

“A co-existence that was an undeniable historical necessity”: Greek stereotypes of the Turks from 1878 until 1909

Abstract: Although Greek perceptions of the Turks have been negative throughout Greece’s modern history, between 1878 and 1909, Greeks saw Turks as less threatening than Bulgarians. Some Greek politicians and diplomats also considered the possibility of an alliance with the Ottoman Empire as the best way to promote Greek interests. The need to protect against Bulgarian expansion and the maintenance of balance between Greece and Bulgaria reshaped Greek perceptions of the Ottoman Empire. Between 1878 and the Balkan Wars Greek diplomats and politicians saw the Ottoman Empire not only as a foe at the expense of which Greece could expand but also as an ally against Bulgaria. After Greece’s defeat in 1897 and the ensuing cool off of Greek irredentism, a period of conciliation with the Ottoman Empire and the Turks followed, which lasted until the Balkan Wars in 1912.

During the first half of the 20th century, Greek-Turkish relations were hostile, as one might have expected. Greek nationalists were still hoping to unify all Balkan Christians in a single state to which the Ottoman Empire reacted by diplomatic complaints on Greek violations of the frontier, denying direct diplomatic communication with Greece as well as complaining against the Greek tactic of granting citizenship to Ottoman subjects of Greek descent. The Greek irredentist hope was revived during the Crimean War, in 1854, when six thousand Greek irregulars entered Thessaly and Macedonia to instigate a rebellion against the Ottomans: the rhetoric used by Greek nationalists at the time was often taken from religion, as the opposition of *all* Christians to the Ottomans was considered obvious. Thus, Greek nationalists, such as the journalist Democritus, asked for all Balkan Christian to “merge into Hellenism”, so that their cumulative strength would topple the Ottoman Empire. (Democritus, ‘The nation’, *Aion* 6/18 October 1842, p. 1. The original is in verse.) Similar thoughts were echoed among Greek diplomats such as Alexandros Contostavlo.

Things changed rapidly in the 1870s, once it became clear that instead of joining Hellenism, Bulgarians preferred to carve out their own state. The conflict was first sensed in the religious realm: in September 1872, the Synod of the Patriarchate decided that ‘everyone participating and agreeing and collaborating’ with the Bulgarian Church was a schismatic. (Ματάλας 2003, 335) The Patriarchate became an enemy of the Bulgarian Church: it allied with the Greek consuls in European Turkey, and especially in its most contested region, Macedonia in order to restrain the influence of the Exarchate. Greek diplomats and politicians saw great profits in this new alliance: it allowed them to claim with seductive but illusory logic that all the communities that did not join the Exarchate were not simply faithful to the Patriarchate but also members of the Greek nation. Since the 1870s the Ministry started using the term Patriarchist as interchangeable with that of Macedonian Greek. But, beyond rational calculations, both of these parties based their response on an instinctive mistrust for Bulgarians, and in general ‘Slavs’: ‘the gangrened and rotten’ Exarchate, as the Orthodox guilds of Constantinople called it. (Ματάλας, 2003, 302)

The old perception of the Turks as oppressors of all Christians of the Balkans, emerged for one last time during the 1876-78 Eastern Crisis. It gained momentum when Gladstone published his pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*. In the text, Gladstone asked for a quick solution to the Eastern Question “Let the Turks now carry away their abuses in their only possible manner, namely by carrying off themselves”. (L.S. Stavrianos, 2000, 404) However, it was unclear what Greece should do to speed up the demise of the Ottoman Empire, especially given that the numbers of unredeemed brethren were significantly diminished without the Bulgarians. The Greek army was not large enough to confront the Ottoman army. The catalyst was the Russian declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire in April 1877. Greece mobilized 35,000 men and Greek irregular troops entered Ottoman territory. (Dakin, 1972, 127-9) The Ottoman Empire complained to the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lord Derby against the Greek mobilization but the Greek Foreign Minister, Charilaos Tricoupis, answered that it was within the rights of Greece as an independent state to decide whether to mobilize its troops. (Tricoupis, 1877¹ and Tricoupis, 1877²).

The Treaty of Berlin which ended the Eastern Crisis meant two things for Greece. On the one hand, a competitor for Ottoman territory in the Balkans had appeared in Bulgaria. From now on, in any Eastern Crisis, Greece could choose to side with Bulgaria or Turkey. Indeed, Greece sided with Turkey when it considered that a new territorial settlement in the Balkans would favour Turkey. On the other hand, Greece received a promise to receive territories in Thessaly and a part of Epirus. This was understood to be a compensation for the new Bulgaria. From then on, Greeks insisted that any adjustments of the Balkan frontiers should take into account the territorial balance between Greece and Bulgaria.

