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THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF GREEK-SOVIET RELATIONS IN 1924

After the October Revolution, the Greek government severed its relations with Russia. In fact, in order to ensure British and French support for Greek national claims at the Paris Peace Conference, Venizelos actually declared himself willing to send an expeditionary force to the Ukraine in January 1919 to assist the Allies in their efforts to overthrow the Bolsheviks¹. However, five years later, in 1924, Greece renewed its relations with Soviet Russia. It is the purpose of this article to examine and analyse the circumstances that compelled the Greek government to recognise the Soviet Union.

After the Lausanne Treaty, a new era began in Greek politics. The realisation of the *Meghali Idhea* had to be abandoned and the leaders of the state were obliged to re-orientate Greek foreign policy on the basis of the following principles: respect for Greece's territorial integrity and independence; the re-establishment of its position in the international forum by coming out of isolation; maintenance of its security through membership of the League of Nations; the establishment of friendly relations with all its neighbours; and avoidance of exclusive reliance on any one power by establishing friendly relations with all the Great Powers².

The re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Greece and Soviet Russia in 1924 falls into the context of this general diplomatic re-orientation. But apart from its new "multi-dimensional policy", the Greek government also considered that it should resume relations for economic reasons too, and also on behalf of the general interests of the Greeks of Russia³. An

1. Concerning the Ukrainian expedition see Army General Staff, Historical Division, *Το ελληνικόν εκστρατευτικόν σώμα εις μεσημβρινήν Ρωσίαν*, Athens 1955, passim: For the political aspects of the decision to intervene, N. Petsalis-Diomidis, "Hellenism in Southern Russia and the Ukrainian Campaign: Their effect on the Pontus Question (1919)", *Balkan Studies* 13₂ (1972), pp. 233-237.

2. Panayotis Pipinelis, *Ιστορία της εξωτερικής πολιτικής της Ελλάδος 1923-1941*, Athens 1948, pp. 6-7 and passim: Constantinos Svolopoulos, *Η ελληνική εξωτερική πολιτική μετά την συνθήκη της Λωζάνης: Η κρίσιμος καμπή Ιούλιος-Δεκέμβριος 1928*, Thessaloniki 1977, pp. 11-15.

3. In accordance with the Soviet census of 28 August 1920, the number of Greeks living

important part in the development of Greek policy was played by the “Association of Greeks from Russia”, which began lobbying for the re-establishment of relations in 1921, and also by well-known politicians and political parties.

When the preliminary Anglo-Russian trade agreement was signed in May 1921, the President of the Association of Greeks from Russia, Eleftherios Pavlidis, impressed upon the Greek government the necessity for contracting a trade agreement with the Soviets, not only for the sake of the Greeks in Russia, but also for broader political reasons. He believed that a certain degree of friendship with the Soviets would thus be ensured and that any chance of their giving aid to the Turks would be averted⁴.

In the summer of 1921, the Association’s Administrative Council sent a telegram to the Foreign Ministry of Soviet Russia requesting that trade relations be re-established and that the Greeks of Russia be permitted to emigrate to Greece and vice versa. It is significant that the Foreign Minister, Chicherin, agreed to meet representatives of the Greek government to discuss the question of the mutual repatriation of the two countries’ citizens and the restoration of trade relations⁵. But at that time, any moves on behalf of the repatriation of Greeks were bound to fail owing to the procrastination and reluctance of the Greek authorities.

Pressure continued to be applied to the Greek government in the years which followed, and the miserable circumstances of the Greeks of Russia were repeatedly stressed. There is no doubt that the Greek campaign in the Ukraine considerably aggravated the position of the Greeks there and contributed to their ill fortune⁶. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that prior to the campaign the Greeks of Russia had enjoyed almost privileged treatment in comparison to the other foreigners there.

Eleftherios Venizelos also pronounced himself in favour of the re-establishment of relations in January 1924, declaring that the Greek government ought to have contracted relations with the Soviets long before, both in order to strengthen Greece’s diplomatic position and for the sake of the Greeks of Russia⁷. Venizelos’ statement encouraged Pavlidis to submit a lengthy memo-

in Russia were 203,050, Andrew Zapantis, *Greek-Soviet Relations, 1917-1941*, New York 1982, p. 13. For the number of Greeks prior to the October Revolution and generally for the Greeks in Russia see Eleftherios Pavlidis, *Ο Ελληνισμός της Ρωσίας και τα 33 χρόνια του εν Αθήναις σωματείου των εκ Ρωσίας Ελλήνων*, Athens 1953, p. 38 and passim.

