

# Greek Tobacco Moguls in America

By Steve Frangos,  
Special to The National Herald

## PART I

ROUND LAKES, Ill.-The role of Greeks in the development of the international tobacco trade is one of the most unusual chapters in the history of the Modern Greek Diaspora. Beginning in the mid-1800s, various Greek-owned companies held a commanding role in the production and sale of premi-

um tobacco products in North America. The manufacture of Egyptian-style oval cigarettes, made of the finest blended Oriental tobaccos, soon became the province of Greek merchants not only in Alexandria or Cairo, but also Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. These Greek businessmen spanned the gamut of individual owner-operated shops to international business moguls with factories scattered across the planet. Complicating this tale further is

the fact that the unique position Greeks occupied in the international tobacco industry first began in the Ottoman Empire during the 1860s.

In the best sense, any study of the Modern Greek diaspora should encompass at least two perspectives: the situation in North America and simultaneous events in Greece. But knowing what we do of Greek history since 1453, more is involved than simply the geographic boundaries of the Greek nation state. Consequently, any study of the Greek merchants involved in the international tobacco trade must span several continents.

Far from merely a study in the commercial advancement of Greek-speaking people, we also find a pivotal moment in cultural history. For through the forum of advertising, Greek merchants set into motion a whole series of stereotypes related to tobacco, many of which are still widely held to this day. Adopting existing motifs, these merchants expanded upon Western ideas of Egypt, Greeks, the Middle East, the "Orient," masculinity, the social prestige of smoking and the nature and culture of Greeks.

## 'Troy' Invades Greek Cinema

By Diana Arapakis  
Special to The National Herald

ATHENS.-Judging by the queues, Troy's first week in Athens was pulling in its own epic weight at the box office. Showing at all of the city's major movie houses, the \$200 million Hollywood version of the ancient classic the Iliad hit number one at U.S. box offices after its May 14 release to expectant crowds in Athens and worldwide.

Nearly 200,000 Greeks flood-

ed the country's theaters during its first weekend in theaters to see the line-up of Hollywood's finest chiseled actors and a pumped-up Brad Pitt.

The reasons for seeing the movie are fairly clear: you either come to see Brad Pitt as handsome, glory-bound, Achilles or for the cinematic experience of watching one of Greece's oldest tales of battle, trickery and bloodshed spread before you on screen.

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# Greek Tobacco Moguls in North America

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Since American advertising executives, under the initial direction of Greek businessmen, were creating and mass marketing these new images, this process was, by definition, a popular undertaking and not one cleared through the peer review process of university academics. Confusion, cultural misrepresentations, unmitigated romance and sheer hokum were the result. But saying that advertising is not history does not make the images presented in these advertisements any less powerful in their ultimate effect.

When American-based tobacco monopolies began buying out the largest Greek-owned companies, most historians turned their attention away from all things Greek. Yet it was American executives who fully realized that the advertising images first established by the Greeks sold cigarettes. So the images and the underlying themes initially promoted by the Greek merchants were not only retained but also, in some instances, expanded upon.

Given that this is a complex tale, which involves individuals in various countries, we find that not all Greek merchants sold their companies at the same time. Many did not sell out completely but retained sizable stock holdings. And, in typical Greek fashion, various smaller companies have stayed in the hands of descendants.

In order to offer this vast amount of information in a succinct manner, it will be presented in three parts: a broad historical overview, a survey of the Greek-owned companies in North America, and finally, in our last installment, a select presentation and discussion of the advertising and stereotypes will be offered.

We will also cite not simply published sources but also websites and venues where the interested reader can continue their reading on this fascinating facet of Modern Greek history.

## THE OTTOMAN MONOPOLY

In 1897, Cairo became the recognized manufacturing capital of blended-tobacco-Egyptian-style-oval-shaped cigarettes. As Alexander Kitroeff notes in his book-length study *The Greeks in Egypt 1919-*

tion and sale of tobacco to a private firm owned by a group of bankers in Constantinople." The formation of this monopoly, known popularly as the "Regie," forced Greek, Armenian, and Sephardic tobacconists doing business in Constantinople and Asia Minor, to emigrate to Cairo or Alexandria. As every Greek school student knows, at that time Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire. The new monopoly wouldn't allow tobacconists to make their cigarettes anywhere but in Egypt, nor would it permit Egyptian farmers to grow tobacco.

