

## VENIZELOS AND THE STRUGGLE AROUND THE BALKAN PACT

Thirty years ago on February 9, 1934, a Balkan Pact was signed in Athens by Yugoslavia, Rumania, Turkey and Greece. Albania's absence was not considered of great significance, but the conspicuous lack of Bulgarian participation was doubtless a major failure of the pact. Yugoslavia had exerted tremendous efforts to persuade Bulgaria to join the alliance, and there was real ostentation in the absence of such a major Balkan state from this historically significant endeavor — Bulgaria being geographically the most Balkan of the Balkan nations. Increasing pressure from Italy was only part of Bulgaria's motivation for refusing to sign the pact; primarily, she was emphasizing her unwillingness to renounce territorial and national aspirations in the Balkans. The Macedonian issue and the question of Bulgarian access to the Aegean were two major, if not *the* vital, issues which made Sofia reject the idea of partnership in the new alliance. The motivations for Albania's absence were even more obvious. King Zogu had only recently freed himself from Belgrade's grip and his nation was totally controlled by fascist Italy. It would have been unrealistic to expect from him the kind of daring, independent diplomatic scheme that might have allowed Albania to join voluntarily with her Balkan neighbors without encountering Mussolini's opposition.

It was, however, the sudden and completely unexpected opposition from Greece that dealt the death blow to the effectiveness of the pact. In previous years, Greece had provided the major initiative for, and contributed generously to the Balkan Conferences which had promoted political and cultural rapprochement between the peoples and states in the area, and out of which the pact had grown. The opposition came from one of Greece's most outstanding political leaders, a man whose name was deeply identified with the final struggle of the Balkan peoples against the Ottoman Empire, and who, following the Balkan Wars, had warmly sponsored the idea of a Balkan Union that would lead eventually to the formation of a Balkan Federation. On the very eve of the signatory convention, Elefterios Venizelos, former Prime Minister of Greece and, at the time, leader of the opposition in parliament, started a violent campaign against the pact, a campaign which he pursued until the pact was ratified by the Greek Parliament in a rewritten and virtually inoperative form.

According to Venizelos, the alliance would deprive Greece of the comfortable neutrality in which his foreign policy had sheltered her, and would expose her to the danger of involvement in a war between Yugoslavia and Italy. Greece had just recovered from the catastrophic aftermath of her war with Turkey, and Venizelos' major international achievement had been to establish friendly relations with Turkey and all the other Balkan nations excepting only Bulgaria. His basic Mediterranean policy was to maintain a balance in relations with Yugoslavia and Italy, between which he envisioned a major conflict. In this light, he saw the Balkan Pact as a dangerously provocative alliance directed against Mussolini's aspirations in the Mediterranean. And Greece, in his view, was far too vulnerable with her open shores and islands to risk the possibility of confrontation with the rapidly growing military power of Italy. Though Yugoslavia was considered at the time to be the strongest Balkan nation militarily, Venizelos felt that Greece could not possibly count on her in a war against Italy as Yugoslavia would never be sufficiently strong to cope with what he considered the most powerful nation in the Mediterranean.

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To King Alexander, the primary architect of the pact, the Balkan Alliance could have had only one basic set of purposes: to reinforce and indeed to enlarge the Little Entente in Central Europe by extending it to include Greece and Turkey, and thereby to keep the Balkans free of Italian influence by reducing and eventually putting a stop to Mussolini's expansion along the eastern flanks of the Mediterranean. These were, in fact, the ideas he stressed when he visited all of the Balkan leaders except Albania's Zogu in late September and early October of 1933. When he talked with General G. Kondylis on the island of Corfu on October 9, I was the only witness, acting as interpreter for the general who spoke only his native Greek. At that meeting, Alexander made it clear that he was convinced of the inevitability of war now that Hitler was in power in Germany. Mussolini would ultimately join Hitler and the only way for the Balkan states to prevent the future Axis Powers and Western Allies from using them as pawns in their coming conflict would be to unite. He felt that the old principle of "the Balkans for the Balkans" should be given a new realization by the pact and explained that the Balkan Entente would have to be an essentially defensive alliance that would strive to keep war out of the Balkans. Alexander had already obtained the full consent of Kemal Ataturk whom he had seen the day before in Istanbul. As to Bulgaria's final decision, he told Kondylis that he doubted she would soon join the alliance, but did not exclude a future possibility.

