

**OSMANLI DONANMA CEMİYETİ – THE ASSOCIATION
FOR THE OTTOMAN NAVY**

Strona | 1

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In the first decade of the 20th century, when in most countries around the world patriotism was understood almost solely as the readiness to lay down one's life for the home country, in the Ottoman Empire, along with the reintroduction of civil liberties after the establishment of the Second Constitutional Monarchy, different kinds of societies had started to appear. Some of them chose as their main goal the promotion of new kinds of patriotic conduct, so far unknown among the sultan's subjects.

One of these organizations was the Association for the Ottoman Navy, officially registered on July 19, 1909 under the name of "Donanma-i Osmanî Muavenet-i Milliyye Cemiyeti". After a certain time, such a long name proved to be not practical, so on February 17, 1913 it was replaced with a simplified version "Osmanlı Donanma Cemiyeti". Initially the association's statutory goal was the stimulation of the society's charity for the Ottoman Navy by motivating people to deposit voluntary donations. However with WWI approaching it took on the form of a veiled tax, because – even if not for all citizens, than at least for all members of the public sector, traders and craftsmen – the minimal amounts they were obliged to allot from their wages or incomes were determined. Although the form of fund raising was a dubious one, there was not a citizen in the Ottoman Empire who neglected the fact that the needs of the Ottoman Navy were indeed enormous.

During the sultanate of Abdülaziz (1861-1876) Turkey had been the world's third naval power and the second one in the Mediterranean. However, as early as the rule Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) its navy was to totally lose its significance and became useless even in confrontation with Greece. There were two main factors that lead to this situation: Firstly, Abdülaziz was in the habit of developing the Ottoman Navy regardless of the state's financial capacities, and thus taking out huge international debts. Secondly, Abdülhamid II who cared much more about the state budget, faced a dramatic dilemma right at the very beginning of his 33 years long sultanate: whether to keep on running the state debt in order to enable his navy to keep up with the world's leading and vastly developing navies (and we should not forget that this was the era of the mass introduction of the steam drive as well as of the appearance of the first battleships), or to rebuild the land forces, which after total defeat in the war against Russia in 1877-78 had reached such a dramatic state that they were unable to guarantee the empire's territorial integrity, especially in the Balkans? Seeing his

European dominions shrinking fast the sultan decided to save the land forces and thus, out of necessity, sentenced the navy to almost total degradation.

So, the Second Constitutional Monarchy inherited the already extremely obsolete ships from the Abdülaziz era, slowly rusting in the Golden Horn with their crews representing a level of training close to zero. At the same time, the events on the international arena that were to take place during the sultanate of Abdülhamid II (including those in which Turkey participated) were to prove that the Ottoman Empire, with the geographical situation it had, could not afford not to have a navy at least equivalent in power to those possessed by its the closest neighbors. However it was obvious that the country still could not rebuilt the navy with its own budget resources. Paradoxically, the idea for how to solve this problem came from one of Turkey's greatest enemies, Greece. The Istanbul press reported: "the Greek government, with great financial support from a very rich Greek, Georgios Averof, has purchased a most modern and much more powerful cruiser than the Italian ones¹. This ship has a displacement of 10 thousand tons, is very fast and has enormous firing power. Such a cruiser is equal to from three to five [of our] battleships"². The Turkish tradesman Yağcızade Şefik Bey inspired by this example not only immediately established the Association for the Ottoman Navy, but was the first person to give a substantial donation from all incomes he had in his shop at Balkapanı Hanı. Wonders never cease, he was immediately followed by other members of the then already very impoverished and divided Ottoman society³. The funds held in the association's account were to increase quickly. New local sections of 'cemiyet' started to mushroom all over the Ottoman Empire⁴. Two were even established in Berlin and Paris.

The forms of fund raising for naval personnel training, but first of all for the purchase of new ships, were different – from the collection of "widow's mites" to boxes carried by street collectors, through the acceptance of larger financial donations from richer citizens with a receipt given to the donor, to the sale of commemorative gadgets or postcards and even the cultural activities of the "Osmanlı Donanma Cemiyeti Heyet-i

¹ Averof put in 280 thousand sterling pounds and the Greek government 680 thousand (Mim Kemal Öke, Erol Mütercimler, *Sultan Osman*, „E” Yayınları, İstanbul 1991, p. 48).

² Quotation after: İbrahim Refik, *Sultan Osman'ın Hazin Dramı*, [in:] "Sızıntı", Yıl: 13, Sayı: 152, Eylül 1991, p. 2. *Georgios Averof's* most essential technical facts are: displacement 9958 t, maximum speed 22,5 knots (in trials), maximum operating range 7125 NM (with a speed of 10 knots), armament: 4 x 234/45, 8 x 190/45, 16 x 76 mm, 2 x 47 mm, 3 x 457 mm TT; crew 670 men.

