country. This was overcome in 1875 with the creation of the General Postal Union (the later Universal Postal Union), which made all member countries one postal territory of free exchange at an equal and modest tariff. The Ottoman Empire was a founding member and strongly demanded the closure of the foreign offices that no longer had any reason to exist. Even then technical considerations were completely subordinate to political ones: the offices remained open. All that was left for the Sublime Porte was to attempt to compete on tariffs, which was soon overturned by the harsh European reaction. The new Ottoman regime of 1908 – the Young Turks – brought up the issue again, which still ended in a deadlock.

The Postal and Telegraphic Situation in Smyrna

Within this general framework, I will in this paper, deal in particular with Smyrna and the Italian post office in the city.⁶

The city, founded by ancient Greeks, isolated on the Anatolian coast of the Aegean Sea, inside a small gulf protected by a wide promontory. In the second half of the 19th century, the city had about 200,000 inhabitants; the second largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Constantinople, it was a lively commercial, financial and cultural centre, a caravan destination, cosmopolitan, multiethnic and polyglot. About half the population was Muslim (mainly Turks), the others were Greeks – the largest and most numerous minority – Armenians, Jews and Levantine Europeans: Italians, French, British, Germans, Austrians, Russians and other nationalities.

These are the first steamship lines touching Smyrna with the dates of their start, which correspond to those of the opening of post offices in the city:

- 1837 France, government lines, then (1851) Messageries Nationales, then Messageries Impériales, then Messageries Maritimes: Marseille–Constantinople, then extended to Smyrna.
- 1838 Austria: Austrian Lloyd. Trieste–Constantinople (1837), extended to Smyrna in 1838.
- 1843 Great Britain: Peninsular & Oriental, Southampton–Constantinople (1842), prolonged to Smyrna in 1843.
- 1857 Russia: ROPiT (*POITuT*), Odessa–Constantinople, later extended to Smyrna.

At the end of the 19th century there were Ottoman; British, at the consulate; Austrian Imperial Post Office; Austrian Lloyd (separate from the former); French; Russian post offices in Smyrna. An Egyptian office had also operated between 1865 and 1881, which closed due to low traffic. There was also a post office of the Principality of Samos, i.e. the autonomous tributary state of the Ottoman Empire on the island opposite Smyrna, which exchanged mail with the island and with Austrian or French offices for further forwarding or receipt.

The city was connected daily by sea to Constantinople and other important ports in the Levant by British mail; four days a week by Austrian mail; once a week by Russian mail; weekly by the Egyptian shipping line; fortnightly by the Italian company Florio & Rubattino (from 1881 Navigazione Generale Italiana), as well as by French lines, the German lines Deutsche Levante Linie and Freytas, and a dense network of local coastal shipping lines. However, by then, most postal dispatches to Constantinople no longer travelled by sea but by rail, which connected the two centres much more quickly.

5 A large number of documents relating to the demands and complaints of the Ottomans are located in Paris: Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Turquie, Affaires postales, 1867–1877.

6 The work is based primarily on French sources (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques) and the few Italian printed works, as well as on the extremely sparse literature available. The historical diplomatic archives of the Italian Foreign Ministry in Rome contain several dossiers on these topics concerning Italy, but the great difficulties and cumbersome nature of this institution make it difficult, if not impossible, to consult them; cf. Viscone, 2007.

The other communication system in operation was the telegraphic system. In addition to the Ottoman network (more developed, in general, than the postal network), there was a strong presence in the imperial territories of the British Eastern Telegraph Company, which operated an international network with land and submarine cables. One of its main cables connected Britain with Malta, from there by sea to Zakynthos, where it continued by land to Athens and again by sea across the Aegean to Constantinople; from the island of Scio a branch line ran to Smyrna. The city was also connected by land cable that ran along the Anatolian coast of the Aegean to Rhodes, Crete and from there rejoined the international lines. The other telegraph office in the city was the Ottoman.⁷

While the various national postal administrations were in perfect agreement with each other in rejecting Ottoman requests, they were in fierce competition with each other to attract traffic, for the reasons already stated, to their own offices: an episode involving Smyrna is very illustrative in this respect.



Fig. A1: Inside the German Empire post office in Smyrna.⁸

Germany had opened its own offices in Constantinople since 1870 (still as Norddeutscher Postverein, North German Postal Confederation) but had not developed its own network in the region, because its geopolitical interests were rather directed towards Africa and the Middle East. German interest in the Ottoman world had been reawakened towards the end of the 19th century, both to counterbalance British and French influences and because of the attractive contracts for railway construction: it is in this context that the visit of Emperor Wilhelm II to Constantinople and Jerusalem in 1898, the very rapid development of the privileged relationship between Constantinople and Berlin and the opening of new offices, the first of which was in Jaffa in 1898 for the emperor's postal needs and in Jerusalem, can be explained.