Venizelos, contrary to Alexander's views, thought of the Balkan Pact as an aggressive instrument which would be so thoroughly resented by Italy that it would expose Greece to the danger of war. It was the protocol attached to the pact that persuaded him that this was no simple Balkan defensive agreement. Venizelos correctly interpreted the meaning of the protocol in this manner : should an Italian-Yugoslav war start through a direct attack across their common border and without involving other Balkan territory, Greece and the other Balkan nations could remain neutral; *but*, if Italy should attack Yugoslavia by way of Albania, Greece would be obliged to mobilize her army and send it to the defence of Yugoslavia. Moreover, Venizelos felt that, regardless how Italy might attack Yugoslavia, if Bulgaria were to join the war as Italy's ally, Greece would be obliged to ally herself with Yugoslavia. Therefore, he decided that the only way to avoid involvement in a war which would definitely be against his nation's interests was to reinterpret the protocol, stating that Greece would under no circumstances enter a war against a great Mediterranean power (Italy). From the speeches he delivered around the country and from the articles he wrote, the public was slowly convinced, indeed grew terrified that the Balkan Pact would necessitate Greek involvement in an inevitable conflict between Italy and Yugoslavia.

In Yugoslavia, in royal court circles and in the government, the prevailing opinion was that the pact was rapidly losing its political and military strength — Venizelos's campaign had succeeded in nullifying its defensive character and in turning it into a strictly formal, insignificant diplomatic act. The same opinion spread to the other Balkan capitals, especially when the Greek government yielded to Venizelos' demands for a new interpretation of the protocol. The situation had worked out to Mussolini's complete satisfaction; the pact was ham-strung by the absence of Bulgaria and Albania and by a Greece half willing and half paralyzed by Venizelos' successful opposition. It was under these circumstances that Venizelos and the other leaders of the opposition ratified the pact with its reinterpreted protocol in the Greek Parliament.

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One of the fundamental grounds for Venizelos' opposition to the pact was his fear that Yugoslavia would be unable to defend herself against Italy. He believed that Mussolini had completely transformed the little Italy of the pre-fascist years and had built a great military power which his nation could not afford to antagonize. He also felt that France and Great Britain were not strong enough to prevent Italian expansion in the Balkans. He never passed up an opportunity to impress these opinions upon friends and visitors. I often heard them when I visited him during his term as opposition leader in my ca-

capacity as Press Attaché to the Yugoslav Legation in Athens and representative of the official Yugoslav government news agency "Avala."

Venizelos' fear of Italian military might was increased by his skeptical attitude toward Yugoslav strength. Since 1928 when King Alexander abolished constitutional government in Yugoslavia and imposed his personal dictatorship, he had become persuaded that Greece's northern neighbor was growing weaker and weaker. As a dedicated republican, Venizelos looked askance at this total concentration of power in the hands of a monarch. On at least two occasions between 1930 and 1933, he confided to me his impression that the situation in Yugoslavia was terribly critical as the issue of nationalities kept the country under the constant threat of internal division. To his personal friends he was even more outspoken in predicting the internal collapse of Yugoslavia. One of them, Stavros Costopulos, told me after a cabinet meeting in 1930 that Venizelos had terrified the members of the cabinet by reporting a worsening Yugoslav situation with the Croatian resistance to Belgrade centralism growing increasingly strong. Venizelos felt that the Croatian demands for more autonomy were not only natural, but legitimate, and his political prejudices and experiences had convinced him that every absolute or dictatorial power is bound to fall. "Dictatorship," he liked to say to me, "is a sword with two cutting edges; one kills the enemy, the other, the man who holds the sword."

Venizelos disliked Alexander's dismissal of the political parties, his imprisonment of political leaders and censorship of the public expression of political opinion. Moreover, he feared that Alexander's example might encourage reactionary elements to attempt to introduce a similar system in Greece. Under Venizelos, Greece was not only republican, but so politically free that elections were outside of government control and the press, both republican and monarchist, was published without any censorship — something very rare in those years, not only in the Balkans, but all over Europe. Among the Balkan states, Greece was the only free republic with a democratic structure and democratic political liberties, indeed the only nation where political life was exuberant in all its individual manifestations—a situation that was not at all to the taste of King Alexander. And Alexander naturally disliked Venizelos whom he found too similar in point of political personality to the Serbian leader Nicolas Pašić whose downfall he had helped to engineer.

