



The Japanese at Smyrna: September 1922

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One of the controversial aspects of the evacuation of Smyrna in 1922 involves the existence of one or more Japanese ships that took on Greek and Armenian refugees at a time when the European powers would not. At least one recent author of a book on Smyrna believes this is a myth.¹

When I visited the U.S West Coast in 2003 and 2004, some of the my Greek-American friends told me that their parents and grandparents had told them of a Japanese ship involved in the transportation of Greek and Armenian refugees to Piraeus from Smyrna in September 1922. My initial reaction to this information was one of skepticism, but I also kept an open mind.

On my return to Australia, I couldn't find any evidence of a Japanese ship being in the harbor of Smyrna at the time of Greek exodus from Asia Minor. Considering my initial disappointment, I let the matter rest until I accidentally stumbled across some newspaper articles and a U.S. Department of State document mentioning an unnamed Japanese ship in Smyrna. The news articles and documents are reproduced below:

The most prestigious commentator on the Japanese ship was George Horton, American Consulate General. He wrote to the American Secretary of State on Sept. 18, 1922 that, "A Japanese boat brought off some refugees and I have heard threw overboard some of their cargo for the purpose. Passengers on the ship speak in the highest terms of the kindness of the Japanese officers and men."² This report was reprinted in the *Indianapolis News* on September 20, 1922.³

A few days earlier the prestigious *New York Times* also noted the existence of the Japanese ship. A piece dated September 16 reported that, "Refugees constantly arriving from Asia relate new details of the Smyrna tragedy. On Thursday last there were six

steamers at Smyrna to transport the refugees one American, one Japanese, two French and two Italian. The American and Japanese steamers accepted all comers without examining their papers, while the others took only foreign subjects with passports.⁴

A month after the *Times* article, John S. Owns Jr. of Atlanta, Georgia, wrote to his parents of the horrors he had witnessed and the role of the Japanese ship:

There was a Japanese warship in the harbor, Contrary to the action of every other man-of-war in Smyrna, this warship took board every refugee it could possibly find room for. There was also a cargo boat from Nippon there. When it saw this, it dumped a large part of its cargo overboard and took off all the refugees and carried them to Piraeus. American, British, French, and Italian and everybody else told the refugees that they could only take their own nationals on board, and it remains for the lowly Japs to prove their mettle. I was proud of them because after all east could meet west....I rushed back to Athens to get a place for rest for the night. The next morning I was up bright and early. A Japanese ship was loading its last batch of refugees. As I stood there and looked on I just thrilled to the ground. I don't why, unless it was because the realization that Japan is at least human, and not a barbarian, as we imagine of the yellow peril.⁵

A newspaper in Japan also wrote about the ship. It reported a U.S. official who was praising the work of the American colony in Smyrna had noted, "A Japanese merchantman brought succor to the refugees en route to Greece and gave them the kindest treatment."⁶

A more detailed account was later offered by Mrs. Anna Harlowe Birge wife of Professor Birge of the International College at Smyrna. She spoke of desperate refugees crowding each other off the wharves as Smyrna began to burn. The harbor was full of men and women swimming around in the hope of rescue until they drowned. She reported that:

In the harbor at that time was a Japanese freighter which had just arrived loaded to the decks with a very valuable cargo of silks, laces and china representing many thousands of dollars. The Japanese captain, when he realized the situation did not hesitate. The whole cargo went overboard into the dirty waters of the harbor, and the freighter was loaded with several hundred refugees, who were taken to Piraeus and landed in safety on Greek shores.⁷

Four conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence presented above. The newspaper articles and Horton's dispatch clearly mention an unnamed Japanese ship and an unnamed captain and his crew who deserve to be honored and remembered for their fine humanitarian assistance rendered to the Asia Minor refugees. All of these news stories were published in respected U.S and Japanese newspapers, and all portrayed the Japanese in a positive light. Finally, three of the accounts refer to a single Japanese ship; John S Owens Jr. mentions two.

Search of the U.S. Department of State records on Turkey to locate additional materials on the unnamed Japanese ship have not shed any light on this matter. Nor did war diary entries compiled by Admiral Mark L. Bristol, the U.S. High Commissioner in Constantinople (1919-27), for the period September-December 1922. Why such a piece of information wasn't recorded in the war diaries is difficult to say. Certainly, with all the confusion and chaos taking place along the Smyrna quay, it would have been very easy to overlook this Japanese ship, as thousands of Greeks and Armenians were trying to flee from the Kemalists. The war diaries do list the names of American, British, French and Italian and Greek ships that were later involved in the evacuation of foreign nationals and refugees from Smyrna.

