

The Hellenic – Ottoman War of 1897

FOREWORD – REMARKS

The Hellenic-Ottoman War of 1897 has been for our country the first large-scale war operation, after it obtained its national independence with the Revolution of 1821. During this war, all national forces were put to tough test and proved to be not ready and unprepared to assume the task of accomplishing the “Megali Idea¹”, which was nothing else than the liberation of all the still unredeemed fellow-patriots, living under the Ottoman yoke. Greece entered a war with an Army numerically inferior, unorganised, untrained, with serious shortages in weapons, and substantially unable for any successful results.

The war was provoked and declared by the Ottoman Empire, because of its intention on the so-called “Issue of Crete”, considering that the ratio of powers between the two countries was favourable for the Ottoman Empire. However, for our approach to this “unhappy” war, we shall apply political, military and mainly historical deontology, in order to draw the most significant results and general benefits or losses for Greece.

The different understandings – views – evaluations of various historic periods, which delimitate the object of study of each and every historian, have many times become the principal element that diversifies their consideration and analysis. This signifies that there is a possibility of generating various “opinions”, depending on the questions and the various limits, set for the object under examination. This is why Fernand Braudel, one of the best historians of the previous century, has dedicated only 3 pages out his 3-volume work “Mediterranean” of 2.000 pages, on the historically important naval battle of Lepanto², considering it as a simple event within the totality of events that took place in this region of the Mediterranean Sea from the 16th to the 18th century. Thus, he placed particular gravity on the macroscopic examination of the period, “mining” in this way, more important events according to other historians. With these thoughts in mind, certain questions could raise on the historic period under consideration:

- Was the Hellenic-Ottoman War of 1897, a significant event for the history of Greece? If positive, in which time frame should it be placed?
- Was the war of 1897 an “unhappy” one or, if we place it into a time frame, broader than its precise chronological duration of 30 days, was it the introduction to a later success?

This is why we have tried to give answers to these reasonable questions in the following analysis.

The Hellenic-Ottoman War of 1897 has historically been included in what Douglas Dakin called the “Unification of Greece”. From a broader his-

¹ Great Ideal

² Greek coastal town of Naupactus

toric perspective, it has been part of the well-known "Eastern Question", i.e. the historic developments in the area of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, during the efforts of recovery of the Ottoman Empire, under the pressure of the Russian Empire, expanding to the South; and the effort of foreign forces to impose themselves in this space. As regards "conventional" military history, the Hellenic-Ottoman War of 1897 was the epitome of failure of the military and mainly the political leadership of Greece of that time, to raise themselves to the level of the circumstances. Nevertheless, the lack of the required war preparations and the necessary political maturity, generated a strong incentive to derive correct lessons, leading thus to the national resuscitation and the triumphs of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913.

When trying to deepen this questioning for one and only historic event, it becomes obvious that deriving conclusions is not an easy-to-acquire result. Therefore, it should be examined as part of the period from 1770 to 1923, and either be integrated, for example in which way it contributed to shaping up the present-day geographical surface of Greece, or in the expansion of Greece from the Antiquity up to now; or integrate these 30 days of this war as an event that led to the removal of the Ottoman Empire from the region of south-eastern Europe. Finally, it could be simply considered as a war of duration of 30 days, from 6 April to 7 May 1897, characterised as an event with 672 dead and 2.481 wounded, with activation of operational plans, with conduct of battles and the defeat, which set an object lesson for the next generations (in Greece).

In essence, the diverging historical differences on this particular case tend to sum up into a more "spherical" historic perspective, which narrates not only the event itself, but indeed the views on the event leading to the desired approach.

THE ANTECEDENTS OF THE WAR – INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

As regards the antecedents of the war, we shall attempt to apprehend the spirit and the pulse of that time: certainly, the Protocol of London³ had created a [Hellenic] State, but the delineation of the borders, imposed by the Great Powers, left out of Greece entire regions, where the National Revolution was choked into the blood by the Ottoman Turks, thus condemning millions of Greeks to a life of prolonged harsh slavery.