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Venizelos was afraid that Alexander would, after strengthening his position in the Balkans through the pact, inevitably interfere in the domestic affairs of the other member nations. He would be especially prone to meddle in Greek

affairs, trying to establish a monarchy or other personal dictatorship. One great contribution to Venizelos' fear of Alexander's possible intentions was the way General Kondylis had interpreted a recent visit to the king in Belgrade. The visit took place well before the signing of the Balkan Pact in Athens, indeed before Alexander's meeting with the general on Corfu in October, 1933. Like most official visitors to Yugoslavia at that time, he was given only a superficial glimpse of the military and political situation. He was, however, so positively impressed by what he saw, in particular by the respect that the army establishment and the top military hierarchy had for the king, that this experience began to color his political thinking.

Kondylis made his new convictions clear to everyone he saw and even declared them publicly to the press. In a long conversation with me, he particularly stressed the iron discipline of the Yugoslav military hierarchy and the absolute devotion that its members showed toward Alexander; this, he said, could never occur in Greece under a republican government. Only a monarchy, he declared, can exercise sufficient authority to keep an army general staff so disciplined that it will be free of every political influence and every temptation to play an active role in politics.

In 1933 there was growing dissatisfaction with republican government in Greek conservative circles, that is, among the military and state bureaucracies and the middle and upper classes that controlled the nation's life. By reinforcing this rather generalized conviction, Kondylis' neophyte conversion on returning from Belgrade was a major help to the monarchists in popularizing their cause. Through him they regained the support of the military which they had lost during their long years in opposition, and his collaboration continued to be of great value throughout the transitional period between real republican government and the eventual restoration of the monarchy.

From General Kondylis' new ambition to play the role of a monarchist condottiere, Venizelos developed the theory, as he admitted to me several times, that King Alexander was using Greek generals to bring the monarchy back to Greece. Alexander, he reasoned, felt that the new Balkan Alliance would have united support and be strong and enforceable only if there were a monarch or dictator at the head of each of its member nations; a democratic government like the one in Greece could paralyze the pact — as indeed it did through Venizelos' opposition. In these convictions, Venizelos was not too far from the truth; Alexander thought of himself not only as the opponent of Mussolini's plans to dismember the Balkan status quo, but also as the opponent of every kind of internal democratization in the Balkan states. Nothing of this sort of subterfuge, however, came out in the conversation between A-

lexander and Kondylis on Corfu; the king limited his remarks exclusively to the basic international objectives of the Balkan Pact.

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The Greek republican leaders lined up solidly behind Venizelos in opposing the pact, with the single exception of Alexander Papanastassiou, a former Venizelist, but a man deeply and sincerely attached to the idea of Balkan rapprochement. The movement toward a Balkan Union had begun under his initiative and leadership at the end of 1929, while Venizelos was prime minister. Greek officialdom gave its full approval to the idea, though the other Balkan governments were not so warm to it. King Alexander, for instance, feared the popular, unofficial nature of the movement and sent firm instructions to the Yugoslav Legation in Athens to treat it in a lukewarm manner. Alexander, as I later learned, distrusted any Balkan movement that would not be strictly controlled by the participating governments. As an absolutist, he was of the opinion that the initiative for and the development of a Balkan Alliance should be the work of governments, chiefs of state and their subservient diplomatic machinery. Every operation of public opinion and of its various representatives, both political and intellectual, should be suppressed. Beside, Alexander was sensitive and proud, jealous of his prestige and unwilling to be deprived of the central personal role in Balkan affairs. He could not easily accept the idea that the initiative for a Balkan movement had come from Athens — Greece was not strong enough to pursue the matter. And above all else Alexander was a Serb; only Belgrade, in his opinion, should or could be considered as the prime initiator and builder of a Balkan Alliance.

