EXTENDING GREECE TO THE NEW TERRITORIES: A BRITISH VIEW

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It is an honour to be invited to give this talk at so significant and auspicious a time, one hundred years since the liberation of Thessaloniki and its Greek population. For it was almost exactly one hundred years ago, on 28 October 1912, that Crown Prince Constantine as Commander in Chief of the Greek army, having taken the surrender of the city by the Ottoman governor, entered into Thessaloniki on his horse and the Greek army occupied the city. That was the most crucial event for the future of Greece of the 1st Balkan War, a moment of high emotion for the liberating troops, and that is the beginning of my story of the extension of Greece to the new territories, mainly in Macedonia, but also the Aegean islands, Epirus, and even Crete – and later Western Thrace as well.

Three years later the city and surrounding countryside was turned into a fortified camp following the landing of British and French troops in October 1915. Let me give you a British view of the situation then. It comes from a distant cousin of mine, Vivian Ross Crawford, who served here in Salonika as a VAD, a nurse belonging to the Voluntary Aid Detachment. She was quartered somewhere outside the city, and here is what she wrote in her diary:

“Today, Nov 12th, I had my first half day. Scott and I got a pass for Salonika...I needn’t really do more than allude to our thrills over the kaleidoscopic crowds we met - Russians, French, Serbs, Italians all in uniform, Alpini and Bersiglieri as well as infantry...Greeks in kilts, Turks [i.e. Muslims], Jews in mediaeval gaberdines, and peasants in native costumes from all the Balkan states pretty well - Cretans in black tango knickers. The British uniform pretty well dominated the crowds, and there were Tars and French sailors, a few sepoys, Algerians, French coloured colonial troops - reverend Greek priests, and an occasional nun or sister with elaborate starched head-dress.”

There are photographs from the period of the Great War which illustrate that kaleidoscopic variety, which was so striking to a young English woman who had probably never left the shores of England before she came to Macedonia as a nurse.

But of course, as my cousin Vivian wrote, it was not only the foreign troops who were exotic and varied, it was also the crowds in the streets, Greeks, Muslims, Jews, peasants from the countryside, Slavs, Vlachs. This was the Salonika and the Macedonia of the period of the Macedonian Question, a rich and varied tapestry of peoples, languages and religions.

The old Salonica, and the old Macedonia, were about to change, some aspects rapidly, some gradually, as Greece consolidated and extended her administration.

I should like to look at the process of extension and the challenges it posed for the Greek state and the people of northern Greece.
ENTENTE
From left, Indochina, France, Senegal, Britain, Russia, Italian, Greece, India

French troops, top r and top l, Russians, lower l, Italians lower r
The logic of the extension was straightforward enough. This was the process of realising the Great Idea (Megali Idea), of bringing Greeks by language and religion within the bounds of the Greek state.

Map of Greater Greece

The territorial changes of 1913 were a giant step in that direction. Greek sovereignty was extended to include the lion's share of Macedonia, a good part of Epirus, and Crete; and the Aegean islands became Greek by right of occupation although the question of sovereignty remained as yet undetermined. But while this extension followed the logic of the Great Idea, the manner of it and the circumstances in which it happened were dictated by what I may call competitive nationalism. Prime Minister Venizelos had not wished to throw the Greek armed forces into an uncertain struggle before they were fully prepared. But he felt obliged to do so by the active preparations of Bulgaria and Serbia for war against the Ottoman armies in Europe. Greece could not stand by and watch while Macedonia was carved up between Bulgaria and Serbia. Therefore Greece took part. And the successes of the Greek army and navy, and the occupation of Salonika, brought her massive territorial gains, which were further increased through the second Balkan war at the expense of Bulgaria.
Though vast amounts of paper and ink were expended in trying to prove the claims of the different Balkan states to territory in Macedonia, it was in the end the hazards of war that determined Greece’s share. And for Greece that was a good thing. Greece and Bulgaria did not seriously attempt to settle in advance who would get what in the event of victory. If they had tried to they would have failed. And if they had managed to patch up some agreement Greece would surely have won less territory than she won through the outcome on the battlefield. So the way in which Venizelos concluded Greece’s defensive treaty with Bulgaria in May 1912 was both sensible, and skilful, and lucky.

