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Article in *Balkanica* · January 2018

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A Ten Years' War Aspects of the Greek Historiography on the First World War

Abstract: This article tries to provide an evaluation of the Greek historiography on the First World War (WWI) and to illustrate its various research stages and trends. It is argued that the Greek historiography mainly approaches WWI and Greece's involvement not as an international, but as a domestic phenomenon. Greek involvement in WWI has been looked at through the lens of the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922, an episode of the ten-year war of the Greek army starting with the triumphant Balkan Wars and ending with the defeat in the Asia Minor Campaign in 1922.

Keywords: historiography, Greece, National Schism, Eleftherios Venizelos, King Constantine, Entente, Central Powers

In 1962, the Greek historian Polychronis Enepekidis, professor at the University of Vienna, published his book *Η Δόξα και ο Διχασμός 1908–1916* (Glory and Discord 1908–1916), which was mainly based on Austrian archival sources. Enepekidis argues that the period of 1909–1918 was dramatic for Greece because the country suffered a lot as a result of the National Schism, and the failure to establish a liberal state such as those of Western Europe.¹ Enepekidis begins his account with 1909, the year when a military coup d'état led to the arrival in Athens of a young Cretan lawyer, Eleftherios Venizelos, who soon emerged as the most inspired political leader on the Greek political scene. Venizelos saw national integration as the main goal of Greek foreign policy at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Enepekidis, he was a man who was able to realize the Greek "Great Idea", i.e. Greece's territorial expansion and incorporation of territories – such as Asia Minor, Constantinople, Eastern Thrace, etc. – where thousands of Greeks had been living for centuries. Through the pages of his book, Enepekidis unrolls his line of thought clearly, approaching historical events through a spectrum of national expansionist priorities. Therefore, he considers the resignation of Venizelos in 1915 to have been a disaster,

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¹ Πολυχρόνης Ενεπεκίδης, *Η Δόξα και ο Διχασμός. Από τα μυστικά αρχεία της Βιέννης 1908–1916* (Athens: Mpiris, 1962), 11.

arguing that the “great national dreams for a resurrected Greek Asia Minor and a Constantinople in the hands of the Greek army were destroyed”.² Enepekidis goes one step further when he makes a clear correlation between the expulsion of the Greek Christian population from Asia Minor and the political debates in Athens, accusing Berlin of having designed the persecutions.³ He also accuses King Constantine and the anti-Venizelist politicians of national betrayal leading to the occupation of Greek eastern Macedonia by the Bulgarian army in 1916.⁴

Enepekidis was not the only scholar to make such observations. In this article, I shall try to point out that the participation of Greece in the First World War (WWI) has been perceived by most Greek historians not as a distinctive period in its own right, but rather as an episode in Greek expansionist policy, which reached its peak during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, Greek historiography focuses on Greek involvement in the Great War more in relation to national ambitions, much less with regard to its European dimensions and perspectives. The National Schism arose in 1915 as a result of the conflict between Venizelos and Constantine over the orientation of Greek foreign policy. This dispute has been considered to be the main reason behind the Greek catastrophe in Asia Minor in 1922, and still remains the main criterion for evaluating all political developments during these years.

Greek historians began to explain Greek involvement in WWI through the lens of the National Schism as early as during the war itself. The roots of this tendency may be found in the necessity to respond to the propaganda mechanisms of the opponents. During the interwar period, historiography was turned into a “propaganda weapon”, and a “vehicle to justify” the policies of the Venizelists or the royalists. Moreover, the trauma caused by the execution of six leading officials belonging to the anti-Venizelist camp who were found guilty for the Asia Minor Catastrophe in November 1922 enriched the so-called “war of historians” with a moral pressure on pro-royalist historians to work intensively for the vindication of the “innocent victims”. In addition, the Asia Minor Catastrophe and the refugee issue facilitated the consolidation of the period 1908–1923 as a domestic issue in terms of modern history.

Georgios Ventiris, an editor at the time of the Great War and a close friend of Eleftherios Venizelos, published in 1931 a two-volume work on the events of 1910–1920.⁵ Ventiris compares the 1910–1920 period to that of 1820–1830, when the Greek War of Independence led to the creation of the first Modern Greek nation state. Like Enepekidis and all historians supporting

² Ibid. 231.

³ Ibid. 305.

⁴ Ibid. 332.

⁵ *Η Ελλάς του 1910–1920. Ιστορική μελέτη* [Greece 1910–1920. Historical Study], 2 vols. (Athens: Pyrsos, 1931).