It must be stressed that the tobacco used was always carefully selected and blended. This created a new smell and taste to cigarettes not previously enjoyed in Western Europe or North America. Choice leaves from different growing districts (and different varieties of tobacco)—such as from Samsoun, Maden, Dere, Djannik, Baffra and Smyrna in Asia Minor, and Cavalla, Serres, Kir and Zichna in Greece and the Former Yugoslavia—were exported to Egypt aboard cargo ships owned by the monopoly. Other tobaccos from other regions of the Ottoman Empire were also used. A very high import tax on this raw tobacco generated a large amount of revenue for the Ottoman State (see [www.wclynx.com](http://www.wclynx.com)).

The oval shape may sound obvious but the next time you see a cowboy movie where someone 'rolls their own' cigarette, take notice of the pinched ends. It is not easy to roll an oval cigarette. Also, with pinched ends versus oval cut-ends, nearly half of the cigarette is lost, as the twisted paper end is quick to burn up. The meteoric advancement of Greeks in this new premium market in North America was due, in large measure, to the skills Greeks brought with them from the Ottoman Empire.

Odd as it may seem, hand-rolled cigarette manufacture (which always included the selection and blending process) is one of the less than handful of traditional trades Greek immigrants brought with them to North America. Left out of most general accounts on Greeks in the international tobacco industry are two critical points. First, Greeks (along with other minorities of the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East), then streaming into North America, were active consumers of these new cigarettes. Second, just as these premium cigarettes were being produced in



Tobacco importer and manufacturer Sotirios Anargyros (1849-1918); Through the forum of advertising, Greek merchants set into motion a whole series of stereotypes related to tobacco, many of which are still widely held to this day.

Co., Inc. became the designated agent of the Turkish State Monopoly. In this same 1880-1890 era, the Stephano Brothers

ard. Every machine introduced meant...45-60 cigarette maker(s) were out of work. "At the outbreak of World

between 1880-1920. These individuals were not the only examples of Greeks seen by Americans—or their fellow Greeks. Between the 1830s and 1860s, there was a small but highly prosperous and noticeable Greek merchant class in North America. Beginning in the late 1870s to 1880s, there were also quite a number of poor, recently-arrived Greek immigrants who, in a relatively short period of time, became incredibly rich. In the fields of candy making, cotton importing/exporting and cigarette manufacturing, various poor Greek immigrants became fabulously wealthy. This did not go unnoticed in the American or Greek American communities.

In his book *The Greek Community of New York City Early Years to 1910*, Michael Contopoulos draws a critical distinction, saying that "[T]he Greek cotton merchants lived in a closed society, while the remaining Greeks formed an open society that provided for upward mobility." This is too glib an answer. What about access to raw goods? Skill levels? And dare I use the word, 'capital'? No, the cotton merchants were middlemen buyers and sellers. They "produced" nothing.

As the late Dr. Contopoulos himself notes ultimately the vast majority of the individuals in the Greek tobacco industry, "gained their experience in the small New York factories and shops (Ibid 81)." In New York, the Greeks' recognized ability to blend tobaccos created a demand for their cigarettes. Coupled with the high quality was the Greek worker's willingness to work for wages lower than everyone else in the industry, except Italians (and notably those from southern Italy and Sicily), which placed them at an advantage no one else at the time possessed.

Aside from the Dream of America that the vast numbers of Greek immigrants saw around them, the native-born Americans were attempting to sort out the Greeks from all the other foreigners. It is interesting to note that during this era the American writer Walter E. Weyl wrote a fictional account in a major magazine of the day that played on the average American's growing awareness of Greek cigarette manufacturers. Pericles Antonopoulo, Weyl's fictional hero, is an educated Greek immigrant who rises from penniless dishwasher to fabulously





The advertising images first established by the Greeks were effective.