In incorporating and integrating the new territories Greece from the very first day was taking on an enormously difficult task. Victory in 1912-13 came suddenly and imposed the need for instant action, to confront the Bulgarian threat to the city, to establish civil government, and even to determine who was in charge. The Crown Prince, as military commander, saw the new administration as rightly under his direction. The Prime Minister saw things differently. He insisted, and rightly, that experienced civil government should be put in place immediately, and his selected Governor, the eminent jurist and Minister of Justice Konstantinos Raktivan, arrived with a team of civil servants as early as 30 October.

The first task was to ensure the defence of the new territories, the second to ensure that security and order prevailed, the third to develop the economy. Greece had acquired, or inherited, territories extremely difficult to govern, owing primarily to the great mixture of nationalities, ethnicities and religions in the area. Macedonia had been subject to turmoil and violence for years, so great as to defy the efforts of Ottoman governors to maintain stability. This did not necessarily mean that Greece would be incapable of governing a multi-ethnic region. Greece had experience both in old Greece and particularly in Crete of governing mixed ethnic groups. But the experience could not be called an unqualified success, as was shown by the high rate of emigration to Turkey of Cretan Muslims in the first decade of the century. The arguments in favour of altering the ethnic balance in the region in favour of the Greek element were difficult to resist.

Then again, these regions were acquired through war, leaving in its wake resentful Slav and Muslim populations and ruined villages and farms. Successful administration and integration
of these areas would have required greater resources in administrative experience than Greece possessed. Bulgarian nationalism and revanchism were seen by the Greeks as a real and imminent threat.

It is not surprising therefore that despite the Greek administration's proclamations of equality for all without discrimination, and respect for the rights of people of every faith, in practice a gradual rebalancing of the populations of the northern territories began to take place. During the 2nd Balkan War the process started, of Bulgarians leaving Salonika and Greek Macedonia for Bulgaria. Muslims also began to leave, either voluntarily or under pressure, for Turkey. Then in summer 1914 Greek refugees started to arrive in Thessaloniki from the western seabord of Asia Minor as the Ottoman authorities began to persecute and expel them.

So the Greek authorities in Thessaloniki and throughout Greek Macedonia could hardly have faced a more difficult beginning. They had to deal with an urban population largely indifferent, or even hostile, to the new Greek regime. The Jewish community, the largest single element in the population of the city, preferred the old Ottoman regime to the new Greek administration. The Bulgarians knew they were unwelcome. The Muslims were uncertain as to the future. But the Greek authorities needed the acceptance and cooperation of the different ethnic communities, in order to keep the public services operating, and try to revive economic activity, severely shaken by the Balkan wars.

The problems were multiple, political, social and economic. Venizelos recognised this, and placed a high priority on the good governance of Macedonia. He sent some of his best colleagues north: Raktivan as the first Governor; the former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and Macedonian notable, Stefanos Dragoumis; Miltiades Negrepontis to take charge of refugee settlement, even Venizelos's deputy Emmanuel Repoulis for a time.