Venizelos, he argues that the second decade of the twentieth century was crucial because it was for the first time in Greek history that a fully independent and homogenous state was achieved. It is easy to understand the innermost thoughts of Venizelist authors. The policy of national expansion and the twofold increase in Greek territory after consecutive wars was the result of a foreign policy designed by Eleftherios Venizelos himself. But the architect of the Greek "Great Idea" or the "Greece of two continents and five seas" lost the 1920 elections to the royalists, despite military success. These election results proved disastrous for Greece since the royalists who formed the new government failed in the Asia Minor Campaign and were held responsible for its disastrous outcome in 1922.

During the National Schism and the catastrophe of the Greek Army in Asia Minor, as well as during the interwar period, the controversy between royalists and Venizelists continued in the field of historiography. With recent tensions still high, the vast majority of the Greek bibliography on WWI was nothing more than propaganda leaflets and pamphlets or memoirs written by supporters of the Entente or the Central Powers. Representing the Venizelist camp, in 1916, the Anglo-Hellenic League, led by some of closer friends of Venizelos, published a pamphlet in English which included reproduced newspaper articles in an effort to support the goal of Venizelos to join the Entente. In 1917, Crawford Price, a British war correspondent during the Balkan Wars, focused his analysis on the personality of Venizelos and described him as a "remarkable" politician.⁶

Turning to the royalist camp, we have to mention the French historian Edouard Driault, who was the most eminent historian supporting the policy of King Constantine. In 1936, Driault published a volume on the reign of King Constantine, in which he likened the king to a hero and a martyr.⁷ Driault's sympathy for the king was also clear in the fifth volume of his *Greek History*, where he presented and analyzed the events from the Young Turk Revolution (1908) to the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). The publication of this book was banned by the Venizelist interwar governments and it was published in Greek only in 2000.⁸ But the aforementioned events aroused suspicions that the Venizelists had something to hide. In this book, Driault argues that King Constantine was stable and sincere in his policy of neutrality and that it was Venizelos himself who pressed for Greece's immediate entry into the war without any substantial offer from the Entente Powers. Spyridon Fokas Kosmetatos was also a strong supporter

⁶ Crawford Price, *Venizelos and the War. A Sketch of Personalities and Politics* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Company, 1917), 17.

⁷ Edouard Driault, *Le Basileus Constantin XII. Héros et Martyr* (Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1936).

⁸ Edouard Driault, *Histoire Diplomatique de la Grèce de 1821 à nos jours*, vol. 5 (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1926).

of King Constantine. Since 1921, Kosmetatos published three monographs to refute the claims that the king was responsible for the National Schism.⁹

As a result of such publications, the dispute between royalists and Venizelists concerning the orientation of Greece continued in the literature. It was a transformation of the National Schism into a historiographical schism, where the focus of most publications was on propaganda mechanisms used by the two main Greek political parties. A highly emotional approach also prevailed, with the use of phrases such as “martyr” or “diablo” prohibiting moderate approaches.

The evaluation of WWI started to change shortly after the end of the Second World War; understandably so because the historical archives holding documents from WWI gradually opened their treasuries during the Cold War. It was also a period when WWI generation started to withdraw, so historians were able to proceed without any conscience-related reservations. Historiographical production began with the presentation of the military operations of the Greek army on the Salonika Front, which have been analyzed in an official two-volume edition by the Greek General Staff.¹⁰

Despite an intensification of the historiographical production at the beginning of the Cold War, it is during the last thirty years that interest in WWI has undoubtedly increased. The main reason has been that historians and other experts have been allowed access to previously closed archives. Alexander Mitrakos published a pioneering work on France’s policy in Greece during WWI, using French and Greek archives.¹¹ The Institute for Balkan Studies in Thessaloniki was probably the most active Greek centre with regard to this issue. In 1983, the Institute organized, in cooperation with King’s College, a conference on relations between Greece and Great Britain during WWI.¹² Four years later, another conference focused on the relationship between Greece and Serbia during WWI.¹³ The last such conference was organized in 2002 by the Institute and

⁹ S. Cosmin, *Diplomatie et presse dans l'affaire grecque* (Paris: Société mutuelle d'édition, 1921); *L'Entente et la Grèce pendant la Grande Guerre*, vol. 2 (Paris: Société mutuelle d'édition, 1926); *Dossiers Secrets de la Triple Entente. Grèce (1914–1922)* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1969).

