

**Burak Sayim**

## A COMMUNIST CENTER IN THESSALONIKI AT THE JUNCTION OF MEDITERRANEAN AND POST-OTTOMAN SPACES

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates a communist plan in the 1920s to establish a Middle Eastern center in the port city of Thessaloniki. To explain this counterintuitive choice, the paper situates Thessaloniki within two radical spaces. First, it shows the importance of post-Ottoman radical networks in making Thessaloniki a critical point of liaison in the 1920s. Second, it discusses the radical connections across the Mediterranean and the agency of revolutionary sailors in establishing these linkages.



### INTRODUCTION

The primary source that I will discuss here comes from the Communist International (Comintern) collection at the Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow. Or, more precisely, from the sub-section holding the documentation of the Eastern Department of the Communist International. Written in August 1924, its title reads “Project for a Near Eastern Bureau in Thessaloniki.” It comes in two copies, the first one typewritten in Russian and the second one handwritten in French.

Although it is not immediately clear which one is the original and which is the translation, there are some hints. The Russian version seems to include some misunderstandings. For instance, and logically enough, the French version lists “Alexandrie [Alexandria] etc.” under the section “Egypt.” The presumed Russian translator, perhaps not well-versed in the Middle Eastern geography, wrote it as “Alexandrette [Alexandretta]” – a city located far away from Egypt. The same applies to another item in the list: the heading “Syria,” which comprises Alexandretta and Beirut in the French version, becomes “Algeria” in the Russian version, probably due to the somewhat hard-to-decipher style of French handwriting and the translator’s lack of familiarity with

*Burak Sayim is a PhD candidate in the International History  
Department of the Graduate Institute of International and Development  
Studies, Geneva. Email: [burak.sayim@graduateinstitute.ch](mailto:burak.sayim@graduateinstitute.ch)*

the Middle East.

More than mere trivia, establishing the French version as the original is of interest, as it might give us a sense of who came up with the plan. Many of the higher echelon members of the Communist International, including in the Eastern Department, were Soviet militants who, understandably, penned their plans and reports in Russian. On the other hand (and not without exceptions), prominent Middle Eastern militants of the Communist International in the first half of the 1920s were often fluent in French but seldom in Russian. Hence, ascertaining the French version as the original might indicate that the plan came from the Middle Eastern militants and not the Russian Bolsheviks. The Russian version, for its part, appears to be the fine-tuned version with some modifications and not just a translation.

The document goes on to briefly but nonetheless meticulously set the working principles of a future Middle Eastern bureau/center<sup>1</sup> of the Communist International in Thessaloniki. As the blueprint explains, the center was to employ three people and take care of connections with the Near Eastern countries, listed as Turkey, Syria, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Palestine, and Egypt. The office would publish an array of propaganda material as well as a weekly (and illegal, as the nameless author emphasizes) journal in Arabic and Turkish. It would then send the published material to Istanbul, Izmir, Iskenderun (Alexandretta), Beirut, Haifa, Jaffa, and Alexandria, through “comrade sailors” who worked on the ships regularly traveling across the Mediterranean. The blueprint also emphasizes the need to conduct propaganda within the recently displaced Anatolian Greeks. Sailors, as the migrant workers, and the Anatolian Greeks, as the forced emigrants, both show that the migratory flows forged the actors of cross-border connections in “the transnational world of the Cominternians.”<sup>2</sup>

#### WHY THESSALONIKI? A POST-OTTOMAN SPACE

In order to begin to unpack this scheme, let me first focus on a very simple question: Why would one choose Thessaloniki for a Middle Eastern bureau? This brief paper will try to answer this question by locating Thessaloniki in two distinct but interlinked spaces, first a radical post-Ottoman space and then the extended Mediterranean as a revolutionary space in its own right.

It is worth underlining that all the seaports listed on the blueprint are post-Ottoman cities. Indeed, Thessaloniki held a special

