

MILITARY OPERATIONS OF THE GREAT POWERS DURING THE CRETAN REVOLUTION (1897): THE GREEK PERSPECTIVE

VOJAŠKE OPERACIJE VELIKIH SIL MED REVOLUCIJO NA KRETI (1897) – GRŠKO STALIŠČE

Original scientific paper

Povzetek Sovraštvo med Grčijo in Otomanskim cesarstvom je bilo trajno in je izviral iz časa turške okupacije ter nenehnih sovražnosti med narodoma. V obdobju pred letom 1897 je njune odnose zaostrovalo kretsko vprašanje. Zaradi svoje strateške pomembnosti pri nadzorovanju prometa in zaradi vloge baze v Sredozemskem morju je Kreta vse od antike privabljala precejšnje zanimanje mnogih narodov. Krečani so po rodu Grki, zato so se po pomoč in spodbudo pri svojem boju proti Turkom zatekali k matični domovini. Vstaja leta 1896, ko so na otoku pristale turške okrepitve, s celine pa so prispele skupine grških prostovoljcev, da bi Kreti pomagale pri osvoboditvi in združitvi z matično domovino, je razkrila vlogo in politiko evropskih sil, ki so sledile enakim tradicionalnim načelom, ki so že desetletja vplivala na vzhodno vprašanje. Konzuli velikih sil so zaprosili za floto, saj so se bali za življenja tujih državljanov. Obsežne operacije so potekale do februarja 1897, ko so velike sile privolile, da Kreti priznajo popolno samostojnost znotraj Otomanskega cesarstva. To je bil glavni vzrok za grško-turško vojno, ki je sledila.

Ključne besede *Kreta, velike sile, Grčija, vzhodno vprašanje, kretsko vprašanje, grško-turška vojna.*

Abstract Enmity between Greece and the Ottoman Empire was perennial and stemmed from the heritage of the Turkish occupation and the ongoing hostilities between the two nations. In the period before 1897, their relations were troubled by the Cretan Question. Due to its vital strategic importance for controlling communications and acting as a base of operations in the Mediterranean Sea, Crete has attracted significant interest on the part of many nations ever since Antiquity. By descent, the Cretans were wholly Greek, and they naturally looked to the motherland for help and encouragement in their struggle against the Turks. The revolt in 1896, when Turkish reinforcements landed on the island and bands of Greek volunteers from the mainland arrived to help for liberation and unification with the motherland, revealed the role

and policy followed by the European Powers, led by the same traditional principles that had influenced the Eastern Question for decades.

The consuls of the Great Powers asked that the fleet be sent, since they feared for the lives of the foreign citizens. Large-scale operations were conducted until February 1897, when the Great Powers agreed to grant Crete full autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. This was the main cause of the Greco-Turkish War that followed.

Key words *Crete, Great Powers, Greece, Eastern Question, Cretan Question, Greco-Turkish War.*

Introduction The immediate result of the 1821 uprising was the creation of the new Hellenic State. Despite the serious reconstitution problems and the internal economic and political adversities faced by the newly founded state, the uprisings of the enslaved were continuous and substantial. The aid given them by the rest of the Greeks was unreserved, in spite of a series of obstacles set by international diplomacy. A significant part of the subjugated regions were liberated and incorporated into the Greek state by the first decades of the 20th century, through diplomatic victories or military triumphs.¹

A new situation for the Greeks started to emerge in the Balkans in the second half of the 19th century. The policy followed by the European Powers, until the eve of war in 1897, was led by the same traditional principles that had influenced the Eastern Question for decades. A policy of preserving the status quo had been adopted and in practice proved to be the most effective way to avoid periodic crises for European diplomacy regarding the Eastern Question. Therefore, the Powers involved in the Balkans (England, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy and France) supported the preservation of the legal status quo set by the Berlin Conference (1878), while promoting their interests in the region in every way, despite open confrontation between them in other geographic areas where they were implementing a clear colonial policy. This policy resulted in a new lease on life for the collapsing Ottoman Empire, but, at the same time, constituted a very serious obstacle for the liberation of enslaved Greeks. Furthermore, it perpetuated the rivalry between them and contributed to the development of propagandistic action on the part of the other Balkan countries, which were preparing their territorial expansion to Greek regions under Turkish occupation. Thanks to its military reinforcement, Turkey continued with its invariable domestic policy towards the enslaved populations; the policy's basic principles consisted in the systematic suppression of the political liberties of the enslaved and the violation of Turkey's obligations towards them. This policy was implemented in Macedonia, Thrace and Crete, as well as Armenia, with tragic results.

¹ *Hellenic Army General Staff, Army History Directorate (HAGS/AHD), A History of the Hellenic Army 1821–1997, Athens 1999.*

1 THE CRETAN QUESTION

The island of Crete is situated almost in the centre of the Eastern Mediterranean and, thanks to its location, dominates sea communications from north to south and east to west.² Precisely due to its vital strategic importance for controlling communications and acting as a base of operations, it has attracted significant interest from many nations ever since Antiquity. The Cretans rose up on many occasions against Turkish rule (in 1841, 1858 and 1866) when their General Assembly declared unity with Mother Greece. During a three-year national liberation struggle, Greece indirectly assisted Crete by sending material and volunteers, while it took diplomatic steps to form an alliance of the Balkan states against the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately and despite the signing of the first Greek-Serbian Treaty of Voeslau,³ the Cretan people's hopes were once again buried, in the framework of the Paris Conference (1869),⁴ due to disfavour from France and Austria-Hungary.