¹⁰ Γενικών Επιτελείον Στρατού/Διεύθυνσις Ιστορίας Στρατού, *Ο Ελληνικός Στρατός κατά τον Πρώτον Παγκόσμιον Πόλεμον* [Greek Army during WWI], vol. 2 (Athens: Greek Army General Staff, 1958), 1961.

¹¹ Alexander S. Mitrakos, *France in Greece during World War I: A Study in the Politics of Power* (New York: Boulder, East European Monographs, 1982).

¹² *Greece and Great Britain during World War I*. Papers read at the First International Symposium organized in Thessaloniki by the Institute for Balkan Studies and King’s College (December 15–17, 1983) (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1985).

¹³ *Proceedings of the Fifth Greek-Serbian Symposium, 1. Serbia and Greece during the First World War. 2. The Ideas of the French Revolution, the Enlightenment and the Pre-Romantic Period in the Balkans, 1780–1830*. Organized by the Institute for Balkan Studies and the Serbian

the National Research Foundation “Eleftherios K. Venizelos” and devoted to the Salonika Front.¹⁴ Most speakers came from Balkan countries and described the Salonika Front in all its diplomatic dimensions and in relation to the political priorities of the Balkan nation states. Moreover, the Provisional Government which settled in Thessaloniki in 1916, and the role of Eleftherios Venizelos, was the general topic of a series of lectures organized by the National Bank of Greece.¹⁵

The Institute for Balkan Studies in Thessaloniki also provided a forum for scholars to publish their work. For instance, Ch. Theodoulou published a book on the relations between Greece and the Entente Powers,¹⁶ while G. Leon continued in the same context.¹⁷ Professor Leon used a variety of sources, and conducted extensive research in the historical archives of the Greek, French, English and German foreign ministries. He was also the main author of a chapter on Greece and WWI in the multi-volume *History of the Greek Nation*.¹⁸

The number of related works has increased in recent years. A new generation of Greek historians has searched for different answers in the documents. New historiographical trends represent a systematic effort to evaluate the consequences of political events in Greek society at the crucial time when the Entente Powers violated Greek sovereignty.¹⁹ Moreover, they highlight some previously ignored aspects of the dispute between royalists and Venizelists. Historians George Mavrogordatos and Ioannis Mourellos, two of the most eminent Greek experts on WWI, describe the dramatic events of the *Noemvriana*, when the

Academy of Sciences and Arts in Thessaloniki and Volos, 9–12 October 1987 (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1991).

¹⁴ *The Salonica Theatre of Operations and the Outcome of the Great War*. Proceedings of the International Conference organized by the Institute for Balkan Studies and the National Research Foundation “Eleftherios K. Venizelos” in Thessaloniki, 16–18 April 2002 (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2005), 446.

¹⁵ National Bank of Greece, *ο Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Η προσωρινή Κυβέρνηση 1916–1917* [Eleftherios Venizelos in Thessaloniki. The Provisional Government] (Thessaloniki: National Bank of Greece, 1994).

¹⁶ Christos Theodoulou, *Greece and the Entente, August 1, 1914 – September 25, 1916* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1971).

¹⁷ George B. Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1914–1917* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1974); *Η Ελλάδα στον Πρώτο Παγκόσμιο Πόλεμο 1917–1918* [Greece in WWI 1917–1918] (Athens: Morfotiko Idryma Ethnikis Trapezis, 2000).

¹⁸ *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους* [History of the Greek Nation], vol. 15 (Athens: Ekdotiki Athinon, 1978), 8–46, 52–55.

¹⁹ A. Tounda-Fergadi, “Violations de la neutralité grecque par les Puissances de l’Entente durant la Première Guerre mondiale”, *Balkan Studies* 26/1 (1985), 113–129.

tension between the Entente Powers and King Constantine reached its peak,²⁰ while D. Portolos focuses on Greek foreign policy.²¹ Gerasimos Alexatos, on the other hand, explains a controversial issue, the surrender of the Greek Fourth Army Corps to the Germans in 1916 and its transportation to Görlitz in Upper Silesia.²² Turning to a more recent generation of Greek historians, Elli Lemonidou discusses aspects of the relationship between Greece and France.²³

The centenary of WWI gave a new impetus to the historiographical production in Greece. It can be described as close to an explosion since interest in WWI has not been restricted to the community of historians but also reached the public sphere. Conferences,²⁴ colloquia,²⁵ public debates and articles in newspapers²⁶ added to the Greek contribution to the commemoration of the events. It is true that public debates in Greece did not have the same intensity as in other countries, and expectedly so because Greece had not been involved in the outbreak of WWI and its more widely debated aspects. But Greece followed

²⁰ Γ. Μαυρογορδάτος, *Εθνικός Διχασμός και Μαζική Οργάνωση. Οι επίστρατοι του 1916* [National Schism and Mass Organization. The Reservists of 1916] (Athens: Alexandra, 1996); Γιάννης Μουρέλος, *Τα 'Νοεμβριανά' του 1916. Από το αρχείο της Μεικτής Επιτροπής Αποζημιώσεων των θυμάτων* [Noemviana of 1916. From the Archives of the Joint Committee for the Compensation of the Victims] (Athens: Patakis, 2006).

