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What Russian-Language Publications Tell Us about Refugee Life in Occupied Istanbul

Ekaterina Aygün

The Revolution of 1917 and the ruthless civil war that followed forced many subjects of the former Russian Empire to flee. Russian-speaking refugees from different parts of the empire rushed to board the often overcrowded and sometimes scarcely seaworthy steamers that could take them from the empire's southern ports to Istanbul. By the beginning of 1921, refugees from the former Russian Empire were almost everywhere in the city (fig. 1). It is not surprising that with such a large number of new settlers, many periodicals and other publications in the Russian language began to appear. They were issued mainly at publishing houses such as Tipografiya L. Babok & fils, Pressa, and Za Rubejom which were located in the Pera district

Figure 1: Schematic plan of Constantinople for Russian-speaking refugees (*Russkiy v Konstantinopole. Le Russe à Constantinople, 1921*). The Slavonic Library, Prague.



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100 at the time. In most cases, such publishing houses, bookstores (for instance, Kul'tura founded in April 1921) and news-stands where the papers were sold, were opened by the newcomers themselves. All of the editions, including the guide book *Russkij v Konstantinopole/Le Russe à Constantinople* (Russian in Constantinople, 1921),¹ the *Calendrier Russe Orthodoxe* (Orthodox Russian Calendar, 1921),² the almanac *Russkaja Volna* (Russian Wave, 1920–1921), *Nashi Dni/Nos Jours* (Our Days, 1921–1922), *Na Proshchanie/Farewell* (1923),³ *Russkie na Bosfore/Les Russes sur le Bosphore* (Russians on the Bosphorus, 1928),⁴ as well as one of the longest-running newspapers *Presse du Soir* (later *Vecherniaia Gazeta*, 1920–1925), are important sources on the lives of Russian-speaking émigrés in Istanbul. Moreover, since such publications were entirely conceived, written, illustrated, and printed by the refugees themselves, today they can be considered as their “voices.” However, some of these editions provide only a superficial impression of the Russian-speaking refugees in the city. Thus, for instance, while reading the almanac *Russkie na Bosfore/Les Russes sur le Bosphore*, which mainly presents the stories and achievements of Russian-speaking émigré artists and intellectuals in Istanbul, one might get the impression that the refugees were not in exile but on long tours, where they sang, danced, painted, photographed, and displayed all sorts of other talents to rounds of applause. As if they simply *veni, vidi, vici*—in other words, as if they arrived, settled down, and immediately found a worthy and profitable use for their talents, skills, and knowledge.

I

The impression that the subjects of the former Russian Empire obtained employment easily and received plenty of help and support in occupied Istanbul is not only given by the almanac *Russkie na Bosfore*. Material for refugees in such informational editions like the guide book *Russkij v Konstantinopole*, written by Russian-speaking refugees for their compatriots, and the *Calendrier Russe Orthodoxe*, which contained information on more than just Russian churches and shrines in the city, further indicate that the émigrés were provided with many of their necessities, ranging from free medical care by hospitals run by the Russians (in Harbiye), the French (Jeanne D'Arc), the Americans (founded by Admiral Mark L. Bristol), the Bulgarians (in Şişli), the Greeks (Balıklı in Yedikule), the Jews (Or-Ahayim in Balat) and other hospitals in Istanbul, to free or cheap canteens and night shelters/shared households and schools for children (not to mention ateliers supporting those who needed to obtain new professions). This was even more impressive given that this help and support came from both the Allied forces and their circles, as well as the Ottoman state and locals who were also going through difficult times. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that due to limited resources, the Ottoman state's support was on a much smaller scale and primarily consisted of different types of assistance including collecting donations, not charging some of the taxes, and providing requested help for refugees.⁵ As one of the Russian almanacs published in Istanbul mentions, when the most crowded group of the refugees reached the shores in November 1920, first aid was provided mainly by the French, Americans, Italians and British; in addition, “the whole Turkish society showed a touching attitude towards Russian grief.”⁶ As for the Russian organizations, the All-Russian Zemsky Union helped by providing food, clothing, shelters, and employment.⁷ In this sense, the following excerpt from a poem by a certain “Russian” poet with the pseudonym Lolo, who apparently had heard something about receiving help in Istanbul as a refugee, is noteworthy: “If I am poor and barefoot / Foreigners will feel sorry / And they will give a ration / Bread, meat, and tea / Sugar, cheese, jam, salo / No, it is not all over yet.”⁸ More evidence that things were not that bad for the newcomers is provided by the advertisements (sometimes very well-created and

