

Justinian and Theodora – the Nika Rebellion

¶1 On January 13, 532 A.D., Justinian, Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, was about to lose his crown-and perhaps his head as well. It was through the determination of an uncommon woman-his wife, Theodora-that Justinian found the courage to hold fast to his throne. With her help, for another 30 years he would guide his people and add to the glory of the Byzantine Empire.

Justinian's Background

¶2 The emperor began life as the son of a poor farmer in what is today Bulgaria or Yugoslavia. His uncle Justin became a Byzantine general and saw to it that his namesake, Justinian, was educated in Constantinople. When Justin became emperor at the age of 62, he brought his bright young nephew to the palace to help him rule. The young man was so much help that he was soon running the empire in his uncle's name. When Justin died with no son of his own, Justinian assumed the throne.

Constantinople

¶3 Constantinople was the wealthiest, most powerful, and most beautiful city in the world of Justinian's day. It was rightly called "the wonder of the world." Like Rome, Constantinople had majestic palaces, public buildings and baths, aqueducts, and bridges. Its citizens enjoyed their own gladiators, chariot races, and plays in Roman style. Also, like Rome, Constantinople's poorer sections were crowded, filthy ghettos of apartment buildings and open sewers that concealed many criminals attracted by the capital's wealth. The smell of this part of the city guaranteed a brisk sale of perfumes.

¶4 Unlike Rome, Constantinople was a Christian city. The Emperor Constantine, who made the city his capital, decreed Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. The city sheltered beautiful

churches and its citizens constantly debated religious dogma and even interpretations of the scriptures.

Blues and Greens

¶5 The most popular entertainment in Constantinople was the chariot races in the Hippodrome-a copy of Rome's Circus Maximus-which seated 80,000 fans. Two teams, the Blues and the Greens, raced there, as supporters clamored for their favorites from opposite sides of the bleachers. Over time the supporters of the teams were organized into groups much like modern-day political parties and became concerned with politics as well as horses. The Hippodrome became a place where the people gathered to voice their opinions on events to the emperor.

¶6 Clashes between Blues and Greens were common and sometimes turned into riots. Soon after Justinian was crowned, some members of both factions were out of control. They robbed and burned each other's homes, kidnapped opponents, threatened judges, and murdered several people in church. Constantinople was in an uproar with Blues and Greens pointing fingers of blame at each other for the disturbance.

¶7 Justinian was determined to stomp out these troublemakers. His first edict as emperor promised to punish the guilty and protect the helpless regardless of "color." After another riot at the Hippodrome resulted in a number of deaths, he had seven ringleaders arrested. Five were executed, but the executioner blundered on the last two. The ropes broke, and the men fled to a nearby church. Although they were soon recaptured and sentenced to death, they protested that they "could not be hanged twice!"

The Rebellion

¶8 Soon after, on January 13, 532, the races at the Hippodrome were interrupted when Blues and Greens in the crowd demanded Justinian pardon these two men. When the angry emperor refused, a riot began. While the crowd screamed “Nika” (“conquer”), the violence spilled over the walls of the racetrack. When troops moved into the city, a battle began. The rioters attacked a prison and released the inmates, a mob fought soldiers in the streets, and a fire that destroyed many buildings broke out.

¶9 The Nika Rebellion came just five years into Justinian’s reign and he was unsure of how to end the violence. With great courage he went back to the Hippodrome to face an angry mob. He fired several unpopular government officials and offered to let the rebels go unpunished if they would stay loyal. Justinian swore to this with his hand resting on the Gospels, but the crowd did not believe him and answered with threats. When he left, they chose a noble as their new emperor, and the violence continued. When Justinian reached his palace, his advisors pleaded that he save his life by sneaking out of Constantinople. They had ships ready for his escape, and Justinian seemed ready to sail away when Theodora, his wife, stopped him.

Courageous Theodora

¶10 It was Theodora’s courage during the Nika Rebellion that convinced Justinian not to flee. Alone before Justinian, Theodora declared she would never run, even if it meant certain death. Everyone dies, she told him, but rulers should not live without their dignity and power. She refused to live even one day without her crown and cloak of imperial purple. Theodora told Justinian to run if he wished. The ships and his gold were ready. But as for herself-well, a throne would make a glorious tomb. Theodora’s words and the thought of losing the woman

he loved inspired Justinian to fight for his throne. Messengers were sent to bribe some of the rebel leaders, and the palace guard marched secretly to the Hippodrome. When the soldiers rushed into the arena from both entrances, the mob ran. Within 24 hours 30,000 of them lay lifeless in the racetrack and in the streets. The noble they had crowned was beheaded and thrown into the sea, and the Hippodrome was closed for several years. Never again was Justinian’s power questioned.

¶11 For the rest of her life Theodora ruled at Justinian’s side as he made himself the most famous of all Byzantine emperors. Under their joint rule the Byzantine Empire reached its greatest size. The magnificent church of Hagia Sophia was built, glorious in its gold mosaics, and marble, and giant dome. The laws of the empire were reorganized into Justinian’s Code, and the people prospered.

Answer the questions below:

1. What was Justinian’s personal background?
2. Describe Constantinople.
3. Describe the Hippodrome’s uses, and its size.
4. What caused the Nika Rebellion?
5. What was Theodora’s Role during the rebellion?
6. How did the rebellion end?
7. What qualities must a great leader have? Explain.