On September 20, 1922, Bristol's diary records a conversation regarding the New East crisis that Bristol had had with Mr. Uchida, the Japanese High Commissioner in Constantinople. Uchida had come to find out information on what happened in Smyrna. According to Bristol, Uchida was sympathetic to the Turks as was Admiral Bristol.

No information about a ship being in Smyrna harbor in mid-September-October 1922 has been found in the *Japan Times and Mail*, a Japanese newspaper published in English in Yokohama. There is scant data regarding shipping movements destined and leaving the port of Yokohama at that time. On the other hand, the newspaper reported that there were four Yokohama-based Japanese ships (*Suwa Maru*, *Altai Maru*, *Fushimi Maru* and *Mishima Maru*) that serviced European clients from shipping centers that included Marseilles, and Port Said, Suez. One of these ships could have diverted its course for Smyrna for an unexpected order or a transaction in the unofficial or underground commerce.

Additional sources still need to be checked in the hope of ascertaining the name of the Japanese ship and its heroic captain who threw part of the ship's cargo overboard into the dirty water of Smyrna harbor. The Bristol papers and Japanese foreign office documents held in the Library of Congress and Japanese national archives respectively could provide some information. Furthermore surviving records of Japanese

commercial shipping companies operating in European and Mediterranean waters also might provide the name of the ship.

No direct account of a person saved by the Japanese ship has been found. There are many secondary accounts. One of the more detailed has been written by Dan Georgakas, the editor of this journal, who relates how his mother and uncle then aged 12 and 11, were saved by the Japanese. These events were spoken of at his home when he was a child, not at political events or patriotic gatherings. He says that this one of the few events in Turkey that his mother was willing to speak about and what she said was independently repeated by her brother. After harrowing experiences fleeing from their village, included losing contact with their relatives, they arrived in Smyrna at a time when European ships were only saving their own nationals. A humanitarian group of some kind took them to a ship flying a flag with a rising sun. He writes:

Before they even had a chance to call for assistance, rope ladders were dropped for them to board. My mother had become so weak that she feared she would lose her grip and fall into the sea. But Greek adults boosted her from behind until she neared the top of the ladder where a sailor reached over the side to scoop her to safety. Once on the deck, she was lifted on the sailor's shoulders and pointed to a huge pot of hot rich. The man gave her a small bowl and used his hands to indicate, she should eat with her fingers. As he encouraged her to feed herself, my mother became conscious for the first time that his eyes looked slanted and his skin was different from her own. At the instant, she imagined her savior was one of those genies she had learned about in fairy tales. His kindly smile confirmed that he was truly of the good kind. Looking around, she felt she was in a boat filled with magical beings, an impression greatly reinforced when she saw her brother being carried to her side.⁸

My initial research findings raise more questions than answers; but it also offers the opportunity to examine Japanese diplomacy and trade in the Near East in the post-1919 period. A lot of Japanese historical research covering that period concentrates on Japan's relations with Soviet Russia, USA, Britain, China and France concerning issues of economic concessions in Siberia and China and naval disarmament in the Pacific.

Reflections on the Asia Minor catastrophe from a Japanese point of view would help to broaden and deepen our knowledge of the blackest page in Modern Greek history. A comparison of the Japanese view (Far East) with that of Europeans (Western view)

would make a most interesting study on the events that occurred in Smyrna in September 1922.

¹Christos Papoutsy, *Ships of Mercy* (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E Randall Publisher, 2008), pp. 120-140.

² State department document 767 68/450.

³ *Indianapolis News* (September 20, 1922), p. 10.

⁴ *New York Times* (September 18, 1922), p. 2.

⁵ Excerpts from a long article in the *Atlanta Constitution* (Oct. 15, 1922), p. A11.

⁶ *Japan Times and Mail* (October 21, 1922), p. 6.

⁷ *Boston Daily Globe* (December 3, 1922), p. E4.

⁸ Georgakas, Dan. *My Detroit: Growing Up Greek and American in Motor City* (NY: Pella Publishing, 2006) pp 30-31. I would like to hear from other individuals who may have information regarding the unnamed Japanese ship and its crew and also the attitude of the Asia Minor refugees towards their Japanese rescuers.

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