

Greece

By [Loukianos Hassiotis](#)

Summary

Greece officially entered the Great War rather belatedly in June 1917, despite informal involvement since 1914. The war divided Greek political elites, leading the whole country into a civil strife that lasted for decades. This text aims to present the main aspects of Greece's involvement in World War I, its outcome and its impact on contemporary Greek politics.

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Introduction

The history of Greece during the Great War presents certain peculiarities compared with that of the rest of Europe: although the country remained officially neutral for most of the conflict, her territorial integrity and national sovereignty were repeatedly violated by both sides. In addition, the internal conflict over which policy ought to be pursued led to the National Schism (*Ethnikos Dhasmos*), which determined the course of the country's political life for many decades after the war's end. Its consequences lasted until the 1970s and included the abolition of the monarchy and influenced both relevant Greek and international [historiography](#).

The works written during the war itself and the interwar period are characterised by an attempt to justify the policies and actions of the two political factions, the Venizelists and the anti-Venizelists/Royalists, and were produced mainly by protagonists in the conflict – politicians, diplomats and military officials.¹ During the same period, the first purely military studies, as well as a large number of memoirs and testimonies by primarily French and British Salonika Front veterans, were published. The veterans recorded their impressions of Greece, focusing on the Allied armies' activities and experiences in [Macedonia](#).² In the first few decades after the Second World War, interest in the subject declined: Greek historiography evaded the issue of the National Schism, likely because it did not want to reopen old wounds after the Civil War (1946-1949) or broach the subject of the monarchy, which the Left had called into question in the 1940s and which once again became an object of criticism in the mid-1950s.³ Indeed, the most important historical works on the Great War period were published after the collapse of the colonels' dictatorship (*Diktatoria Syntagmatarhon*, 1967-1974) and the monarchy in 1974. The most notable are the books by George Leontaritis, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1914-1917* (1974) and *Greece and the First World War. From Neutrality to Intervention, 1917-1918* (1990), which served as a reference point for subsequent studies. However, studies by non-Greek historians on Greece's stance during the war or on the Macedonian Front were limited, probably because the importance of these issues was underestimated. One important exception was Alan Palmer's work *The Gardeners of Salonica* (1965). The past forty years have witnessed an increase both in the number of historical works and scientific conferences devoted to the subject. Research interest is no longer confined to the period's diplomatic and military aspects but also includes new approaches to Greek social relationships and cultural life at the time, the attitudes of ethnic and religious minorities and Greek policy towards them, and the views and daily life of soldiers in the [Armée d'Orient](#), together with the changes that its presence brought in Greek Macedonia.⁴ These issues, however, have by no means been fully explored, while many of the questions concerning the National Schism remain open.

This article attempts to present an overall picture of Greece during the First World War (WWI), based on a synthesis of the basic findings of historical research to date. The first section presents the historical background, focusing mainly on the [Balkan Wars \(1912-1913\)](#), which were regarded as a prelude to WWI. The second section describes Greece's international position in the first year of the war and the factors that led to the National Schism. The third section deals with different aspects of the country's involvement in the war, the presence of the Armée d'Orient on Greek territory and the climax of the internal political crisis. The final section is devoted to Greece's contribution to the Salonika or Macedonian Front and the consequences of the Allied victory.

Greece before the Great War

The Kingdom of Greece from Independence to the 20th Century

The Kingdom of Greece was born in 1830, after an almost ten-year-long struggle for independence from Ottoman rule. Although it was the first independent state in the Balkan Peninsula, in actuality its political regime and the basic lines of its domestic and foreign policies were determined throughout the 19th century by three “Protective Powers” – [Great Britain](#), [France](#) and [Russia](#) – whose diplomatic as well as military intervention had won the War of Independence (1821-1832). The country’s political life was dominated by the “Great Idea” (*Megali Idea*), i.e. the goal of expanding the state’s borders and liberating the Greeks’ “unredeemed brothers,” who lived mainly within the [Ottoman Empire](#) and who numbered more than three times as many as the approximately 750,000 inhabitants of the new kingdom. However, support for such an aggressive foreign policy was obstructed as much by the country’s obvious economic, administrative, political and demographic weaknesses as by Britain’s policy of preserving the Ottoman Empire’s territorial integrity. After the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Kingdom of Greece was dominated by Britain’s influence and constantly faced the threat of British intervention. The threat became a reality several times during the course of the 19th century. In addition, from the 1860s on Greek [nationalistic](#) aspirations had to contend with the similar claims by [Bulgaria](#) and – to a lesser extent – [Serbia](#) and [Albania](#), particularly in Macedonia.⁵

