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"THE BALKAN WARS 1911-1913"

Chapter 4
The Second Balkan War: A war of thirty days

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The dispute over the distribution of territories, which had been won on the battlefield by the Ottoman Empire brought Bulgaria faced with its former allies, Serbia and Greece. Sofia wanted to prevent any mediatory action of the Powers, figuring that if they occupied by force as possible of the disputed territories, they would create faits accomplis and a stronger bargaining position.

Bulgaria, without an official declaration of war, attacked unexpectedly in June 1913 against the two countries, seeking to prevent the communication of their armies and to create the conditions in order to advance its troops in Thessaloniki. Specifically, on June 16 the Bulgarians attacked simultaneously against the Greek outposts in Nigrita and Eleftheres, in Mount Paggaio and against the Serbian positions in Gevgeli, which captured the next day.

The Greek forces initially winded off Thessaloniki the two Bulgarian battalions camped in the city, capturing their men, after they refused to surrender their weapons and leave the town. The counterattack of Greeks and Serbs occurred simultaneously on June 19. Soon, the Bulgarian advance halted. The Greek army, moving northward regained Nigrita. Bulgarians on their leaving destroyed the town and massacred civilians. The Bulgarian retreat during the

Second Balkan War was accompanied by widespread atrocities; arson, murder of civilians and destruction of the areas abandoned.

More tough battles between Greece and Bulgaria followed in Kalinovo, where the Bulgarians withdrew. On June 21, the Greek army managed a crucial win for the course of the war at the Battle of Kilkis-Lahana. The loss to the Greek forces was large, but after the break of the fortification line of Bulgarians, they were able to march towards the bridges of the river Strymon. This development combined with the significant victory of Serbs in Krivolani, in the area of Kotsana, made clear, since the beginning of the war, its prescribed outcome. The Bulgarians were forced to retreat to the northeast.

Thereafter, several other fights of major severity followed, which were victorious for the Greek army. The Greek forces liberated Gevgeli. After the victorious battle of Doiran (June 23), the Greek side secured full control of the area west of the River Strymon and south of the mount Beles. Furthermore, the loss of Doiran hampered the war effort of Bulgarians as it was a refueling station. At the same time Serbs recaptured Krivolak, Istip, Kotsana and Radovits. The Greek forces crossed the mount Beles and after hard fighting occupied Stromnitsa. On June 26, the Greek fleet liberated Kavala. In the coming days the Greek forces entered Sidirocastro (Demir-Isar) and Serres. During their retreat, the Bulgarians burned

and completely destroyed Serres and the towns Demir-Isar and Doksato and massacred much of the civilian population.

The same period, with looming the crash of Bulgaria entered the war, Romania and Turkey (June 27 and 29, respectively). Romanian troops crossed the Danube and attacked Bulgarian positions in the north of the country. Then marched to the south, and by mid-July had reached just 40 kilometers away from Sofia. For their part, the Ottoman forces until July 10 were recaptured Adrianople and an important part of Eastern Thrace (Raidestos, Forty Churches).

During the first half of July, the advance of the allied forces continued on all fronts. The month began with the liberation of Drama by the Greek forces and the great victory of the Serbian army in the front of Kyustendil and their continued march to the west. Thereafter, the Greek army occupied Nevrokopi and won the battle in Petsovo. In central Macedonia, after a hard struggle, the Greek forces broke on July 10, the Straits of Kresna in the river Strymon and headed northward. The rapid advance of the Greek army had not left the Bulgarians to afford the fortification of the straits in order to render them impregnable and intercept the opponent.

On the diplomatic background, since late June, at the request of Bulgaria in Petersburg, the Russians manifested an attempt to broker an immediate cessation of hostilities, truce and convening a peace conference between the belligerents. Russia wanted to

maintain strong the Bulgarian state in order to maintain the balance of the Balkans. Greece and Serbia made as a condition for the conclusion of the armistice on the battlefield, Bulgaria to accept its defeat and the territories liberated by the Greek and the Serbian army to be granted in those countries. Their governments, as revealed at the meeting of Venizelos with his Serbian counterpart, Pasic, shared the fear that if the signing of the armistice was not accompanied by the determination of the preliminary terms of peace, Bulgaria could exploit the time that would elapse for the preparation of new reckoning.