These two ideas, the need to protect against Bulgarian expansion and the maintenance of balance between Greece and Bulgaria reshaped Greek perceptions of Turkey. Between 1878 and the Balkan Wars Greek diplomats and politicians saw Turkey not only as a foe at the expense of which Greece could expand but also as an ally against Bulgaria. After Greece’s defeat in 1897 and the ensuing cool off of Greek irredentism, a period of conciliation with Turkey followed, which lasted until the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Theodoros Deliyannis became the most prominent supporter of Greek-Turkish reconciliation in the early 20th century:

...it has to be understood that the Turks have been connected to us historically and socially, it would then be imprudent for Hellenism’s sake to demand the separation of the two peoples ... The co-existence, obviously under a compromise, has become an undeniable historical necessity. After all, the free Greek might be able to fight against the Turk, but the enslaved Greek will get in great difficulty if he does this, and it would demand great bravery. ... The Greek has among them [the Turks] friends, protectors, admirers, he loves them and they love him in return. If the Turkish administration improves, the coexistence [between Greeks and Turks] will be the friendliest in the world. (Χατζηγιαννόγλου, 1902, 156-7)

Unlike other politicians, Deliyannis uses the common past of Greeks and Turks not in order to remind the reader of a troubled and violent time, but to promote an alternative perception of the Turks where they share a common past with the Greeks and are for long destined to continue to do so. Instead of invoking the duty of “liberated” Greeks to assist the Greeks who still lived under the Ottomans, a common trope in Greek politics before the 1870s, Deliyannis argues that free Greeks should avoid an armed confrontation for the sake of the enslaved Greeks whose position would be jeopardized in the case of a conflict. Seeing the Turks as “friends” and “protectors” is another striking feature of Deliyannis’ thought: the text was written before the Ilinden Uprising, but at a time when Bulgarian revolutionary activity was known to the Greeks and was seen as a cause for great concern. It was in response to this armed revolutionary movement that Greeks saw the Ottoman Empire as a potential ally against the increasing strength of Bulgarian nationalism. Instead of hoping for a violent reversal of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans, Deliyannis now expressed hope for an improved Turkish administration under Abdul Hamid II.

However, the Greeks were not the only ones who hoped for an improved Turkish administration. Already since the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 (article 23) the Powers had been considering reforms in the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire. A Bulgarian uprising in Macedonia in 1902 revitalised the idea of gradual administrative changes under European supervision – the “Vienna reforms” as contemporaries called them (Dakin, 1966, 86-8). The Russian foreign Minister Lamsdorff visited Belgrade and Sofia in December 1902 and threatened that Russia would withdraw its support for Bulgaria in educational and church matters, unless they stopped fomenting revolution. (Vucinich, 1968, 37). His visit had the support of the other Powers.

The Powers wanted to bring order to what they saw as the most turbulent region of the Balkans. The Austro-Hungarians and the Russians agreed to reforms that would relieve the Christians: offer them legal equality, security and a fairer taxation system. The reforms could bring order in the Eastern Mediterranean without letting the Ottoman Empire collapse. On 24 May /June 6 1903, Nicholas O’Connor, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, ‘urged the Sultan not to let the opportunity slip, ...[and] to meet the Bulgarian overtures halfway through by showing greater clemency towards the revolutionary prisoners, greater consideration for the peaceful inhabitants, and greater moderation in the number of prisoners’ (O’Connor quoted in Elliot, 1903). Moreover, the Powers, and especially Britain, saw in the reforms a model that could be replicated in other regions of the Empire. If the Macedonian reforms worked then something similar could be done in the parts of Asia Minor with an Armenian population.

The Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs soon found out about the reforms plans and was worried. In case the reforms were used as the blueprint for a future partition of Macedonia could it be the case that they favour the Bulgarians instead of the Greeks? With this in mind, several Greek diplomats preferred “the maintenance of the status quo” over the success of European reforms, a view that brought Greek diplomacy closer to the Ottoman point of view, since the Ottoman Empire was the only country which officially objected to the reforms.