Starting from the mid-19th century, an explosive mixture gradually spread over the Balkan Peninsula. The Ottoman Empire, eventually with the method of reforms and other times granting pretended equality to the enslaved minorities, in essence endangered their survivability.

Under such circumstances, Hellenism either free or unredeemed or in the Diaspora, with the existing small Hellenic State as vaulting horse, deliberately started a persistent and long-range struggle to materialise

³ 1830

their national visions. Thus, in 1864 the Ionian Sea Islands were annexed to Greece, while Thessaly and a small part of Epirus were liberated in 1881.

The policy of the Great Powers, as regarded the Balkan Peninsula, was dominated by the traditional doctrine for safeguarding the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. This policy had been clearly expressed during the Berlin Conference, to the great delight of the Ottoman Turks. However, the world colonialist antagonism of the European Powers was bringing the Peninsula closer to the risk of revision of treaties and, subsequently, of borders to the detriment of Hellenism.

Two rival camps emerged: a) the revisionist, expressed by the Triple Alliance of Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary; and b) the conservative, i.e. for safeguarding the established order, expressed by England, France and Russia. At this point, it should be noted that these two alliances were not solid, since internal frictions in both camps never ceased to exist.

Greece had already faced the Ottoman Empire in 1866, due to the 3-year long Revolution of Crete, whose population demanded the union of the Island with the national state. Greece had indirectly assisted by sending materials and volunteers; at the same time, it manoeuvred in the diplomatic scene to achieve an entente of the Balkan nations against the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately, the only achievements then were some reforms and a new Ottoman "Charter" for the Island.

Moreover, at the strategically important region of Macedonia, Hellenism had been encountering Panslavism. Russia had been promoting the establishment of a loyal and monstrously expanded Bulgarian State, which would allow its accession to the Straits and from there to the Aegean Sea. Thus, it achieved the concession by the Sultan of a firman for the establishment of a Bulgarian Church (Exarchate), independent from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (1870). The jurisdiction of the Exarchate was to expand beyond the purely Bulgarian areas, with the ulterior aim to annex Macedonia to Bulgaria, as evidenced by Article 10 of the firman.

Thus, Russia, applying its policy and under the pretext the impasse of the European intermediation for the termination of the Serbian-Ottoman war that erupted, declared war against the Ottoman Empire, and when it won, forced it to sign the "Treaty of Saint Stephan" (1878), almost achieving the establishment of a great Bulgarian State, satellite to Russia.

Other Powers, fearful of these manoeuvres, convened in the very same year the Berlin Conference, which reversed the Treaty of Saint Stephan. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian moved methodically and violating the provisions of the Treaty of Berlin, arbitrary annexed in 1885 the Greek-inhabited Eastern Romulia (northern Thrace), torching, conducting

genocide, displacing populations, or forcibly “vulgarising⁴” the Greek populations that were the majority in some areas. Their policy was favoured by the unwillingness of the Great Powers for any reaction (mainly of England), since these wished, in this way, to pull Bulgaria out of the sphere of influence of Russia. Subsequently, the mobilisation declared by Greece the long of the Hellenic-Ottoman borders (in Thessaly), was received particularly hostilely, and the English-French immediately launched a naval blockade of Greece; thus, the mobilisation was revoked.

The Bulgarians exploited these international balances and, in conjunction with their victory in the Serbian-Bulgarian war that they provoked, actively shifted their attention and shot an expansionist eye on Macedonia. Thus, encouraged by the English, they appointed envoy-bishops of the Bulgarian Exarchate and also sent armed groups, aiming at terrorising the Macedonians.