³ Among the trustees of the association's local sections were the representatives of all institutions, organizations and unions (including the religious communities) active in a given area. Thus, during the Balkan Wars and the increasing Armenian terror (and the state's more and more brutal counteractions against it), the representatives of the state administration and Muslim clericals cooperated for the Ottoman Navy's sake with Greeks and Armenians. However, we must stress that the percentage of the latter among the association's members was rather modest (compare with: Nurşen Gök, *Donanma Cemiyeti'nin Anadolu'da Örgütlenmesine İlişkin Gözlemler*, [in:] Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Tarih Bölümü Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi, Cilt: 27, Sayı: 43, Ankara 2008, p. 83).

⁴ In the very first year of the organization's activity the number of local sections reached 122 and two years later it increased to 331 (*ibidem*, p. 80).

Temsiliyesi” theatre group which existed between 1913 and 1915⁵. A separate but extremely important part of the association’s activity was the monthly (from 1914 weekly) magazine “Donanma” which was published from March 1910 until March 1919. On its pages the readers were not only informed about the organization’s current issues but also educated in naval-war affairs broadly understood, patriotism and even women’s rights.

The people’s generosity soon exceeded both the expectations of the association’s founders and the sultan Mehmet V Reşad (1909-1918) himself, who took the organization under his wing and was generous with his own money too. Moreover, in order to honor the greatest donors he issued a special medal, “Donanma İlane Madalyası”⁶. Not only the most prominent donors but also those people who made the smallest and the most moving payments were described within the pages of “Donanma”⁷. Those examples were soon followed by others. The selling of a bride’s dowry and the transferring of all the money obtained to the association’s account became common practice. Girls’ high schools started to organize auctions of pupil handicrafts... The state clerks from whom the ‘cemiyet’'s board expected special dedication yielded under the social pressure and quite often paid in donations which exceeded by several dozen times their monthly obligations as determined by the association on the basis of their salaries⁸. However, in 1913 they had no choice anymore and were forced to pay – in twelve monthly installments – their whole salaries for December⁹. Sultan Abdülhamid II who was then in exile in Salonika was also legally incapacitated and as was proposed by the association, had to hand over all his personal valuables¹⁰.

⁵ The founder of this group was the then chairman of the association Ziya Bey, who at the same time was a literature professor at the Harbiye War Academy in Istanbul. The group’s managing director was Maridos Minakyan (1839-1920). The drama section director was Nurettin Şefkati and the comedy section was run by Ahmet Fehim (1856-1930). A stage for the actors, among who were the leading artists of the Istanbul stage (including the most splendid actresses from the “kanto” cabaret), was granted by the National Theatre in Şehzadebaşı (http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osmanlı%20Donanma_Cemiyeti_Heyet-i_Temsiliyesi).

⁶ In its activity the Osmanlı Donanma Cemiyeti could rely on organizational and ideological support from the ministries of the navy and the interior, local sections of the Committee of Union and Progress and of many deputies to the Ottoman Grand Assembly. Stanford Shaw claims the association was a private organization only on paper and in fact it was the Ministry of Interior who was responsible for its foundation and current activities (*The Ottoman Empire in World War I*, Volume 1, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 2006, p. 587). There is no doubt that particularly the Committee of Union and Progress used to exploit the association for its own political benefit, something that was at odds with the ‘cemiyet’'s statute stating the organization was apolitical.

⁷ If we take into consideration the poverty in the Anatolian province in those days we must be amazed by the dedication of the peasants from three small villages (Obruk, Zovarik and Akviran) near Konya who collected 500 Ottoman lira in cash, not counting the non-cash donations and grain (Gök, *op. cit.*, p. 85).

⁸ For example Asaf Bey, a judge from Gereede, whose monthly obligation was determined as 20 kuruş paid as much as 600 kuruş (*ibidem*, p. 79).

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Serhat Güvenç (*Drednot Ateşi ve Osmanlı Devleti. ‘Reşadiye’ ve ‘Sultan Osman’ Savaş Gemilerinin Öyküsü*, Deniz Basımevi, İstanbul 2005, p. 25) not without reason says that it was a kind of revenge on the former sultan for his neglect of the navy.

For the total amount of 1,070,000 altın which had been collected by 1910 the Ottoman Empire purchased two twin “Brandenburg” class battleships, already phased out by the Germans. After their arrival to Istanbul they were renamed the *Barbaros Hayrettin* and the *Turgut Reis*¹¹. The society, seeing the tangible results of its charity still did not stint on donations. Thanks to this attitude only two years later the Turkish Navy was to be enriched to the value of four modern destroyers called *Muavenet-i Milliyye*, *Nûmune-i Hamiyet*, *Yadigâr-ı Millet* and *Gayret-i Vataniyye*, bought also in Germany for 480 thousand lira¹². These purchases, however, did not protect the Ottoman Empire from the loss of the majority of the Aegean islands during the Tripolitanian War in 1911-12 and the Balkan Wars in 1912-13. Nevertheless the Ottoman government was fully aware of the navy’s constant weakness and already before the outbreak of the first Balkan War had decided to take out international loans against future association donations and to buy in Great Britain two modern dreadnought class ships. The first of them was the battleship *Rio de Janeiro*, initially ordered by Brazil. The ship, after the amount of 2400000 Ottoman lira was paid by the Turkish side became *Sultan Osman-ı Evvel*¹³. The second one was the battle cruiser *Reşadiye*¹⁴ built from scratch for Turkey. On July 16, 1914 another contract for the construction of a third dreadnought called *Fatih Sultan Mehmed* was signed with the Vickers shipyard. Within the scope of planned subsequent, the Ottoman Navy was going to buy six more battleships and twelve destroyers, twelve torpedo boats, six submarines, two minelayers, two training ships, twenty four river gunboats, one hospital ship and six transport ships¹⁵. However, the outbreak of the First World War thwarted the above mentioned plans, from out of which only the keel lying ceremony of *Fatih Sultân Mehmet* was carried out. In addition, on July 28, 1914, i.e. only a week before the alliance treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Germany was signed, the British government made, under pressure from the First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Winston Churchill, the unlawful decision to confiscate the *Sultan Osman-ı Evvel* and *Reşadiye* ships. The vessels were then renamed as HMS *Agincourt* and HMS *Erin*. In this way the British wished to strengthen the Royal Navy in the face of the approaching war but did not take into consideration the possible gains from leaving those ships under the Turkish flag, considering the fact that the Ottoman Navy was then going through reforms

