

**Greco-Serbian talks towards the conclusion of a treaty of alliance
in May 1913 and the beginning of negotiations
for the establishment of a Serbian Free Zone in Thessaloniki**

In the autumn of 1912, the states of the Balkan Peninsula carried out what one might truly call a peaceful revolution. They abandoned or set aside —if only temporarily— the differences that separated them, they concluded alliances with one another and, most importantly, they declared war on the Ottoman Empire, reaping in the process, and within a very short space of time, a wealth of benefits for their nations. This revolutionary act was the so-called *Balkan League of 1912*¹.

The alliance, however, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The division of the Ottoman Empire's European territories between Bulgaria and Serbia violated historical Greek rights in Thrace and Macedonia. It also prejudiced the rights of the Albanians in the western part of the vilayet of Kosovo and the entire vilayet of Shkodër, which was inhabited by —scattered or concentrated— Albanian populations. The rapprochement between Serbia and Bulgaria (March 1912), which constituted the backbone of the Balkan League, solved the Macedonian Question only temporarily. Bulgaria took the lion's share of Macedonia, since Serbia was only interested in the part of Macedonia that would give her an outlet to the Adriatic. But the determination of the Great Powers, and principally Austro-Hungary and Italy, to create an autonomous Albanian state thwarted this Serbian design and forced Serbia into conflict with her former ally, Bulgaria. Greece aligned herself with Serbia, in order to defend her just claims to the territories of Macedonia that the Greek Army had liberated at such great cost².

1. The term is inaccurate, since the Balkan states were not united by a single bond of alliance, but by bilateral treaties. Historians, however, use the term "Balkan League of 1912" for purposes of easy understanding (See H. Batawski, "The Failure of the Balkan Alliance of 1912", *Balkan Studies* 7 (1966) 111-112.

2. D. Djordjević, *History of Serbia, 1800-1918*, pp. 371 ff.

Greece and Serbia were later followed in their rapprochement against Bulgaria by Romania, on account of the dispute between the latter two states over the territory of Dobruja.

The rapprochement between Greece and Serbia was formalized on May 19th (June 1st), 1913 by a treaty (*ugovor*) of alliance between the Kingdom of Greece and the Kingdom of Serbia, signed in Thessaloniki. This treaty, which contained 11 articles, was signed by the Greek Ambassador to Belgrade, Ioannis Alexandropoulos, and the Serbian Ambassador to Athens, M. Bošković³. The ratifications of this treaty were exchanged between the signatories, in Athens, on June 8/21 of the same year⁴.

At this point, we need to call attention to an erroneous interpretation of the relations that obtained between Greece and Serbia during the First Balkan War. It has been argued that the two countries fought side by side following the signature of an official treaty of alliance in the autumn of 1912. The Greeks and the Serbs did indeed join forces to fight against the Bulgarians; but, because of Serbia's insistence that the proposed treaty include a clause obliging Greece to hasten to Serbia's aid in the event of any clash with the Dual Monarchy, no official alliance had been concluded. It was not until after the Balkan League of 1912 had collapsed that a treaty was signed for the defence of Macedonia, and especially of Thessaloniki, against Bulgarian claims. All factions (Venizelists, Royalists, etc.), however, were well aware of the dangers inherent in Serbia's demand for assistance in the event of trouble with Austro-Hungary⁵.

In addition to the treaty of alliance, and on the same day (19 May), the two states also signed a *Military Convention* (*Vojna Konvencija*); the ratifications of this agreement, too, were exchanged between the signatories in Athens on 8/21 June 1913⁶.

The 11 articles of the Treaty of Alliance of 19 May 1913 included

3. Dušan Lukać (ed.), *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici kraljevine Srbije* [Documents relating to the foreign policy of the Kingdom of Serbia 1903-1914], vol. 6, no. 2, Beograd 1981, pp. 401-404. Cf. Charalambos G. Nikolaou, *International political and military treaties, agreements and conventions, from 1453 to the present*, Athens 1996², p. 213.

4. D. Lukać, *Dokumenti*, *op.cit.*, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 461.

5. Georgios Ventiris, *The Greece of 1910-1920*, vol. 1, Athens 1970², pp. 153 ff.

6. D. Lukać, *Dokumenti*, *op.cit.*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 404 ff.

one, number 7, by which Greece was to provide the necessary facilities for, and at the same time to guarantee for 50 years, full freedom of transit trade between Thessaloniki and Skopje via the Port of Thessaloniki.

The article in question reads as follows:

His Majesty the King of the Hellenes undertakes that his government shall furnish all the necessary facilities and shall guarantee, for the space of 50 years, full freedom to Serbian export and import trade through the Port of Thessaloniki and via the railway lines from Thessaloniki to Skopje and Monastir (Bitola). This free trade zone must be as broad as possible, upon condition of its being within the framework and the full rights of Greek sovereignty.

Within the space of one year from today the two signatory states shall sign a special convention regulating the operation of the details that have been accepted in this article⁷.

This diplomatic act appeared, initially at least, to be of benefit to both states. On the one hand, it was held to be an intelligent action on the part of Greece, both politically and commercially, since it secured the assistance of Serbia in the defence of Macedonia, and especially of Thessaloniki, against the greed of the Bulgarians; on the other hand, it came to be believed that this was a major diplomatic coup for Serbia, because the agreement ensured that country commercial and economic facilities the like of which no European country had ever enjoyed.

Since 1906 Serbia had been suffering the insupportable economic pressures inflicted upon her by the Dual Monarchy with the so-called *Customs War*⁸. The result was that Serbia was compelled to find a new outlet for her import and export trade, in the Port of Thessaloniki. While the Ottoman authorities were initially willing to accommodate Serbian commercial and economic traffic through the Port of Thessaloniki (which would evidently have boosted the city's own economic growth as well), they later began to raise obstacles, either to the rail transport of Serbian products or to the loading and offloading of goods in

7. *Ibid.*, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 403.