The Greek Orthodox Metropolitans of Macedonia were a valuable source of advice to the new administrators. The state could also call on the long experience and local knowledge of the Greek consuls who had served in Macedonia through the years of the struggle for Macedonia, 1903-1908. Ion Dragoumis was one such. The most distinguished among the Consuls had been Lambros Koromilas, but after serving in Washington as Ambassador he entered politics and served not in Macedonia but as Finance and then Foreign Minister in Venizelos's government. It was a problem that politicians sent to Macedonia from Athens tended not to stay long. Some regarded service in Macedonia as a form of exile. They did not wish to be separated from their electoral base or clientèle in Old Greece.
Another problem arose from the centralising tendency in Greek political life since the time of King Otho and his Bavarians. The early years after 1912 were marked by tension and disagreement between the local administrators in Macedonia (Prefects, Governors, senior civil servants) and the central government in Athens (Ministers and their advisers). At first Raktivan and after him Dragounnis encouraged a large degree of local initiative. But gradually, as I suppose one would expect, the heavy hand of Athens made itself felt more and more, and the centralizers won over the local administrators.

The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 changed the way the Great Powers regarded Greece and Macedonia. Let us go back a little. Britain had considerable economic and financial interests in Macedonia, and a political interest in the fate of the territory. Before the Balkan Wars the Powers, including Britain, were concerned mainly to prevent each other from stealing a march, to prevent Balkan instabilities from leading to war, and in Britain’s case to prevent Russia from advancing her interest in controlling the straits (the Dardanelles and the Bosporus). None of the Powers had wanted the Balkan Wars to take place. But their attempts at restraining the Balkan allies failed.

After the 1st war, Britain found herself in a key position, as host of the peace negotiations between the warring parties, and host of a parallel conference of ambassadors to resolve problems that they had reserved to themselves, including the future of Albania and the Aegean islands. Sir Edward Grey, Britain’s liberal Foreign Secretary, was much involved as Chairman and learned a great deal about the views of the various parties including Greece. What he learned did not dispose him to favour any one party. His main concern was to restore and maintain stability to the Balkan area, and preserve the existing Concert of the Great Powers of Europe, so as to avoid a general war involving the Great Powers.

But with the outbreak of war, the Powers, including Britain, looked at Balkan affairs in a more hard-headed way. They looked on Salonika and Macedonia, under the hard pressure of national survival, as potential strategic assets or liabilities. Strategic calculations on a European scale prevailed over traditional bilateral preferences or interests in Greek welfare, or indeed Greek neutrality. This applied particularly to Britain, which had not been as directly concerned with Macedonia as had Russia and Austria (though it was the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, who killed off the idea of a Greater Bulgaria in 1878 at the Congress of Berlin, and thus ensured that Bulgaria would not get Salonika and its hinterland). From the outbreak of war Britain and France saw Salonika as potentially an important strategic asset in the Eastern Mediterranean. It was important to keep hostile powers away from it and the access it gave to the Aegean. Britain now saw Greece and Bulgaria as states to be tempted into joining the Entente by dangerous promises of territorial gains in the event of victory. The potential value of Salonika became actual in 1915, with the failure of the Entente allies’ Gallipoli campaign, and the threat to Serbia posed by Austria and Bulgaria, which led Venizelos to invite Britain and France to land troops at Salonika in October 1915 in order to reinforce hard-pressed Serbia.

This fateful decision led rapidly to a massive accumulation of allied forces in what became the fortified camp of Salonika. It immediately increased Britain’s interest in the economy of the region, and especially in the good working of the port of Salonica, which would be vital for the supply of the allied armies with munitions and foodstuffs. The close interest and involvement of Britain in the affairs of Greece and of Macedonia can be well demonstrated in photographs and drawings by British war artists dating from 1916-1918, the years when a large British army, under French command, inhabited this fortified camp and dug itself in along the Doiran sector of the Macedonian front, facing well-entrenched Bulgarian forces.
General Sarrail with General Milne

General George Milne and the Voivode Misic

British army at the Macedonian front, 1916–1918

German army

Venizelos inspecting Greek troops at the Macedonian front
British troops in Macedonia
After two years of deadlock, and high mortality from malaria and influenza, came the breakthrough of allied troops in September 1918, and the rout and defeat of Bulgaria, heralding the end of the Great War. Britain and Greece fought together as allies on this front, alongside French, Serbian, Russian and Italian forces. It was through the Greek divisions that Venizelos was able to put into the line that he established his credentials to sit at the table in Paris at the post war peace conference, and to assert Greece’s claims to further territorial gains. The outcome was the confirmation of Greek sovereignty over Western Thrace and the Aegean islands, but, after the Greek war against Kemalist Turkey and the catastrophe of Smyrna in 1922, Eastern Thrace and western Asia Minor were lost to Greece.