Thus, on 28th February 1900, Germany opened its own post office in Smyrna, quite unexpectedly and quietly, without notifying either the local authorities or the European consuls. Contrary to usual

7 See the collection of city and empire directories published in Constantinople since 1880: *Indicateur Ottoman* (1880–1884); *Indicateur oriental* (1885–1888); *Annuaire Oriental* (1889–1914).

8 Source: Photo by "Schmidt" on p. 74 of Friedemann, 2nd ed., 1921. 482 p. Online: <https://archive.org/details/diepostwertzeich00friedem>.

practice, there had been no protest from the Ottoman side, which had led to suspicions that there had been a more or less secret understanding between the Porte and the German government. As the French consul wrote:⁹

I do not believe that the [German Government] would have timidly attempted an experiment which could have given rise to conflicts with the Turkish Administration: its influence in Constantinople is great enough for it to be able to allow itself, under less concealed conditions, an act of independence; it is to be presumed, on the contrary, that the reserve shown at the moment with regard to the nascent work has the sole object of respecting the susceptibilities of the Ottoman authority.

The consular report went on to observe that the new opening would not harm the French office any more than that.

If, therefore, the Sublime Porte had not reacted, Austria had. The Austrian office, in fact, had until then enjoyed a near-monopoly of direct mail to Central Europe and this new opening was very damaging to it, because it was estimated that it would divert about 50 per cent of the traffic; and the damage was increased by the fact that the Austrian office had recently made major investments to move to larger premises. In April 1900, therefore, Austria decided to open a branch of its city office in the business district, at the entrance to the bazaar, south of the post office area, with a clerk and a cawas (a local *employée*) to recover at least a slice of the lost traffic. This time, this provoked the reaction of the Ottoman government, which with police pickets forbade access to its citizens (nothing could, however, stoop the Europeans which were protected by the capitulations)¹⁰ as well as the immediate vehement protests of Germany – its political ally – which saw this opening as undue competition to its own office. The German consul even went so far as to complain to Kiamil Pasha, the local vali, who simply replied that he behaved in the same way.¹¹

The Italian Position

In this scenario, Italy was absent. In the Ottoman Levant, important Italian colonies existed in Constantinople, Thessaloniki and Smyrna with around 5,000 people at the end of the 19th century, dedicated to independent professions, crafts and trade. However, Italian strategic interest was mainly directed towards Tunisia, Tripolitania and Egypt, where important colonies of compatriots also resided, as well as the Horn of Africa, where it had soon manifested colonial intentions. This geopolitical trend was also reflected in the opening of post offices in those territories, which were entrusted to local consuls. From the 1860s, Italian shipping lines touched the Aegean and Bosphorus waters, but the Italian postal service did not open its own offices for economic reasons, because of political disinterest in the region and because the postal needs of the national communities had to be met by the extensive network of allied Austria, with which it had made agreements for the exchange of dispatches with Italy. Although the need for a national service was beginning to be felt, as we read for example in this testimony from Smyrna in 1903:¹²

With regard to the means of transport, the Italian Navigazione Generale has recently partly provided for the inadequacy of the postal service by implanting a monthly auxiliary service with which the needs of this trade are better met... But this is still not enough, or rather, it only satisfies for a few months, because in August, September, October and November – the busiest times – the service is even insufficient. The Italian government should seriously address this issue.

9 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Affaires consulaires, c. 42. Report from the French Consul General in Smyrna to the Ministry, 3.03.1900. A few days later, once the situation had stabilised, Germany officially announced the opening of the office, along with those in Pera, Beirut and Jerusalem.

10 It had behaved in the same way towards the post office that Italy had opened in Benghazi (Cyrenaica, today Libya) on 15.03.1901. In May 1901, the Sublime Porte accepted the Austrian establishment as part of a more general agreement with the European powers on post offices, without further interference.

11 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Affaires consulaires, c. 42. Report from the French Consul General in Smyrna to the Ministry, 1.06.1901.

12 Frangini, 1903.

In those years the situation began to change. Italy showed interest in Ottoman Albania (which was also of interest to Austria) and opened three post offices there, again entrusted to local consuls; this caused the first rifts with Austria, later also well known in political history. There was a case in Constantinople in 1906, when the Austrian post office refused to distribute the newspaper *LE COURRIER DES BALKANS*, which was printed in Rome, because it was proscribed in Austria. Member of Parliament Roberto Galli tabled a question to ask the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs what measures he intended to take to ensure that this did not happen again, and also “to know whether, in agreement with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, he did not believe that the time had finally come to establish a special Italian post office in Constantinople, as all great nations have and as our interests require”. The minister agreed.¹³ This immediately attracted the attention of the French embassy, which did not fail to emphasise that “*all this is a new proof of the attention that our neighbours pay to everything that concerns their situation in the Levant.*” At that time, Italian policy was also turning its attention to the Levant, with particular reference to three cities where the Italian community was substantial: Constantinople, Thessaloniki and Smyrna.