The Balkan states’ inability to reach a common understanding and their individual conflicts with the Ottoman Empire favoured the latter. This became all too clear for Greece during the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, when Ottoman forces easily defeated the Greek army. This led once again to foreign intervention and international economic control. The “ill-fated” war of 1897, as it was termed at the time, did not merely throw the country’s problems and contradictions into relief. It also caused great disillusionment both among the country’s intelligentsia and other social classes, comparable to a similar crisis in [Spain](#) caused by the loss of her last colonies in 1898. Questioning the very political system on which the Greek kingdom was based ensued.⁶ The crisis came to a head in 1908 under the pressure of the Young-Turks’ Revolt in the Ottoman Empire and the increasing antagonism in the region between the local states, on the one hand, and the Great Powers, on the other. In August 1909, a group of army officers carried out a coup, calling for political and economic reforms, restrictions on the monarchy’s powers and improvements in the country’s armed forces. The “Goudi Coup” as it was called, brought the liberal Cretan politician [Eleutherios Venizelos \(1864-1936\)](#) to power and helped prepare the country for the military conflicts soon to follow. It also marked the first in a series of military interventions in the nation’s political life that

were to continue for most of the 20th century.⁷

The Balkan Wars and Their Impact on Greece

The policy of Turkifying the Ottoman Empire's Christian [minorities](#) and abolishing their rights, implemented by the Young-Turk regime, made a rapprochement between the Balkan states imperative. In 1911, the [Italian-Turkish War](#) and the Albanian revolt revealed the [Empire's](#) weaknesses and created favourable conditions for a Balkan alliance against the Sublime Porte. In fact, in March 1912 Bulgaria concluded a bilateral alliance treaty with Serbia, followed in May by a similar pact with Greece. The treaties between the Balkan states enabled the formation of a common front, with greater chances of success against the Ottomans, while at the same time preventing any intervention by the Great Powers. The formation of the alliance was also furthered by the inability of the Great Powers, each of which had distinct aims in the region, to agree amongst themselves. Indeed, the unexpectedly swift victory of the Balkan alliance in the First Balkan War (October 1912 – May 1913) earned it the title “seventh Great Power” from the European press.⁸

However, these treaties had many serious flaws: above all, they left open the question of how the conquered territories would be distributed, a fact that soon led to the break-up of the Balkan alliance. Even before hostilities against the Ottoman forces had ceased, the Balkan allies began to fall out over the distribution of the conquered territories. Serbia and Greece had won the lion's share of Macedonia, a basic target of Bulgarian expansionism. The first two countries decided to form a common front to counter Bulgaria's claims. On 13 June 1913 they signed a pact of alliance that provided for collaboration in the event of an attack by Bulgaria or any other power, a clause that was to test their bilateral relations later on, and a commitment to maintain a common border in Macedonia. At the same time, Bulgarian political and military leaders decided to launch a simultaneous attack on the Serbian and Greek positions in order to strengthen Bulgaria's hand at the negotiating table, overestimating the Bulgarian army's capabilities. This choice was secretly supported by [Austria-Hungary](#) with the evident aim of breaking up the Balkan alliance, which it regarded as a threat to its own interests in the region. Bulgaria's decision proved erroneous, with dramatic consequences: its attack was repulsed and the Greek and Serbian forces advanced against it. This was followed by [Romania's](#) and the Ottoman Empire's declaration of war on Bulgaria, effectively ending her struggle. Sofia was finally forced to come to terms and on 10 August 1913 the Treaty of Bucharest was signed in the Romanian capital, setting new Balkan borders.⁹