place in the left-wing militancy in the Ottoman Empire, arguably being the birthplace of Ottoman socialism.<sup>3</sup> One of the most industrialized cities of the Ottoman Empire, it had seen a surge in working-class and socialist politics, particularly after the 1908 Revolution. Socialist Workers' Federation, probably the first working-class organization of the empire surpassing the national lines, had come into being in Thessaloniki, with its mouthpiece, titled simply *Worker's Newspaper*, published in Bulgarian, Greek, Ladino, and Ottoman Turkish.<sup>4</sup> As a telltale example, different people who simultaneously joined or witnessed the early Thessaloniki socialist movement would have leading positions in different communist parties of the post-Ottoman nation-states such as Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria in the early 1920s. Abraham Benaroya, a Jewish militant and the foremost leader of the Socialist Workers' Federation, counted among the Communist Party of Greece's founding leaders until his liquidation in 1924 with the so-called Bolshevization.<sup>5</sup> Şefik Hüsnü, who came of age in Thessaloniki on the eve of the 1905 demonstrations, found himself at the helm of first the Istanbul Communist Group and then the Communist Party of Turkey.<sup>6</sup> Dimitar Vlahov, for his part, represented Thessaloniki in the Ottoman parliament between 1908 and 1912 as a left-wing deputy.<sup>7</sup> In 1911, none other than Alexander Parvus predicted that "he would be for Turkey what Trotskii had been for the revolutionary struggle in St. Petersburg."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps not up to Parvus's expectations, but Vlahov would effectively become a prominent figure both in the Communist Party of Bulgaria and in the Balkan Socialist Federation in the 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the relevancy of Thessaloniki in the radical post-Ottoman space did not just stem from its background. Rather, by 1924 it brought together several elements of the reshaping post-Ottoman space. For instance, the city received a significant share of the seventy to hundred thousand Armenian migrants who came to Greece between 1920 and 1922, and the once tiny Armenian community of Thessaloniki reached some ten thousand.<sup>10</sup> Not incidentally, the Comintern documents from 1922 mention a tiny Armenian communist group in Thessaloniki, mainly tobacco workers whose majority spoke no other language than Turkish.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Jewish militants constituted the most important actors of the pre-World War I left-wing militancy in Thessaloniki. This left an important heritage to the early Greek communist movement—of which Abraham Benaroya constituted the perfect example. From the communist point of view, the first, or the Armenian militants, would be particularly useful in connections with Syrian ports where Armenian militants constituted the main

component of the communist movement throughout the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> The second, the Jewish militant base, was invaluable in contacts with the Palestinian communists—predominantly Yishuvi Jewish militants at that time.<sup>13</sup>

Not incidentally, the blueprint reads, “Take care of agitation, propaganda etc., among émigrés [who came] with the population exchange between Greece and Turkey,” which, in turn, illustrates another crucial human resource that Thessaloniki provided to Communist International: a body of Turkish-speaking militants. The Comintern was well aware that they could be instrumental for connections with Istanbul and Izmir, both of which were listed in the blueprint. And it should be recalled that many of the first-generation leaders of Greek communism like Seraphim Maximos and Nikos Zachariadis cut their political teeth as revolutionary militants in Istanbul and spoke some Turkish.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, this outline gives us the first reason why Thessaloniki was uttered in the same breath as the Middle East by the Communist International. Even when the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist, the capital of Ottoman socialism, so to speak, provided access to the prominent actors of post-Ottoman revolutionary networks across borders. Put differently, in this period of transition, the pre-national framework of the Ottoman Empire lent itself all too easily to the supranational political project of the Communist International in a Middle East amid a process of nation-building.

#### THESSALONIKI AND THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A REVOLUTIONARY MARITIME SPACE

The second level of spatiality that I will try to address is the extended Mediterranean (i.e., including the Black Sea port cities) as a revolutionary space, which connected revolutionary actors across the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the Soviet Union. I aim to underline the agency of “comrade sailors” mentioned in my document and track their stories briefly across the extended Mediterranean space as the neglected agents of radical connections. Sailors served a double purpose in the Cominternian body. They connected different radical spaces and served as the transnational communist hyphen. They also worked for their own trade union organizations focusing on day-to-day matters. This organization itself required a particular approach as the Comintern—and its trade-union branch Profintern—increasingly realized. The struggle over bread-and-butter issues, too, required

organizing with a transnational touch. Indeed, in constructing the working-class organizations, the Bolshevik Orthodoxy stressed the importance of workplace-based organization—"every factory is our stronghold," a distorted citation from Lenin, was already a global communist maxim in the 1920s—as opposed to the Western European socialists' tradition of geographical-unit-based organizations.<sup>15</sup> In the case of sailors, as labor migrants par excellence, it just so happened that their workplace was always on the move, crossing national borders. This particularity had a twofold implication for the Comintern and Profintern. First, as a self-styled world party, the Comintern was ideally situated to organize this elusive segment of the working class. If an organization could promote the same message to a multinational and multilingual body of sailors in different seaports, it was Communist International. On the other hand, once recruited to the cause, the sailors would permit the world party to function in a more flexible manner, spreading the word in places where it had scant implantation. Not incidentally, when discussing the prospects of organizing in the colonial world, Profintern was imploring its sections to help the organization of the colonial chapters and adding, "This especially applies to sailors."<sup>16</sup>

Although the so-called comrade sailors of my document remain nameless—which is often the case with the revolutionary sailor networks—it is possible to pursue their story across the Mediterranean and throughout the 1920s to make sense of their role between Thessaloniki and the Middle Eastern ports.

