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The Nika Riots

Harold Lowery
Parkland College

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Professor John Poling

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When I began my research for completing my honors project for History of Western Civilization, I had a vague understanding of the "Nika Riots." After researching and reading multiple articles on this topic, I came to see these events that nearly toppled the rule of Justinian I and the Byzantine Empire in A.D. 532, and led to the mass destruction of Constantinople's cityscape, as an important precursor to the growth of the Byzantine Empire. As William Rosen states in his book *Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire, and the Birth of Europe*, "By the time of Justinian, that legacy had been undergoing constant refinement for five hundred years, and it is therefore somewhat surprising to discover that its apotheosis was built almost literally on the ashes of the greatest civil insurrection in the history of Constantinople" (Rosen, 2007, p.92). This statement shows the significance historically of the, Nika Revolt, and the impact it had on shaping the city of Constantinople for the foreseeable future and the growth of Justinian I as a leader and politician. My goal for this paper is to show the extent the Nika Riots contributed to the political, economic, and social changes that took place after its conclusion, and the events that led to the start of one of the worst massacres in ancient history.

To achieve the aforementioned goal, I will organize my paper into three sections. In the first section, I will show the events that led to the accession of Justinian I. In the second section, I will discuss the beginning of the Nika Riot and Justinian's order given to his most trusted

general Belisarius to enter the Hippodrome; and the number of lives lost. In conclusion, I will show Justinian's reemergence as a powerful emperor and the rebirth of Constantinople.

Historical Context

Prior to his ascension to emperor in 527 A.D. Justinian was still an outsider among the political elite of Constantinople with his uncle Justin ruling from 518 – 527. Justin I was named Emperor in 518 A.D. and used his newfound power to execute Amantius, the chamberlain who vied for the throne and financially backed Count Theocritus who in turn gave the money to Justin to make the necessary and critical bribes to obtain the throne. Upon receiving the influx of money, Justin used it to bolster his own claim to the throne of Constantinople, and once crowned Emperor in the Kathisma (the royal box within the Hippodrome), he had Amantius and his followers put to death. When Justin became emperor he was 65 years old and made every effort for his nephew Justinian to garner and achieve all the educational benefits that were not afforded in his childhood, "Justinian, Justin's sister's son, who was still, at this point, a candidatus, one of the forty white-uniformed soldiers attending the emperor. Justin had seen to it that Justinian got the education that he himself lacked, and contemporaries, looking back on Justin's reign, were to consider it merely a prelude to Justinian's" (Evans, 2008, p.283).

Justin ruled for nine years and is attributed to the resolution of the Acacian Schism between the eastern and western church and ushering in a momentary peace. During his reign we see the rise of city-wide violence amongst the gangs of Constantinople, broken into two groups from the teams associated with the chariot-racing held within the Hippodrome, "the factions were the production companies that organized the races in the great Hippodrome that flanked the imperial palace, as well as supplying entertainment in the theaters and in the

Hippodrome itself, where dancers and acrobats diverted the crowds between races" (Evans, 2008, p. 284). It is these factions that are at the root of gang violence within Constantinople for nearly six decades coming to head in Justin I rule, "it was the Blues and the Greens in particular that attracted Constantinople's young men: they affected Hunnic appearance, with untrimmed beards and mustaches, pony-tails at the backs of their heads but shaven foreheads, and they wore loose-sleeved garments to accommodate their presumably impressive biceps" (Evans, 2008, p.285).

