AP World History 9 Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Dr. Afxendiou Unit 3: The Postclassical Era

**The Nika Revolt: Violent Uprising in Early Medieval Byzantium**

By Melissa Snell

The Nika Revolt was a devastating riot that took place in early medieval Constantinople, in the Eastern Roman Empire. It threatened the life and reign of Emperor Justinian.

**The Nika Revolt was also known as:**

the Nika Rebellion, the Nika Uprising, the Nika Riot, the Nike Revolt, the Nike Rebellion, the Nike Uprising, the Nike Riot

**The Nika Revolt took place in:**

January, 532 C.E., in Constantinople

**The 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!" In the Nika Revolt, this was the cry the rioters took up.

**The 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.

**The 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.

**The 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.

**The 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 praetorian, 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 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 an 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 in this, the estimable soldier and the emperor's troops 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 out of hand. It was at this point that rioters proposed another candidate for emperor: Hypatius, nephew of the late Emperor Anastasius I. A political coup was at hand.

**Hypatius**

Though related to a former emperor, Hypatius had never been a serious candidate for the throne. He'd led an undistinguished 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 purple, 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 borne to the throne, 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 buoyed by her courage, Justinian rose to the occasion.

**The Nika Revolt is Crushed**

Once more Emperor Justinian sent General Belisarius to attack the rebels with Imperial troops. With most of the rioters confined to the Hippodrome, the results were far different 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. 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'd agreed to remove, including John of Cappadocia -- although, to his credit, he did keep them from going to the extremes they'd 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.

**Hagia Sophia, 532–37**

By Emma Wegner

The church of Hagia Sophia (literally “Holy Wisdom”) in Constantinople, now Istanbul, was first dedicated in 360 by Emperor Constantius, son of the city’s founder, Emperor Constantine. Hagia Sophia served as the cathedra, or bishop’s seat, of the city. Originally called Megale Ekklesia (Great Church), the name Hagia Sophia came into use around 430. The first church structure was destroyed during riots in 404; the second church, built and dedicated in 415 by Emperor Theodosius II, burned down during the Nika revolt of 532, which caused vast destruction and death throughout the city.

Immediately after the riots, Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65) ordered the church rebuilt. The new building was inaugurated on December 27, 537. Architects Anthemios of Tralles and Isidoros of Miletos most likely were influenced by the mathematical theories of Archimedes (ca. 287–212 B.C.).

The vast, airy naos, or central basilica, with its technically complex system of vaults and semi-domes, culminates in a high central dome with a diameter of over 101 feet (31 meters) and a height of 160 feet (48.5 meters). This central dome was often interpreted by contemporary commentators as the dome of heaven itself. Its weight is carried by four great arches, which rest on a series of tympana and semi-domes, which in turn rest on smaller semi-domes and arcades. This complicated structural system was prone to problems: the first dome collapsed in 558, to be rebuilt in 562 to a greater height. Earthquakes and earth subsidence have also taken their toll on the building over the centuries, although the surviving main structure is essentially that which was first built between 532 and 537.

The interior of Hagia Sophia was paneled with costly colored marbles and ornamental stone inlays. Decorative marble columns were taken from ancient buildings and reused to support the interior arcades. Initially, the upper part of the building was minimally decorated in gold with a huge cross in a medallion at the summit of the dome. After the period of Iconoclasm (726–843), new figural mosaics were added, some of which have survived to the present day.

After Mehmet II’s conquest of the city in 1453, Hagia Sophia was converted to a mosque (Ayasofya Camii), which it remained until the fall of the Ottoman empire in the early twentieth century. A view of Hagia Sophia during the conquest is conveyed in a woodcut by Pieter Coecke van Aelst, depicting the procession of Süleyman the Magnificent through the Hippodrome (28.85.7a). During this period, minarets were built around the perimeter of the building complex, Christian mosaic icons were covered with whitewash, and exterior buttresses were added for structural support. In 1934, the Turkish government secularized the building, converting it into a museum, and the original mosaics were restored.