However, the continuous Turkish violation forced the representatives of the General Assembly, in 1870, to strongly protest to the Great Powers' consuls, resulting in heavier persecution by the administration. After persistent battles, the Cretans prevailed and confined the Turks to the island's fortresses. Following their constant reinforcement and systematic violation of all the armistices signed, the Turks proceeded to organised destruction, setting villages on fire and slaughter, all of which aggravated the Cretan Question. With the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War of 1878,⁵ the Cretans revolted again, with the support of the Greek government. At the subsequent Berlin Congress (1–13 June 1878), Crete was ignored, and it was decided that only the privileges accorded in 1868 would be implemented. Following the interpretation, the Treaty of Chalepa, concluded on 3–15 October 1878, called for the establishment of a Cretan parliament, consisting of forty-nine Christian and

² HAGS/AHD, *The Greek-Turkish War of 1897, (in Greek)*, Athens 1993, p. 1–65.

³ The treaty signed in August 1867, accompanied by a military convention a year later, was never enforced due to the assassination of Serbian sovereign Michael (1868). Its purpose was the liberation of all Christians in the Balkans and the Aegean, and the minimum condition was that Greece would incorporate Epirus-Thessaly and the islands, while Serbia would incorporate Bosnia and Herzegovina. The integration of Crete into Greece provided no other territorial rights to Serbia. Laskaris T. M., *The Eastern Question*, Thessaloniki 1978, vol. A, p. 127–134.

⁴ The tension brought to the Eastern Mediterranean as a result of the breach in the two countries' relations, combined with the gathering of military forces on both sides of the Greek-Turkish border, forced the Great Powers to summon a conference in Paris which adopted Turkish positions and compelled Greece to abandon all aid attempts to the Cretans. The Paris Conference was the only outcome of the dramatic and bloodstained two-year Cretan struggle that simply confirmed the incomplete Structural Law, which provided insignificant reforms in administration, justice and taxation. It established the Greek language as the official language, along with Turkish, and allowed for the constitution of a General Assembly after elections, as well as the founding of mixed Christian and Muslim administrative councils. It also provided that one of the two advisers of the provinces' governor-general should be Christian.

⁵ In fact, in 1877, under the pretext of European mediation for settlement of the Serb-Turkish war that had come to a dead end, Russia declared war on Turkey, forcing it to sign the Treaty of San Stefano (1878), which set the borders of a huge Bulgarian state, among other things, at the expense of the Greeks and, in part, the Serbs. The Great Powers, which would not allow the creation of a Great Bulgaria, a satellite country of Russia, were concerned about the development of the Eastern Question. Thus, the Berlin Conference (1878) overturned the resolutions of the Treaty of San Stefano, without, however, any regard to the enslaved Greeks.

thirty-one Muslim members, as well as the appointment of a Christian governor and the establishment of Greek as the official language.

In this way, a new parliamentary system was introduced in Crete, while Turkish administrative action made its implementation impossible. The Cretans were still not satisfied with these measures; they separated into conservatives and liberals, the political climate was tense, and it led to deep divisions among the people. It paralysed the public administration, giving the Turks the opportunity to resume violations. These illegal Turkish acts sparked off new protests and riots during 1881 and through 1885 to 1886. The fact that no measures were taken to deal with Crete's general financial recession triggered a new revolution in 1889, which was soon suppressed. Turkey reacted promptly with a strong military force that cracked down violently on the Christian population. Public opinion in Greece was in an uproar, and the Greek government requested the intervention of the European Powers. The Powers forced the Sultan to issue the Firman (Decree) on Crete on 25 November 1889. The firman, however, effectively restricted the concessions of the Treaty of Chalepa and was thus rejected by the Cretans, who declared general abstention from parliamentary elections. The Turks benefited from their abstention, declaring that the Christians had renounced their rights. The Turkish administration then saw the opportunity to declare martial law in Crete, in August 1889. As a result of the Christians, the Turks exploited the situation and maintained that the Christians had abdicated their rights. From that time onwards, the governors of Crete started to rule with unrestricted authority,⁶ encouraging terrorist acts against the civilian population by various Turkish committees, while Cretan politicians resigned from the public offices they occupied in protest against the Turkish acts of violence. In 1895, the situation in Crete had worsened to such an extent that the Sultan appointed a Christian governor-general, Alexandros Karatheodoris, and charged him with appeasing the Cretans and peacefully re-establishing the Chalepa regime. The Turks of Crete rebelled and decided violently to oppose the rule of the new governor with a view to demonstrating to the Porte that Christian governors would find it impossible to govern the island. The Greek population reacted, and clashes between Muslims and Christians were repeated.⁷

Things went from bad to worse, until the violent riot at Chania forced England, Russia, France and Italy to dispatch warships to the spot, which brought the Cretan Question prominently to the forefront and thus once again to the attention of the Powers. In some respects the Cretan problem closely resembled that of Armenia: both were fundamentally the outcome of Turkish misgovernment, though different in many essential ways. The position of Greece added another complicating factor to the Cretan problem. By descent, the Cretans were wholly Greek, and they naturally looked to the motherland for help and encouragement in their struggle against the Turks. This put the government in the unenviable dilemma of either risking their