When the blueprint appeared in 1924, the Greek sailors' networks were no newcomer to the Communist International activity in the Middle East. As a prominent example of the left-wing sailor militancy, Istanbul-based Union Internationale des Travailleurs (UIT) came into existence on 18 May 1920.<sup>17</sup> The UIT's sailor section had a predominantly Greek base but strove to recruit sailors of other nationalities with varying degrees of success. The choice to include the word "International" as part of its name broadcasted this intention loud and clear. The Comintern envoy in Istanbul estimated that in 1922 the UIT's sailor section marshaled a force of about a thousand strong, composed of some eight hundred Greeks, one hundred fifty Turks, and fifty Armenians.<sup>18</sup> Around the same time, French military intelligence made a more conservative estimate of two hundred members—mostly Greeks, again, but also some Russians, Turks, and Armenians.<sup>19</sup>

The wide-spanning transnational networks created around the UIT and the Greek sailors could be perceived simply by the physical

objects located at the office of the sailor's section. It displayed a red flag received as a gift from the "Sebastopol Port Bureau of International Propaganda amongst Transport Workers."<sup>20</sup> UIT's and Greek sailors' connections stretched all around the northern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. As the gift of Sebastopol sailors indicates, Crimea was a large part of these connections. Finally, the UIT sailors were reportedly in contact with the Greek communists at Piraeus, one of the vital Greek ports.<sup>21</sup>

Although UIT did not survive the crackdown of the new Turkish Republic, Greek and Levantine sailors continued to be prominent actors of radical connections. In 1927, when Communist International opened a branch of the International Seamen's Club (henceforth Club) in Marseille, this prominent position was in full display. The Club would soon come to be a crucial link in connecting French communism to anticolonial movements across the French Empire. According to one report, it was "quite common practice" for the Parisian communists to send the necessary material to the Club in Marseille, who would, in turn, transfer them "illegally," once again, to Saigon, Tunis, Algiers, as well as to Syria and Palestine through sailors of confidence.<sup>22</sup> And giving a sense of who these sailors of confidence were, the French police accounts from the opening of the Seamen's Club state that among the mostly foreign four hundred sailors present at the opening, "Balkan and Levantine"<sup>23</sup> seamen constituted a sizable part.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, as a photo from the French communist daily *l'Humanité* shows, revolutionary slogans in Greek greeted the visitors within the premises of the Club, in addition to those in French, Italian, and English.<sup>25</sup>

And once again, both the activities and the physical surroundings of the Club illustrate the interconnected nature of the communist worlds in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the Soviets, as well as nameless sailors of the extended Mediterranean as the agents of these connections. The Lenin sculpture in the display was a gift from the Novorossiysk chapter of the International Seamen's Club, brought to Marseille by the sailors of the French commercial ship *Phyrgie*<sup>26</sup> – similarly to the red flag in Istanbul, coming from Sebastopol. Incidentally, the same ship and its sailors would reappear soon after in the surveillance reports for carrying propaganda material "hidden in the coal bunkers" in their ship running the Soviet Union–Istanbul–Marseille route.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude, let me return to my document and ask what happened to the Thessaloniki Center? It did not leave a paper trail at

the Communist International archives, which might mean that the planned center never became fully operational. Yet, correspondence from the Italian embassy in Cairo mentions a Thessaloniki center supplying Egyptian communists with publications and money as late as 1928.<sup>28</sup> Although this is not enough proof to say that there was a functioning center in Thessaloniki, it certainly hints that the connections across these spaces perdured late into the 1920s. Therefore, the Cominternian gesture to use the comrade sailors of Thessaloniki in creating connections across the Eastern Mediterranean was, in a way, an attempt to capitalize on a phenomenon appearing throughout the port cities of the Mediterranean. A Thessaloniki center in the east and Marseille club in the west were only two examples of left-wing sailor networks making the extended Mediterranean a site of radical connections across the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the Soviet Union. Through their agency, money, publications, and guns, militants from distinct spaces of revolutionary militancy crossed borders seamlessly and made the interwar Mediterranean a radical space.