1937 *Ethnicity and Class*, (Ithaca Press, 1989), this transformation of Cairo into the very center of the international tobacco trade in the Middle East came about by virtue of a decree issued by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The Sultan "granted a monopoly in the produc-

Boston, Philadelphia and New York City, Greek and Armenian immigrants were establishing themselves as small businessmen all across North America. Their role as active purveyors and promoters of the new premium cigarette market has never been examined.

#### THE GREEK AMERICAN TOBACCONISTS

So why did these Greek manufacturers come to the United States? High import tariffs coupled with a growing market for premium cigarettes brought first Sotirios Anargyros (1849-1918), in 1883. Based on Anargyros' phenomenal and immediate success, other Greek manufacturers from Egypt, Asia Minor, and England soon began to produce Egyptian style cigarettes in North America. Between 1895-1896, there were at least ten Greek-owned tobacco importers and manufacturers in New York City alone. An attempt was made at this early date to organize these ten companies into one cooperative association, but without success. Over the last 90 years, Greek and Greek American historians have reported that, beginning in the 1880s, there were some 30 Greek-owned and -operated tobacco companies in the United States.

Around 1890, G. A. Georgopulo &

Company was established in Philadelphia. After first having a New York City office, by 1904, TT Timayenis & Co. opened a "cigarette manufacturers" business at 404 Atlantic Ave. in the Boston City Business Directory. Author Michael Contopoulos, in his book *The Greek Community of New York City: Early Years to 1910*, notes that "[M]ost of the firms combined a retail outlet with their small manufacturing plant. Initially, the small Greek companies were successful because the small scale of the industry...gave little advantage to machine production."

In the July 22, 1899 edition of the New York City Greek newspaper *Atlantis*, it was reported that the Greek employees of New York's cigarette trade had created a mutual benefit society to protect their interests. That very same year the Greek cigarette makers in Egypt formed the first trade union in that country, the L'Union Internationale des Ouvriers Cigaretteurs d'Egypte. This union organized two successful strikes in 1899 and 1903, when they demanded and received higher wages and improved working conditions. The cigarette workers had reason to be concerned. By 1907, writes Kitroeff, "When the first German and British cigarette-making machines were brought into Egypt...the top-paid jobs of the skilled 'cigarette makers' were in jeop-

War I, the introduction of these machines was still in the experimental stage. By the end of the war, however, they were coming into general use." By 1910, Greek cigarette makers were averaging only about \$1.14 per day.

Greek American scholars, however, point to the purchase by the American Tobacco Company of the Anargyros Company in 1900 as signaling the decline of Greek-owned companies in North America. The new technological advancements for the American-based Greek workers, as their arguments go, were therefore less significant.

#### GREEK AMERICAN STEREOTYPES

In the 1880 to 1890 era, new stereotypes of Greeks in North America began to take shape. From 1821 to 1840, and for some time thereafter, Americans who had heartily responded to the Greek War of Independence had developed a unique set of stereotypes of Greece and Modern Greek culture. With the arrival of thousands of Greek immigrants from 1880 to 1920, entirely new notions concerning the Modern Greeks took shape in the American popular imagination. For far too long, Greek American Studies has focused exclusively on the massive waves of Greek immigrant laborers who arrived

wealthy oriental cigarette manufacturer. All the twists and turns typical of an American rag-to-riches story are found in Weyl's account.

But mixed within this predictable genre story of a determined young man pulling himself up by his boot straps, are elements drawn from the world of the newly arrived Greek cigarette makers. Antonopoulo takes his small savings and is "persuaded to open a little cigarette establishment in the cellar of a downtown tenement." Through much hard work (and luck!), our handsome hero marries "the daughter of a retired merchant of Alexandria, Egypt." In keeping with the implicit class orientation of popular American magazines of the era, Antonopoulo's six-year-old son attends "a private school on Central Park West." Finally, at the story's end, Pericles Antonopoulo sells his business to the American Tobacco Company. All these points, as well as others in this story, would have been well known through the daily news and personal observations of any New Yorker.

Weyl's short story draws upon the personal experiences Sotirios Anargyros, Miltiades Melachrino and other real life merchants. Part II of this series will survey, in considerable detail, the establishment of the Greek cigarette manufacturing industry in New York City.