In parallel, Greece regained the control of the coast of western Thrace. On July 12 the Greek fleet disembarked its forces in Dedeagats (Alexandroupoli), in Maroneia and Porto Lagos, in order to ensure the protection of the Greek population by the Bulgarian atrocities and to create a barrier to the rapid Turkish advance that was underway in eastern Thrace. With the liberation of Xanthi and Gkioumoultzina (Komotini) on July 13 and 14, respectively, the entire western Thrace had come under the Greek control.

Meanwhile, the Greek army, north of the straits of Kresna, had entered the Bulgarian territory. After two days of hard struggle, the Greek forces advancing towards Ano Tzoumayia (Blagoevgrad), repulsed the Bulgarian army. Boosted by forces arrived from the Serbian front, the Bulgarian army launched a counterattack against the Greek positions in the front of Tzoumagia –Petsovo - Machomia

fighting hard. Despite their initial successes, the Bulgarians failed to shake vigorously the Greek penetration, especially after the counterattack of the Greek forces, which in cooperation with Serbian forces, repelled the Bulgarians at the Battle of Prentel Khan.

The Second Balkan War became an overwhelming victory of the Allies. The Bulgarian army was defeated everywhere from the Greek and Serbian forces and forced to retreat on all fronts. The concluded fighting was characterized by particular cruelty and the losses were significant for all belligerents. Within one month, despite the adverse conditions, giving a victorious battle day by day, in several cases with significant losses, the Greek army advanced, covering a total distance of about 250 kilometers. Moreover, Romanians advanced comfortably inside Bulgaria, approaching menacingly in its capital and the Turks took the opportunity to reoccupy lands in eastern Thrace, which had been conquered during the First Balkan War by the Bulgarians.

Under the relentless pressure of unfavorable developments in the war fronts, in early July the Bulgarian King Ferdinand replaced the Russian friendly Prime Minister Danev with Rantoslavof, who was friendly towards Austria. The new government, after an Austrian suggestion, requested the mediation of King Charles of Romania, who took the initiative for truce and for the simultaneous opening of peace negotiations. Venizelos considered essential a positive response from the Greek side in the Romanian initiative, as

otherwise, given the apparent fatigue of Serbia by the continuation of hostilities, there was a risk for Greece to be isolated. Constantine, however, felt the need to continue the advance of the Greek army to crush completely Bulgaria. This way, they will permanently cease to be a threat to Greece. The Greek Prime Minister disagreed with the proposed military overthrow of Bulgaria and suggested the king to accept the armistice and to claim a limit on the river Nestos. Venizelos faced the Conference of Bucharest as the opportunity to consolidate the new balance of power in the Balkans, to lay the foundations for a lasting peace and to promote the understanding of the two non-Slavic states in the Balkans, Greece and Romania. He considered a pernicious error the consideration Serbia and Romania to sign a separate peace with Bulgaria and the Greek army to continue its military confrontation with the Bulgarians. The Greek army was weakened, was already a long distance from its supply bases and conducted an extremely difficult war in inaccessible areas.

Therefore, Venizelos believed the truce at that time was advantageous for Greece as its possible postponement and the continuation of the fight could topple the previously acquired. The Greek Prime Minister went to the Romanian capital without having managed to convince the king. Because of the persistence of Constantine, the Greek army would continue the hostilities and the risk of isolation of Greece was real. In order to gain time, Venizelos gave the extension of military operations to technical reasons.

Eventually, with his urgent telegram on July 15, Constantine informed Venizelos that under the burden of adverse developments he had changed his stance and he also argued in favor of the armistice. Specifically, the Bulgarian army had stepped up its attacks and the exhausted Greek forces, no longer counted on the assistance of the Serbs, had reached the limits of their physical and moral strength. This forced conversion of Constantine, Venizelos presented as a diplomatic choice, as a retreat of Greece in the mediation efforts of Romania. So, finally all the belligerents consented to the temporary war business interruption. The five-day armistice was signed on July 17 by all belligerents and entered into force the following day. At the same time, began the works for the peace conference.