When, in April 1895, the political party of Theodore Diligiannis formed a new government, they found themselves facing serious substantial internal and external problems. The bankruptcy of 1893, the regulation of the external debt of Greece, as well as the great national issues of Macedonia and Crete were all of primordial importance, necessitating particularly delicate and effective manoeuvres. Due to all these negative developments, Greece tried to pull itself out of its diplomatic isolation, and made an effort to warm over the Hellenic-Ottoman relations. Yet, this proved to be impossible, due to the Ottoman aggression in regard to the delimitation of the borders in Thessaly and their policy over Crete, especially after the events in Eastern Romulia.

It left the Hellenic government no other way than the reformation of the country and the enhancement of its military might. Unfortunately however, due to the latent financial crisis and the enormous external debt, such an action was impossible.

At the peak of these events and the national impasses, on 12 November 1894, fifteen junior Officers founded the “Ethniki Etaireia⁵” (one of the founding members was Ioannis Metaxas⁶). The aims of the Association were: to modernise the Army, to promote the national sentiment, and to assist the subjugated Greeks. Gradually, the Association became so powerful, thanks to the personalities that it attracted from the people of culture (such as Spyros Lampros⁷, Kostis Palamas⁸, Nikiforos Lytras⁹, Grigorios Xenopoulos¹⁰, Linos Politis¹¹, and other), along with the entire family

⁴ Literally, forcing them to declare Bulgarian nationality

⁵ National Association

⁶ Then, Army Officer; later, Chief of the Army Staff, and Dictator-Prime Minister (1936-1940)

⁷ Journalist

⁸ Poet

⁹ Painter

¹⁰ Author and Columnist

¹¹ Folklore Specialist

of the Grek Press, that it almost replaced the Hellenic State and paralysed its actions, working in parallel or contrary to it.

Abroad, after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 in conjunction with the transfer by the Ottomans of Cyprus (1878) and Egypt (1882) to the English, the primary role of the Ottoman Empire in the strategic plans of Great Britain was substantially pushed aside. The Ottoman Turks, aware of the prevailing situation, enhanced their relations with the Triple Alliance, and invited German Officers under General Kolmar Von Der Goltz to promote the modernisation and strengthening of their Army. Thus, the massacres against the Armenians in the years 1889-90 and 1896-97 gave Old Albion the occasion to disengage from its previous policy concerning the Ottoman Empire. Even Lord Salisbury, himself an ardent proponent of safeguarding the Ottoman integrity, changed course of action.

It becomes clear that at the unification level (first historical example) and the "Eastern Question" level (second example), or even at history of events level (third example) these elements led to a national (Greek) unrest.

The Issue of Crete

The main cause for the subsequent evolution of the problem was to become the first of the three theatres of the war, the one of Crete, even if this "Theatre of Operations" is not included, as regards the majority of the relevant bibliography, in the main part of the Hellenic-Ottoman War of 1897, but in its "Foreword".

At the same period of the Bulgarian successes, the Ottoman Turks continued violating the "Organic Law" that they had signed for Crete.

The Island had remained for the entire 19th century in a revolutionary unrest. The successive revolutions of 1821-23, of 1825-30, of 1841, of 1858, of 1866-69 (of Arkadi¹²), of 1876-78, of 1881 and of 1885-86 did not confer any significant change to the savage Ottoman administration methods (massacres, torching of villages, etc). The number [of revolutions] is an explicit witness of the impasses felt by the Greeks of Crete in the face of an Asian Sultan that had no intention to alter even the slightest of the Ottoman theocratic establishment, to a state of equality and justice for the subjugated people. The declarations of Michelidakis, the leader of the Conservatives or "Karavanades"¹³ (the other political formation was the Liberals or "Xypolitoi"¹⁴, led by Venizelos¹⁵) are characteristic for their sagacity; he said that, "in order to obtain what you are entitled from the Turks, you must conduct two wars: one to make them sign the treaty and one to make them apply it".