1 Anonymous, *Russkij v Konstantinopole. Le Russe à Constantinople* (Istanbul: Tipografiya “Pressa”, 1921).

2 Edition du Comité de l'Église de l'Ambassade de Russie à Constantinople, *Pravoslavnyj Russkij Kalendar' na 1921 god* (Istanbul: Tipografiya L. Babok & fils, 1921).

3 Anatolij Bourmakine and Dominic Valery, eds., *Al'manah Na Proshchanie. The Farewell Almanac. L'Almanach Nos Adieux (1920–1923)* (Istanbul: Imp. L. Babok & fils, 1923).

4 Anatolij Bourmakine, ed., *Russkije na Bosfore. Les Russes sur le Bosphore* (Konstantinopol': Imp. L. Babok & fils, 1928).

5 Bülent Bakar, *Beyaz Ruslar: Esir Şehrin Misafirleri* (Istanbul: Tarihçi Kitabevi, 2015), 123; Bourmakine, *Al'manah Na Proshchanie. The Farewell Almanac. L'Almanach Nos Adieux (1920–1923)*, III.

6 Anonymous, “Zhizn' russkih bezhencev. V pervye dni,” *Russkaya Volna* (December 1920): 25.

7 Ibid.

8 Anonymous, “Novosel'ye,” *Russkoye Ekho* (April 18, 1920): 2.

Figure 2: The advertisements of the Vodka Factory and the Yar Restaurant, Constantinople (*Nashi Dni/Nos Jours* 9 [1921]). The Slavonic Library, Prague.

„НАШИ ДНИ“

ВОДОЧНЫЙ ЗАВОДЪ
 Б. ПОСТАВЩИКА ВЫСОЧАЙШАГО ДВОРА
Петра СМИРНОВА С-нъ
 просить требовать вездѣ единственную настоящую
РУССКУЮ ВОДКУ № 20
И СМІРНОВКУ № 40

Издѣлія фирмы не взирая на затраты приготавливаются
 изъ лучшаго ректификованнаго хлѣбнаго спирта.
 Остерегайтесь!! всѣвозможныхъ жѣстныхъ поддѣлокъ
 Обращайте вниманіе на этикетъ съ надписью
 и КЛЕЙМО НА ПРОБКѢ.
 Фирма Петра СМІРНОВА въ Москвѣ сущ. съ 1818 г.



Встрѣча всѣхъ русскихъ
Ресторанъ „ЯРЪ“
 Пер. 479. противъ Русскаго
 Консульства.
ЛѢТНІЯ ТЕРРАСЫ.

Борщъ	— — —	15 п.
Окрошка	— — —	20 »
Консомъ съ пир.	— — —	15 »
Рыбное	— — —	25 »
Зелень	— — —	15 »
Котлеты	— — —	30 »
Рюмка водки	— — —	5 »

Лучшая здоровая кухня

ЛУНА-ПАРКЪ !!! ЛУНА-ПАРКЪ

36

illustrated) in numerous Russian periodicals. Careful study of these advertisements containing the establishments' titles (laundries, hairdressers, restaurants, fashion and footwear stores, etc.), the names of the owners and addresses, reveals that not all "Russians" had to depend on charity, since some opened businesses throughout the city and were quite successful in their endeavors.⁹ As the Turkish journalist of the time Hakkı Süha Gezgin wrote (not without indignation):

Two years ago, starving Russians roamed the streets of Istanbul like a walking disaster. Today [...] Beyoğlu's most amazing restaurants, bars, and hotels are in their hands. They opened grocery stores in the neighborhood. Eighty percent of music teachers consist of them. They even managed to establish a large butcher's business around Tophane.¹⁰

⁹ As an example, one of the advertisement pages at the very end of the *Nashi Dni* 5, (1921), n.p.