The Italian Navy opens a Post Office in Smyrna

From the postal point of view, this was realised in February 1908, with the decision to open their own post offices in the heart of the Empire: in Constantinople (three offices, like the other powers, in Galata, Pera and Stamboul), Valona, Thessaloniki, Jerusalem and Smyrna, where the inhabitants had by then risen to almost half a million and the Italians to 7,000. The reasons were now more political and of prestige and confrontation with the other powers than real postal needs.

The Italian embassy in Constantinople informed the Sublime Porte, which did not reply; the Italian insistence was finally answered by the Ottoman ambassador in Rome directly to the foreign minister Tommaso Tittoni, stating that he could not grant authorisation because the Treaty of Berlin (1878; Italy had not participated in the congress and therefore had not signed the treaty) did not reserve this right to Italy. Italy rejected the interpretation and, in order to assert its own reasons and prestige, mobilised two naval squadrons that were to present themselves in front of Constantinople and Smyrna for a show of strength: before the squadrons even reached Ottoman waters, the Porte gave way on 20th April, also because Germany and Austria had considered Italy's requests reasonable and supported them; Italy obtained authorisation and stopped the squadrons.

This show of strength was widely reported and propagated by the national press at home¹⁴ and aroused the enthusiasm and pride of the Italian communities in the Levant, especially in Smyrna where patriotic demonstrations were continuous. With annoyance the French consul in the city wrote:¹⁵

Since the famous naval demonstration was halted en route, they [the Italians of Smyrna] have really become unbearable and all their coryphées are constantly shouting in all the cafés that no Power, not even England, would have been capable of mobilising its fleet in 24 hours as Italy was able to do very recently. If, as has been announced, the Italian squadron is soon to go to Smyrna [a crusade to the Levant to ‘show the flag’ had already been planned before this incident, author’s note], we can expect demonstrations that will be all the more noisy as spirits in the Italian colony seem literally intoxicated by the supposed success achieved by their country’s diplomacy and the consular authorities seem willing to maintain this enthusiasm [...] It would therefore seem that, for the time being, the Consul, the Authorities and the Italian colonists are inclined to be over-zealous and are only waiting for the arrival of the Wing to let

13 Camera dei Deputati, 2.04.1906, p. 7616, answered 12.04.1906, p. 8051.

14 “La Tribuna”, “L’Illustrazione Italiana” and others, as well as the entire daily press. See the major daily newspapers from 21.04.1908: *La Stampa*, for example, devoted its entire front page and half of the second page to this topic.

15 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives Diplomatiques, Unions Internationales période 1907–1944, c.

501. French Consul General in Smyrna to the Foreign Minister, 20 May 1908. The consul concluded by suggesting to his government that it should make it clear that Italy was not the only power capable of mobilising and deploying a fleet, and pointed out that if a decision were taken to send a fleet – the proposal was not accepted – it should not be inferior to the Italian fleet, so as not to undermine ‘our influence and prestige’.

their joy overflow and indulge in the most exuberant demonstrations in order to establish Italy's omnipotence. In reality, much ado is made of very little, and serious minds will certainly not be moved by this 'bluff', which is more irritating than really clever. However, although it is perhaps wise to imitate the imperturbable calm of the Turks and not to exaggerate the importance of this agitation, we should nevertheless take into account the fact that we are in the East and that the various elements living there side by side always attach some importance to manifestations of force in whatever form they occur.

It is understandable that the event was interpreted by the Italian community in Smyrna – frustrated in front of other Europeans for a role perceived as inferior – as an opportunity for social redemption and identity, for community and national pride. Even if it was ridiculed by the French embassy in Rome, which wrote in a confidential note about the enthusiasm aroused in Italy by the rapid mobilisation:¹⁶

There is a very respectable sense of patriotism in these outbursts of self-love, but it is a little excessive in that it is based, as always here, on appearances: "far figura" (keeping up appearance) is an essentially national character; and people are happy to go without a roast, as long as they can drive by car.



Fig. B1: As proof of the central significance and importance of the post office, this small map shows the location of the seven post offices in the city at the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁷

16 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, c. 501. Embassy of the French Republic to His Majesty the King of Italy, 20.06.1908.

17 Source: Brockhaus' Konversations-Lexikon. 14th ed., Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1892–1896. Map in vol. 14 opp. p.1048. Online: <https://archive.org/details/brockhauskonvers14leip/page/n1234/mode/1up>.