¹¹ The ships were launched as early as in 1891 but with their technical value they still outclassed the battleships of the post-Abdülhamid navy. At the moment they entered service in the Ottoman Navy their technical characteristics were as follows: displacement 10013 tons, maximum speed 10 knots, armament: 4 x 280/40, 2 x 280/35, 6 x 105/35, 8 x 88/30, 12 MG, 4 x 450 mm TT; crew 600 men.

¹² The names of those vessels were intended to be a kind of tribute to the devoted society. They can be translated as: “National Support”, “Example of Patriotism”, “National Memento” and “Care about the Home Country”. The most essential technical data of the above mentioned destroyers were: displacement 765 tons, maximum speed 32 knots (26 knots in trials in 1912), armament (since 1911): 2 x 75/50, 2 x 57/50, 3 x 450 mm TT; crew 90 men.

¹³ Displacement 27500 tons, maximum speed 22 knots, armament: 14 x 305/45, 20 x 152/50, 10 x 76 mm, 5 x 47 mm, 2 x 533 mm TT; crew 1267 men.

¹⁴ Displacement 23000 tons, maximum speed 21 knots, armament: 10 x 340/45, 16 x 152/50, 2 x 76 mm, 4 x 533 mm TT; crew 1130 men. For both ships the Turkish side was expected to pay four million pounds sterling (Öke, Mütercimler, *op. cit.*, p. 52).

¹⁵ Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 589.

supervised by British advisors¹⁶. With this illusions about Great Britain, held by those Turkish citizens and politicians who as late as July 1914 still opted for an approach with the Entente Cordiale, were dispelled. The cup of bitterness was to overflow given that the ships were bought on credit which was supposed to be paid back by the whole of Ottoman society. As it was to turn out some time later, the British side took from the Turks the last installment for *Sultan Osman-ı Evvel* and *Reşadiye* after the decision for their confiscation had been already made¹⁷.

The First World War was obviously a period of stagnation in the activities of Osmanlı Donanma Cemiyeti. New ships could be ordered – though theoretically – only in Germany or Austro-Hungary. The shipyards of both countries could barely manage to keep up with production for their own navies and even if they built a ship for Turkey there was no possibility to deliver it to Istanbul, where at the time the main base of the Ottoman Navy was located, because of the British and French naval domination of the Mediterranean Sea and the permanently blocked entrance to the Dardanelles.

As a result of Turkish defeat in the Great War, followed by the internment of the Ottoman Navy in the Golden Horn, the further functioning of the association had no sense anymore. Thus, on February 1, 1919 along with the decision of closing down the Ministry of the Navy, the Osmanlı Donanma Cemiyeti was dissolved too. However, very few people realize that the effects of the association's activity can be seen in present day Turkey, in an area which at first glance has nothing to do with the navy. This concerns the still very popular tradition of handing over sheep skins to the Turkish Aeronautical Association (Tur.: *Türk Hava Kurumu*) during the period of the Festival of Sacrifice (Tur.: *Kurban Bayramı*). This tradition had its birth during the Second Constitutional Monarchy when within the framework of the Association for the Ottoman Navy there existed a so-called "Aviation Fund" (Tur.: *Tayyare İanesi*), which besides money for new airplanes raised the means to purchase the animal skins used in the production of flying suits.

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¹⁶ This decision definitively pushed the Ottoman Empire into the arms of Germany and to a large extent influenced the course of WWI forcing Great Britain to conduct military operations in the Middle East and in the Dardanelles. As a result of entering the war by Turkey on the side of the Central Powers it also resulted in cutting Russia off from the deliveries of war supplies through the Black Sea straits (more information about this topic in: Piotr Nykiel, *Wyprawa do Złotego Rogu. Działania wojenne w Dardanelach i na Morzu Egejskim (sierpień 1914 – marzec 1915)*, Wydawnictwo Arkadiusz Wingert, Kraków-Międzyzdroje 2008).

¹⁷ Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 621.

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