Greece's gains from the Balkan Wars were truly impressive. Its territory increased by 70

percent in size and its population swelled from 2,700,000 to 4,800,000. The “new lands” of the Greek kingdom provided new resources and gave the state a demographic boost during a critical period of antagonism with its neighbours. The war successes boosted the country’s self-confidence and international prestige and rekindled the expansionist aims of liberating the Greeks who remained in Ottoman territory. On the other hand, the wars also created new problems: the state’s new, extensive northern borders would be difficult to protect in the event of new military conflicts. Greek refugees from Eastern Thrace, Asia Minor and Bulgaria began to flow into Greek Macedonia, while Muslim and Bulgarian inhabitants of the same region moved in the opposite direction, thus intensifying the hostility between Athens, Sofia and Constantinople. In the “new lands” there were compact populations of Muslims, Slavs and Jews, a new phenomenon for the Greek state, which had hitherto been more or less ethnically homogeneous. Finally, during the wars the relations between Prime Minister Venizelos and Crown Prince Constantine were tested for the first time over military and diplomatic issues, providing a foretaste of the looming rift in the country’s political regime.¹⁰

Greek Dilemmas and the Entente’s Indecision

Greece, the Balkans and the Entente at the War’s Outbreak

Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia on 28 July 1914 posed a critical dilemma for Greece: should the country activate the special clause in the Greco-Serbian treaty of alliance that provided for mutual military support in the event of an attack by a third power? If it did so, it would become embroiled in a local Austro-Serbian war that did not directly concern it. Besides, Serbia had refused to help Greece against the Ottoman Empire in June 1914 at the height of the Greco-Turkish crisis over sovereignty in the Aegean Islands – although to be fair, Serbia had diplomatically supported Greece.¹¹ In addition, transferring Greek troops to the Austro-Serbian border would weaken Greece’s ability to defend itself against a Bulgarian or Ottoman assault – a possibility still open at that time. If, however, Greece took no action, it would remain isolated in the region and would probably have to face Bulgaria’s revanchist designs on its own. The transformation of the Austro-Serbian confrontation into a pan-European conflict only complicated the matter for Athens. On the one hand, it highlighted the different orientations that existed in Greek political and military leadership on the issue. On the other hand, it upset the balance of power created in the Balkan Peninsula by the Treaty of Bucharest a year earlier, since both the Balkan countries and the Great Powers seemed ready to revise their options in order to deal with the new situation.¹²

The Greek government’s official position at the beginning of the war was that Greece would maintain a stance of favourable [neutrality](#) towards Serbia and would not become involved in

a conflict of a non-Balkan character, although in the event of a Bulgarian attack on Serbia it would activate the treaty signed between them in order to protect the regional status quo. In any case, Venizelos believed it inevitable that Greece would side with the Entente, as he was convinced that the country's interests were inextricably linked with those of the Western naval powers and, above all, those of Great Britain. For this reason he asked during discussions with British, French and Russian diplomatic envoys that Greece be allowed to join the Entente and enter the war on condition that they would guarantee Greece's territorial integrity. However, at that point the Entente was unwilling to accept Greece's offer because it did not want to alienate Bulgaria or the Ottoman Empire, which had so far remained neutral. Venizelos tried to overcome these reservations by proposing the creation of a Balkan alliance or even confederation in order to combat the Austro-German threat. His proposal was in principle welcomed by the Entente governments but was not as attractive to the other Balkan states.¹³

The Entente's stance did not change even after the Ottomans joined the Central Powers in October 1914, because it believed that the need to win Bulgaria to its side was now even greater. The influence of the pro-Bulgarian lobby in British diplomacy, the Russian aim to bring about a rapprochement between Belgrade and Sofia, and the Entente's conviction that the Bulgarian army was fully prepared and battle-worthy explain its insistence on securing Bulgaria's cooperation or at least neutrality, despite the latter's clear contact with Germany and Austria-Hungary. At any rate, this insistence proved to be particularly crucial in diplomatic negotiations. Not only did the Entente ultimately fail to win Bulgaria over but it also irritated Greece and Romania and reduced their likelihood of entering the war on its side. This was more evident in Greece's case, where opinion over the country's war stance remained divided.¹⁴

The Conflict within the Greek Political Regime

During WWI, Greece experienced the most serious internal political crisis it had ever known: the National Schism. The crisis had two main protagonists – the Prime Minister Venizelos and [Constantine I, King of Greece \(1868-1923\)](#) – but many additional aspects, including a foreign policy conflict, a dispute over the monarchy's constitutional powers, antagonism within the Greek officer corps and also between old and new elites over access to and control of power, and between the distinct interests of the traditional southern Greek elites and the Greek capitalists from the Ottoman Empire and the Diaspora. The mass mobilisation of supporters from both camps was a particular feature of the National Schism and characterised later political conflicts in Greece during the 20th century.