The Italian Post Office in Smyrna

Between May and June 1908, the planned Italian post offices were opened. For the first time, these were high-ranking offices, i.e. run by career staff from the homeland and not by consuls or local staff. The Italian post office in Smyrna was opened on 16th May 1908.¹⁸

Several post offices were operating in the city at the time. The Ottoman one was located in a large building on the quais – the waterfronts – and so was the Russian one: in the Honischer building; the French and German ones (again in the Honischer building, on the side towards the interior of the city) in the *Rue Parallèle*, i.e. the avenue parallel to the quays, separated by a series of blocks.¹⁹ The English one in the consulate in the *rue Franque*, further inland, the Austrian one a little further north, in the Ténékidhi quarter. In fact, they were all grouped together (except for the Austrian branch at the bazaar, further south) in an area of less than 500 metres between the sea and the Franco quarter, i.e. the central quarter. There was also the Austrian Lloyd office, in the building next to the Ottoman Post Office.²⁰ The Eastern Telegraph office was located on the north side of the quays.

There are no sources on the location of the Italian office other than photographs. In these two photo postcards, taken a few years apart, one can see the same view of the quays, with the same buildings. On the ground floor of the building on the right in the foreground is the agency of the Messageries Maritimes, the French shipping company that managed the sea post, as can be seen from the sign (*fig. 1*). The next postcard shows, in what are undoubtedly the same premises, evidently vacated by the Messageries, the new Italian post office, with the sign “RR. POSTE ITALIANE.” The premises can be better appreciated in *fig. 3*. Above the dark door under the balcony there is another sign with a flag, on which we can read, in the second line (the first is illegible): “Poste Russes”. On the right of the image, not framed and at the photographer’s height, was the headquarters of the Ottoman post office, which can be seen in *fig. 4*.

The director of the Italian office was *Cavaliere* O. Fossati; the employees in 1908 were Domenico Calicich, Umberto Filidei, Umberto Patierno and Enrico Tedeschi. In 1912, the controller Cav. Francesco Maggiotto was added, and the employees Calicich and Filidei were replaced by Federico Walter and Isaac Ventura. Other probable Italians – at least from their surnames – worked at the English office (E. Vedova, clerk); the French office (B. Valentini, director; clerks N. Armao, S. Valentini); and the Austrian office, where they may have come from the Italian provinces of the Empire (Trentino, Gorizia, Istria, Fiume, Dalmatia): Ferdinando de Galateo, director; Riccardo Brazzafolli, Geo. Vianello, Giuseppe Petrizza.²¹

As part of the patriotic fervour that had spread throughout the Italian community after the ‘show of strength’ and the opening of the office, there was a lapse in the consul’s style. As his French colleague reported:²²

The Consul General of Italy has just published an official notice in the “Corriere di Smirne” announcing the opening of the new Italian office and telling his constituents that it is their duty to give their business to the Italian office. There is advice and recommendations which are usefully given in the secrecy of the Cabinet but which it would be clumsy and in bad taste to publish in a sheet of paper circulating in the streets, cafés and all public places.

18 The establishment, which initially took place *de facto*, was formalised by Royal Decree Nn. 611 of 19.06.1909.

19 Incidentally, the quays (*quais*), Rue Parallèle and other streets in the city were paved with lava stones from Vesuvius.

20 Some (but not all) locations are listed in the series of the above-mentioned *Annuaire Oriental*. I would like to thank Jean-Bernard Parenti for providing me with several issues and the reproduced photo post cards. Çorapçioğlu, 2019, is also very helpful.

21 *Annuaire Oriental*, 1914.

22 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Unions Internationales période 1907–1944, c. 501. French Consul General in Izmir to the Foreign Minister, May 1908.

In this case, one cannot help but agree with the French consul on the lapse in style of his Italian colleague. However, there is no information on the success of the office, or rather on how well it was received, especially among his compatriots.²³ It seems that, for patriotic or practical reasons, the national community did in fact move from the Austrian office to the Italian one, which was also used, at least for some mail, by other European communities.

The office, which probably provided users with a room and writing equipment, thus became, like other public places, a place of socialising for the national community, especially on 'post days', i.e. the days when the dispatch to Italy departed or arrived (mails to Constantinople went daily by mail).



Figs. 1 and 2

The two postcards mentioned above show the same view of the quays, with the same buildings. In the one above, you can see the Messageries Maritimes agency.

In the one below, in what are undoubtedly the same premises, there is now the new Italian post office, with the sign "RR. POSTE ITALIANE"

(both cards courtesy of J.B. Parenti)



The office operated, of course, according to national postal regulations and performed all mail, parcel and money services. There arose, however – and it was the most serious issue of friction with the other European powers – the question of the rates charged.