This led to a period when the Greek perception of Turkey was significantly less negative than usual. Greek journalists and writers focused on Bulgarians as the main national enemy, Greek diplomats could work together with the Ottoman authorities in Macedonia. But this did not mean the erosion of old stereotypes against Turks. . Typical of such attitudes was the Greek diplomat and author Evgenios Zalokostas. In 1895 he gave a talk on his recent visit to Constantinople. Zalokostas knew Turkey well, and he was convinced that Turks were of a very different nature than Greeks. He said of Turkish women: ‘what are they thinking since they do not talk? What are they doing since they do not move? This is the Turkish life. Speechlessness, stagnation, gaiety’. For educated upper-middle-class Greeks like him, there was no doubt that Greece was superior to Turkey, and the reason was that Turkey (unlike Greece) could never become European. He described the city ‘as a painter representing an image’: the inhabitants were reduced to the details of a picturesque landscape without thoughts and history. For Zalokostas, looking in the direction of Turkey meant betraying Europe. (*Ζαλοκώστας*, 1895; Said, 1996, 81; Pamuk, 2005, ch.27)

For many Greek diplomats the reforms were undesirable. In 1901, the Ministry was vaguely informed about the European reform plans. The Minister, Athos Romanos, commented to Metaxas that in the case that reforms would be introduced ‘the greatest danger... would be the definition of spheres of influence based on untrue data’; but ‘for the time this thing [i.e. the introduction of reforms] looks rather dubious’: Greece would prefer ‘the maintenance of the *status quo*’, in other words, the unqualified sovereignty of the Sultan. Romanos worried that the Bulgarians, who were believed at the time to have a numerical superiority in Macedonia, had much more to gain from the involvement of the Europeans in the domestic affairs of the Empire. (Romanos, 1907)

The reforms were similarly undesirable among nationalist journalists, who saw in them an opportunity to attack the government. Kalapothakis, editor of the nationalist newspaper *Embros* and head of the Macedonian Committee in Athens, glorified the actions of the bands and attacked the government for its supposed “impeccable stance”: „the government has the right to take under consideration the Turkish representations and to be intimidated by the threats and the pressure. But it should learn that such a policy would be opposed by the whole of Hellenism“. (Kalapothakis, 1904)

Like the newspaper articles, the memorial services for Macedonian bandits served to express the anger of the irredentists with the government. One of the best documented memorial services is that of Ioannis Skordakos. Skordakos was a nineteen year-old pharmaceutical student from Gytheion, in Mani. He was killed on 2/15 January 1906 in a skirmish with the Turkish army. According to *Asty*, Skordakos and his four colleagues preferred death to surrender to ‘two hundred Turks’ who had surrounded them – this fantastically unrealistic language was the staple of radical irredentists. (for instance see *Αστυ*, 1906) *Acropolis* described the preparations for his memorial service: ‘offices and shops shall remain closed, street lamps shall be covered with a piece of cloth’. At nine in the morning, the university and school students, the guilds, and the associations would lay wreaths. They would walk to the Cathedral for the religious service and then start a ‘Macedonian demonstration’ asking from the

Government to abandon the deadly lethargy that has occupied them and to rush to create a navy and army because the time is nigh'.(Unknown, 1906) Macedonia had entered Greek politics, not as a geographic region, but as a concept and a mobilising theme: there were 'Macedonian' demonstrations, memorials, associations and committees, and for the most part 'Macedonia' stood for opposition to conventional politics. Following 1906, the Turkish army inflicted heavy casualties on the Greek bands.

Despite the criticism's, in reality the Greek government tried relentlessly to find alliances in order to promote its interests in Macedonia. It is noteworthy that that even then Theotokis never considered an alliance with the Ottoman Empire apparently because it regarded it as an undesirable ally.

In April, Wilhelm II visited Corfu, Theotokis's birthplace, and Theotokis offered him in person an alliance of the two countries over the Macedonian Question. According to Kostas Loulos, Theotokis confided to Wilhelm that he preferred Macedonia to remain Turkish. He suggested to Wilhelm what he had previously offered to Britain and France: the Greek participation in the Triple Alliance, and the reorganisation of the fleet according to German wishes. In exchange he asked for the connection of the Greek and Ottoman railways and a German loan. Wilhelm approved of Theotokis's suggestions and informed accordingly the German Ambassador in Constantinople. (Λούλος, 1991, 116-7)