8. For this war we have a special monograph: See Dimitrije Djordjević, *Carinski Rat Austro-Ugarske i Srbije, 1906-1911* (The Customs War between Austro-Hungary and Serbia, 1906-1911) Beograd 1962.

the Port of Thessaloniki. Here we can distinguish the hand of the Dual Monarchy, which wanted Serbia to be economically isolated and therefore fully attached to the economic interests of Austro-Hungary. In order to resolve the problem a joint Turco-Serbian commission was set up in 1911, with the additional participation of foreign companies that used the Port of Thessaloniki. This commission was charged with fixing the nature and the extent of the rights to be granted to Serbian trade. Its work, however, was brought to a halt by the outbreak of the First Balkan War⁹. Following the liberation of Thessaloniki by the Greek Army, Premier Venizelos appeared willing to accept those arrangements that would be conducive to optimum exploitation of the city's port. This would also deprive the country's opponents of their argument that the Greek presence would monopolize the advantages of the port and lead to economic stagnation as a result of the loss of its natural hinterland¹⁰.

The economic consequences of the Balkan Wars were, along with the question of the conclusion of an alliance, from the very first the subject of talks between Greece and Serbia, and were the focus of discussions between the two states. As early as January 1918 the two governments were discussing the question of the customs tariffs to be imposed in the newly acquired territories. Greece's imposition of a new system of taxation on products imported and exported through Thessaloniki displeased the Serbian government, which wanted to see taxation, especially for the Macedonian capital, held to the levels of the Ottoman regime, although it had itself increased its tariffs in the "new territories"¹¹. The basic issue in the talks between Greece and Serbia concerned the Port of Thessaloniki and guaranteeing Serbian trade through that port. In performance of article 7 of the 1913 treaty, an agreement was signed on 10 May 1914 by which Serbia was conceded a certain area within the Port of Thessaloniki, under full Greek sove-

9. D. G. Papamichalopoulos, *The Serbian Free Zone in Thessaloniki*, Athens 1953, pp. 48-49, 53-54; Loukianos Hassiotis, *Five Years of Diplomatic Dilemmas. Relations between Greece and Serbia (1913-1918)*, Thessaloniki 1999, pp. 54-55 (unpublished doctoral dissertation).

10. Ioan. K. Vasdravellis, *The Port of Thessaloniki* (reprint from the 50th anniversary of the Liberation of Thessaloniki), Thessaloniki 1962, pp. 537-538; Evang. A. Hekimoglou, "Thessaloniki, 1912-1940. Economic Developments", in the collective work *Queen City of the Good* (Thessaloniki 1997), p. 199.

11. See L. Hassiotis, *op.cit.*, p. 55, note 48, with bibliography.

reignty. Implementation of this 1914 agreement on port and railroad facilities was, however, prevented by the outbreak of the Great War.

The sensational events that followed, including the catastrophic Asia Minor Expedition and the Treaty of Lausanne, had an immediate impact on Greco-Serbian talks relating to the Free Zone in the Port of Thessaloniki. Greece at that time had great need of the assistance of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, as Yugoslavia was then called. The newly united kingdom appeared willing to help Greece, but in exchange for certain concessions that were granted in the convention signed on 10 May 1923 by the Foreign Ministers of the two countries, *Alexandris* and *Ninčić*. While this new agreement retained Greek sovereignty over the Port of Thessaloniki, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes acquired extensive customs, postal and railway rights¹².

On 29 September 1924 two declarations of identical import were signed at the seat of the League of Nations in Geneva, by Nikolaos Politis, Greece's representative at the League of Nations, and Christos Kalfov, Bulgaria's Minister for Foreign Affairs. These two documents formed the notorious *Politis-Kalfov Protocol*, which recognized as Bulgarian the Slav population living in Macedonia. This recognition was prejudicial to the united Yugoslav Kingdom, which feared that Bulgaria would argue that the Slavs living in Serbian Macedonia were also Bulgarians¹³. The event was exploited by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in a manner that may be characterized as inelegant.

On 30 October 1924, in a sharp scene with the Greek Ambassador in Belgrade, Serbian Foreign Minister Marinković brandished the threat of an agreement with Bulgaria to divide Greek Macedonia into zones of influence. A few days later his government asked for the signature of a new protocol, which would recognize the Slav minority in Macedonia as Serbs. Greece, naturally, refused. On 17 November 1924 the government of the neighbouring kingdom issued a categorical note denouncing the 1913 treaty of alliance. The reason given was that the *Politis-Kalfov Protocol* was in breach of that treaty and performance of the 1913

12. Ioannis Andreadis, *The Greco-Serbian Treaty of Alliance (1913)*, p. 16.

13. Those interested in the events of the much-discussed *Politis-Kalfov Protocol* may follow the progress of the affair in the monograph by: Areti Tounta-Fergadi, *Greco-Bulgarian minorities. The Politis-Kalfov Protocol, 1924-1925*, Thessaloniki 1986, *passim*.

agreement “for a Free Zone in Thessaloniki” was therefore impossible¹⁴. Thus came about the rupture in the bonds of alliance between the two states.

Talks between Greece and Serbia were resumed in 1928 under the second Venizelos’ government, and concluded with the signature on 17 May 1929 of 5 protocols regulating the regime of the Serbian Free Zone in the Port of Thessaloniki for a period of several years¹⁵.

14. A. Tounta-Fergadi, *op.cit.*, p. 97.

15. D. G. Papamichalopoulos, *op.cit.*, pp. 51 ff.