The Smyrna disaster led to by far the largest displacement of population in these years, as more than one million Christian Greeks left Asia Minor either in the wake of the Greek army, or under the terms of the 1923 Lausanne Convention on the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey. The main burden of resettlement fell on Macedonia. The outcome was a sort of ‘solution’ to the problem of mixed populations in Macedonia, resulting in a homogenous northern Greece populated solidly by Greeks, but at the cost of a lengthy, difficult and costly settlement programme lasting through the 1920s and 30s. The Lausanne exchange also solved the problem, if it was truly a problem, of the mixed population of Crete, with the departure of the remaining Cretan Muslims for western Turkey.
How then, looking back a hundred years later, may we judge the extension of Greece into new territories which took place between 1912 and 1923?

Even if it were possible to show a balance sheet of economic gains and losses, I could not try to do so. My balance sheet is altogether less precise.

The gain to the Greek nation has been great, but incalculable. The larger Greece resulting from the Balkan Wars and the post war settlements was larger not just in territory and populations and economic resources, but also in a spiritual and cultural dimension. The extension of Greece represented the achievement of much of the Great Idea. Even when that Idea was shattered at Smyrna, the arrival and settlement in northern Greece of the refugees meant not only that the Greek presence in Macedonia was consolidated, but also that the crafts, customs and dialects of Asia Minor had some continuing life, even if a shadowy one, in Greece.

As against this, one may set the loss of homelands in Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace, and the intangible but real loss of the varied ethnic and religious tapestry of Macedonian life before the wars. It is good to know that under Mayor Boutaris efforts are being made to remember this lost past, and to make Thessaloniki again a pole of attraction for neighbouring peoples and for men and women of different faiths.

Both the gains and the loss resulted from the nationalism that was the prevailing ideology of the 19th and 20th centuries in Greece and her neighbours.

**CONCLUSION**

The British who dug trenches (in Clemenceau’s phrase, ‘the gardeners of Salonica’) and fought and died at the Macedonian front came to know the countryside of Macedonia and the city of
Salonika. Many of them are buried here, in commonwealth war cemeteries. They are remembered in Britain. Even now there is are active regimental and other Salonika associations which keep alive the historical memory of that period, one of the most intense in the long history of relations between the Greeks and the British.

There remains from those years the literary record of poems and memoirs, and the visual record as in the photographs and paintings by war artists that I have shown.
Aerial view of Salonica by William T Wood, who served as a kite-balloons observer in the Royal Flying Corps. Unclear whether this is view after air raid, or view of the Great Fire. Wood says after air raid. Imperial War Museum
One such record, perhaps the most impressive and moving of all, is a memorial chapel at the little village of Burghclere in Berkshire deep in the English countryside. Here a visionary painter called Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), one of our greatest 20th century artists, painted a series of wall paintings recording his experiences in Macedonia where he served in 1916-18 with the 68th Field Ambulance Unit of the Royal Army Medical Corps as a medical orderly, and later in the infantry. I cannot convey the glory of these paintings in one or two colour slides, but if any of you during a visit to England decide to visit the Sandham Memorial Chapel so as to see them, I can promise that you will not be wasting your time. They are a very moving witness to the life of the soldiers in this far distant theatre of war, ensuring that they and it will not be forgotten.

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Salonika after the fire
The Doiran front seen from Sal Grec de Popovo, William T Wood

Strymon Valley
Documentary film making, Grand Couronné, Doiran, right: the 'Devil's Eye'

Sandham Memorial Chapel: Stanley Spencer