It was the German Foreign Minister who blocked the *rapprochement*. Wilhelm von Schoen pointed out that Greece had a bad reputation in banking circles, and issuing a loan would be difficult. Moreover, as had happened with Pichon and Grey, Schoen saw a problem in Greek bandit activity. Turkey, the territorial integrity of which Greece violated, would be offended by any Greek-German agreement. For Schoen it was foolish to risk good relations with Turkey for the sake of a small country such as Greece. (Λούλος, 1991, 117-9) Theotokis understood that something had gone wrong. He wrote to his wife that

while the Emperor was very warm during our conversations in Corfu, now that he is back in Berlin, he has not sent me a single message. This is very worrying and means that his political advisers suggested he should not continue the negotiations and conversations we had in Corfu. (Ράλλης, 302-3)

This attempt of Theotokis gave rise to a false interpretation of his foreign policy. Loulos has exaggerated the significance of the *rapprochement* which he has called 'the Greek-Turkish agreements of 1908-09'. (Λούλος, 1991, 114) He has argued that these agreements were an instance of 'the leading group of a peripheral country that collaborated with power centres in the metropolis, promoting in this way the penetration of German imperialism'. (Loulos, 1991, 258). Other historians followed his example and argued that Theotokis and Crown Prince Constantine reoriented Greek foreign policy towards Germany prefiguring Constantine's neutrality policy in the First World War and the ensuing National Schism. (Koliopoulos and Veremis, 2002, 281-2)

If correct, Loulos's account would show that there was a powerful interest group that already since the 1900s worked to detach Greece from British influence and ally Greece to Germany in the coming European war. Nevertheless, it misses three things: first, as the above passage suggests, Theotokis himself saw the *rapprochement* as a failure: after this incident, Theotokis abandoned for good any idea of a Greek-German alliance.

Second, Constantine was not involved with the initiative in question and in any case he had little involvement with foreign policy in this period. And third, Theotokis was a supporter of the liberal politician Tricoupis, and therefore an Anglophile. He moved towards Germany not for ideological reasons but only after Grey categorically rejected his proposals. He described his negotiations with Wilhelm as 'as my attempt to ally ourselves even with the devil to avoid isolation'. (Theotokis quoted in Πάλλης, 1986, 302-3).

In short, in 1905, with the Deliyiannist Party broken in two, Theotokis could hope that in future the New Party would dominate Greek politics. Deliyiannis was dead and his party fragmented; Theotokis had the support of the King; and Greek finances were improving. By 1907, however, he was facing a formidable coalition: radical irredentists, the press and army officers had formed a lobby and used Theotokis's silence on the Macedonian Question to present him as a dishonourable politician who was abandoning Macedonia to the Bulgarians. He turned to diplomacy but his hopes were frustrated by Greece's military and financial weakness and by the violent outrages of the Defence, which Germany, France and Britain agreed made Greece an undesirable ally. Events in Turkey would soon help this anti-establishment coalition gather further momentum.

Thus, Baltazzi, Theotokis and Zalokostas tried to apply the brake on the consuls' demand for more involvement by the Greek state. Saktouris, consul in Serres, subsequently provided a vivid description of the difference of opinion between government and consuls. Writing in 1951, he claimed he had predicted months in advance the coming of the Young Turk Revolution: while Gryparis, Theotokis and Baltazzi were sure that the Sultan's power was secure, and allegedly stayed on the Sultan's side to the very end, Saktouris had warned that Greece had to switch sides and ally itself as quickly as possible with the conspirators who would soon be the new masters of Turkey. Saktouris felt so exasperated that Athens ignored his warnings that he submitted his resignation a few days before the Revolution broke out. He claims that after the Revolution took place, Baltazzi understood his mistake, rejected his resignation, and called him to Athens for consultation. (Σακτούρης, 1951, 74-6).

Greece maintained a cautious stance for a few months, but by December 1908 Baltazzi cooperated well with the newly appointed Turkish Ambassador in Athens, Naby Bey. Saktouris described Theotokis according to the stereotype of his irredentist enemies, as an effete aristocrat without nationalist convictions: Theotokis was too careful and moderate for the circumstances. For Saktouris Theotokis's caution was an unnecessary waste of time. Theotokis's mistrust of the Young Turks confirmed the view of the irredentists that he was a hesitant and tired man unsuited to the nationalist politics of the Balkans.