Difference of opinion over the war between Venizelos and Constantine was a key factor in the Greek political crisis. Venizelos faithfully supported the special bond between Greece and Great Britain. He believed the Allies would win the war and that in all events Anglo-French naval supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean would determine the settlement of regional territorial issues after the war. Consequently, once the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the Central Powers' side, her possible future dismemberment presented Greece with a unique opportunity to realise her vision of the Great Idea. In contrast, Constantine was convinced that Germany would win the war due to its military supremacy. Therefore Greece ought to remain neutral, since she was in no position to oppose British naval supremacy. Constantine had studied in Germany and was an admirer of German culture and the German monarchy. He had also married [Sophia of Prussia \(1870-1932\)](#), the sister of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#). His views were shared by the General Staff's German-educated officers, who believed that Greece ought to adopt a prudent, not an opportunistic, stance in the war in order to preserve her gains from the Balkan Wars. The same officers, moreover, were concerned about the increasing influence of their junior colleagues, who had risen rapidly through the military ranks after the Goudi Coup and the Balkan Wars, and supported Venizelos's aggressive policy. Politicians from the traditional parties also supported the king. Their influence had diminished after Venizelos's rise to power and the electoral supremacy of his party, the Liberals. The king's gradual identification with the anti-Venizelist opposition intensified the political crisis and ultimately led to a complete rift between the two sides.¹⁵

The political conflict involved different sections of public life, including the press and the Greek-Orthodox Church. The first participated willingly in foreign policy debates, often neglecting journalistic ethics and not hesitating to reveal secret negotiations or state secrets in order to damage the opponent's prestige. The debates in the [newspapers](#) reflected the antagonism between French, German and British [propaganda](#), which financed friends and supporters among the political, economic and cultural elite. The [Church](#) remained largely devoted to the king throughout the period; indeed, in December 1916, [Theoklitos, Archbishop of Athens \(1848-1931\)](#) succumbed to pressure from the Royalists and excommunicated Venizelos, though he was later dethroned, after which bishops well-disposed to the Cretan politician took control of the Church.¹⁶

The first manifestation of this rift became apparent in early 1915 when Britain and France requested Greek military aid in the [Gallipoli campaign](#), giving vague promises of future concessions in western Asia Minor. Venizelos agreed immediately, even going so far as to accept a limited number of territorial concessions to Bulgaria. The General Staff, however, were opposed to the idea of sending troops to the Dardanelles, both because they wanted to avoid weakening the defence of the northern borders and also because they believed that

the campaign was unlikely to succeed, a fact that was soon confirmed. Constantine agreed with the General Staff, forcing Venizelos to resign. The new government, led by Royalist [Dimitrios Gounaris \(1867-1922\)](#), pursued a policy of neutrality, albeit a short-lived one. In June 1915, elections were held in which Venizelos once again emerged victorious. His efforts to get Greece into the war and to provide military aid to Serbia reached a head in September, when Bulgaria declared a general mobilisation in preparation for an attack on Serbia. This move compelled the Greek government to do the same, although it kept the country in a state of armed neutrality. In a final attempt to present the king with a fait accompli, Venizelos entered into an agreement with the Entente's envoys that permitted the dispatch of Allied troops to Thessaloniki to support Serbia in the event of a Bulgarian attack. On 5 October 1915, he requested and gained Parliament's support to dispatch Greek forces to Serbia. On the same day, however, Constantine, after colluding with Berlin and Vienna, forced him to resign again on the grounds that he believed Germany was bound to win the war. In light of this, there was no way he could agree to a policy that would lead the country to disaster.¹⁷

The Salonika Front and its Impact on Greece

The Armée d'Orient[18] in Greek Macedonia

On the day Venizelos resigned, the first Allied troops landed in Salonika. The aim of the Macedonia campaign was partly to encourage Greece to enter the war and partly to support the Serbian army against a Bulgarian threat. However, none of these things were achieved: the Allied force was too small, initially consisting of only two infantry divisions, one French and one British, and arrived too late to prevent Serbia from collapsing, while also failing to change Greece's stance after Venizelos's resignation. In addition, the campaign had no specific military operational plans. There was no prior agreement between the British and French General Staffs and no decision about a joint command.¹⁸