²¹ D. Portolos, "Greek Foreign Policy from September 1916 to October 1918" (PhD thesis, University of London, 1974).

²² Γεράσιμος Αλεξάτος, *Οι Έλληνες του Γκαίρλιτς 1916–1919* [Greeks in Görlitz 1916–1919] (Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis Kyriakidi, 2010).

²³ Elli Lemonidou, "Les volontaires grecs au service de la France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale", *Revue Historique des Armées* 240 (2005), 112–122; Elli Lemonidou, "Des écrivains grecs engagés durant la Première Guerre mondiale", *La Lettre R* 2-3 (2005), 160–169; Elli Lemonidou, "Entre information et propagande: la Grèce dans la presse britannique et française de la Première Guerre mondiale", *La Revue LISA* IV/3 (2006), 17–28, accessible at: <http://lisa.revues.org/1982> (24/2/2018); Elli Lemonidou, "La politique britannique en Grèce durant l'année 1916", in 1916. *La Grande-Bretagne en guerre*, eds. Henry Daniels and Nathalie Collé-Bak (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 2007), 45–61; Elli Lemonidou, "Propaganda and Mobilizations in Greece during the First World War", in *World War I and Propaganda*, ed. Troy Paddock (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2014), 273–291; Elli Lemonidou, "La Marine alliée en Grèce pendant la Première Guerre mondiale", in *Making Waves in the Mediterranean*, eds. Michela d'Angelo, Gelina Harlaftis and Carmel Vassallo (Messina: Istituto di Studi Storici Gaetano Salvemini, 2010), 139–143.

²⁴ See e.g. https://www.imxa.gr/ebooks/Thessaloniki%20ogovernment_volume.pdf (accessed 24/2/2018).

²⁵ See e.g. <https://www.britishcouncil.gr/sites/default/files/salonika-remembers-presentation-programme.pdf> (accessed 24/2/2018).

²⁶ See e.g. <http://www.tovima.gr/opinions/article/?aid=556115>, <http://chronosmag.eu/index.php/sl-p-g-e-ths-pgs-pl.html>; <http://www.tovima.gr/culture/article/?aid=62136>, <http://www.tovima.gr/culture/article/?aid=654750> (accessed 24/2/2018).

these debates and new historiographical narratives through Greek translations of the best known books, such as *The Sleepwalkers* of the Australian historian Christopher Clark.²⁷ In October 2015, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in collaboration with the University of Macedonia and the Institute for Balkan Studies in Thessaloniki organized an international conference under the title “The Salonica Front in World War I”. Historians and other experts from involved countries presented their work on the Macedonian Front.²⁸ As stated by the President of the Organizational Committee Ioannis Mourellos, the conference tried to restore the Salonica Front into the general framework of the other military fronts. This conference was actually the most systematic effort to focus on the participation of Greece in WWI as an international, and not a domestic/local issue. In the same direction, in December 2014 the Kalliopi Koufa Foundation for the Promotion of International and Human Rights Law organized an interdisciplinary colloquium, “World War I – Centenary”, in order to evaluate the causes of the war and discuss its legacies and memories.²⁹ Some aspects of Greek involvement and the memory of the Great War were also discussed in a colloquium organized by the Institute of International Relations in Athens.³⁰ The public interest in WWI is also evident in public history. In this respect, the most noteworthy work is “Thessaloniki during the First World War”, a continuing publication series with more than 15 titles thus far.³¹ In the same framework, we may also mention the book *‘Η Θεσσαλονίκη στον Α΄ Παγκόσμιο Πόλεμο και η γενικότερη ελληνική εμπλοκή* (Thessaloniki in the First World War and Greek Intervention).³² In December 2015, the Greek journal *Archeiotaxio* devoted an issue to WWI and the participation of Greece in it.³³

But despite the aforementioned fresh approaches, the memory of WWI in Greece is still mostly associated with the National Schism and the catastro-

²⁷ Christopher Clark, *Οι υπνοβάτες. Πώς η Ευρώπη πήγε στον πόλεμο το 1914*, Greek translation (Athens: Alexandria, 2014).