On one thing Saktouris was certainly right: Theotokis felt desperate in the summer of 1908. His diplomatic initiatives had failed, the Young Turks frustrated his hopes on Macedonia and the irredentists criticised him for inactivity. Criticisms against him focused on the missed opportunity of 1908. As Venizelos put it to Theotokis several years later, when Venizelos was Prime Minister and Theotokis an opposition MP: 'in 1908 you didn't move'. (Venizelos quoted in Stefanou, 1981, 417) The irredentists argued that Greece could have annexed Ottoman territory through a brazen *fait accompli* like Austria-Hungary did with Bosnia Herzegovina: the government should have claimed Crete and the vilayet of Janina, and maybe Macedonia too. That Greece stood by, doing nothing was an insult to the honour of the

nation: on 22 September/8 October Bulgaria became independent – Greek irredentists interpreted this as national humiliation. Irredentists saw Greek prestige evaporating while other Balkan nations were making gains. (Mazower, 1992, 896-7)

Theotokis saw things very differently. Baltazzi advised him that, if tension arose in Greek-Turkish relations, the Turks would turn against the Greeks of Asia Minor and the Aegean islands. Moreover, Gryparis suggested that Turkey was ready to declare war on Greece: for instance, General Mahmud Shevket Pasha threatened publicly that in case of Greek aggression, he would drink his coffee at the Acropolis – a phrase that circulated widely among Athenian irredentists adding fuel to the fire that threatened Theotokis. A war would have given a domestic boost to the Young Turks, and after 1897, the Turks were confident about the outcome. To the mind of Theotokis, the unilateral annexation of Turkish territory would have been a disaster. (Pάλλης, 1986, 295)

This does not mean that Theotokis remained inactive. In August 1908, the government replaced the Macedonian Committee with the Panhellenic Organisation [*Πανελλήνιος Οργάνωσις*]. This took the Defence in the direction that Rallis had in mind in 1903. The Organisation set up secret offices inside Turkey, manned by Greek officers who collaborated with the consuls. They also sent agents inside Turkey to collect information. But the key change was about the means of the Defence. Some Greek bands remained active after 1908, but the scale of operations was greatly reduced. The focus was on arming the local population. In September, the Ministry of Defence gave to the Organisation 4,800 gras rifles and a hundred cartridges for every rifle. According to Gounaris, until the fall of Theotokis from power in 1909, 10,657 gras rifles and 1,076,300 cartridges had arrived to Macedonia. Between 1903 and 1908, the Defence had created the networks that made possible what in 1903-04 was mere fantasy: the self-defence of Greek Macedonians. There was now an efficient network of the sort that Ion had envisaged in 1903. (Pάλλης, 1986, 291; Γούναρης, 1986, 198-99; cf I.K. Μαζαράκης, 1986, 162-3)

Two things are worth pointing out. First, this massive project in the last year of his premiership shows that Theotokis was not necessarily against supporting irredentist adventures: he simply was against advertising his involvement with them – as we shall see in section III, in this respect he was very different from Venizelos. In his actions, Theotokis was not as far from the irredentist circles as their denunciations in the press would make us believe. Second, the government was at last free of the burden of the bandits: there was no longer a need to apologise about their actions. But, as we shall see, arming the Greek Macedonians was risky, especially with the CUP in power. (Naby, 1909)

The military lobby, however, were displeased with Theotokis and saw in the Young Turks a model. The Greek CUP was called the Military League and was formed in October 1908. By the time of its revolution it had 1,300 army officers as members and all of the NCOs – Theotokis's austerity meant professional stagnation for them. The League used irredentism as a vehicle to attack the Greek political institutions: they put into practice Ion's suggestion to Melas in 1904 for a coup d'état against the political establishment. Why did the officers decide to do so? As radical irredentists, they had been upset for years with the 'impeccable stance' of Theotokis, but they were reluctant to move against the government. The CUP convinced them that officers could legitimately claim a role in politics. Moreover, the parliament was by then discredited. As happened in Europe, the parliament spent most of its time debating the annual budget, financial reforms and institutional reforms, but the officers thought all this did little to advance Greek irredentism. Moreover, the parliament operated only for a few months every year, and even then filibustering was common practice: the slow rates of Greek politics appeared unfit for the Balkans after 1908 when the times demanded

quick and decisive action. In the opinion of the officers, MPs were lost in details about state finances and forgot about national regeneration, the necessary prerequisite to the accomplishment of the Great Idea. Apart from the *bête noire* of Greek irredentists, Theotokis, the officers also had complaints about the royal family: they saw George as unable to advance Greek national interests, both because he cared more about not upsetting the Powers than supporting Greek national interests, and because he was getting old and tired. Crown prince Constantine too had become a scapegoat for the defeat of 1897: the officers resented his continued involvement with the army. In irredentism, the officers found a cause that legitimated their political ambitions. (Veremis, 1982, 395; Papacosma, 1981, 80; Μαρωνίτη, 2010)

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