¹² Monastery-centre of the Revolution in Rethymnon Prefecture, that perished gloriously

¹³ Slag for "Other Ranks"

¹⁴ Slag for "Barefoot"

¹⁵ Later, great statesman and Prime-Minister of Greece

One of those Sultan "concessions" was the notorious new "Organic Law" for Crete (3 / 15 Oct 1878) that introduced some kind of parliamentary system to the Island. Nevertheless, endless Sultan decisions-interventions altered this law to an extent that "its value was less than the one of the paper, on which it was printed".

At the same time, the Hellenic efforts to approach the Romanians and the Serbs failed, due to the irrational perspectives of the latter against Macedonia. The Ottoman Turks undisturbed and exploiting the Hellenic "irreproachable attitude" policy that was imposed by the diplomatic isolation of Greece, suppressed the Revolution of Crete of 1888-89. Thus, in the early 1890's, the Greeks of Crete were exasperated by the ulterior motives of the Ottoman administration and remained vigilant in an endless revolutionary mood.

All facts talked about another crisis of the Eastern Question under development. In 1895, Alexandros Karatheodoris was appointed as Governor General of Crete [by the Sultan], but his work was obstructed. The intransigence of the Sultan to the administrative changes that he proposed, as well as the generalised reaction of the Christian inhabitants of the Island, forced Karatheodoris to resign, and he was replaced by a Turk-Albanian, Turhan Pasha. The hostilities that broke out by Turkish provocations (raids, plunders, etc) in spring 1896, led to the Revolution on 3 May, without the consent of Athens, busy at that time with the organisation of the first Olympic Games.

In spite the efforts for appeasement of the Great Powers, considering that their interests were endangered and afraid for the fate of their citizens living on the Island, the Ottoman Turks reinforced their military contingent, moving in new troops, and acted more provocatively. By the end of July on the Revolution spread out demanding the termination of the Ottoman administration, due to incessant Ottoman perfidies against the agreement (unprovoked assassinations and devastations of villages). Volunteers and supplies from mainland Greece started flowing Crete.

THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR

Meanwhile, the "Ethniki Etaireia" had been pushing Diligiannis government to assume an active attitude, since he kept a stance of expectation, due to the existing difficulties. Nevertheless, on 25 January 1897, Hellenic warship "Hydra" sailed off for Chania, in order to impede landing of fresh Ottoman forces on the Island; this action by the Hellenic Government on one hand enthralled the public opinion, but on the other it shook the apparent initial neutrality of the Great Powers. This "casus belli" action of Greece towards the Ottoman Empire, as well as the later on reinforcement of the Hellenic contingent with 1.500 men, under the command of Colonel Timoleon Vassos, gave a belligerent character to the situation that could evolve into a danger for the nation. All compromising efforts failed,

while the withdrawal of all Hellenic forces from the Island was demanded by the Great Powers that had, in the meanwhile, occupied the main towns of the Island. Mining of all compromising solutions was mainly a result of the activities of the "Ethniki Etaireia" and the opposition, resulting in throwing the Hellenic State into a terrible war adventure.

Since February 1897, troops of the "Ethniki Etaireia" were crossing the Hellenic-Ottoman borderline, giving thus the Ottoman Turks the pretext not only to successfully face this effort, but also to declare war against Greece. It should be noted that the borderline between the two States before that war ran along the line north of Penius River starting from Thermaicus Gulf in the East, up to Epirus in the West and south to the Ambracian Gulf. In the night of 27 to 28 March, rebel troops of the Association, divided into three columns, invaded Ottoman-occupied territory, entailing the engagement of the Hellenic guard-posts along the borderline. On 30 March, following continuous battles and re-conquering of heights and villages in the area, the rebel forces, fearing the risk of being encircled by the assembling Ottoman forces, hastily redeployed to Hellenic territory, only hastening the declaration of war. On 5 April, the Sublime Porte notified the Greek Ambassador in Constantinople about the severance of the Hellenic-Ottoman relations, while on the other hand it systematically, silently and methodically prepared its troops for war. On the side of Greece, Prime-Minister Diligiannis hastily organised a Field Army of approximately 45.000 men, only in part prepared, to face the Ottoman threat.