The expected large-scale attack on Serbia by the Central Powers under the command of Field Marshal [August von Mackensen \(1849-1945\)](#) began on 7 October 1915: three German army corps from the north moved towards the Morava Valley and a similar number of Austro-Hungarian corps from the west crossed the Drina River, heading for Belgrade. A week later, two Bulgarian armies crossed the Serbian border with the aim of capturing the Vardar Valley and trapping the Serbian forces. Meanwhile, the first French units that had arrived in Thessaloniki managed to temporarily check the Bulgarian attack at Štip, but were then defeated at Krivolak and forced to retreat. On 5 November 1915, the Bulgarian army captured Niš and thus came into contact with the forces of Field Marshal Mackensen. In an attempt to escape the tight noose formed by the enemy forces, the Serbian political and military leadership ordered a retreat through Albania to the Adriatic coast. In all, more than

150,000 people took part in what later became known as the “Albanian Golgotha.” Later, despite Greek government protests, they were transported by the Allies to the island of Corfu, where the Serbian government was based until the end of the war.¹⁹

The collapse of the Serbian front completely upset the Allies’ plans and created a new dilemma in the region. The conquest of Serbia effectively meant the loss of a faithful ally while at the same time restoring communication between the Central Powers and Constantinople. The Allied forces’ position in Thessaloniki was extremely insecure, given the possibility of an enemy advance into Greek territory. In addition, the dubious stance of King Constantine and the new royalist government in Athens left open the possibility that Greece might abandon her neutrality and move against the Allied forces. The Allies themselves were divided over the usefulness of a new front: the British wanted to abandon the campaign and reinforce other fronts, while the French wanted to reinforce their existing army in Thessaloniki so that Greece and Romania would not deliver themselves into their opponents’ hands. These last political parameters finally led the Entente to decide in favour of maintaining the Salonika Front and continuing to exert diplomatic pressure on Athens to enter the war. However, over the next two years the Entente’s relations with Athens, as well as those between the exiled Serbian leadership and the latter, underwent a severe crisis as a result of the Allies’ constant violations of Greek sovereignty, the Greek government’s ensuing threat to disarm Serbian and Allied troops (in order to prevent Bulgarian forces from invading), its refusal to permit the overland transfer of Serbian troops to Macedonia, and its general unwillingness to cooperate with the Armée d’Orient.²⁰

The Central Powers halted the advance of their troops at the Greek border to avoid provoking Greece or causing it to abandon its neutrality. In the meantime, the Allied forces fortified their positions around Thessaloniki, constructing new wharves in the harbour, building new roads and railway lines, and erecting new buildings, around which a network of [barbed wire](#), trenches and [machine-gun](#) posts was set up. The Allied forces’ defensive role in the region earned them the demeaning title “Gardeners of Salonika,” while [German propaganda](#) called the front “the greatest internment camp in the world.” In early 1916 new British and French troops arrived in the city after the end of the Gallipoli campaign. A limited number of Italian and Russian forces and the remnants of the Serbian army (approximately 120,000 men), reorganised by the French, later reinforced the Allied troops. Thus, by May 1916 the Armée d’Orient consisted of more than 300,000 men. Opposite them was a force of roughly the same size, consisting mainly of Bulgarian and, to a lesser extent, German troops. The Salonika Front remained more or less stagnant until September 1918, stretching from Lake Ohrid in the west to the Struma River and the Orfanos Gulf east of Thessaloniki.²¹

As the Armée d'Orient extended its control in the city and, more broadly, in Greek Macedonia, friction increased between itself and the Greek authorities. A key player in this crisis was the Allied Commander-in-Chief [Maurice Sarrail \(1856-1929\)](#), succeeded in December 1917 by [Marie-Louis-Adolphe Guillaumat \(1863-1940\)](#) and in June 1918 by [Louis Franchet d'Espèrey \(1856-1942\)](#). Sarrail demanded, and succeeded in obtaining, the withdrawal of Greek forces from Thessaloniki, restricted the powers and functions of the Greek authorities and proceeded to arrest and deport Central Power consuls and subjects from the city. In practice, Greek sovereignty in the region and the country's neutrality were abolished.²²