This dual spatialization, which shows Thessaloniki straddling post-Ottoman and Mediterranean spheres, explains the seemingly counterintuitive choice of the city for a Middle Eastern center. It stood where two radical spaces met and let the Communist International tap two different sources, namely “comrade sailors” of the extended Mediterranean and revolutionary networks dating from the late-Ottoman period.



## PRIMARY SOURCE

F. 495, op. 154, d. 222, ll. 1-7. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Moscow. (Translated by Burak Sayım)

- 1- Project for a Near East bureau in Thessaloniki<sup>29</sup>
- 2- Syria-Mesopotamia Organization<sup>30</sup>
  - 1- Organize a bureau composed of three members in Thessaloniki, which will have the task of being a point of

support,<sup>31</sup> liaison, information, and organization [emphasis in the original] for the countries and organizations of the Near East: including <sup>32</sup> Turkey, Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt.

### Liaison and communication

a- Organize a regular service: Thessaloniki, Vienna, Moscow

b- Thessaloniki, Cons.[tantino]ple, Odesa

c- Thessaloniki, <sup>33</sup> (Turkey) Smyrna, Beirut, <sup>34</sup> (Syria), <sup>35</sup> Beirut, Alexandretta, (Palestine) Jaffa, Haifa, (Egypt) Alexandria,<sup>36</sup> etc.

[1] - For the first plan [it] would use the railroad, post, etc.

2- Place comrade sailors who will work there in the ships making regular trips in the Mediterranean and pay attention to the stability of this work. Send all the necessities this way.<sup>37</sup>

### Support point<sup>38</sup>

Print in Thessaloniki and send leaflets, brochures, proclamations, etc. to the organizations and regions of those countries in accordance with the situation and needs. Edit a weekly magazine—illegal, in Turkish and Arabic in turn. Send them to organizations in those countries and contribute to its distribution where they don't exist. (Take care of agitation, propaganda, etc. among émigrés [who came] with the population exchange between Greece and Turkey.)<sup>39</sup>

Do the preparative work for a conference of workers' parties and unions of the countries of the Near East.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I use bureau and center interchangeably, given that the word “bureau” was used for de facto centers on more than one occasion by the Communist International. The most prominent example is the West European Bureau (WEB).

<sup>2</sup> Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).



<sup>3</sup> Paul Dumont, "Naissance d'un Socialisme Ottoman," in *Salonique 1850–1918: La "ville Des Juifs" et Le Réveil Balkan*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: Editions Autrement, 1992), 195–207.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430–1950* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), 285–90.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Benaroya, "The Socialist Frenzy of Two Decades," in *Modernism: The Creation of Nation-States: Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe 1770–1945: Texts and Commentaries*, vol. 1, eds. Ahmet Ersoy, Maciej Górny, and Vangelis Kechriotis, *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe 1770–1945* 3 (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), 444–49.

<sup>6</sup> Şefik Hüsnü's Biography, 1953, f. 495, op. 266, d. 38, ll. 27–28, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Moscow.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Dumont, "A Jewish, Socialist and Ottoman Organization: The Workers' Federation of Salonica," in *Socialism and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1923*, eds. Mete Tunçay and Eric Jan Zürcher (London: British Academic Press, 1994), 58.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Lukas Kieser, "World War and World Revolution: Alexander Helphand-Parvus in Germany and Turkey," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 2 (2011): 397.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Claude Fišera, "Communisme et intégration supranationale: La Revue 'La fédération balkanique' (1924–1932)," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine* 34, no. 3 (1987): 497–508.

<sup>10</sup> Anahide Ter Minassian, "Une Petite Communauté Arménienne," in *Salonique 1850–1918: La "ville Des Juifs" et Le Réveil Balkan*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: Editions Autrement, 1992), 141–42.

<sup>11</sup> "Armianskaia Kommunisticheskaia Partiiia v Salonikakh," circa 1922, f. 495, op. 154, d. 136, ll. 266, RGASPI.

<sup>12</sup> Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern: L'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), 154–72.

<sup>13</sup> Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 1–12.

<sup>14</sup> For Maximos, see "Anketa," 30 March 1921, f. 495, op. 207, d. 414, ll. 4, RGASPI; for Zachariadis, see "Oproshyĭ List Studenta," 20 September 1923, reproduced in Russian in N.G. Tomilina and L.A. Velichanskaia, eds., *Nikos Zakhariadis: Zhizn' i Politicheskaiia Deiatel'nost', 1923–1973: Dokumenty* (Moscow: Nestor-Istoriia, 2017), 20–21.