War operations were conducted on mainland Greece's soil, in two main theatres of operations: in the East in Thessaly and in the West in Epirus; in both cases the numerical and tactical superiority of the Ottoman forces vice the Hellenic ones was more than obvious. The Headquarters of the Hellenic Field Army in Thessaly was in Larissa, under the command of Crown Prince Constantine and with Colonel of the Artillery Konstantinos Sapountzakis as the Chief of Staff; in total, the forces in Thessaly were 24 Infantry battalions, 7 Evzones¹⁶ battalions, 9 independent Infantry battalions, 5 Foot squadrons, 1.100 Cavalrymen, 48 Pack Artillery guns [2nd and 3rd Artillery Regiments of the Hellenic Army in Thessaly] and 4 Engineers Companies. The Ottoman Force in Thessaly, on the other hand, were 99 Infantry battalions, 26 Cavalry squadrons, under the command of Etem Pasha, with headquarters of the General Command of the Field Army in Elasson.

The main Ottoman offensive against the Hellenic Force was launched on 6 April 1897. Etem Pasha ordered a main effort along the borderline from the coasts of Thermaicus Gulf down to the area of Tyrnavos; by the end of the day, he succeeded in occupying Melouna Pass, without advancing at all to the South. The Hellenic Field Army, not able to resist, gradually retreated without order, cohesion and plan, transmitting confusion and panic to the non-combatant population of Thessaly. On 12 April, re-

¹⁶ Light Infantry, dressed in traditional costumes

treat began to the position of Pharsala-Velestinon, and on 14 April, the Hellenic Field Army finally assembled in the designated position in Pharsala. On 23 April, new retreat started towards Orthrys Mountain, since most of Thessaly and more [to the South] until the area of Thermopylae was lost to the enemy. By mid-day 7 May, Crown Prince Constantine received outside Lamia the telegram of the Government ordering the conclusion of a truce. There was a ceasefire by 1500 hours of that day, while negotiations were long and tough; the truce was signed in the area of Taratsa near Lamia on 23 May [1897].

In contrast to Thessaly, the theatre of operations in Epirus saw the Ottoman Turks take a rather defensive posture, while the Hellenic Army was offensive, aiming at the objective of seizing the town of Ioannina. The headquarters of the Hellenic Command of the Field Army in Epirus was on Korodimos Height, South-East of Arta, under the command of Colonel of the Artillery Thrasybulus Manos; in total, the forces were 12 Infantry battalions, 3 Evzones battalions, 4 Field Artillery batteries, 4 Pack Artillery batteries, 5 Engineers companies and 3 Cavalry squadrons. Respectively, the Turkish Force, under the command of Lieutenant General Ahmet Hifci, with headquarters in Ioannina, composed of 44 Infantry battalions, 6 Field Artillery batteries, 1 Pack Artillery battery and 4 Cavalry squadrons.

On 6 April, Hellenic troops were put on alert. Nevertheless, in spite of the initial promising messages from the front of Epirus, after the Hellenic forces crossed Arachthus River on April and the liberation of Philippias on the very next day, the Hellenic forces gradually retreating towards Arachthus River. The same disappointing situation continued, even after the battle of Grimpovo (1-3 May), until on 7 May 1897, a ceasefire was finally agreed between the two belligerents, upon request of the Ottoman side.

After one month of combats, Greece was definitely defeated. The main battles took place in:

[Thessaly]

- * Deleria (11 April)
- * Velestino (18 April)
- * Pharsala (23 April)
- * Domokos (5 May)

[Epirus]

- * Pente Pigadia (11 April)
- * Anogio-Hani Kravasara¹⁷ (16-17 April)
- * Grimpovo (1-3 May)

Those interested can find more information in the Hellenic Army General Staff / Army History Directorate's edition on "The Hellenic – Ottoman War of 1897".

