NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION "ELEFTHERIOS K. VENIZELOS"
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"THE BALKAN WARS 1911-1913"

Chapter 2
The First Balkan War - Phase One

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At the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century, when Eleftherios Venizelos assumed prime minister of Greece, the Ottoman Empire was in dire straits. The turmoil inside the empire was the starting-point for the prevalence of the Young Turk revolution two years earlier. The Young Turks reinstated the Constitution of 1876 and after elections ousted the sultan. The new regime of Constantinople immediately began to implement a policy of violent Turkification of Christian nations who lived in the territories of the empire. The autonomy of religious communities circumvented, the privileges hitherto enjoyed by the Patriarchate and the Bulgarian Exarchate became meaningless and the action of organizations was prohibited. Education was under strict state control, the compulsory teaching of the Turkish language in primary school introduced and the teaching in Turkish language in all courses in senior schools established. The Muslim population of Macedonia strengthened with organized settlements of Bosnians. Also, the empire acted economic war to Greece and stubbornly refused, with a threat of war, any subsequent resolution of the Cretan issue.

Meanwhile, the global crisis of October 1908, in response to the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary and the

proclamation of the independence of Bulgaria, was a clear indication that the Ottoman Empire was impossible to maintain intact the coming years. The Great Powers and the Balkan countries pursued the division of European Turkey. In their conflicting aspirations identified the first flakes of the major conflict that followed six years later, this of the First World War. Apart from the growing unrest internally, in September 1911, the empire was involved in a particularly hard martial adventure. Italy, which sought an increased role in relation to other forces in North Africa, declared war against it and attacked the Ottoman troops in Libya. With the fear of general destabilization, Turkey on one hand and Greece and Bulgaria, on the other, were quick to react to a declaration of partial recruitment along their common border. Soon recruitments lifted, as it was deemed that there was no immediate danger of ignition in the area, since the confrontation was limited to Africa. A year later, in October 1912, the signing of the Treaty between Italy and Turkey sealed the end of this war. The financial blow suffered by the empire was strong, while the Ottoman fleet had been seriously weakened. The complete dominance of Italy was reflected in the attribution to it of Cyrenaica and Dodecanese, except Kastellorizo. The term for repayment of the Dodecanese to Turkey after the final removal of Ottoman troops from Libya, remained in fact meaningless. Italy, citing the continued presence of the Turks in the region, could prolong indefinitely its occupation of the archipelago.

The increasing violation of the rights of Christian communities that made visible the risk of their extinction and the dealing with the Young Turks' nationalism mobilized the governments of the Balkan countries. The weakening of the empire after the war with Italy was seen as a great opportunity to promote their territorial claims after its impending demise. Every Christian state intended to maximize the benefits of the next day of the war by extracting as much territory as possible and by including across its territory the widest possible population, with the invocation of ethnological, religious and linguistic ties.

The sidelining of their differences and their cooperation were a must. Eleftherios Venizelos worked systematically and with diplomatic skill to promote this cooperation. Anticipating that the dissolution of European Turkey was a matter of time, the Greek prime minister, immediately after taking office, focused on the military preparedness of the country. He personally became Minister of War. Bulgaria, Serbia and the Ottoman Empire faced with obsolescence the combat effectiveness of the Greek armed forces. The first two were unwilling to include Greece in their planning for a unified Balkan front.

The time for the Greek government was limited. At the appropriate time, which it will not be long enough, the country should be able to participate with claims in the inevitable war confrontation in order to ensure an influential voice in the distribution of land that would

follow. In the same context, Venizelos placed the definitive solution of the Cretan issue. In a first step, however, as Greece was not yet ready for any military engagement, he opted to the restoration of normal relations with the Porte. At the same time, he promoted the concert with the other Balkan states.

The period that followed the declaration of the Italian – Turkish war, with the initiative of the Greek government, Greek-Turkish relations had improved significantly. In order not to be disrupted again and also to avoid possible international reaction, Venizelos was consistently negative in the urging of his countrymen Cretans to send their representatives to the Greek parliament, who the Cretans elected for this purpose in armed assemblies during 1911. The Cretans sought thereby to impose to the Greek government the union as an accomplished fact. However, Turkey would face this development as a pretext for war. When, in May 1912, the Cretan deputies attempted to enter the House, Venizelos had prevented and stopped abruptly the meeting until October, whereas the conditions would then be favorable. It was a difficult time for Venizelos, on a personal level. The leading protagonist of the revolutionary and diplomatic struggle for the Union during the past two decades seems to be negative of the desire of his countrymen.