In the 1860s and 1870s, in the European countries that had opened post offices in the Levant, the rate for a letter in the first weight step (about 15 grammes) for their own national territory varied

23 Mainly thanks to the examination of correspondence that has been preserved on the collectors' market.

between 15 and 20 centimes and they applied this rate in their Levant offices; the rates for foreign mail, on the other hand, as we have seen, varied according to destinations and special agreements. The creation of the General Postal Union had resolved this issue, establishing a single international tariff of 25 centimes (except for some remote areas) which came into force in 1876.

Since then, all European post offices in the Levant had adopted the international rate of 25 centimes for exchanges with the whole world, including their own metropolitan area.²⁴ The different offices operated at the same rates and competed with each other in terms of quality, variety of services offered, and frequency of exchange of dispatches.



Fig. 3:

The Italian post office
"RR POSTE ITALIANE"
in 1910²⁵

*The image belongs to
the collections of the
Ministry's Historical
Museum of
Communication, which
I would like to thank for
providing it.*

24 The Latin Monetary Union had been in force since 1866 and the participating currencies had the same value: the Italian lira, the Greek drachma, the French, Swiss and Belgian francs, the Spanish peseta, the Austrian krone and, later, the Russian rouble. The German mark and the British pound had not joined and had a different value, but the exchange rate ratio to the currencies of the Union was almost fixed.

25 Image source: Ministero per lo Sviluppo Economico, © Mise.



Fig. 4: Post-war postcard of the quays. In the centre, the white building had been the headquarters of the Italian office; opposite, across the street perpendicular to the sea, the darker building on the ground floor had been the headquarters of the Ottoman post office, and in the foreground on the right, where a flag is flying, had been the headquarters of the Austrian Lloyd maritime and postal agency (courtesy of J.B. Parenti).

On the other hand, when the Italian office in Smyrna opened and published its rates, it was immediately realised that it had not adhered to that established tariff agreement, because it offered the domestic rate (15 cents) for Italy and the other Italian post offices abroad. This meant that a letter to Italy but also to Constantinople or Thessaloniki (Italian offices) would have cost 10 centesimi less. Since the commercial traffic between Smyrna and those places was considerable, there would certainly have been a considerable drain of customers from all the other offices to the Italian one.

Fig. 5 shows the price list published by the office, divided into two sections, for Italy and its offices abroad, for the rest of the world. Note also the equivalent in Ottoman currency, circulating in city.²⁶

This breach of the tariff "cartel" prompted immediate protests from the other consuls. The French consul wrote:²⁷

What surprises the world here is the opinion given that the domestic tariff will be applied between the Smyrna office and all offices in Italy [...] In short, Italy is treating Turkey as a conquered country, settling in as if it were at home, and while all foreign post offices and Ottoman offices themselves are required to apply the international tariff, Italy claims the right to apply its own domestic tariff in its offices in the Levant. Turkey will certainly protest, and it seems to me that it is in the interest of the Powers that maintain post offices in the Levant to support the complaint that the Porte will send to the International Bureau in Bern [UPU]. The opinion I expressed above regarding the trends in Italian policy in Turkey was recently confirmed by a statement made by the inspector sent to set up the Italian office in Smyrna. When the Director of the Austrian post office expressed surprise that the Italian administration could

26 The leaflet had been enclosed with the French consul's report. The Ottoman currency was 40 paras per piastre; its actual exchange rate was 1 piastre for 22 centesimi, i.e. 20 paras for 11 c., 30 paras for 16½ c. The 'postal' exchange rate, on the other hand, was: 1 piastre = 20 or 25 c., 30 paras = 15 c., and 20 paras = 10 c.

27 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Unions Internationales période 1907–1944, c. 501. Consul General of France in Izmir to the Foreign Minister, 20.05.1908.

consider applying its domestic tariff in Turkey, the inspector replied with great arrogance: "What do you expect? Wherever we Italians find ourselves, we consider ourselves at home."

Despite the scandal aroused by the application of the Italian tariffs, the French ambassador in Rome suggested doing the same for the French offices in the Levant "to help our trade in the region, which decreases every day in favour of that of Italy"²⁸ His suggestion was not adopted, the European Powers remained united in their positions and continued to put pressure on Italy, which finally had to give in: on 1st January 1909 in Smyrna (and in the other offices) the international tariff came into force for all consignments.