At the same time, the presence of both Allied and Bulgarian troops in the area led to renewed propagandist activity over the future status of Greek Macedonia and Thessaloniki. Political and military officials from France, Italy and Serbia, who sometimes operated without their governments' consent and sometimes with their tacit encouragement, took advantage of the Greek state's limited power in the region to promote their own aims. [French](#) and [Italian propaganda](#) served mainly to further their economic and commercial interests and rarely extended to purely political designs. Moreover, the desire of certain French officers and diplomats to turn Thessaloniki and Macedonia into a French protectorate after the war did not meet with the official French government's approval. Serbian politicians and military men carried out even greater propagandist activity, setting their sights on western Greek Macedonia – where there was a large local Slav element, part of which initially expressed a desire to come under Slavic rule – and Thessaloniki, which was regarded as a natural termination of the Morava Valley and the Vardar, while its harbour was considered essential for Serbian trade. The breakdown in Greco-Serbian relations after Constantine's refusal to provide Serbia with military aid strengthened Serbian propagandist activity. However, this activity diminished after Venizelos's return as prime minister and Greece's official entry into the war.²³

On the other hand, the presence of thousands of foreign troops (French, British and their colonial troops as well as Serbs, Montenegrins, Russians and Italians) revived economic activity in Thessaloniki, which had suffered after the Balkan Wars and the loss of the city's hinterland. The construction of military works provided the unemployed and refugees (from the Bulgarian-occupied areas or from the Ottoman Empire) with work. The great increase in demand caused by the foreign troops led to a sharp increase in profits for local businessmen, while also causing prices to skyrocket. The music halls, cabarets, cinemas, theatres and orchestras provided an unprecedented social life, while twelve daily newspapers addressed seven different linguistic and ethnic groups. It could be said that during the Great War Thessaloniki saw its last great flowering as a multi-ethnic city. Joining its already mixed

population of Greeks, Jews, Muslims, Slavs and Armenians were Greek refugees from Eastern Greek Macedonia and Thrace, Serbian civilians that had followed their army, and thousands of foreign soldiers. This character was largely erased after the post-war movement of populations, in particular the forcible exchange of Muslims and Orthodox Christians between Greece and Turkey, respectively, in 1923.²⁴

The National Schism Unfolded: The “National Defence” of Salonika versus the Royalist Government of Athens

While events were unfolding at the front, the Greek political crisis was also evolving. Shortly after Venizelos's resignation, the Greek Parliament was dissolved and new elections were announced for December 1915. Venizelos's Liberal Party abstained from the elections, fearing they would be rigged and that the army would intervene at its own candidates' expense. Venizelos also knew that he was in an extremely difficult position, since he supported the country's entry into the war at a difficult time for the Entente. The elections proved to be a farce: the abstention rate reached 68 percent because of abnormal conditions in many parts of the country and because of Venizelos's popularity amongst a large part of the electorate. The new parliament and the governments that were formed up until June 1917 were purely royalist. Venizelos's supporters were ousted from the state machinery and army. These developments intensified the crisis and created implacable hatred, dividing Greek society into two camps. The Venizelist anti-parliamentary opposition became radicalised, and revolutionary and anti-monarchist tendencies developed within it, particularly amongst the officers who had played a leading role in the 1909 coup. Venizelos himself, however, did not share these views, although by now he had clearly realised that he could not return to power by constitutional means and that he would need the Entente's active intervention.²⁵

The events on the Macedonian Front in 1916 hastened such a development. In May 1916, a joint German-Bulgarian offensive was launched against eastern Greek Macedonia, which had remained under the Greek army's control. King Constantine and his military chiefs of staff knew of and were expecting this invasion and hoped it would drive the Armée d'Orient out of Macedonia. Indeed, the new prime minister, [Stefanos Skouloudis \(1838-1928\)](#) ordered the local Greek garrisons not to resist. As a result, the Bulgarians seized the Rupel Fort at the Greek-Bulgarian border, near the town of Serres, thus threatening the Allied defensive lines' eastern wing. The Allies responded by assuming complete control of Greek Macedonia and dividing it into different military occupation zones. They also declared martial law in the region, imposed [censorship](#) and demanded the complete disbandment of the Greek army, regarding it as a threat to their forces' security. While preparing their own counterattack to

support Romania's entry into the war and tie down as many Bulgarian forces as possible, their opponents launched a surprise attack along the entire front on 17 August 1916. Bulgarian troops broke through Allied lines and captured Florina to the west, although their attack was subsequently checked. To the east, however, the Greek Fourth Army Corps based at Kavala surrendered without a fight to the Bulgarian army on 11 September 1916 and was later deported to a prisoner-of-war camp in Görlitz, Germany, where it remained until the end of the war. Part of the Fourth Army Corps managed to escape on British ships and was taken to Thessaloniki.²⁶