⁶ Markezinis S., *Political History of Modern Greece, (in Greek) vol. 2, p. 278.*

⁷ *On 18 May 1896, the Cretans went into action and surrounded 1,600 Turkish troops in Vamos. Shortly after, the Turks massacred Christian civilians in Chania.*

own popularity by doing nothing for the Cretans or else endangering the safety of their country by embarking on an active policy which could easily lead to a rupture with Turkey and alienation of the sympathies of the Great Powers, which objected to seeing the peace of Europe disturbed. There was great excitement in Athens as soon as the news of the Chania riots was known, and it was feared that public opinion might force the government's hand. In spite of their difficulties, however, the Greek government maintained a remarkably moderate attitude and did its best to prevent the transport of volunteers and ammunition to Crete.⁸

The riots, executions and attacks ceased upon the arrival of European warships in the harbours of Chania and Souda Bay. The consuls of the Great Powers had asked that the fleet be sent, since they feared for the lives of the foreign citizens. At the time, the Greek government, occupied with hosting the first Olympic Games in Athens (1896), did not wish to interfere in the Cretan Question. These acts of violence further provoked and incensed public opinion in Greece, which was also being suitably agitated by the National Society.⁹ The result was explosive. The government, under pressure from the Great Powers, refrained from taking any evident measures against Turkey and limited its efforts to sending arms and volunteers to Crete. Deliveries of arms were carried out through the National Society. In June, the Great Powers, at Austria-Hungary's initiative, demanded that the Sublime Porte implement the Chalepa Treaty, grant a general amnesty and convene the Cretan Parliament. At the same time, in a march on the Greek government, they demanded that support in arms and volunteers to Crete cease. The Greek government assured the Powers that it was not involved in any such operation, but that the volunteers, being Cretans, were Turkish subjects, over which it had no right to impose a ban on travel to their place of origin. The Turks, on the other hand, accepted the proposals of the Powers. Despite all this, the military commander of Crete assumed the political administration as well, and rebellious acts and massacres broke out anew. Greece complained to the Powers and, in response, the Turks accused the Greek government of continuing its dispatching of armed bands, not only to Crete, but also to Macedonia and Epirus.

2 CONFLICTS IN EARLY 1897

The operations of Greek bands in Macedonia further aggravated the situation. Almost all of the Great Powers desired to maintain the status quo in Eastern Europe. They discussed the possibility of a peaceful blockade of Crete and a naval show of force to subdue Greece. England opposed these acts and later in August convinced

⁸ Papadopoulos S. George, *England and the Near East 1896–1898*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1969, p. 67–69.

⁹ *The core of the organisation, called Ethniki Etairia, was established in Athens on 12 November 1894. Its aim was to upgrade the army, boost national morale and assist the enslaved brothers. The founders of the Society comprised 15 officers with ranks up to lieutenant, and its members came exclusively from the ranks of junior officers. It later included high-ranking officers as well politicians, members of the clergy and private individuals, which resulted in the growth of its circle of activities and its extension to domestic political affairs.*

Turkey to accept a plan for pacification of the island.¹⁰ The Cretans, suspecting that the plan would only serve to prolong the existing situation, reacted and demanded unification with Greece, or at least full autonomy. The war spirits of the population were inflamed, and pro-war demonstrations followed one after the other, under the guidance of the National Society. The situation was further exacerbated by the Muslim uprising in Chania in November. Other uprisings took place at the beginning of 1897, and as a result sporadic massacres and attacks on Christians were repeated. The admirals of the European fleet, which rode at anchor in Chania after the Turkish massacres in May 1896, disembarked detachments to restore order only when the Turks stopped firing and after noticing that fire threatened their districts. In the meantime, the admirals' refusal to send detachments propelled the general consul in Chania, N. Gennadis, to send a telegram to the Greek government, asking for the immediate dispatch of "ships and an army of occupation" for the protection of Christians. On the morning of 24 January, the marines of the foreign fleet assisted the city's evacuation of Christians and their transport to the foreign ships. However, the Turks went on with the attacks, in joint action with the Turkish army and with the support of artillery in the city's suburbs.

The events in Crete had a great impact on Greece. Public opinion and the opposition demanded that the government act. The excitement reached its peak when, on 25 January, the consul telegraphed that "the fire and massacres would exterminate all Christians".¹¹ These developments obliged the government to change its position and take all the necessary measures, although up till 23 January it declared its hope for a peaceful resolution of the Cretan Question by the Powers. Hence, between 25 and 27 January, five fleet ships gradually set sail from Piraeus.¹² The first three arrived at Chania on the morning of the next day, where four warships of the Great Powers were riding at anchor, while conflicts in the city's suburbs kept on with unabated intensity. Their arrival encouraged the Cretans and exasperated the Turks even more.¹³ The action of the Greek warships, which were under the command of the general consul, was confined to the protection of Christian civilians. The refugees, transported on Greek or Great Powers' ships, disembarked on the islands of Syros or Melos, while serious conflicts continued in nearby villages. Following information that Turkish army forces were to be dispatched to the island, the Greek government decided to send a torpedo squadron to Cretan territorial waters. This squadron consisted of six