The high levels of testosterone that infused many of the young men within Constantinople led to increased violence on the streets at night which Justinian was accused of encouraging based on his recognition of the Blues as his faction, "Blue and Green gangs made the streets of Constantinople unsafe at night, and Justinian was blamed for encouraging the violence, for when Blues attacked they could count on his support if they got into trouble with the law." (Evans, 2008, p.285) Constantinople was a city divided, we see on one hand the immense wealth and political clout of the senatorial elite, and on the other we see the influx of travelers coming to improve their place in society, many of these being young men, who during this time latched on to any group, cause, or gang in hopes of bringing about change to their lives, "these gang members were semi-employed young men coping with the testosterone rush of youth, easily politicized but without any consistent political or theological policies." (Evans, 2008, p.286) During this period of heightened emotions and violence we the descriptions of Justin I as a ruler not in touch with his constituents and as the royal historian during the rules of Justin and Justinian, Procopius, who had a great amount of animosity towards Justinian, stated "Justin seems to be unaware of how extensive the street violence is. He is a stupid donkey, blind to the misdeeds of Justinian" (Evans, 2008, p.286). Between Justin and Justinian we see the

seeds of riots and animosity towards differing factions within the city and the political elite which will only grow with the decision by Justin to name Justinian co-emperor in 527.

Constantinople prior to the ascension of Justinian I in 527 A.D. was a city dealing with extensive gang violence and a tremendous loss of life due in large part because of the plague. As mentioned by Geoffrey Greatrex, "Constantinople, like the other major cities of the eastern empire in the early sixth century, was a violent place. This stemmed in part from the existence of bands of partisans whose activities reached their peak in this period" (Greatrex, 1997, p.60). Justinian already dealing with a history of encouraging violence within Constantinople issued a decree along with Justin in 527, "mandating law and order throughout the cities of the empire; street violence was to be suppressed whether those responsible were Blues or Greens" (Evans, 2008, p.286). This law caused the violence to abate for a short time, but as the factions had shown through their history in Constantinople they would continue fighting until the violent and brutal end of the Nika Riots.

The Beginning of the Nika Riot.

The events that led to the Nika Riots are based in the arrest of partisans associated with the Blue and Green factions who handled the races at the Hippodrome. The city prefect Eudaemon, who found seven individuals guilty of murder during their execution two men survived with the breaking of the scaffolding, "the reaction of the bystanders was to 'acclaim the emperor' upon witnessing this, and to rescue the two partisans" (Greatrex, 1997, p. 68). Upon the two men surviving, two priests from the St. Conon took the men into the monastery and put them under the protection of the church, Eudaemon who was administering the death penalties had troops stationed outside the church to keep watch and make sure the men did not escape

during the night. On the following Tuesday the factions were filing into the Hippodrome for the day's races when they took up the chant for pardoning the two men who survived the botched execution, "still trapped in the church of St. Laurence, Justinian's refusal to acquiesce in their demands – in fact give any response whatsoever – led to the first serious outbreak of rioting" (Greatrex, 1997, p. 68).

The day's events carried on as normal with 24 races scheduled to be held, with every race that ran the factions cried out for the pardon of the two men, "Justinian consistently refused to answer them, they all of a sudden united; their watchword 'Nika' (meaning victory or conquest)" (Greatrex, 1997, p. 69). The factions had previously joined forces prior to the Nika Riots, but it is this moment they created a sense of fear and combined hate for Justinian. This was no longer just about the release of two men it was the combined effort to overthrow a government they deemed evil and power hungry. Justinian was aware of the risk of the mob uniting, "the experience of his uncle may have strengthened his resolve not to bow to the demands of the crowd, since, when Justin had granted their wishes, the factions had rioted nonetheless" (Greatrex, 1997, p.69). The first outbreak of violence occurred that night, "that evening the crowd, now a mob, broke into a prison, released all the occupants, and to set fire to the Chalke entrance on the north side of Justinian's palace. A wind from the south spread the flames north to the senate building and to the cathedral church, the Hagia Sophia, the second to stand on that site, and the second to be burned down" (Rosen, 2007, p. 93).