In Thessaloniki, Venizelist officers, frustrated with Constantine's stance and concerned about the fate of Greek Macedonia, had already created the "[National Defence](#)" (*Ethniki Amina*) organisation, with the aim of challenging the Royalist government in Athens and getting Greece into the war. On 30 August 1916 they tried to gain control over the Greek garrison in the city, which they eventually managed, albeit with difficulty and only thanks to assistance from Sarraïl. Venizelos himself regarded this move by the National Defence as premature and disapproved of the anti-monarchist language it used, because of the way it might upset his potential supporters both at home and abroad. However, Constantine's inflexible policy on the question of Greek participation in the war and, above all, the occupation of Kavala finally persuaded Venizelos to take command of the movement. Urged by various French diplomats, he left Athens and installed himself in Thessaloniki, where he formed a provisional government. After a year of wavering and pointless compromises, he began to oppose the king and his chiefs of staff a second time. Greece was divided, with two different governments: the official Royalist government in Athens, which controlled "Old Greece," and the Venizelist Provisional Government of Thessaloniki, which controlled the islands and Greek Macedonia with the Armée d'Orient's support. One of the Provisional Government's basic aims was to restore both Greece's standing in the Allies' eyes and its sovereignty in Macedonia. In order to do this, it attempted, without notable success, to form a creditable army and to regain at least some administrative control over the region. This endeavour was obstructed by the lack of a unified position and unreserved support on the part of the Allies as well as the Macedonian population's unwillingness to respond to the military call-up. In any case, the Entente only gave de facto recognition to the Provisional Government because of objections raised mainly by [Italy](#) and Russia, who did not want Greece to enter the war and then claim territories after it ended. The Tsarist government also did not favour supporting any revolutionary action.²⁷

At the same time, events were also unfolding rapidly in Athens: the capture of the Rupel Fort and later Kavala led to the resignation of a succession of Royalist governments. The formation of the Provisional Government of Thessaloniki intensified the Venizelist purges. The

Allies demanded that the king surrender a quantity of war material equivalent to that which had been handed over to the Central Powers by the Fourth Army Corps, confiscate Greek navy ships and withdraw the Greek army to the Peloponnese. Although the king initially agreed, he later changed his mind, yielding to pressure from his hard-line supporters. The Allies responded by landing 3,000 Anglo-French marines in Piraeus on 1 December 1916 (18 November 1916 according to the old Julian calendar) in a show of strength to force the Royalists to conform. Brief hostilities ensued, ending in a disorderly retreat by the marines, who suffered considerable losses. Immediately afterwards, a wave of terrorist activity organised by the associations of reservists (*Epistratoi*), founded in 1916 and loyal to Constantine, was launched against the Venizelists, with murders, looting and arrests. These events, which became known as the November Events (*Noemvriana*), caused a tremendous stir in the Entente camp. France abandoned the possibility of a compromise with Constantine. Despite initial Allied objections, on 11 June 1917 France proceeded to capture various strategic points in southern Greece and to deliver an ultimatum to the Greek government demanding Constantine's immediate resignation. The king was forced to accept the French demand and abdicate his throne, though without officially resigning, declaring his second son Alexander as his successor. The time for Venizelos's return to power had come.²⁸

The Greek Contribution to the War and the Entente's Victory

Venizelos returned to Athens and resumed his post as prime minister on 26 June 1917. The new government proceeded to purge the state machinery and the Royalists' armed forces. The most eminent members of the monarchist faction who were regarded as particularly pro-German, including the former prime ministers Dimitrios Gounaris and Stefanos Skouloudis, and Constantine's military advisors General [Victor Dousmanis \(1861-1949\)](#) and Colonel [Ioannis Metaxas \(1871-1941\)](#), dictator from 1936 to 1941, were exiled either to Corsica or the Aegean Islands. In effect, Venizelos's government replaced Constantine's unconstitutional regime with its own form of dictatorship, which was to last until the 1920 elections. On 28 June 1917 Greece formally declared war on the Central Powers and gradually implemented a general mobilisation. However, the mobilisation of Greek forces was extremely difficult because of army purges, pro-monarchist propaganda, revolts by Royalist officers and privates, and the lack of resources and credit for equipping and resupplying the army. In spite of all this, a year later ten Greek divisions (approximately 300,000 men) were ready to reinforce the Armée d'Orient on the Salonika Front.²⁹