¹⁰ *The plan called for the appointment of a Christian governor for a five-year period, appointment of Christians as civil servants at a ratio of two out of every three, as well as the convening of the Parliament every two years to vote on the budget and legislature. In addition, the plan addressed the reorganisation of the Gendarmerie under European officers and the setting up of a committee of European lawyers to draw up a set of new judiciary rules.*

¹¹ *Mazarakis Alex., Historical Study 1821–1827 and the 1897 War, (in Greek), p. 276.*

¹² *The battleship Hydra, under Captain of Gendarmerie Reinek and Captain I. Vokos, the troop ship Mycale, under Captain G. Koundouriotis, the steam corvette Alpheus, the battlecruiser Admiral Miaoulis, under Captain Kosmas Zotos, and the steam corvette Peneus.*

¹³ *On 28 January, the battleship Hydra sailed into Rethymno, where the Turks had already begun the rampage. Its presence, as well as the presence of the Alpheus, prevented slaughters but not looting, and facilitated the consuls' intervention for evacuation of the Greek inhabitants. In Heraklion, the battlecruiser Admiral Miaoulis pursued and forced the troop ship Ismael Fuat, which carried Turkish irregulars who were to reinforce their fellow nationals at Sitia, to turn back.*

torpedo boats under Prince George and set sail on 29 January. The government also reinforced the rebel corps, which had been formed with career officers,¹⁴ and supplied them with cannons. The Greek government's actions alarmed the Great Powers. However, in a note to the latter and the Sublime Porte, it justified its course of action stemming from the need to protect the Christians and hamper the dispatch of Turkish troops to the island. The Greek government also maintained that since the reforms proved to be inapplicable the only solution remaining was the island's unification with Greece. Consequently, the Porte requested that the Great Powers obstruct any intervention of Greece in the Cretan affair and reinforced its military forces on the Greek-Turkish border. The dispatch of new Turkish forces to Crete was prevented by the intervention of the ambassadors in Constantinople, while the governments of the Great Powers examined Turkey's request and came to the decision to engage in an international occupation of the cities of Chania, Rethymno and Heraklion. In view of this possibility, Greece decided to send a military force to Crete, thus preempting the Great Powers' reaction. The latter had clearly shown that they would, once again, support the doctrine of territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire on the suspicion that England, benefiting from the whole situation, was attempting to bring the island under its sphere of influence.¹⁵

The Hellenic occupation dispatch to the island was assigned to King George's adjutant, Colonel Timoleon Vassos, who was ordered to seize the island "in the name of the King of Greece" and restore order.¹⁶

The Expeditionary Force set sail on 1 February,¹⁷ while on the same day the ambassadors of the Great Powers in Athens made a joint representation regarding the aforementioned dispatch of army troops to Crete. They also sent a note to the Greek foreign minister stating that such acts were disapproved of by all governments and that, as a result, they would let the consequences of those acts weigh heavily on the Greek government. The foreign minister replied with a verbal note that the into-

¹⁴ *Officers of Cretan descent (17 in total), after they had submitted their resignation from the Hellenic Army.*

¹⁵ *Edouard Driault and Michel Lheritier, Histoire Diplomatique de la Grece, Paris 1925, vol. IV, p. 340–348; Spiliotopoulos, Ant., History of the Greek-Turkish War 1897, p. 198–200.*

¹⁶ *HAGS/AHD, Greek-Turkish War of 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Colonel T. Vassos, p.4–5. Proclamation to the people of Crete.*

The sufferings which you have sustained for a long time now and which you still sustain due to the complete anarchy, the destructions of your families and property, which are exposed to the appetites of the uncontrolled fanaticism and the barbaric riots, have agitated the national feelings and moved all Greeks. This pathetic situation of people of the same origin, religion and common fates and history with us will no longer be tolerated. H. M. the King of the Greeks and My High Lord decided to put an end to this situation through the military capture of the Island. In the name of H. M. the King of Greece, George I, I capture the island of Crete and declare the following to its inhabitants, without any discrimination based on religion or nationality, I promise in the name of His Majesty that I will protect the honour, life and property and respect the religious beliefs of its inhabitants, bringing to them peace and equality before the law. Issued from the Gonia Monastery of Crete, on 2 February 1897, The Commander of the occupation army of Crete, Colonel T. Vassos.

¹⁷ *Consisted of two weak infantry battalions, an engineer company and a pack artillery battery – totaling 1,500 men – immediately embarked on steamboats Pelops, Theseus and Thetis, which set sail for Crete. The English destroyer Dragon also set sail at that time and followed the steamboats till Melos; afterwards it headed to Crete.*

lerable situation in Crete justified the decisions taken by the Greek government.¹⁸ Colonel Vassos had planned to land near Chania and attempt to capture the city with support from the sea.