¹⁰ Hakkı Süha Gezgin, *İşgal Günlerinde İstanbul* (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2019), 276. All translations are mine.



Furthermore, judging by the description of the Byzantine and Muslim sights of the city in *Russkij v Konstantinopole* some refugees even had the opportunity in their free time to participate in guided walks organized by the émigrés around the Historic Peninsula and other areas along the Golden Horn.¹¹ But does all this information from the abovementioned “Russian” editions published in Istanbul at the beginning of the 1920s mean that the émigré journalist Nikolai Chebyshev was right in saying that “[...] never again during emigration, even in the hospitable Slavic countries, did the Russians feel themselves to be ‘so at home’ as they did in 1921 and 1922 in Constantinople?”¹²

II

In fact, this statement by Chebyshev is debatable. The main reason for this is the fact that despite the enormous efforts of the Americans, the French, the British, the Russians themselves, and others to support refugees in the city, assistance as well as employment was not enough for all the victims in this unprecedented circumstance. The Russian-speaking émigrés in Istanbul at the beginning of the 1920s were far from being in the position that the German-speaking émigrés—many of whom were invited by Turkish authorities—would find themselves in after 1933.¹³ Evidence can be found in the numerous almanacs and newspapers published by the émigrés. For example, one of the articles on the situation of refugees begins directly with the following words: “The life of Russians in Constantinople flows in difficult conditions.”¹⁴ This was expressed primarily by the fact that the night shelters and shared households that were opened were not enough for all people,¹⁵ often forcing the newcomers to solve the housing problem at their own expense or to sleep on street benches, the mosque steps, local Turkish baths and many other unsuitable places.¹⁶ For instance, in a short span of time, the Ukrainian émigré artist Alexis Gritchenko happened to stay at the flophouse for Jews in Pera, the overnight shelter in Harbiye, the Bulgarian hospital, the camp controlled by the British Occupation Forces in Büyükkada, and, later, in the attic in the house belonging to Turkish painter Ibrahim Çallı as well as at the caravanserai on the historical peninsula.¹⁷ Another major problem was that even the existing imperfect free rations started to diminish in the spring of 1921: “As a result of starvation, the weakest begin to die (primarily those with tuberculosis and those who have been weakened by long-term typhus).”¹⁸ The reason for this was that the American Red Cross, which had previously helped refugees “on a colossal scale,” started to cut back.¹⁹

Figure 3: Illustration of Russian-speaking refugees arriving in Constantinople (*Nashi Dni/Nos Jours* 7 [1921]). The Slavonic Library, Prague.

11 Anonymous, *Russkij v Konstantinopole. Le Russe à Constantinople*, 29–42.

12 Nikolai Chebyshev, *Blizkaya Dal’: Vospominaniya* (Imp. de Navarre, 1933): n.p.; Nikolai Chebyshev, “Blizkaya Dal’,” in *Beloe delo. Konstantinopol’-Gallipoli* (Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Gumanitarnyj Universitet, 2003), 127.

13 Burcu Dogramaci, “Flight, Modernity and Metropolis at the Bosphorus. With an Excursus on the Island Exile of Leon Trotsky,” in *Arrival Cities. Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century*, ed. Burcu Dogramaci et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 206.

14 Anonymous, “V Konstantinopole, Ot nashego korrespondenta,” *Ogni* 19 (January 28, 1921): 1.

15 More on the refugee places that at the time were located at either already existing buildings or functionally transformed available buildings: Bilge Ar, “İşgal İstanbul’unun Kenttsel Dönüşümünü Beyaz Ruslar Üzerinden Okumak,” *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* 1 (2019): 101–122.

16 El’pe, “Konstantinopol’skie dni,” *Zarnitsy* (September 25, 1921): 25–26.

17 Alexis Gritchenko, *Istanbul da İki Yıl 1921–1919. Bir Ressamın Günlüğü*, trans. Ali Berktaş (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2019).

