

BYZANTINE EMPIRE

NIKA REVOLT

January, 532 C.E., in Constantinople

The Nika Revolt was a devastating riot that took place in early medieval Constantinople, in the Byzantine Empire. It threatened the life and reign of Emperor Justinian, but was ultimately saved by his wife!

Hippodrome

The Hippodrome was the site in Constantinople where enormous crowds gathered to watch exciting chariot races and similar spectacles.

Several other sports had been outlawed over the preceding decades, so chariot races were particularly welcome occasions. But events in the Hippodrome sometimes led to violence among the spectators, and more than one riot had begun there in the past. The Nika Revolt would begin and, several days later, end in the Hippodrome.

Nika!

Fans in the Hippodrome would cheer on their favorite charioteers and chariot teams with the cry, "*Nika!*", which has been variously translated as "Conquer!", "Win!" and "Victory!" During the Nika Revolt, this was the cry the rioters.

Blues and the Greens

The charioteers and their teams were garbed in specific colors (as were their horses and the chariots themselves); the fans who followed these teams identified with their colors. There had been reds and whites, but by the time of Justinian's reign, the most popular by far were the Blues and the Greens.

The fans that followed the chariot teams retained their identity beyond the Hippodrome, and at times they wielded considerable cultural influence.

Scholars once thought that the Blues and the Greens each associated with particular political movements, but there is little evidence to support this. It is now believed that the primary interest of the Blues and the Greens was their racing teams, and that occasional violence sometimes spilled over from the Hippodrome into other aspects of Byzantine society without any real direction from fan leaders.

For several decades, it had been traditional for the emperor to choose either the Blues or the Greens to support, which virtually guaranteed the two most powerful teams would not be able to join together against the imperial government. But Justinian was a different breed of emperor. Once, years before he took the throne, he had been believed to favor the Blues; but now, because he wanted to remain above partisan politics even of the most superficial kind, he did not throw his support behind any charioteer. This would prove to be a serious mistake.

New Reign of Emperor Justinian

Justinian had become co-emperor with his uncle, Justin, in April of 527, and he became sole emperor when Justin died four months later. Justin had risen from humble beginnings; Justinian was also considered by many senators to be of low birth, and not truly worthy of their respect.

Most scholars agree that Justinian had a sincere wish to improve the empire, the capital city of Constantinople, and the lives of the people who lived there. Unfortunately, the measures he took to accomplish this proved disruptive. Justinian's ambitious plans to reconquer Roman territory, his extensive building projects, and his ongoing war with Persia all required

funding, which meant more and more taxes; and his wish to end corruption in the government led him to appoint some overzealous officials whose severe measures caused resentment in several levels of society.

Things looked very bad when a riot broke out over the extreme strictures employed by one of Justinian's most unpopular officials, John of Cappadocia. The riot was put down with brutal force, many participants were jailed, and those ringleaders that were captured were sentenced to death. This engendered further unrest among the citizenry. It was in this heightened state of tension that Constantinople was suspended in the early days of January, 532.

Botched Execution

When the ringleaders of the riot were supposed to be executed, the job was botched, and two of them escaped. One was a fan of the Blues, the other a fan of the Greens. Both were hidden away safely in a monastery. Their supporters decided to ask the emperor for leniency for these two men at the next chariot race, possibly that God was protecting the innocent?

Riot Breaks Out

On January 13, 532, when the chariot races were scheduled to begin, members of both the Blues and the Greens loudly pleaded with the emperor to show mercy to the two men that "fortune" had rescued from the gallows. When no response was forthcoming, both factions began to cry out, "Nika! Nika!" The chant, so often heard in the Hippodrome in support of one charioteer or another, was now directed *against* Justinian.

The Hippodrome erupted in violence, and soon the mob took to the streets. Their first objective was the *praetorium*, which was, essentially, the headquarters of Constantinople's police department and the municipal jail. The rioters released the prisoners and set the building on fire. Before long a substantial portion of the city was in flames, including the Hagia Sophia (a large Christian Church) and several other great buildings.

From Riot to Rebellion

It is not clear how soon members of the aristocracy became involved, but by the time the city was on fire there were signs that forces were attempting to use the incident to overthrow the unpopular emperor. Justinian recognized the danger and tried to appease his opposition by agreeing to remove from office those responsible for conceiving of and carrying out the most unpopular policies. But this gesture of conciliation was rebuffed, and rioting continued. Then Justinian ordered General Belisarius to squelch the riot; but this originally failed.

Justinian and his closest supporters stayed holed up in the palace while the riot raged and the city burned.

Then, on January 18, the emperor tried once more to find a compromise. But when he appeared in the Hippodrome, all of his offers were rejected. It was at this point that rioters proposed another candidate for emperor: Hypatius, nephew of the late Emperor Anastasius I. Constantinople was on the verge of a political coup.

Hypatius

Though related to a former emperor, Hypatius had never been a serious candidate for the throne. He had led an indistinguished career-- first as a military officer and now as a senator -- and was probably content to remain out of the limelight. According to Procopius, Hypatius and his brother Pompeius had stayed with Justinian in the palace during the riot, until the emperor grew suspicious of them and their vague connection to the throne, and threw them out. The brothers did not want to leave, fearing they would be used by the rioters and the anti-Justinian faction. This, of course, is exactly what happened. Procopius relates that his wife, Mary, took hold of Hypatius and wouldn't let go, until the crowd overwhelmed her, and her husband was carried to the throne against his will.

The Moment of Truth

When Hypatius was appointed to the throne by the Senate, Justinian and his entourage left the Hippodrome once more. The revolt was now too far out of hand and there seemed no way to take control. The emperor and his associates began to discuss fleeing the city.

It was Justinian's wife, Empress Theodora, who convinced them to stand firm. According to Procopius, she told her husband, "... the present time, above all others, is inopportune for flight, even though it bring safety ... For one who has been an emperor it is unendurable to be a fugitive ... 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."

Shamed by her words, and inspired by her courage, Justinian rose to the occasion.

Nika Revolt is Crushed

As the games in the Hippodrome continued and most of the rioters in attendance, Emperor Justinian ordered General Belisarius to the Hippodrome to attack the rebels with Imperial troops. Locking the doors behind him Belisarius and his soldiers provided a much different result than the general's first attempt. Scholars estimate that between 30,000 and 35,000 people were slaughtered. Many of the ringleaders were captured and executed, including the unfortunate Hypatius whose body was tossed into the sea. In the face of such a massacre, the rebellion crumpled.

Aftermath of the Nika Revolt

The death toll and the extensive destruction of Constantinople were horrific, and it would take years for the city and its people to recover. Arrests were ongoing after the revolt, and many families lost everything due to their connection to the rebellion. The Hippodrome was shut down, and races were suspended for five years.

But for Justinian, the results of the riots were very much to his advantage. Not only was the emperor able to confiscate a number of wealthy estates, he returned to their offices the officials he had agreed to remove, including John of Cappadocia - although, to his credit, he did keep them from going to the extremes they had employed in the past. And his victory over the rebels garnered him new respect, if not true admiration. No one was willing to move against Justinian, and he was now able to go forward with all his ambitious plans -- rebuilding the city, reconquering territory in Italy, completing his law codes, among others. He also began instituting laws that curbed the powers of the senatorial class that had so looked down on him and his family.

The Nika Revolt had backfired. Though Justinian had been brought to the brink of destruction, he had overcome his enemies, and would enjoy a long and fruitful reign.