The international occupation of the city of Chania was effected by the admirals of the Great Powers on their governments' orders on 3 February and prevented Colonel Vassos from occupying the city. Since the city's fall was imminent, Turkey had no objection to the Powers' proposals for foreign occupation of the island. Therefore, the admirals disembarked a detachment of 500 men that seized the city, and the Great Powers' flags were placed alongside the Turkish flag on the ramparts of the city's fortress.¹⁹ Turkey also protested to the Great Powers against the Greek dispatch of an expeditionary force, since after the foreign occupation and preceding agreement it was restricted from sending new military forces to the island. At the same time, it promoted the establishment of army headquarters near the Greek-Turkish border. On 5 February, the international occupation was extended to other island coastal cities and fortresses as well. The admirals also defined a six-kilometre buffer zone around the fortress of Chania and prohibited hostilities within this zone. The Greek government ordered Colonel Vassos to avoid conflict with the European detachment forces. At the same time, the alliance requested the Greek government to withdraw all of its troops from Crete.

On 9 February 1897, the European Powers' naval units in Souda Bay bombarded the Greek rebel forces. In particular, the military governor of Crete, undisturbed by the Europeans, not only attacked the Cretans to the southeast of Chania, but also extended his attacks up to Akroteri. Although the Cretans were also attacked by the Turkish ships that were anchored at Souda, they managed to repel them. Some Cretan troops, in their pursuit of the Turks, followed them into the buffer zone, where the European ships opened continuous fire against them. This happened because the admirals had declared in a previous agreement that they would intervene against the Cretans only if they entered the buffer zone. The first to open fire was the German warship *Empress Augusta*, followed by the Austro-Hungarian *Maria Theresia* and the English *Revenge*, *Dryad* and *Harrie* with their heavy cannons. The French and Italian ships did not participate, because they were in a disadvantageous position. On 15 February, the Cretan members of parliament in Athens submitted a petition to the King, asking for the integration of the island. On the same day, the revolutionists at Akroteri responded to the proclamation issued by the admirals on 13 February requesting that the Cretans lay down arms, that only unification with Greece would bring peace. At the same time, the Cretans repulsed the Turks, who came out of Chania, perpetrated massacres in the area and supplied their besieged compatriots, supported by the firing Turkish warship at Souda Bay and under the eye of the captains of the European warships. This bombardment had a major impact on European public opinion and made the worst impression on the Greek people, while on the other hand

¹⁸ *Aspreas G., Political History of Modern Greece 1821–1921 (in Greek), vol. II, Athens 1925, p. 235–23, Driault-Lheritier, Histoire ..., vol. IV, p. 345.*

¹⁹ *HAGS/AHD, Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos, p. 14.*

it boosted morale and increased Turkish insolence.²⁰ After all this, the Cretans sent a protest to the admirals and the Christian people in Europe. The Italian press, as well as the French opposition press, described the act as ignoble and a stain on Europe. The press in Germany and Austria-Hungary maintained their anti-Greek stand. The Greek parliament expressed its deep regret and appealed to the Christians of Europe for the holy rights of freedom that had been trampled on in Crete.²¹

At the same time, the European Powers reached an agreement, despite their differences. On 18 February, the ambassadors of the European Powers in Athens delivered identical notes declaring that Crete could not be unified with Greece but would be granted autonomy instead. Moreover, Greece was given a six-day deadline to recall its troops and ships from the island. An identical notification on Crete was also delivered to Turkey by the ambassadors in Constantinople.²² On 24 February, when the deadline expired, the Greek government responded to the Great Powers' notification refusing to recall troops from Crete, remaining, however, open to any future negotiations. Turkey had responded earlier and, as per its usual tactics, accepted the Powers' decision. The Great Powers regarded the Greek response as unacceptable and resumed negotiations on the fate of Crete. At the same time, the admirals, by orders of their governments, ousted the director of the abolished Greek consulate in Chania.

Despite the admirals' hostile acts, the Cretan struggle did not ebb; on the contrary, it continued with intensified vigour. On 16 February, the Cretans, reinforced by troops and cannons from the Expeditionary Force of Colonel Vassos, seized the fortress of Stavros. The admirals protested against the occupation while Vassos responded by maintaining that he had not disturbed the coastal fortresses which were under the protection of the flags of the Christian Powers.²³

On 21 February, European warships sailed into Kasteli Selinou (Paleohora) and disembarked 500 enlisted men.²⁴ The admirals requested that the Cretan leaders who had besieged Kandanos not oppose their decision to evacuate the town. The Cretan leaders expressed their regret that Europe was not at all moved by the slain

²⁰ *On 20 February, a massive demonstration took place in Athens, where the people expressed not only their opposition to the Powers' decision but also their bellicose disposition. Demonstrations were staged for the same purpose abroad as well. More than 100 British members of parliament expressed their sympathy for the stance of the Greek government to the Greek king in a telegram. Furthermore, after the proclamation of the Cretan Committee of London to the British people, multitudinous demonstrations (the second numbering more than 100,000 people) were staged on 21 and 23 February, protesting against using the British fleet to force the Cretan people to give in to the interests of the Sultan and requested that the Cretans be given the right to decide their fate on their own*

²¹ Spiliotopoulos, *Ant., History of the Greek-Turkish...*, p. 244–250.

²² Edouard Driault and Michel Lheritier, *Histoire...*, vol. IV, p. 361–365.

