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Venizelos, Eleutherios

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Venizelos, *Eleutherios*

Prime Minister of Greece

Born 23 August 1864 in Mournies of Crete, (then) Ottoman Empire

Died 18 March 1936 in Paris, France

One of the most prominent and important statesmen in modern Greek history, Eleutherios Venizelos full-heartedly favored Greek participation in World War I on the side of the Entente. This caused tension with King Constantine I, who favored neutrality. Venizelos finally succeeded in his goal in 1917, when Greece officially joined the Entente alliance.

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1. Early years – From Crete to Athens

Eleutherios Venizelos (1864-1936) was born in Crete, then part of the [Ottoman Empire](#), on 23 August 1864. After graduating from the Law School of the University of Athens (1886), Venizelos returned to Crete and began working as a lawyer. Soon afterwards he became involved in politics on the island, where Ottoman rule had for years been under pressure from the local Greek population to create a union with the Greek state. In 1889 Venizelos was elected to the Cretan Assembly. From that time

until 1909 he played a leading role in the political scene of Crete. His strong personality and political actions were highly influential in laying the ground for the union with [Greece](#), which finally happened in 1913. Meanwhile, Venizelos had been called to offer his services in Athens, after a military movement had seized power in the Greek capital. In 1910 he was elected to Parliament and thereafter as Prime Minister. He was confirmed in office in 1912. The Venizelos' government was particularly active in reforming the state and reorganizing the Greek army. The political and diplomatic genius of Venizelos proved decisive in the [Balkan Wars](#) (1912-13), which brought important territorial gains for Greece. The Balkan Wars, as well as the upcoming Great War, promised the eventual, partial or full, realization of the "Megali Idea" (Great Idea), the irredentist concept according to which all Greek citizens who still lived under Ottoman rule should be incorporated into the Greek state. Venizelos was the greatest proponent of this "Megali Idea" in the beginning of the 20th century. At the same time, however, the enthronement of [Constantine I, King of Greece \(1868-1923\)](#) in 1913 to replace his moderate father [George I, King of the Hellenes \(1845-1913\)](#), deteriorated Venizelos' relations with the royal family.

2. World War I – Strong disagreement with King Constantine

During the First World War, the unending conflicts between King Constantine, a supporter of the [neutrality](#) of Greece, and Prime Minister Venizelos, who stood for the participation of Greece in the war on the side of the Entente, brought about the National Schism. Greek society was split in two and the country fell into a serious political, social and economic crisis, with consequences lasting far beyond the end of the war. The conflict between the two leaders led to Venizelos' two subsequent resignations from his duties as Prime Minister; he first resigned on 6 March 1915, when Constantine did not give his consent to Venizelos' proposal for Greek participation in the Dardanelles Campaign, and resigned a second time on 5 October 1915, after the disagreement over sending Greek troops in Thessaloniki to stand by the side of the Entente allies. The landing of French and British forces in Thessaloniki had begun just a few hours before Venizelos resigned for the second time.

3. Schism in Greece – Formation of Provisional Government in Thessaloniki

The breach had become definitive towards the end of September 1916, when Venizelos moved to Thessaloniki and formed his Provisional Government – it was practically a parallel state, with a different ideological basis and political praxis than the official state in Athens. The Provisional Government encountered many problems, mainly financial; at first the Entente allies only reluctantly supported it. Despite the obstacles, Venizelos managed to organize an important corps of armed forces, which was put into the disposition of the French General [Maurice Sarrail \(1856-1929\)](#), head of the allied expedition on the [Balkan front](#).

4. Prime Minister of Greece in the last phase of World War I

After the forced dethronement of King Constantine on 12 June 1917, Venizelos moved to Athens. He formed a new government and officially declared war on the Central Powers. However, the people's fatigue from the previous wars and the longstanding state of mobilization, as well as the influence of pro-Constantine and pro-German propaganda in Greece, posed serious problems during the mobilization process (rebellions, desertions etc.). Venizelos' government had to use authoritarian measures against the royalists. In the end, though, the Greek army assembled by Venizelos fought and played an important role in the battles at the Macedonian front in the spring of 1918. Its contribution in the final attack of September 1918 was also praised by the Allies. The victory of the Entente powers proved Venizelos' ideas about the war to be correct; on the battlefield Greece had gained the prestige needed for its new aspirations, now to be pursued in the diplomatic field.

5. A prominent political career in the 1920s and 1930s

Following the end of the First World War, Venizelos concentrated his efforts on maximizing the gains of Greece in the post-war era; for almost two years he spent a lot of time abroad in order to achieve his goal through meetings and negotiations. The milestones of that period were the arrival of the Greek army at Asia Minor in 1919 and, above all, the signing of the [Treaty of Sèvres](#) in 1920, which almost entirely satisfied the Greek territorial claims of that time. However, Venizelos' defeat in the general election of 1920 interrupted his plans and forced him into self-exile outside Greece. Two years later, after the disastrous end of the Asia Minor campaign and the subsequent abdication of King Constantine, Venizelos was appointed head of the Greek delegation for negotiating peace terms. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, regulated, among other things, the issue of territorial limits of the Greek state. In the years that followed and until his death on 18 March 1936, Venizelos held almost uninterruptedly a leading role in the political scene of Greece, culminating in his term as Prime Minister from 1928 to 1932, when he combined important work in domestic politics with rich diplomatic activity – the main point of reference of the latter being the treaty of friendship signed with Turkey in 1930. Long after his death Venizelos is now widely recognized as one of the most charismatic and influential statesmen of modern Greek history.

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