4. Pavlidis, *Ο Ελληνισμός της Ρωσίας*, p. 344.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 52 and 85.

7. *Ελεύθερο Βήμα*, 15 January 1924; Pavlidis, *Ο Ελληνισμός της Ρωσίας*, p. 377.

randum about Greek-Russian relations to the Greek government, in which he said:

“...Fully realising the difficulties involved for our respected government in contracting diplomatic relations with present-day Russia, we are of the opinion that the establishing of a trade agreement ought to be the object of particular concern and study... Irrespective of the advantages to be derived from a trade agreement with Russia by the Greeks there and also from avoiding the accumulation of an even greater refugee population here in Greece, Greek-Russian commercial relations would prove even more profitable to Greece in the future than they have been in the past...

“It would be a major national loss to Greek trade and Greek shipping if, when affairs are settled after the war, special agreements are not contracted in good time between the two states, and Greek trade is supplanted in Russia and Greek merchants are ousted by foreign rivals...”⁸.

During this same period, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) persistently called for relations to be resumed, emphasising the fact that since 1919 the working class had shown itself through resolutions and mass meetings to be in favour of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in the country's general interests. According to the KKE, Russia had regained its former position as a political organisation and was now an important, if not prime, factor in eastern affairs. Relations had to be resumed, not only because they were necessary for the Greeks living in Russia, but also in the interests of the shipping trade, for the ports of Russia had always been the principal commercial route for the Greek merchant navy⁹.

Apart from the KKE and the Athens and Piraeus Chambers of Commerce, a great many members of liberal circles had declared themselves in favour of the re-establishment of relations¹⁰. In fact, the government had even been asked to sever all contact with Demidov, Tsarist Russia's former ambassador in Athens, since Moscow might deem such contact to be unfriendly¹¹.

8. Pavlidis, pp. 345-346.

9. Greek Communist Party (KKE): *Επίσημα Κείμενα*, vol. 1, 1918-1924, Athens 1974, pp. 391-393.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 392. See relevant articles published in the newspapers *Δημοκρατία*, on 17 December 1923 and *Πατρις* on 30 December 1923.

11. KKE: *Επίσημα Κείμενα*, p. 393. In the beginning of February 1924 Eleftherios Venizelos and George Kafantaris informed Demidov that Greece would recognize the Soviet Union, *Εφημερίς των Βαλκανίων*, 7 February 1924.

It is clear that pressure for the resumption of diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia emanated from all levels of Greek society. Nevertheless, the Greek government took no steps in this direction; and the question is, why did the official state hold back in this way? Admiral George Kakoulidis, Commander of the Greek fleet on the Ukraine expedition and Liberal MP for the town of Kozani, provides some revealing information on this matter in a report he submitted to the Foreign Minister, Apostolos Alexandris, at the end of 1923.

There were two main reasons for the Greek government's refusal to recognise Soviet Russia. First, it considered the matter to be an international one, not concerning Greece and Russia alone, and consequently did not wish to recognise the Soviet regime for fear of arousing the displeasure of Britain and France. The second reason was the fear that Communism might take root in Greece. Analysing these reasons, Kakoulidis noted:

“...The first fear is groundless. In view of the fact that France has loans of fifty billion francs in Russia and is still begging for transactions between their political and commercial agents, and in view of the fact that twenty-four countries have trade relations (including England and France) and trade agreements (including England and Italy), and five have diplomatic relations (including Turkey, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland) with Russia, it would be quite unreasonable of France to protest about Greece alone, since she has not complained to any of the others with the cry that “My interests are endangered by your diplomatic relations”. On the contrary, while today she (France) employs Austrian agents in Russia, tomorrow she will employ Greeks. Besides, even if France were to protest, it seems to me that France's disfavour towards us is only one degree below that of Italy, such that we must ask ourselves whether we shall be displeasing a friendly power or a hostile one.

England cannot possibly protest, for we shall cite its own trade agreement of 20-12-20, the name of its official agent in Moscow, Asquith's speeches, the Anglo-Russian companies. On the contrary, she will co-operate with us.

As far as fear of Communism in Greece is concerned, it is not the Russian ambassador who will bring it here and spread it about. A private agent is more effective because he works in obscurity, whereas an ambassador is in the public eye and pregnable, his activities constantly under police surveillance. If the Russian government wished to betray its Communist activities, it would only have to entrust them to its ambassadors, and the police would immediately

and easily acquire all the evidence for investigation. Whereas matters are not so simple with the secret agents. But since England and Italy, which offer most suitable territory for Communism, are not afraid of having a Soviet ambassador, I see no reason why Greece should be afraid. For this reason, I unreservedly unite my own voice with the voice of the Greeks of Russia: "Relations - Passports!..."¹².