²³ HGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos*, p. 37–38. *Vassos asked to be informed »whether the neutrality of positions professed by the admirals concerned only Christians and if the minimum violation of this, for reasons of defence, by them and only them, was to be penalised with bombardments, and whether the bullets of the Christian Powers would continue to lay the neutral ground for the Christian corpses.«*

²⁴ HGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos*, p. 48–49.

Greeks, when on the other hand it showed its interest and care of the Muslims. The evacuation was carried out on 25 February, and after it was completed, the European ships initiated a cannonade and firing against the Cretans on the grounds that some of them had entered the forbidden coastal zone.

In the eastern part of Crete, the struggle went on under Captain Aristotelis Korakas, who besieged Heraklion Port.²⁵ On 20 February, the captains of the European warships that were in town informed Korakas that, by order of the admirals, Heraklion had been placed under the protection of Europe and that a buffer zone was being defined around it. Following this development, at the request of the inhabitants of Ierapetra, Korakas moved that same day towards the southeastern coast of Crete and reached the city, leading 3,500 men. When the admirals were informed of his move, however, they sent the Italian warship *Ruggiero di Saurra* to Ierapetra. The Italian captain forbade the Greek inhabitants to enter the town, in order to receive and protect their looted property. Therefore, the next day, despite the Italian captain's declaration that any action would be repelled by cannonry, Korakas attacked the town with artillery and blockaded it from land. But no sooner had the artillery fired than the Italian battleship intervened with its cannons and machine guns in alliance with the Turks. At the same time, marine detachments disembarked on land. Additionally, when the Greek troops, on 28 February, attacked the island of Spinalonga, the French warship *Sughet* arrived and placed the island under its protection. The bombardment from the Italian warship created a bad impression in Italy; the people's indignation was so great that the Italian government was forced to recall the warship²⁶ from Crete.

The government foresaw the naval blockade on Crete and thus recalled the Greek ships, save for two. It also feared a blockade on Piraeus (Athens' seaport), which Germany had been persistently requesting. Despite people's reactions in France and England, where new massive demonstrations had been organised, the governments of all Powers agreed to take coercive measures. The blockade of Crete and its joint occupation by the Great Powers was therefore decided. Each of the Powers undertook to reinforce its detachments on the island, by 500–600 more men. While the Powers agreed to grant Crete full autonomy within the Ottoman Empire and the admirals of the Alliance openly declared the fact on 5 March, the rebellion continued to grow in intensity, as the rebels were infuriated at the naval blockade imposed on the island. The Turks reacted to the autonomy and insisted on having a Turk appointed governor of Crete. On 6 March, the ambassadors in Athens delivered a notification on the blockade of Crete, which was due to come into force on 9 March 1897. After that, the Greek government decided to recall both ships still remaining at Chania.

²⁵ *Korakas, after resigning from the Hellenic Army, disembarked in early February, with the Greek Expeditionary Force, heading about 400 volunteers and with 2 pack cannons, 3,000 Gras weapons, various other equipment and supplies. After recruiting about 3,000 men, he invited local leaders to engage in joint action and created a tight besieging cordon around the city of Heraklion.*

²⁶ *HAGS/AHD, Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/B/1, Report by Captain Aristotelis Korakas.*

Subsequently, the Great Powers occupied Crete with the international army in the following way: the Austro-Hungarians seized the province of Kissamos, the Russians the province of Rethymno, the Italians Chania, the Germans Souda, the French Sitia and the British Heraklion, forcing the Greek vice-consul stationed there to leave. The admirals proposed that their governments immediately appoint a governor, organise autonomy, have the Greek and Turkish troops removed and blockade Piraeus. New deliberations followed among the Great Powers. Britain maintained that it would be preferable to have the pacification of the island assigned to the Expeditionary Force of Colonel Vassos. Russia, in line with France, suggested that Prince George of Greece be appointed governor of Crete and the ambassadors in Constantinople assigned the task of granting autonomy. On 22 March, the ambassadors laid down the relevant plan. In order for it to be enforced, however, the Greek and Turkish military forces had to be removed. Hence, the matter remained pending, while relations between Greece and Turkey became even more tense and mobilisation was underway.²⁷

In the meantime, the admirals implemented the naval blockade on Crete before the official starting date of 9 March specified in the Great Powers' notification. Specifically, an Austro-Hungarian warship sank a Greek sailing boat on 5 March. The next day the admirals circulated printed proclamations to the inhabitants of Crete and promised them, in the name of their governments, complete autonomy of the island, provided they lay down arms. Subsequently, they assigned the consul of Britain, Bilioti, to go into the provinces and receive the Cretan people's reply in writing.²⁸ The Cretans, in their gatherings in various provinces on the island, signed resolutions against autonomy and demanded unification. Bilioti pretended that these events did not represent the people's will and suggested that the Admirals go to the provinces themselves to ascertain the truth. In fact, the admirals did go into the provinces and were faced everywhere with the Cretan people's irreversible decision

²⁷ Mazarakis Alex., *Historical Study...*, p. 284, *Spiliotopoulos, Ant., History...*, p. 321–329.

²⁸ HAGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos*, p. 95–98.

To the inhabitants of Crete

The signatories, High Commanders of the naval forces of Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Great Britain, Italy and Russia in Cretan waters, acting according to the instructions of their Governments, declare to all and announce to the inhabitants of the Island that the Great Powers have received the irrevocable decision to ensure full autonomy of Crete, under the suzerainty of the Sultan. This means that the Cretans shall be completely relieved of any control by the Porte with regards to their internal affairs.