18 Anonymous, “Bezhenkaya zhizn’,” *Zarnitsy* (March 20, 1921): 26–27; Anonymous, “V Konstantinopole,” *Zarnitsy* (November 6, 1921): 26; Anonymous, “Pitanie bezhencev i invalidov,” *Presse du Soir* (July 19, 1922): 3.

19 B. Ivanitsky, “Russkie bezhency v Konstantinopol’skom rajone v iyune 1921 goda,” *Nashi Dni* 9 (June 20, 1921): 18–19.

Figure 4: The advertisements of the places opened by the Russian-speaking émigrés in Istanbul (*Nashi Dni/Nos Jours* 5 [1921]). The Slavonic Library, Prague.

ПАРОВАЯ ХИМИЧЕСКАЯ ПРАЧЕВНЯ
Бр. СИДОРЯДИ.
ПЕРА.
Миссь, № 7.

СOCIÉTÉ ANONYME DE PAPETERIE ET D'IMPRIMERIE.
Anciens Etablissements Fratelli Helm
Papiers et articles de Bureau
Siège central Galata, rue Mahmoudié II.
Téléphone : PÉRA 1761.

LAITERIE DES GOURMETS
GR. RUE DE PÉRA PASSAGE CHRISTAKI EFF. N. 3.
„ГУРМЕ“ ЛУЧШЕ МОЛОЧНЫЕ ПРОДУКТЫ.

GALERIE SVJETS D'ART ул. ПЕРА, 378, 1й этаж.
ВЫСТАВКА, ПОКУПКА И ПРОДАЖА
драгоценн. камней, прошедшей искусства, цыпочь и коровь.
Открыто отъ 11-2 ч. в отъ 3-6 ч. Вечер. отъ 11-1 ч.

БАЗАРЪ ВСПОМОЩЕСТВОВАНІЯ ИНВАЛИДАМЪ
(бывшій ВЕКІРОВЪ).
Стамбул, Бахче Напу,
1-й Вакуфъ - Ханъ, тел. 40.
ПЕРВЫЙ МАГАЗИНЪ
обуви и коженихъ издѣлій
Дорожная одежда, пальто,
шля, шель и шерстяныя тка-
ни, алюминев. издѣлія и
прочеемъ одежд.
Говорятъ по русски.

ИНСТИТУТЪ ГИГИЕНИЧЕСКАГО БЮТИ
Massage Manicure,
électriques, coiffures, tein-
tures et champoings.
Spécialité des Produits
pour les soins hygiéni-
ques du visage.
Grande rue de Péra, passage Chris-
taki effendi N. 2.

ДЫНКИНЪ И СВИДЛЕРЪ
Салонъ мужскихъ и платьевъ
аккуратная и изящная
РАБОТА.
Цѣны вѣтъ конкуренціи.
ПЕРА, ул. КАБРИСТАНЪ № 177
по линіи трамвая № 12.

БАРЪ-РЕСТОРАНЪ СЪ САЛОНОМЪ
I. НОВОТНУ
Асмали - Мееджида, ул. Минареть.
ЛУЧШЕЕ ПИВО
ЦѢНЫ УМѢРЕННЫЯ.

КОДАКЪ Sire Ave
Машина въ Стамбулѣ
Въ 1-3-5 на фаръ № Тира
ОПТИЧЕСКО-ПЕЧАТ.-АДВ.
ДИЗЕНАТЬ.

АДВКАНСКОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО
"КОДАКЪ"
Константинопольское отд.
Пера № 39 вѣтъ. Тира
Принимаетъ заказы на
фотографическія снимки,
портреты, альбомы, фото-
граммы.