Kakoulidis discussed these two points—Anglo-French displeasure and the fear of Communism—with Chicherin in Moscow in the autumn of 1923, when he visited the city as a private individual to sound out Soviet Russia's frame of mind. He emphasised the fact that it was in the Greek people's interest to be on friendly terms with all the Great Powers, both because of Greece's geographical position and for the purposes of commercial exchange. But a great divide lay between this point of view and that which refused to countenance friendship with Russia for fear of displeasing the western powers. As far as fear of Communism was concerned, Chicherin assured Kakoulidis that the official representatives of Soviet Russia had no connection whatever with Communist propaganda, which was served by private organisations¹³. Understandably, the Foreign Minister's statement greatly impressed and pleased Kakoulidis, who now believed that there was no longer any real reason for not officially recognising Soviet Russia. Furthermore, he was certain that the Greek government would share this opinion, since "any government can confront private organisations, but it would be exceedingly unpleasant to have to confront an official representative of a friendly nation over matters of public order"¹⁴.

Apart from the diplomatic recognition of Soviet Russia, however, the Greek MP was also interested in commercial exchanges, which he believed would benefit Greece economically. In this context, he approached Krassin, the Minister for Foreign Trade, proposing the creation of a central company for the mutual exchange of products, a Greek-Russian shipping company, a "refrigerating tanker" company for transporting meat, fish, and dairy products from Russia, a Greek-Russian bank, and a Greek-Russian Chamber of Commerce¹⁵. His basic arguments for developing these relations were that

12. Historical Archives of the Greek Foreign Ministry, (A.Y.E.) 1924, A/5/VII, undated report of Kakoulidis to Alexandris, pp. 19-20.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

while Russia had always been a sphere of Greek commercial activity, Greek traders had never involved themselves in the domestic politics of a country they viewed as a political and religious sister of their own. Furthermore, the geographical position of Greece and the commercial genius of the Greeks, made the latter Russia's best commercial middlemen. And finally, Soviet Russia need have no fear whatsoever of any Greek economic or political infiltration, since Greece was such a small country¹⁶.

Clearly, Kakoulidis' plan was quite an ambitious one, and very difficult to carry out at that critical period. Nevertheless, there was widespread conviction that Greece would acquire enormous economic benefits if relations with Russia were restored, for despite the considerable destruction it had suffered, the latter was considered to be a great deposit of raw material and an unexplored treasure-house¹⁷. In fact, on 15 February 1924, an article in the newspaper *Elefthero Vima* (Free Tribune) stated that Greece needed Russia and that political and economic relations ought to be re-established, since they were now more than ever essential to Greece and closely tied up with its economic reorganisation¹⁸. An indication of the prevailing climate of opinion regarding Greek-Russian relations is the fact that the *Elefthero Vima* advised George Kafandaris' government to take note of Soviet Russia's foreign policy and to develop Greece's foreign policy accordingly¹⁹.

Kakoulidis' views about the foreign policy that Greece ought to follow in Europe are quite revelatory; he believed that Greece's geographical position did not permit her to have unfriendly relations either with "the sovereign of the sea, Britain" or with Soviet Russia, in view of the fact that she shared borders with Slavonic states. Furthermore, should Britain ever become an adversary of Russia, Greece ought then to adopt a position of neutrality. The Venizelist MP said in this context:

"The best national emblem strategy dictated for Greece is not the Two-Headed Eagle, but rather the Two-Headed Hermes. Greece's strength does not lie in territorial expansion; it lies in her geographical position and the natural commercial genius of the Greeks. Our strength will lie in our being excellently equipped both navally and militarily; the Two-Headed Hermes of trade between East and West. Financially, we shall conquer much more of the world market

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

17. *Εφημερίς των Βαλκανίων*, 24 March 1924.

18. *Ελεύθερο Βήμα*, 15 February 1924.

19. *Ibid.*

than the Jews. And the vital pillars of our national economic structure are two: whatever nation happens to be sovereign of the sea (at the moment England), and the Slavs. If in time of war these two pillars of ours are allies, we too must be allies; if they fight against each other, we must arm ourselves to the teeth and take up a position of armed neutrality..."²⁰.

Kakoulidis' memorandum clarifying and outlining Greece's position with respect to the problem of recognising Soviet Russia met with the approval of the Greek Foreign Minister, Alexandris. In January 1924, the Greek government immediately began negotiations with the Soviets in Berlin, as a result of which, Greece formally recognised the Soviet Union on 8 March 1924²¹. On that day, the Greek ambassador in Berlin exchanged diplomatic notes with his Soviet counterpart. In its note, the Soviet government accepted the re-establishment of diplomatic relations and the friendly settlement of outstanding matters between the two countries²².

In this way, following the Asia Minor Disaster, and in the context of its quest for a new diplomatic and economic orientation, Greece finally recognised Soviet Russia after a rupture of seven years' duration. Certainly, Greece did not gain the great economic benefits she had hoped for, and the hopes and expectations of the Greeks in Russia were not fulfilled; nevertheless, relations both in the political and in the economic sector developed satisfactorily, despite the difficulties that confronted them in the critical years before the Second World War.

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20. A.Y.E., 1924, A/5/VII, Report of Kakoulidis to Alexandris, p. 21.

21. For the negotiations see Zapantis, *Greek-Soviet Relations*, pp. 137-142.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 140.