The Powers, mainly dealing with curing the sufferings that have stricken this place and preventing the return of these, process a set of measures destined to regulate the operation of the autonomous constitution and restore peace, secure, without any discrimination based on origin or religion, the freedom and the guarding of properties, facilitate the resumption of agricultural works and transactions and the gradual development of local resources: This is the cause of the Powers.

For that, they demand that this be understood by all. A new era is upon Crete. Let everyone give up their arms. The Powers desire peace and order. In case of emergency, they shall have enough power in order to make their decisions be respected. They rely upon the support of all the inhabitants of the Island, Christians and Muslims, in order to proceed with them to the completion of a work that will secure unity and prosperity for the Cretans. Souda, March 5/17 (7/19 according to the French calendar) 1897.

The Commanders of the international naval forces.

The German Captain Kelner, the Vice Admiral Harris.*

The Austria-Hungarian Vice Admiral Hinke, The Russian Vice Admiral* Andriev.*

The French Vice Admiral Pottier, The Italian Rear Admiral* N. Canevaro.*

**The translator incorrectly translated "C. Admiral" as Vice Admiral, instead of Rear Admiral and "V. Admiral" as Rear Admiral, instead of Vice Admiral.*

for unification. The admirals were convinced by the whole reaction of the people and their unanimous will for unification, yet failed to lure the Cretans into accepting the proposal of autonomy.²⁹ In the course of time, the admirals' position gradually changed. It was observed that although they had defined a buffer zone, they aimed to let the Turkish army extend to the island's interior.

Greek forces seized the Malaxa Fortress on 13 March, before the Turkish forces could supply the guard, as was their intention, since they had already received the approval of the admirals. The European fleet started firing against the fortress and the Greek camp. They also telegraphed to Europe, the British Consul Bilioti in particular, that the Turkish guard (46 men) had been captured and slain by the Greek army. The next day many correspondents from foreign newspapers visited the prisoners and saw for themselves that the rumours were inaccurate.³⁰ On 18 March, the admirals seized the Annibali Fortress with a detachment, to allegedly secure Chania after the fall of Malaxa, while at the same time Turkish troops attacked Cretans occupying proximate positions. Despite the fact that the Turks were supported by artillery and two Turkish warships, the Cretans managed to repulse the attacks. The European ships started cannonading the Cretans even after cessation of the battle. On the next day, the struggle was repeated with greater fierceness with cannonades from the Turkish and European ships, particularly the Russian and British. Thus, with the help of the admirals, the Turks seized the Cretans' fortified positions, pillaged and set fire to the nearby Greek villages.

On 18 March, Colonel Vassos sent a written protest³¹ to the admirals concerning all that had taken place, and the next day he communicated his protest to the London newspapers and the opposition leader of the English parliament, causing a tumultuous discussion to break out. On 22 March, the Italian admiral contested the accuracy of the assertions. On the same day, a group of Turks, in Cretan dress, approached the Cretan outposts at Akroteri and attacked the unsuspecting Cretans, who lost 25 men. A fierce attack followed from Turkish forces that were awaiting the success of the surprise attack, but the Cretans managed to repulse them after inflicting losses on them of 53 men. The Cretans of Akroteri, as well as Colonel Vassos, protested the next day to the admirals, asking why such acts that had occurred before their very eyes had not induced their intervention. Since British Consul Bilioti disputed the Turkish excesses, four officers of the Great Powers were sent who saw the deplorable state of the dead.³² Following the Cretans' protests that the admirals had a double standard, the latter replied that they would recommend the disarmament of the Turkish inhabitants.

²⁹ HAGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos, p. 103–104.*

"We took to the arms in order to die under the Greek flag. We have tried all regimes Europe imposed on us, and all kinds of autonomy granted to us fell through. We are tired of rebelling just to receive regimes that fail. Our desire is one, unification. For this we have been in revolt since 1821. This is our fathers' will and the only appropriate solution of the question; any other solution is ruled out."

³⁰ HAGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos, p. 70–76; Edouard Driault and Michel Lheritier; Histoire..., vol. IV, p. 380–384.*

³¹ HAGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos, p. 79–85.*

³² HAGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos, p. 106–107.*

In the meantime, in the province of Kissamos, the coastal fortress of Kasteli, which had been placed under the protection of the European Powers and was guarded by six of their warships, remained in the possession of the Turks. In order to storm the fortress, on the night of 15 March, the Cretans decided to blow it up, and with the help of Colonel Vassos' engineer platoon, they started constructing a mine. The venture failed, since they were spotted by the Turks, who opened fire against them. The next day, European detachments landed and started bringing down the houses of Cretans next to the fortress so as to prevent any other attempt to blow it up. On seeing their houses being demolished, the Cretans attacked the detachments, which withdrew to their ships and opened continuous fire against them. However, on the night of 19 March, Kounoupitsa Tower was blown up, forcing its guard to abandon it, and later, so was Mesogeia Tower.³³