²⁸ For more details see <http://www.hist.auth.gr/en/macedonianfrontconference> (accessed 24/2/2018).

²⁹ See <http://www.koufafoundation.org/december-wwi/> (accessed 24/2/2018).

³⁰ See <http://www.idis.gr/?p=4654> (accessed 24/2/2018).

³¹ <https://www.ebooks.gr/gr/%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%81%CE%B1-%CE%B7-%CE%B8%CE%B5%CF%83%CF%83%CE%B1%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%B7-%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CE%BD-%CE%B1-%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%BA%CE%BF%CF%83%CE%BC%CE%B9%CE%BF-%CF%80%CE%BF%CE%B5%CE%B5%CE%BC%CE%BF-11816> (accessed 24/2/2018).

³² Γαβριήλ Ν. Συντομόρου, *Η Θεσσαλονίκη στον Α΄ Παγκόσμιο Πόλεμο και η γενικότερη ελληνική εμπλοκή* (Thessaloniki: Zitros, 2016).

³³ *Αρχαιοτάξιο* 17 (December 2015).

phe of the Greek army in Asia Minor.³⁴ Focusing on the National Schism, Professor Mourellos argues that WWI was only the peak of it, describing it also as a conflict between the traditional Greek elites loyal to King Constantine and the newly emerged bourgeoisie led by Venizelos.³⁵ Generally, Greek participation in WWI is being seen as a compact period which started with the triumphant Balkan Wars and ended with the dramatic events in Smyrna. This interpretation seems to be inevitable. Since the Great Idea policy was dominant, it is easy to understand that national integration seemed more appealing than any other option – especially because Greece’s involvement in WWI was short, actually lasting less than one and a half years. The country declared war against the Central Powers in June 1917, shortly after King Constantine’s dethronement and the establishment of Venizelos’s government in Athens. Only the troops loyal to Venizelos had joined the operations of the Entente on the Macedonian Front from the middle of 1916, but even in this case the military operations in Macedonia cannot be compared to what was happening on other fronts, especially the Western Front. The “gardeners of Salonika”, as the soldiers of the Entente Powers sent to the Salonika Front were known, became famous more for their achievements in the Macedonian countryside during a peaceful period than for their military feats.

The trend to evaluate Greece’s involvement in WWI through the lens of the National Schism is clear even in recent works. The sixth volume of the *History of New Hellenism* covers the period 1909–1922 under the title “The National Integration”. In this volume, Greek participation in WWI is included in the same chapter as the Balkan Wars and the Greek military campaign in Ukraine.³⁶ Moreover, John Koliopoulos and Thanos Veremis, two leading Greek historians, in their book *Greece. The Modern Sequel*, include WWI in the ten years’ war (1913–1923).³⁷

The First World War proved to be a great catastrophe for almost all of the participants. It was not only the loss of lives on battlefields; it was also the legacy of this war, the collapse of ideals, Europe’s lost generation. Greece remained on the margin of the events in 1914–1918. The Great Powers did not consider Greece to be as important as the other Balkan states. But in 1919, when

³⁴ Γιώργος Μαυρογορδάτος, 1915. *Ο Εθνικός Διχασμός* [1915. The National Schism] (Athens: Patakis, 2015), and Αθηνά Κακούρη, *Τα δύο Βήτα* [The two B] (Athens: Kapon Editions, 2016). Both books, presenting interpretations of the Venizelists and of the supporters of King Constantine respectively, have become bestsellers in Greece.

³⁵ Μουρέλος, *Τα Νοεμβριανά*, 18.

³⁶ *Ιστορία του Νέου Ελληνισμού (1770–2000)* [History of New Hellenism 1770–2000], vol.16 (Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 2003).

³⁷ Θάνος Βερέμης & Γιάννης Κολιόπουλος, *Ελλάς. Η σύγχρονη συνέχεια από το 1821 μέχρι σήμερα* [Greece. The Modern Sequel from 1821 onwards] (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2006), 328–362.

the rest of the world entered a short, twenty-year period of peace, Greece faced its real war in Asia Minor. The Asia Minor campaign proved a real catastrophe for the Greek Army. On the outskirts of Ankara, Greeks experienced their own havoc like the other Europeans had on the Somme and in Verdun. Paying tribute to its own lost generation, Greek historiography has included the period of 1914–1918 into its own national historical narrative which started with the triumphant Balkan Wars in 1912 but closed dramatically in the ashes of Smyrna in 1922.

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