The next morning Justinian, convinced that the mob could be calmed decreed that the races should continue, "Justinian's first reaction was to appease; he tried to hold races but the mob was out of control, and the center of the city, including the monumental entrance to the imperial palace known as the 'Brazen House' was now in flames" (Evans, 2008, p. 293). The

mob was demanding the dismissal of three of Justinian's ministers all unpopular with the people of Constantinople, Eudaemon, the urban prefect; Tribonian, the quaestor of the sacred palace, and the praetorian prefect John of Cappadocia. This was answered swiftly by Justinian who was trying to diffuse the situation before it escalated to greater violence and chaos in the streets, "Justinian promptly replaced them with men who had the respect of the senators, and his choice showed where he thought the riot was getting its support." (Evans, 2008, p. 294) Justinian held the belief that there were members of the Senate that wanted to overthrow him and place someone who would give greater power to the Senate, "The old Constantinople elite disliked Justinian, with his appetite for reforms, and hated Theodora, the former striptease artiste who now insisted the senators prostrate themselves before her as well as before Justinian when they were granted audiences" (Evans, 2008, p.294). It was this reasoning behind Justinian's granting the request of the mob, and his belief that it would appease them, but as history had shown, they now tasted their power and were determined to overthrow Justinian and create a better Constantinople.

This is the moment of critical mass; the city was burning and the mob was determined to find a ruler who they could bring to the Hippodrome and crown in the Kathisma and overthrow Justinian. Justinian, who was taking refuge within the palace, was now becoming more and more suspicious of the senators taking refuge with him inside the palace, "Justinian, fearing the senators who had taken refuge in the imperial palace with him, ordered them to return to their own mansions and defend them. Two of them were Hypatius and Pompeius, were nephews of Anastasius, and they begged to stay. But Justinian, now in a state of paranoia, was obdurate" (Evans, 2008, p.294). The following day Justinian took to the imperial loge in an effort to appease the masses within the Hippodrome, upon his arrival the crowd fervently opposed his rule

and led Justinian to retreat back to the palace. The mob being fed information from informants within the palace had learned that Hypatius was at his home and they were adamant about making him the next emperor, "he was dragged to the Oval Forum where, at the foot of Constantine's Column, a golden chain was placed on his head. At first Hypatius was reluctant, but then a rumor spread that Justinian had fled, and he began to feel the lure of the imperial purple. He let himself be taken to the Hippodrome and displayed in the imperial loge to the cheering crowd below" (Evans, 2008, p.294).

It was at this moment when Justinian's paranoia and fear took hold and he and his supporters were urging to flee the city, and it is at this moment the tides turned and it is the courage of his wife, Theodora, who brought resolve and courage back to Justinian's rule and it merits being quoted,

> "As to the belief that a woman ought not to be daring among men or to assert herself boldly among those who are holding back from fear, I consider that the present crisis most certainly does not permit us to discuss whether the matter should be regarded in this in some other way….My opinion then is that the present time, above all others, is inopportune for flight, even though it brings safety. For…one who has been emperor it is unendurable to be a fugitive. May I never be separated from this purple, and may I not live that day on which those who meet me shall not address me as mistress. If it is your wish to save yourself, O Emperor, there is no difficulty, for we have much money, and there is the sea, here the boats. However consider whether it will not come about after you have been saved that you would gladly exchange that safety for death. For as for

> myself, I approve a certain ancient saying that royalty is a good burial shroud" (Rosen, 2007, p.96).

Behind the resolve of his wife and the fortuitous events of having his most loyal general, Belisarius, Justinian ordered to have his troops enter the Hippodrome and kill Hypatius and take back the Kathisma.