These incidents further inflated pro-war sentiments in Greece. Following the events, Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro, urged on by Russia and Austro-Hungary – who did not want the status quo in the Balkans disturbed – assured the Turks that in case of a Greek-Turkish war they would maintain strict neutrality. This fact encouraged the Turks, who decided to resolve their differences with Greece through war. The Great Powers made efforts to reach an agreement on extending the blockade to the ports of mainland Greece. No agreement was reached on England's proposal that both Greece and Turkey move their troops 50 miles away from each side of the border. This situation did not contribute to pacification, and Europe seemed unable to ward off the forthcoming crisis. Therefore, following a proposal by Russia, the Great Powers delivered notifications simultaneously to both the Greek and Turkish governments, because they observed the gathering of Greek and Turkish forces at the border every day and foresaw an imminent rift. The Great Powers, however, did not agree on issues such as the blockade of Greece, the participation of Colonel Vassos in the pacification of Crete and the appointment of Prince George as sovereign of Crete. The officials in Athens considered the above to be a sign of a rift among the Great Powers, while, as the national celebration (25 March) approached, demonstrations took place on a daily basis in the streets of Athens. The Greek government, discerning the forthcoming war, wanted to reach an understanding with Bulgaria. However, the Balkan states, pressured as they were by Germany and Russia, notified the Porte on 28 March that they were to keep a strictly neutral position towards the war between Greece and Turkey. Hence, despite diplomatic efforts to prevent the war, everything led directly to it, even the bellicose movement in Greece, which could not but affect the government. On the other hand, Turkey was being pushed by Germany to attack.

Although the National Society had placed itself at the government's disposal, it started organising rebel corps again and planned a sortie to Macedonia. Therefore, the only outcome of their invasion was to accelerate the declaration of war.³⁴ On

³³ HGS/AHD, *Greek-Turkish War 1897 Archive, F.1800/A/1, Report by Col. T. Vassos, p. 108–113, 1800/A/1, Part C, Reports by Captain D. Mattheopoulos and Professor P. Kondilis.*

³⁴ *Spiliotopoulos, Ant., History..., p. 351–357, Edouard Driault and Michel Lheritier Histoire..., vol. IV, p. 389–391.*

the afternoon of 5 April 1897, the Porte announced to the Greek ambassador in Constantinople its decision to breach diplomatic relations and begin war operations. The Great Powers, in different statements, declared that they would keep away from any intervention, observing neutrality, and that the situation in Crete would remain invariable. However, Germany, with ammunition and officers, took over command of the Turkish units.³⁵

Conclusion

The Cretan Issue remained open during the war. The actions of the Great Powers were limited to the recall of the Hellenic Army from Crete and acceptance by the Hellenic Government of the autonomy of Crete. The Cretan Assembly was forced to accept the autonomy on 16 October 1897. Subsequently, the issue of the governor came up. Many personalities were proposed, but the Great Powers did not agree. In December 1897, the Tsar proposed Prince George of Greece as a candidate, but again the Great Powers reacted, mainly Germany and Austria-Hungary. Russia, however, insisted, and Germany reacted and proposed that Crete should be captured by two Powers and on 2 March 1898 recalled its warships from Crete. Austria-Hungary followed, so only the naval forces of England, France, Russia and Italy remained in Crete. The remaining powers divided the island into four departments, which they severally undertook to administer. By her active intervention in Crete, Greece had caused European attention to shift from the island to the mainland. But no sooner were the Greco-Turkish difficulties settled than Crete continued to provide a major element of instability in the Near East, from which further complications might ensue at any moment. It was incumbent upon the Powers, in accordance with their promises, to provide Crete with sufficient autonomy, and their efforts to this end occupied the latter half of 1897, and practically all of 1898. It was not until Germany and Austria-Hungary had withdrawn from the Concert, and not before a further outbreak led to the loss of several British lives, that a final settlement was reached. Throughout this period, Crete, because of its strategic position and the value that Turkey attached to a favourable settlement, served as an important pawn in the general diplomatic game, as well as in the affairs of the Near East.³⁶ After an attack by the Muslims of Heraklion with the connivance of the Turkish authorities, the Hellenic Government asked that the Great Powers recall the Ottoman troops. The last Turkish soldiers left the island on 3 November 1898. The Great Powers asked for the authorisation of King George I to appoint his son, Prince George, High Commissioner in Crete for three years, on condition that he would recognise the suzerainty of the Sultan and raise the Turkish flag as a symbol thereof on one of the island's fortresses. The King of Greece accepted the proposal, and on 9 December 1898, Prince George disembarked in Souda Bay, being officially accepted by the four admirals and with

indescribable enthusiasm on the part of the inhabitants. The assumption of governance by the Cretan Eleftherios Venizelos in 1910 and the victorious wars of 1912–1913,

³⁵ *Spiliotopoulos, Ant., History...*, p. 368–371, *Driault-Lheritier, Histoire...*, p. 360, *Mazarakis Alex., Historical...*, p. 288–289.

³⁶ *Papadopoulos S. George, England and the Near East 1896–1898, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1969, p. 195.*

during which the contribution of many Cretan volunteer corps was very important, were the final solution of the Cretan Issue. With the treaties of London (17 May 1913) and Bucharest (28 July 1913), the unification of Crete with Greece took place officially. This unification was officially sealed on 1 December 1913.

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