Coiffeur P. C. GRUYITCH.
Гигиеническая иго-славянская
ПАРИКМАХЕРСКАЯ.
Пера, 470. Говорятъ по русски.
ساعت ه دن ۹ قدر اورکتره موزطه می
۱۲ قدر بیخا دود رفیس
ΠΕΛΟΠΟΝΝΕΙΟΝ ΑΣΙΕ
Από τήν 5 έως τήν 9 ώρας
ΟΡΚΥΣΤΡΑ Μουσική βίβλος του Σωβουζιάνου
Από τήν 9 έως 12, ΧΟΡΟΙ εις τήν Κωστήν

Е. А. Милитинскій
Харьковъ—Севастополь.
ПРІЕМЪ ЗАКАЗОВЪ ЭЛЕГАНТНОЙ
ДАМСКОЙ И МУЖСКОЙ ОБУВИ.
Единствени, мастерская исполн.
художественни, обувъ.
БОЛЬШОЙ ВЫБОРЪ готовой обуви
СОБСТВЕННИ, ПРОИЗВОДСТВА.
ПЕРА, магазинъ КАРЛМАНА.

Another very important difficulty was the job shortage. Although multiple places of business were opened by émigrés in the city, their owners still represented only a small share of the new arrivals. These were the ones who, as émigré journalist Anatoliy Bournakine wrote, were “tough nuts to crack” that “do not burn in fire and do not drown in water.”²⁰ The rest of the refugees could not find work despite their willingness to accept any job, and those who managed to be selected from among hundreds of other candidates were considered “happy exceptions.”²¹ The situation is described in *Nashi Dni* as follows:

20 Anatoliy Bournakine, “Grazhdanin mira,” *Zarubezhnyj Klich* (1925): 1.

21 Bogodar-Tourkestanzev, “Omut,” *Nashi Dni* (January 1, 1921): 9; Ivanitsky, “Russkie bezhency v Konstantinopol'skom rajone v iyune 1921 goda,” 19.

Here a professor comes up to you for alms, holding out his hand; here an officer with a St. George cross is dying of hunger; here is a talented journalist shouting out the names of newspapers in a hoarse voice; here the artist who has not slept for three days is barely dragging his feet; here is an actor; here is a young lady selling her body...²²

From this quote, as well as from numerous memoirs of émigrés, we can glean that the Russian-speaking refugees found themselves in a situation where their class and/or status no longer played the most important role in their lives. Rather, it was owing to belonging to a particular community (especially true for the Jewish émigrés), old networks as well as unions created by refugees (the Union of Disabled People, the Union of Cossacks, the Union of Engineers, the Union of Writers and Journalists, the Union of Artists, and others) that refugees could stay afloat. Second-language skills, connections or good relations with Allied forces and their circles also often increased the chances for a better life in Istanbul (for the owners of businesses and artists alike) but still did not guarantee the living standards that individuals had been accustomed to in pre-revolutionary Russia. It is also worth mentioning that the labor office noted success in female employment, while with men it was not possible to achieve such results due to the fact that the demand was low.²³ Many women worked as waitresses at such a fast pace that in some busy restaurants special rooms were set aside for those who fainted from exhaustion.²⁴ As for the artists and intellectuals, they also went through a lot of unpleasant experiences. For instance, because of the “wolfish appetites” of restaurateurs and the meagre wages they paid, Russian-speaking émigré musicians worked three times more than the prescribed hours, which is why the press referred to them as ruthlessly exploited “musical *hamals* (porters).”²⁵ The lives of refugees working in various sectors in the city in one way or another were often accompanied by humiliation: female waitresses regularly experienced the “rudeness, swagger and arrogance” of restaurant visitors,²⁶ while men were looked down upon²⁷ and sometimes even subjected to physical violence, as in the case of the painter Dimitri Ismailovitch, who was beaten “for nothing” by an American sergeant.²⁸ If one adds to this the increasingly negative attitude of the locals due to cultural differences,

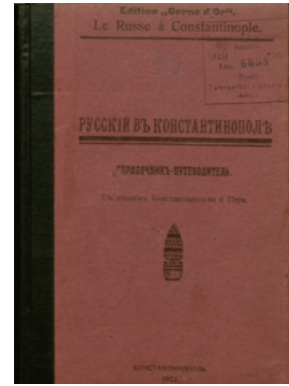


Figure 5: The cover of the guide-book *Russkiy v Konstantinopole / Le Russe à Constantinople*. The Slavonic Library, Prague.