Venizelos and his minister of foreign affairs, Andreas Michalakopoulos, considered Papanastassiou's movement in an altogether different light. They treated it as an independent action for which Greek official policy could not be held strictly accountable; should it fail, it would not spell defeat for the government, but only for a political leader with idealistic leanings. Venizelos and Michalakopoulos were then practicing a decidedly cautious foreign policy. Reassured by treaties with Turkey to the east and Yugoslavia to the north, their major emphasis was on avoiding any transaction that might make Mussolini suspicious of Greece or irritate his pride. Papanastassiou must repeatedly have received instructions in line with this policy when he and Venizelos discussed the Balkan Conferences and the future Balkan Union. If mentioned Papanastassiou's movement to Venizelos, praising the man's sincere idealism, he would not hide the sympathy he had for Papanastassiou's integrity, but he would always specify that the Greek government was not responsible for his actions. Thus, in a conversation I had with Venizelos on May 28, 1932, he said:

But in the question of the rapprochement of the Balkan peoples, Mr. Papanastassiou must not exaggerate... I have already told him, and I shall tell him again that he should be more cautious... You see, Mr. Marinković [then foreign minister of Yugoslavia] is also not too inclined to favor the idea... One should not go too far and arouse new misunderstandings, matters that might not be altogether pleasant for him or for the situation of Greece...

Regarding his worries about Bulgaria, Venizelos said the same day: "As concerns Bulgaria and her position in the Balkans, one must be very careful not to arouse suspicion on the other side..." The allusion here was naturally to the attitude Italy might take.

Despite all the cautions of Venizelos and his foreign ministry, Papanastassiou was profoundly convinced that the movement for Balkan unity was vitally necessary for the fuller political, economic and cultural development of the Balkans and for the elimination of war from the region. The original Balkan Conference was the first attempt ever made to bring together outstanding representatives of all walks of life from all the Balkan states. Greece and Turkey did have truly representative leaders in their delegations; the other nations, however, sent less significant figures from the worlds of politics and culture, generally selected and carefully supervised by their respective foreign offices. The Yugoslav delegates were definitely the least representative, with the exception of some tremendously capable experts in limited fields. There was no personality in the delegation qualified to speak either for the independent political thought or for the cultural feeling of Yugoslavia. The whole group was, in fact, appointed by the Belgrade foreign ministry which was thoroughly hostile to the movement.

When the first conference was held in Athens in 1930, the basic need was not for the realization of specific political goals, but rather for the popularization of the idea of a Balkan Union. The Balkans had continued to be divided after the Balkan Wars; the wounds suffered in the recent war between Greece and Turkey were not yet healed; there were the profound disagreement between the Serbs and Bulgarians and the long-standing hostility between Bulgaria and Greece; Albania's deep suspicions of the Serbs and Greeks completed the grim picture of Balkan affairs in those years. A Balkan Conference which required the acceptance of all the Balkan governments and whose decisions had to be supervised and approved by the several foreign offices was indeed a daring adventure. Papanastassiou was the only Greek politician with the courage to start it and the personality needed to give it its inoffensively idealistic cast — the only possible framework within which it could function and develop. There was, however, an understanding between Papanastassiou and

Venizelos, as was known in diplomatic circles: the Greek government would give the conference all necessary financial backing and limited moral support, but the conference should make no decisions that would either question or contradict the official policy of the Greek government. The other governments took the same position; only Turkey seemed truly outspoken in defending Balkan interests. The majority of the delegates conformed strictly to their instructions and were careful not to oblige their governments in any way. Resolutions passed in this atmosphere had, of course, no major political significance.

There was, however, some improvement in the fields of cultural and economic understanding. The members of the conference displayed a shocking ignorance of the economic and cultural situations in the Balkans. Virtually none of the intellectuals who participated in the meetings had ever before visited Greece or Athens, or, indeed, any other Balkan country beyond his own. But these were men who had travelled widely and were well acquainted with Western Europe and its cultures. The Balkan intelligentsia had read everything that was published in Paris, Berlin and Rome, but were totally ignorant of the things, the life and the culture of their own part of the world. Coupled with their ignorance was a pervading lack of interest in Balkan matters. Though these people had shared the same history and the same patterns of cultural retardedness under the Ottoman Empire, though they had acquired certain fundamentally common ways of life, they showed absolutely no concern for each other's problems.