At the same time, the efforts for the Greek-Bulgarian approach that had already begun in mid-1910 with the utmost secrecy by the government of Dragoumis, intensified since the beginning of

Venizelos premiership. In view of the looming conflict, Venizelos believed that Greece should approach the Balkan front. But the Bulgarian side systematically refrained from comments on the Greek initiatives and put in first priority an alliance with Serbia. In March 1912, after the Bulgarian - Serbian approach, with the decisive contribution of Russia, was essentially complete, the Greek-Bulgarian negotiations progressed and ended two months later, in a treaty of defensive alliance with the pro-Russian government of Ivan Gkesov. Both countries were committed to joint action in order to preserve the rights of the Christian nationalities. In case of Turkish attack against one of the two countries, the other undertook the obligation to support it. However, if Greece was involved in a conflict with Turkey because of the Cretan issue, Bulgaria was exempt from the obligation to intervene. The treaty did not provide conditions for distribution of land, after a winning confrontation with Turkey, but vaguely defined that the distribution would be according to the contribution of each side in the war. Greece and Bulgaria declined to identify in advance an indicated distribution, since their demands, especially in the southern region of Macedonia, were unbridgeable. Thessaloniki was a bone of contention between the two countries. With a mood to reign in the Balkans, wedded to the vision of "Greater Bulgaria", the Bulgarian government claimed the settle of borders at the base of the unworkable treaty of San Stefano of 1878, which attributed to

Bulgaria all the land between the Danube and Rodopi, the biggest part of Macedonia and the entire valley of Axios.

The summer of 1912 the situation in Macedonia was explosive. The revolt of the Albanians, which had started a year ago, in northern Albania and Kosovo, took by the time alarming dimensions. The Young Turks rejected their demands to be recognized as a nation, having autonomy within the empire with decentralization of the four villayets in which they maintained populations (Ioannina, Kosovo, Shkodra and Monastir). After its expansion in extensive areas of Epirus and Macedonia, the Albanian threat had almost reached the brink of Thessaloniki. The revolt of the Albanians, the violence of the Turks, culminating in the massacre of civilians in Kosovo in mid-July and the ensuing political crisis that broke out in Istanbul and culminated in the resignation of the Ottoman government, intensified the anguish of the Balkan states on their fate in an environment of generalized instability. Moreover, having registered a diplomatic cooperation and a united front with other Balkan countries, on individual bilateral agreements, Bulgaria sought to cause confrontation with the empire. The outbreak of military conflict in the Balkans was a matter of time.

After the signing of the Greek-Bulgarian Treaty, Bulgaria proceeded in the signing of a military agreement with Serbia (June 19) and in consultation with Montenegro. Gkesov proposed to Venizelos to speed up the launch of the Greek parliament, in a manner that the

entry of the Cretan deputies to be used as a casus belli. The Greek Prime Minister initially appeared reluctant. The military and especially the naval preparation of Greece expected to be completed in spring 1913. However, Venizelos predicted that the distribution of land after the war would be on the basis of military occupation. The rest countries underestimated both the potential of the Greek armed forces and the Greek aspirations, for which they believed to be limited to the annexation of the Aegean islands and Crete. Bulgaria was going to direct the bulk of its forces in Thrace, while Serbia would base in the region of Skopje. Venizelos finally consented to the immediate start of the confrontation, considering the circumstances favorable for Greece - as the allied forces were busy on other fronts, he could assert the liberation of Macedonia and Epirus.

The developments that followed were rapid. In mid-September general mobilization was declared in the four Balkan countries. On the 22nd of the same month signed a military agreement between Greece and Bulgaria. In case of a Bulgarian- Turkish war, the agreement provided the offense of Greece against the Empire on land and at sea. Three days later Montenegro, in order to implement the agreement with Bulgaria, declared war on the Ottoman Empire. On September 30, Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia submitted to the Portal a joint note to ensure the autonomy of national minorities on the basis of the principle of nationalities. Among other things, they called for sweeping reforms in the

administration, protection and recognition of the independence of the Christian communities (millets), proportional representation in public offices and parliament, appointment of Europeans in positions of General governors in the respective villayets, educational freedom, suspending of the conscription of Christians in the Ottoman army, e.tc. The next day the Hellenic Parliament resumed its session and this time the Cretan deputies were accepted with enthusiasm. A few days later, on October 12, Venizelos sent in the island, as General Governor of Crete, the former Prime Minister Stephen Dragoumis.

Meanwhile, on October 3rd the Gate, as expected, rejected the Allied ultimatum. Just the day before the Italian-Turkish war had been completed and the empire had no discretion to transfer troops from the front of Africa in the Balkans, while also had been terminated the blockade of the coast of Asia Minor from the Italian fleet. While a battlefront closed for the Empire, several thousand kilometers away from its center, with significant losses, several more opened in the Balkans, near the capital, endangering its very existence. On October 4, Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The Great Powers, especially France, England and Russia, tried unsuccessfully to prevent the conflict, because they feared that the war boom in the Balkans, the "powder keg of Europe" could quickly be rampant, leading to global instability. However, the reluctance they showed in conjunction

with the indifference, with which over time the Gate was facing the Christian nations, made the confrontation inevitable.