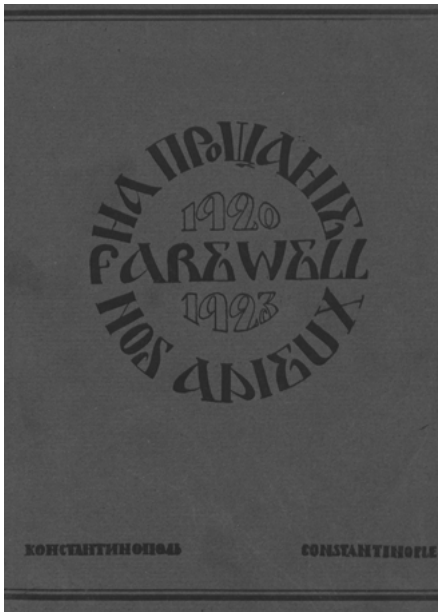


Figure 6: The cover of the *Al'manah Na Proschaniye. The Farewell Almanac. L'Almanach Nos Adieux (1920–1923) (1924)*. SALT Research, Harika-Kemali Söylemezoğlu Archive.

Figure 7: The cover of *Russkiye na Bosfore. Les Russes sur le Bosphore (1928)*. Litfund, accessed October 6, 2022, <https://www.litfund.ru/auction/362/180/>

22 K. Treplev, “Na rekah vavilonskih,” *Russkaya Volna* (December 1920): 18.

23 Anonymous, “Bezhenkaya zhizn’. Byuro truda,” *Zarnitsy* (February 13, 1921): 30.

24 Anonymous, “Medvezhij byt,” *Russkaya Volna* 5 (1921): 16.

25 Anonymous, “Muzykal’nye hamaly,” *Konstantinopol’skij Kommercheskij Kur’er* (July 15, 1923): 3.

26 G. Rimskiy, “Mozaika,” *Ekonomicheskaya i Literaturnaya Zhizn’* 1 (27(14) March 1921?): 2.

27 Bournakine, *Al'manah Na Proschaniye. The Farewell Almanac. L'Almanach Nos Adieux (1920–1923)*, XXIV.

28 Gritchenko, *Istanbul’da İki Yil*, 251.

among other reasons,²⁹ the image of “Russian” emigrants in Istanbul at the time seems rather grim—which, in fact, pushed most of them to leave for the more promising shores of other cities and countries.³⁰

Final Thoughts

The periodicals and other publications that appeared in the Russian language in Istanbul in the early 1920s (newspapers, almanacs, religious calendars, etc.) had different goals. For instance, the creators of *Farewell* (1923) dedicated the almanac primarily to the social situation of refugees in the occupied city and set the task of thanking everyone who helped, whilst *Les Russes sur le Bosphore* was created almost five years after the formation of the Republic of Turkey (1927/1928) and aimed to describe the achievements of the refugees in the city (fig. 6–7). It is also important to understand that some of them were purely informational, while others presented the émigré perspective through their own essays, poems and sometimes even illustrations. These various publications perfectly complement each other, and together they give us the opportunity to not only gain a more complete picture of what is sometimes referred to as Istanbul’s “Russian Moment”³¹ but also to understand that this period—as so often is the case in a refugee crisis—was made up of diverse and ambiguous circumstances, reflecting the unique experiences of each individual refugee.

29 Anonymous, “Prishlye gosti Konstantinopolya,” *Presse du Soir* (December 13, 1922): 3. More on the matter, see Bakar, *Beyaz Ruslar*, 215–241.

30 Anonymous, “Russkie bezhency v Konstantinopole,” *Vecherniaia pressa* (July 5, 1924): 1.

31 This term was used for the lecture and talks on Russian-speaking refugees in Istanbul which were organized by the Sakıp Sabancı Center for Turkish Studies of Columbia University in 2019 and 2020, accessed September 14, 2022, <https://sakipsabancicenter.columbia.edu/events/iraida-barry-thomas-whittemore-istanbuls-russian-moment> and <https://sakipsabancicenter.columbia.edu/events/istanbuls-russian-moment-1919-1923>.