<sup>15</sup> For the original citation, see Marxists Internet Archive, "Lenin: The Elections in the Worker Curia in St. Petersburg," Lenin Internet Archive,

2004, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1907/jan/30.htm>;  
for the popularized Comintern version, see Jay Lovestone, "More  
Communist Strongholds," *The Workers Monthly*, October 1925.

<sup>16</sup> *Resolutions and Decisions: Third World Congress of the Red International Labor  
Unions, Held in Moscow July 1924* (Chicago: The Trade Union Educational  
League, n.d.), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Union Internationale des Travailleurs to the Profintern, circa March 1921,  
page 5, CD 38, fol. Findbuch 7, doc. 47-52, Comintern Archives at the Social  
History Research Foundation of Turkey (TÜSTAV), Istanbul.

<sup>18</sup> "Dvizhenie i Sostoianie Sotsialistov i Rabochikh v Konstaninopole v  
Nastoiashchee Vremia," 9 April 1922, page 3, CD 24-25/B, fol. 32\_36 (346-82),  
doc. 16-17, TÜSTAV.

<sup>19</sup> "Compte-Rendu," 17 August 1922, page 1, GR 20 N 1103, Renseignements  
1922, Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Paris.

<sup>20</sup> "Bolshevik Propaganda Amongst Foreign Seamen," 1 September 1922, FO  
371, fol. 8170 (Northern Russia-1922), The National Archives (TNA), Kew.

<sup>21</sup> "Compte-Rendu," 25 July 1922, 2, GR 20 N 1103, Renseignements 1922, SHD.

<sup>22</sup> Untitled note, 14 November 1927, F7/13164, fol. 6, doc. 632c, Archives  
Nationales (AN), Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.

<sup>23</sup> A native of the Eastern Mediterranean, mostly (and likely here too) used for  
natives of Eastern Mediterranean countries such as Turkey, Syria, or Egypt  
with European origins.

<sup>24</sup> "Communistes-Club International des marins," 30 April 1927, F7/13164, fol.  
6, doc. 597, AN.

<sup>25</sup> *L'Humanité*, "Le Club International des Marins s'ouvrira demain à  
Marseille," 9 April 1927, 2.

<sup>26</sup> "Communistes-A.S. d'une statue de Lenine," 3 February 1927, F7/13164, fol.  
6 (Club International des Marins), doc. 578c, AN.

<sup>27</sup> "Transport des tracts communistes par les paquebots de la compagnie  
Paquet," 13 September 1927, F7/13171, fol. 1 (Propagande Communiste dans  
les Colonies), subfol. "Propagande Communiste dans les Colonies 1927," AN.

<sup>28</sup> "Collquio S.E. Orsini con Ministro di Egitto," 13 June 1928, Rappresentanza  
Diplomatica Egitto, busta 219, fol. "Comunismo e Bolscevismo," doc. 1698,  
Archivio Storico Diplomatico (ASD), Rome.

<sup>29</sup> The translation is based on the French original. But, as the Russian copy  
seems to provide the finalized version of the project, notwithstanding some  
errors, I will be noting the omissions, additions, and differences in the  
Russian version in the footnotes. Notes in the brackets are mine. In the

Russian version: "Project for the organization of a Near East bureau in Thessaloniki."

<sup>30</sup> Not included in this translation.

<sup>31</sup> Omitted in the Russian version.

<sup>32</sup> Omitted in the Russian version.

<sup>33</sup> The Russian version has "Constantinople" with a strikethrough (~~Constantinople~~) at this point.

<sup>34</sup> Omitted in the Russian version.

<sup>35</sup> "Algeria" in the Russian version.

<sup>36</sup> "Alexandretta" in the Russian version.

<sup>37</sup> In Russian, the paragraph is somewhat different: "First of all, it is necessary to organize a railway connection, then seaborne lines of communication, in particular on steamers making regular voyages in the Mediterranean through comrade sailors working at sea, and [one should] pay special attention to strengthening of this work."

<sup>38</sup> "Press" in the Russian version.

<sup>39</sup> In Russian:

1. Organize in Thessaloniki the publication of brochures and proclamations for distribution, according to the current situation and needs, through the party organizations in the army and railway units.
2. Publish a periodical – illegal, in Turkish and Arabic to distribute among the corresponding organizations in these countries. Conduct agitation and propaganda among the Greco-Turkish emigrant groups.