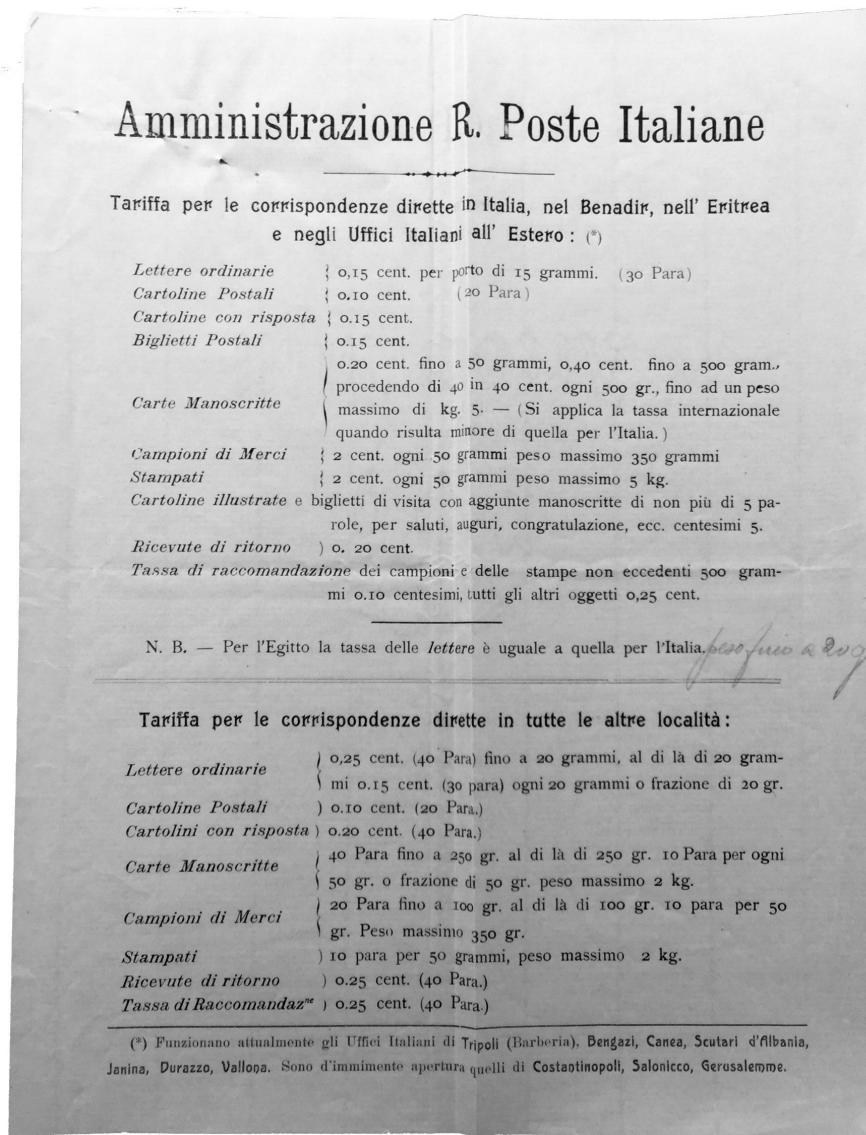


Fig. 5:

The flyer distributed by the newly opened Italian office.

For the franking of mail, the office was provided with the normal Italian postage stamps (postage stamps, postcards, etc.) for sale to the public, as well as, from February 1909, a dedicated series: i.e. eight Italian stamps and one postcard with the additional "SMIRNE" overprint and the value in local currency, i.e. 40 paras per piastre. The use of overprinting the values being distributed in offices abroad was common to all powers, dated back several years and, at first, met a technical need. The most common value was the 25 centesimi value, the rate of an ordinary letter; but as we have seen, it was usually sold in local currency piastre, the exchange value of which was 22 centesimi. It was therefore feared that large consignments of stamps would be purchased at 22 centesimi and then used at 25 centesimi at home, with damage to the treasury: the overprinting,

28 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Unions Internationales période 1907–1944, c. 501. French Ambassador to Italy to the Foreign Secretary, 20.06.1908.

instead, would have made them unusable in Italy. Their use then continued, not so much because of this truly laughable possibility of profit, but mainly for prestige reasons and the flourishing philatelic market of the time.²⁹

The final phase before the war and the post-war epilogue

On 30th September 1911, due to the outbreak of hostilities between Italy and the Empire over the conquest of Libya, the Imperial government decided to sever postal relations with Italy and close its post offices on its territory, including the one in Smyrna. Italy entrusted its postal interests in the Empire to the German offices (relations with Austria were now cooling). The Italian community, which was deeply rooted in the city's commercial fabric, had largely remained in the city, and the Ottoman government soon realised the important role it played in the economy of the city (and other cities where there were significant communities). Therefore, on 30th November, "in the interests of the commercial transactions of Ottoman and foreign subjects", it restored postal communications with Italy through its own post offices. In May 1912, while the conflict continued and Italy had occupied the Dodecanese to force the Empire's hand, it decreed the expulsion of all Italian citizens residing in Smyrna. It was emptied of one of its historical components, which did not return completely after the Peace of Lausanne in December 1912 and had by then lost much of its role and economic capacity.³⁰

The Italian post office reopened in December 1912 and, despite the shrinking of the Italian community, from the second half of 1913 it saw an increase in traffic because some users of the French office turned to it, due to staff shortages: in fact, only the director was working there and had to take care of everything, with obvious and continuous delays.