One of the most considerable drawbacks at the conference was the tremendous variety of languages. Only the Yugoslavs and the Bulgarians could understand one another; the rest of the delegates had to use French and German. Even more of a handicap than the lack of a common language was the apathy toward the idea of mutual comprehension that prevailed among the majority of the government-appointed representatives. Only those delegates who were independent of government supervision were willing and able to make concrete contributions.

The true success of the conference lay in the considerable and unexpected enthusiasm with which the public regarded it. The succeeding conferences that were held in several other Balkan capitals no doubt cleared the air and prepared the benign climate in which the Balkan Pact was realized. Balkan officials later recognized that these conferences had reassured the masses that their governments were following the right path. Without the ensuing popular approval, the pact would have been a cold and virtually meaningless diplomatic formality.

All this was evident to Venizelos when he started his campaign of oppo-

sition. He knew that he must make it clear that he did not oppose the pact itself, but only the protocol that had been attached to it. On March 4, 1934, I was received by Venizelos at his home and discussed the situation with him for a full hour. He was in the midst of his most vehement campaigning. The Greek press and public were divided on the question and characteristically passionate, often frantic, in their discussions. Venizelos was himself tremendously agitated in his approach to the problem.

The following is the text of our conversation which I dispatched that day to the Yugoslav government in Belgrade :

Raditsa : What is your real position on the Balkan Pact?

Venizelos : My position is that the pact cannot under any circumstances oblige Greece, in the event of a conflict between a major Mediterranean power and a Balkan power, to side with the latter nation. I think that our vital national interests forbid us to accept such an obligation. I do not want a repetition of what happened in 1915; we should not be placed, as we were then with Serbia, in a position in which we are unable to meet our obligations to Yugoslavia. (Mr. Venizelos alluded here to the fact that in 1915 Greece did not join Serbia as soon as she was attacked by Austria. When King Constantine refused to fulfill Greece's obligation to Serbia, Venizelos personally opposed the denial. He always felt proud that he had remained loyal to the Serbs).

R: Do you still feel that the Greek government must issue a statement specifying that Greece will not accept any obligation in the case of a conflict with an extra-Balkan power?

V: That's it. By the proposal that was read by Mr. Metaxas at the meeting of the leaders of the political parties, I demand that the government make such a declaration in agreement with the other signatories of the pact. Such a declaration would not contradict the pact, but only the secret protocol which has been added to it. We cannot assume obligations that are contrary to our interests and which we are unable to fulfill. I am asking that the Greek government make this declaration to specify that the pact cannot expose us to involvement in a conflict with a great Mediterranean power. In the event that the government does not make such a declaration, I will vote against ratification of the Balkan Pact in the Senate where I have the majority.

R: According to your position and to the statements in your press it seems clear that you consider Italy as a Balkan power because of her interests in Albania which you do not consider an independent state.

V: In Belgrade in 1923 I declared that I have no interest in Albania. As to the first part of your question—whether I regard Italy as a Balkan power—I can say that I do not consider Italy a Balkan power, but rather a great Mediterranean power and one with which Greece, because of her vital interests,

must maintain good relations. Nor is Greece herself an exclusively Balkan power; she is simultaneously a Mediterranean state—at least fifty percent Mediterranean. For these reasons, a conflict with Italy is a luxury that Greece cannot afford.

R: The Balkan press has remarked that your present attitude signifies a change from your Balkan policy of previous years.

V: The policy that I am now practicing is not identical to the one I followed before the First World War and during the Balkan Wars. Things have changed since that time. Changes of policy have been imposed on us by changes in the diplomatic and political situations. Yugoslavia was indeed the first to adjust her foreign policy to these altered circumstances; in 1924 she renounced the Serbian-Greek alliance, convinced that it did not answer the demands of the new situation.

I think that my new policy toward Yugoslavia was clearly explained when I was in Belgrade following the signature of our pact with Italy. It was then, as you know, that we created the free Yugoslav zone in Thessaloniki and paved the way for our pact with Yugoslavia. My present policy in no way deviates from the line I took in 1928; it is, I feel, the only policy Greece can conduct in her own interest. And it has met with the understanding and consent of the Yugoslav government.