The following period the military and diplomatic effort overshadowed every other activity in Greece. The Greek army was divided into two armies. Its balk of six divisions (about 100,000 men) with commander the heir Constantine passed on October 5 the borders in Thessaly and moved north toward the central Macedonia. The army of Epirus consisted of various units, aggregating a total strength of a division, under Lieutenant Konstantinos Sapountzakis. In one week the army of Thessaly successively liberated Elassona and Deskati, scored the first major victory of the Greek army in the Sarantaporo and entered in Kozani and Servia. By that time the first serious conflict between Constantine and Venizelos took place. The heir was planning to move the army towards Monastir, where there was strong Greek element, in order to join faster the Serbian troops and prevent the descent of Turkish aid from the north. Instead, the prime minister put in first priority the liberation of Thessaloniki, which, however, claimed also by the Bulgarians. With strict ultimatum Venizelos persuaded the last moment the unwilling Constantine to divert his forces to Thessaloniki. Despite the extreme conditions and having already liberated sequentially Grevena, Veria and Katerini, the Greek army won the battle of Giannitsà (19-20 October). It was a victory of strategic importance: the last line of defense for the Ottoman forces had collapsed and their retreat opened the way to

Thessaloniki. What was foremost of importance was the Greek army to prevent the Bulgarian forces coming towards the city from the east. The outcome of the battle of Giannitsà had also a symbolic significance, as it was a sacred city for Muslims.

Thereafter the Greek army released Naoussa, Edessa, Siatista, Nigrita and Poligiros. On October 26, the Turkish commander of Thessaloniki Tahsin Pasha, after consultation with the consuls of the Powers, capitulated unconditionally and surrendered the city and 25,000 captured Turkish soldiers to Constantine. About 250 officers were released. The Greek army entered Thessaloniki in the morning of the next day, while the Bulgarians were only three hours away. In order not to cause a rift in the alliance, the Greek side has accepted the request of General Theodorof and the next day entered the city's barracks a small force of the Bulgarian army. However, soon launched in Thessaloniki one division and guerilla bodies and the Bulgarians began to raise a question of rights of sovereignty in the city. In order to maintain control of the region by the Greek forces on October 28, Konstantinos Raktivan was appointed General Governor of Macedonia in Thessaloniki. The next day arrived in Thessaloniki King George and Prince Nikolaos appointed as military commander.

The following period gradually completed the liberation of Macedonia by the entering of the Greek army in Serres (October 30) in Florina (November 7) and Kastoria (November 11). The Greek

forces came in contact with Serbian and Bulgarian troops, which at the same time had moved to the Adriatic Sea and the northwestern Macedonia and in Thrace and eastern Macedonia, respectively.

At the same time, the army of Epirus liberated Filipiada (October 12) and Preveza (October 21). In Pente Pigadia, after a hard battle (October 24-28) succeeded in repelling the Ottoman forces towards the fort of Bizani, which protected Ioannina. Their liberation was the next target for Greece. Afterwards, they released Metsovo (October 31) and Himara (November 5). The small volume of the Army of Epirus, the extreme cold and the frequent attacks by units of guerilla Chams made the effort extremely difficult.

The Greek navy, under the inspired leadership of Rear Admiral Paul Kountouriotis with executives and high level crews, became absolute master of the islands of the northern and eastern Aegean and of the maritime communications, which until then was essentially in the hands of the Powers. This way, the empire basically lost the ability to carry aid by sea to various war fronts. That was a decisive factor in the outcome of the war. Creating a naval base in Lemnos, on October 10, the first days after the declaration of war, allowed the Greek side to check the region of the Straits of the Dardanelles. The next period, with the liberation of Thasos, Imbros, Agios Efstratios and Samothraki the Greek naval forces were able to exclude the bays of Kavala and the Dardanelles. Until October 24, with the capture of Psara and Tenedos the Greek

sovereignty in the North Aegean islands had been completed. Then, the Greek forces landed in Chalkidiki and in the peninsula of Athos and released Ikaria, Lesvos, which was the seat of the Ottoman General Governor of the archipelago, and the island of Chios. Samos, which was hitherto autonomous hegemony, declared union with Greece. The victorious naval battles of Elli (between Gallipoli and Imbros) on December 3 and of Limnos on January 6, 1913 confirmed the prevalence of the Greek fleet, solidified its naval supremacy, cut off the Turks from Thrace and canceled the efforts of their navy to exit the Aegean. The Greek sovereignty at sea was the result of systematic pre-treatment that Venizelos' government had done for the reorganization and the modern equipment of the navy. Greece achieved the fruition of one of its leading strategic objectives in this war by the time of its beginning. Protagonist in this saga was the armored cruiser "Averof", along with battleships "Hydra", "Spetses", "Psara" and nine destroyers.

On November 20, on the initiative of the Powers, signed in town Tsataltza of Eastern Thrace fortnightly or quarterly truce between all belligerents, except Greece. From the beginning of the month, the Turkish side had asked the Powers to mediate the armistice and the conclusion of peace. The Greek side refused to agree posing as terms the delivery of Ioannina and of the Ottoman garrisons of Chios and Mytilene.