The situation at the front had not significantly changed since the summer of 1916. The Bulgarian assault launched at that time had been checked and the Allied counterattack in

November had led to the capture of Bitola (Monastir), the first Serbian city to be liberated. The assaults undertaken by Field Marshal Sarrail in the spring of 1917, in which Greek units of the Provisional Government of Thessaloniki took part for the first time, saw some limited success. Sarrail's replacement, General Guillaumat, undertook the reorganisation of the Armée d'Orient, which was suffering from low morale, mutinies and desertions by Russian soldiers, and internal rancour in the Serbian army, caused by Colonel [Dragutin Dimitrijević's \(1876-1917\)](#) controversial trial in Salonika in March 1917 and the subsequent purge of his supporters' army. In the spring of 1918 Guillaumat undertook a series of local offensives aimed at tying down enemy forces and preventing them from transferral to the [Western Front](#), where the final German war offensive was underway. These offensives involved the participation of three Greek divisions (the Serres, Archipelago and Cretan Divisions), who scored a notable victory in May by taking the strong Bulgarian defensive position at Skra-di-Legen. This success boosted the Greek army's morale, raised its standing in the Allies' eyes and highlighted the Bulgarian forces' weaknesses and drop in morale. On 9 June 1918, the French government recalled Guillaumat to Paris in order to appoint him governor of the city and named General Louis Franchet-d'Espèrey as his replacement. The new commander immediately began preparations for a big Allied offensive, with the aim not only of tying down enemy troops but also breaking through the front.^{[30](#)}

The Allied offensive began on 14 September 1918 with a powerful bombardment of the enemy's defensive line at Dobro Pole, which was captured the following day by Serbian and French troops assisted by units of the Archipelago Division. On 18 September 1918, British and Greek forces (the Serres and Cretan Divisions) attacked in the area of Lake Doiran. The Bulgarians managed to repulse the attack, but only with great losses, and later retreated under pressure from the Serbo-French advance from the west. At the same time French and Greek units had broken through the lines of the 3rd Bulgarian Division on Mt. Gena (Kožuf), while the Greek First Army Corps, with three divisions, attacked the Bulgarian positions on the Struma River. The fall of Skopje on 29 September 1918 marked the end of the Bulgarian resistance. On the same day, under the extra pressure of revolts by peasants and soldiers behind the lines, Bulgaria was forced to capitulate. The Armée d'Orient continued its advance both into Serbia and towards Thrace, forcing the surrender of the Ottoman (30 October 1918) and Habsburg Empires (3 November 1918). The war in the Balkans had finally come to an end.^{[31](#)}

Conclusion

As a result, Greece found herself on the victors' side of the Great War. In return, she annexed Western Thrace from Bulgaria under the [Treaty of Neuilly](#) (1919) and received even greater

concessions from the collapsing Ottoman Empire under the Treaty of Sèvres (1920). For a moment, it seemed as if the vision of the *Megali Idea* had finally been fulfilled, although political and military developments soon overturned these expectations. The Greek army continued to fight against the Turkish nationalists in Anatolia from 1919 until August 1922, when it was forced into a disorderly retreat. Its withdrawal from Anatolia was followed by the flight of more than a million local Greeks, who abandoned their ancestral lands for good. The *Megali Idea* had come to an end in a most dramatic fashion.³²

In Greece's case, WWI did not begin in 1914, or even in 1917, but rather in 1912, and did not end in 1918 but in 1922. These years represent a unified period that was particularly eventful, one marked by military conflicts, humanitarian disasters, diplomatic upsets, political antagonisms and a constitutional crisis. The Kingdom of Greece, like the other Balkan states, tried to exploit the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the antagonisms between the Great Powers in order to implement her irredentist programme. For the first time she sought and participated in alliances that led both to significant territorial expansion as well as implication in broader regional disputes – another characteristic shared by many other European countries at the time. Greece's involvement in the European war was inevitable due to the combination of her geopolitical position and her own ambitions. However, as happened elsewhere, the war both caused and highlighted internal disputes. At the end of the period, the country emerged twice as big as before both territorially and population-wise, but at the same time divided and deeply wounded, a fact that created the conditions for new internecine conflicts that would characterise the country's history for most of the 20th century.

Loukianos I. Hassiotis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Notes

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