Belisarius took his troops through the passageway that linked the Hippodrome and the Imperial Palace, encountering guardsmen at the door to the kathisma, who refused to allow entry to Belisarius and his troops. Belisarius returned to Justinian, who ordered them to enter from the outside, they forged through the ashes of the now burned, Brazen House, and split into two regiments, one led by Belisarius and the other by his lieutenant Mundo who went to the left side while Belisarius would enter from the right, "At that moment the trap was closed, the Hippodrome was so full of rioters that they were physically pressing in on one another, with fifty thousand mostly unarmed people occupying considerably less than 50,000 square meters" (Rosen, 2007, p.97). Belisarius gave the order to enter the Hippodrome, "the two battalion-sized units needed to traverse only a few hundred meters before they met in the middle of the killing ground, by all accounts looking like a modern-day threshing machine sweeping through the wheat. It was, not surprisingly a massacre." (Rosen, 2007, p.97) The loss of life is staggering, Procopius who estimated the death toll at 30,000 people, while other contemporaries have the figure as high as 50,000. The massacre ordered by Justinian led to the suppression of the riot, and changed the historical view of the Hippodrome, "the massacre was executed in a few hours and the bodies were thrown under the seats. For many centuries thereafter, the place was known as, Nekpá, (the place of death)" (Giatsis, 2007, p.148).

The Rebirth of Justinian and Constantinople.

As the riot came to an end we see a city in complete disarray with the destruction seen from the gates of the imperial palace to the entrance of the city. As Justinian took stock of the damage done to the city and his public image we see the true meaning behind the riot revealed, "Finally, the Riot of Nika was a case neither of public revolt nor of hooliganism. It was rather a plot against Justinian I, instructed secretly by 'rioter' Hypatius. This man, as in many cases in Byzantium, tried to use the world of the hippodrome (place, demes, and people) to gain the throne" (Giatsis, 2007, p. 148). Justinian also ended all chances of another revolt by having Hypatius and Pompeius to death, and their bodies cast out to sea. Justinian proved his ability to lead when the bodies of Hypatius and Pompeius washed ashore, "when they were washed ashore Justinian allowed them to be buried in the family mausoleum." (Evans, 2008, p. 295) It was this mercy shown to the men who led the revolt that showed the true nature of Justinian and his goal of rebuilding Constantinople is his image. After the riot we see the elite of Constantinople in flux, "the power of the old senatorial elite that despised Justinian and Theodora was broken, but Justinian had no wish for vengeance. The city core of Constantinople had been burned out, but the fire had cleared the area for Justinian's building program: only forty-five days after the Nika riot, the construction of the great Hagia Sophia began on the site of the incinerated basilica that Theodosius II had built. The levers of power were now in Justinian's confident hands" (Evans, 2008, p.295).

Justinian proved very capable in the rebuilding effort of Constantinople in his forty-seven year reign, creating masterpieces such as the Hagia Sophia and many other structures commissioned post-riot to show the grandeur of his city. His most difficult task post-riot was religion based and before his death in 565 had pressed for orthodoxy, and in 564 he left on a

pilgrimage to the shrine of Archangel Michael at Germia, near modern Ankara. Upon his return from this journey he had discovered the true faith, Aphthartodocetism, he issued an edict stating that it was now the faith of the orthodox. The patriarchs were disgusted, but Justinian was in no mood to argue, and sent Eutychius the patriarch of Constantinople, was sent to a monastery, and while preparing the punishments for the other patriarchs within Constantinople, Justinian died in his sleep. Justinian ruled Constantinople for a tremendous length of time, "it had been a long reign – forty-seven years, if we count Justin's reign as part of his reign" (Evans, 2008, p. 302). During those years he dealt with the greatest riot of Constantinople, dealt with numerous attempts on his life, and gave to the world his Code of Laws, which is the basis of all civil law today. As historian James Evans states, "Only Augustus and Constantine could claim more lasting achievements than Justinian. He presided over a last flowering of the Roman empire: a period of literary, artistic, and architectural achievement that few ages can equal" (Evans, 2008, p.302-303). Justinian is known for his laws and architectural wonders, but he also held court during the most tumultuous time in Constantinople's long history and survived to rebuild a city to forge ahead into the future. His reign can be seen as a disappointment but overall he led to the rebirth of the Byzantine Empire.

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