In any case, the offices that undoubtedly had the highest volumes of traffic were the German and Austrian ones. There are no data on the volumes of mail handled, but the number of employees (including clerks, shop assistants and delivery staff) in each office is known, which is a very clear indicator: Russian and English offices: 6 people; Italian and French: 9 people; German: 10 people; Austrian: 18 people.³¹

On 30th September 1914, the Empire, having entered the European conflict, decreed the end of the capitulation regime and, consequently, of all foreign post offices.

With the armistice of 30th October 1918 and the military occupation of some areas of the Ottoman Empire by the Entente, Italian troops entered the city and the Italian Army opened its own military post office, i.e. a post office with the same technical characteristics as civilian ones, but managed by the military and reserved for them. The Smyrna office began service on 1 March and was identified by the number 171.³² It was not located in the pre-war office premises, but in those formerly occupied by the Austrian Lloyd (figs. 4, 6 and 8), before moving to the building next to the one that housed the pre-war office, next to the Poseidon café (figs. 4 and 7).³³

29 These stamps and postcards are listed separately in special philatelic catalogues. The philatelic works that best describe them and place them in context are Crevato-Selvaggi, 2006, pp. 189–193, and Filanci, 2014, pp. 119–121.

30 The expulsion of Italians from Smyrna was decided on 9.05.1912, followed by the expulsion of Italians from Constantinople on 28.05.1912. The Italian occupation of the Dodecanese resulted in a sharp increase in postal traffic at the French post office in Smyrna, as all mail from the Ottoman Empire to the occupied islands, as well as mail to mainland Greece and Crete, which had previously been transported by the German postal service, was now routed there. Reich to the occupied islands, as well as mail to mainland Greece and Crete, which had previously been transported via the German postal service, was now routed there.

Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Unions Internationales période 1907–1944, c. 380, Memoria from the chief administrator of the French post office in Smyrna, B. Valentini, to the French consul in Smyrna, 22.01.1914.

31 Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives diplomatiques, Unions Internationales période 1907–1944, c. 380, "Personnel comprising the foreign posts in Smyrna" 29.01.1914.

32 For security reasons, military post offices were not identified by name, but rather by conventional numbering. Crevato-Selvaggi & Macrelli, 2018/19, vol. 2, p. 320.

33 The postcard in Fig. 4 shows the darker building behind the white building, which housed the pre-war office.



Fig. 6: The first headquarters of the Italian military post office in Smyrna after the war, in the premises formerly occupied by the Austrian Lloyd maritime and postal agency.

(courtesy of J.B. Parenti)



Fig. 7: The office, with the "R.R. Poste Italiane" sign in its second location.

Given the limited presence of Italian military personnel in the city, the office mainly served civilians, although it never lost its military status. In fact, opening a military post office was the most practical way to reopen a post office for the surviving Italian community, and this – which was of little interest to the Army – was in fact opened at the request of the Foreign Ministry.

On 1st March 1919, the same day as with the Italian office, the British office also opened in the city, while the French reopened at the end of May (the three powers had each opened another one in Constantinople). Naturally, the Austrian, German and Russian ones were no longer there. On 15th May 1919, in accordance with the Mudros Armistice between the Empire and the Allies, which assigned the Smyrna area to Greece, Greek troops landed in the city and also opened their own office for the population. For consignments within the empire, the population used the Ottoman postal service, which was also present, while for despatches abroad, they relied on the foreign offices.

Meanwhile, the political and military situation was deteriorating. In August 1920, the Empire signed the Treaty of Sèvres with the Allied Powers, which provided for a drastic reduction of its territory and, in particular, the cession of Smyrna and its region to Greece. However, the Ottoman parliament never ratified the treaty, and General Mustafa Kemal, who had placed himself at the head of the nationalist troops, began a campaign of reconquest. On 9th September 1922, Turkish nationalist troops entered the city and engaged in indiscriminate massacres of the local Christian populations. On 13th September, a great fire broke out, which lasted four days, destroyed most of the Greek,

Armenian and European quarters and caused some 30,000 casualties. The survivors (Smyrna residents and Greeks from the interior who had taken refuge in the city when the Turkish troops arrived) abandoned the city, which completely changed its ethnic and cultural character.