In October 1897, the Great Powers (Russia, England, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy) imposed on the Sultan, in an uneasy

¹⁷ Inn near Amphiloehia

situation due to the international outcry after the massacres against the Armenians of 1896-97, the acceptance of a new "Organic Law", providing for a status of semi-autonomy for the Island of Crete, appointing at the same time Prince George of Greece as High Commissioner of the Great Powers in Crete. Greece was condemned to a fine of 4 million Ottoman pounds that the Greeks had to pay as compensation for the retreat of the Ottoman forces from Thessaly, while the borderline were slightly modified to the benefit of the Ottomans.

For the payment of the fine, Greece was forced to request a new loan from the Great Powers, after paying out the old lenders. This resulted in the imposition of financial control in the country, known as the "International Financial Control", directed by a 6-member committee and covering the entire Hellenic public sector and mainly the income of the monopolies on the salt, the fuel, etc. The finalised peace treaty was signed on 22 November 1897 in Constantinople, after long negotiations and the intermediation of the Great Powers. It should be noted, at this point, that the Czar of Russia kept an exceptionally favourable position as, defending his own interests, he supported the Hellenic ones against the demands of the Sublime Porte after the truce, and in spite the particularly adverse plans of England and Germany almost ceding the entire Thessaly to the Ottoman side.

EPILOGUE – CONCLUSIONS

Given the exposed Bulgarian aggression in Macedonia, voiced by the organisations of the "Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Committee"¹⁸ (1870) and the "Supreme Macedonian Committee" (1894), as well as the Ottoman atrocities in Crete, it could be said that the foundation of the "Ethniki Etaireia" served a historic necessity. It reflected the very intense popular discontent, expressed by feelings of anger and indignation, for the incapacity-unwillingness of the Hellenic political leadership to take action. For the first time, scholars and military came together to serve the national visions. They excluded all statesmen, even Crown Prince Constantine, when he showed his will to become their general commander!

Even not successfully, since 1896 the "Ethniki Etaireia" had organised and sent armed groups in Macedonia, thus initiating the counteroffensive of the Greeks of Macedonia (Groups of Broufas, Ververas, Papadimos, Velentzas and Groutas). Various history writers accused them for "all the bad in the country". But, if we judge more remotely and macroscopically its actions, as time separates us from that period, and if we consider the subsequent events, we could say that:

a) The Association forced the Government of George Theotokis to deal, as they should, with the modernisation of the Hellenic Army, inviting at the same time the national benefactors to make more money available. Thus, [the Hellenic Army] started serious training, organisation and ar-

¹⁸ Known as VMRO

mament programmes, in order to meet its harsh national mission, and more to wash away the shame of 1897.

b) It signalled the beginning for the Struggle for Macedonia. The compromising solution of the appointment of Prince George¹⁹ as High Commissioner of the Great Powers in Crete, just heralded the union of the Island with Greece, as was pretty soon granted full autonomy. The union [of the Island] with the homeland was finally achieved after the end of the [victorious] Balkan Wars (1912-13).

c) Its Officers-members became the leaders of the Movement of Goudi²⁰, which was beneficial for the nation, as accepted by all.

d) It sustained and fostered a high national morale, as evidenced by the [victorious] Balkan Wars.

Finally, it should be underlined that unexpectedly, even the imposition of the International Financial Control greatly assisted the monetary stability of the country and the improvement of the credibility of the Hellenic State abroad.

Concluding this brief report on various conceptually different approaches to this subject, we could echo that the HAGS / Army History Directorate's has edited the historic volume on "The Hellenic – Ottoman War of 1897", Athens 1993, of 502 pages, detailing and analysing all political and military subjects and events, respectively.

¹⁹ Second son of King George I of Greece, brother of Crown Prince and then King Constantine I

²⁰ 9 Aug 1909 – The military, supported by the people demanded and achieved major changes in the political and military establishment.