Notwithstanding, I see in our press that an article published in “Politika” has blamed me for my present policy; I will answer that in the evening papers. “Politika” even accuses me of promising Bitolj to Italy - - *I* who have always been a convinced Serbophile, *I* who rejected the German envoy’s offer of neutrality for Greece and led my country into war in defense of Serbia. (“Politika” was the leading Serbian daily in which the Yugoslav government often published editorials expressing its official position. It strongly attacked Venizelos’ opposition to the Balkan Pact).

R: There is a general conviction in the most responsible circles in Athens that your opposition to the pact is determined by your conviction that a conflict between Yugoslavia and Italy is inevitable.

V: The possibility of such a conflict is not so great; war is not imminent. Who knows? One day Yugoslavia and Italy may become friendly. But I must deal with facts and realities, and that is one of the major reasons why I cannot accept a situation in which Greece would be obliged to defend Yugoslavia. Our military experts tell us that an Italian attack on Yugoslavia would have to be launched from Albania because the common Yugoslav-Italian border is too short and the terrain there is not convenient for military operations. (It became clear that Venizelos really did believe in the certainty of war between Italy and Yugoslavia). It was my opinion that the Balkan Pact should

be merely a pact of non-aggression, and should be written so as to allow Bulgaria to join it. On the contrary, as the pact stands now, it definitely throws Bulgaria into the hands of Italy. This was inevitable with our policy being managed by incapable people—men who are far from being on a level to deal with diplomatists of the stature of Titulesko and Jevtić. Greece has been fooled. Her most vital interests demand that she remain faithful to her friendship with Italy and to the policies toward Italy and Yugoslavia that Greece pursued under my government.

R: It seems to me that you would welcome the formation of a Balkan Union with Italy as one of its members.

V: I am convinced that the Greek interests, our islands, all our vital territorial and national interests force us to maintain good relations with Italy in the Mediterranean. Yugoslavia cannot help us at all in that policy. What I am asking now is that the government declaration stress so strongly the fact that we will not join in a war against Italy that there will be no doubt either in our minds or in the Italian mind. If this is not accepted by our government, there can be no agreement between us.

R: But what of the destiny of the Balkans and their independence, the policies to which you have dedicated your whole life? What will Balkan public opinion say of your new willingness to admit Italy to a position of priority in the Balkans?

V: I am convinced that Greece's vital interests demand that her relations with Italy be good—the best.

R: Do you think that Italy will respect your islands and territories without a strong alliance between Greece and the Balkan states?

V: I am as certain as I could be that there will be no concord in the Balkans unless Greece returns to the position she took under my administration. If I advocate this policy it is because I feel that it satisfies our present interests. There can be no agreement between our nations if you do not accept the premise that our policy must mean friendship first with Italy and then with Yugoslavia.

R: Then there is only one thing for Yugoslavia to do—to work out an alliance with Bulgaria.

V: I would have nothing against that, though I don't believe it could be easily brought about. Yes, let us also have that, for I am convinced that there can be no peace in the Balkans without an understanding between Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Greece.

R: What then would be the way out of this deadlock?

V: The situation is not a simple one. If the Greek government signs the declaration that we demand, it will be difficult for the other signatory states

to accept the new reservation. On the other hand, if we are not granted the declaration, we will not vote for the pact. As you know, our constitution specifies that the pact can have no obligation for Greece unless it is ratified by the Senate, the Parliament and the President of the Republic.

Toward the end of our conversation, Mr. Venizelos suggested that the best solution would be the resignation of the Greek foreign minister, Maximos —though he noted that Maximos was a friend of his — and the appointment of a new minister of foreign affairs who could convince the other members of the alliance to accept the new declaration.

When it was effected, the declaration robbed the pact of all its strength and gave Mussolini a major diplomatic victory in the Balkans. Yugoslavia and Turkey were uneasy. Without a Bulgarian signature and with Albania left firmly in the grip of Italy, the pact remained incomplete.

However, war had not been kept out of the Balkans, nor had Greece been spared, as Venizelos hoped, an attack launched from Albania by Italy. Venizelos' opposition to and effective emasculation of the pact did not restrain Mussolini from making Greece a target for conquest in the last war.

But Venizelos had long been dead when that happened — as had king Alexander who had thought that through the Balkan Pact the Balkans could escape the coming war.