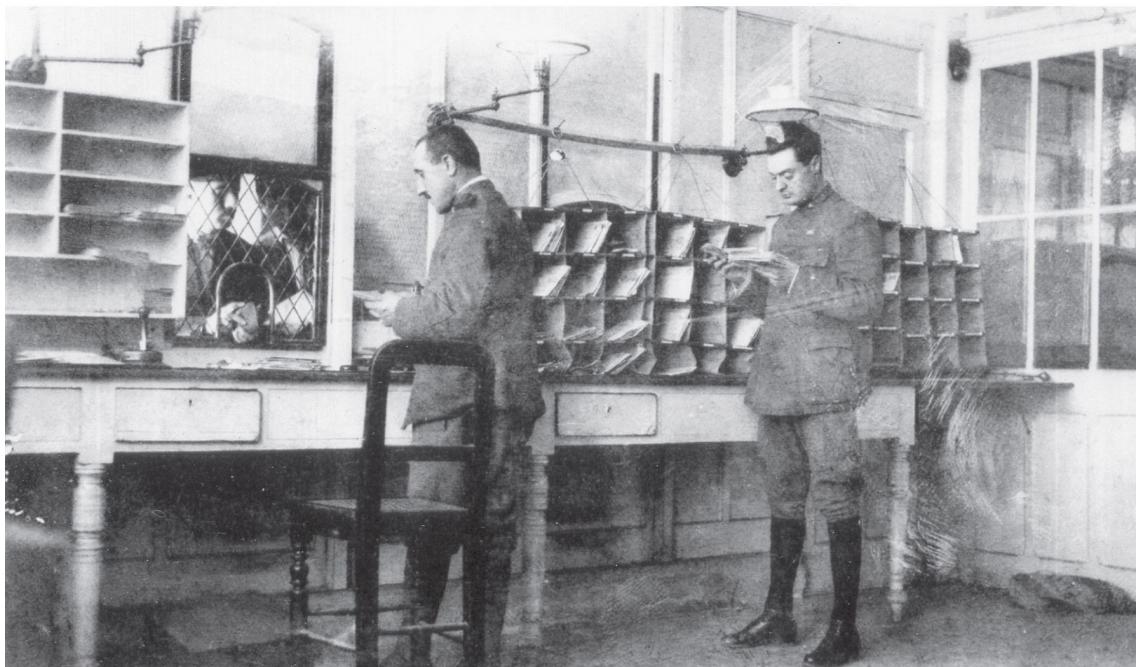


Fig. 8: The interior of the military post office in its first location.
The customer at the counter is a civilian (*private collection*).

The European post offices naturally ceased operations during the fire: After it ended, the Italian office fortunately resumed operations and then began operating more regularly from the beginning of October 1922. It remained the only European office in the city and handled all the traffic of the survivors. The French office also reopened, while the British office never reopened.

However, the situation had changed radically: the nationalist troops were victorious and the Republic of Turkey had replaced the Ottoman Empire. The new Treaty of Lausanne of 24th July 1923 cancelled the Treaty of Sèvres and confirmed the new situation. In the meantime, the two post offices, the Italian and the French, had closed on 15th June 1923: Smyrna had definitively become İzmir.³⁴

Conclusions

The European post offices in the Levant were important centres for their respective national communities and, more generally, for commercial activities in Smyrna and other markets. Created to contribute to national economies, thanks to the great favour they enjoyed among both Europeans and Ottomans, at a certain point they themselves became engines of economic growth, generating significant profits, to the extent that they became strong competitors with each other. They also played a not insignificant political role in the relations of the various powers with the Porte and among themselves, constantly striving to extend their influence but also their prestige.

Italy had not shown political interest in the area despite the presence of strong national communities in the main commercial centres (Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Smyrna). When it changed its policy, as the last of the Powers to do so, and decided to open its own post offices, it was motivated by reasons of prestige and attempts to exert influence at least equal to those of an economic nature. In any case, it attempted to increase its share of the market with a particularly reckless tariff policy, which began in Smyrna but then failed to be sustained. Even on a technical level – reliability, frequency, speed of service – it failed to erode the absolute primacy of the Austrian network

34 Bollettino del Ministero delle Poste e dei Telegrafi, 1.09.1923.

throughout the Levant. The situation described in Smyrna is representative of the entire region. On the international political front, however, there was friction with France, which by the last thirty years of the nineteenth century had won the cultural and linguistic battle in the city and was a direct competitor in European trade.

From the point of view of the Italian office's reception in the national community, in addition to reports on the events of 1908 and reports on the use of the various offices, the social role of the office in the community's consciousness remains to be investigated, as well as whether and how the Italian office had reshaped its habits. Here, the sources are scarce, if not non-existent, and can only give us a very vague picture of what, in terms of size and social centrality, between 1908 and 1914 must have been one of the main points of reference for the national community towards Italy, on a par with the Consulate and the Chamber of Commerce.

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