

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 155

“A Lake of Blood”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the year 1899, Georges Clemenceau had just returned to Paris from a visit to Greece. At a social gathering, he was invited by his hostess to offer his impressions. Clemenceau replied, “Well, Madame, I am not going to talk about the grandeur of the Acropolis, nor do I intend to torment you with a lecture on archeology. I have been to see strange and picturesque lands, among them Crete. You will never guess, though, my most interesting discovery in the island, one more interesting by far than the splendors of the excavations. I will tell you. A young advocate, a M. Venezuelos... Venizelos? Frankly, I cannot quite recall his name, but the whole of Europe will be speaking of him in a few years.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme.]

Episode 155. A Lake of Blood.

I intend to cover two topics today. One is the developments in the Balkans and Greece in 1917, but before I get to that, I want to say a few words about the nation of Iran.

Iran has come up before in the podcast, mostly in the context of competing Russian and British interests there. I talked a little about the political situation in Iran in episode 41, and I told you the story of the death of Prince Bahram, who was killed in the English Channel en route to his homeland when the German submarine *U-29* sank the French ferry *Sussex*. I’ve been promising you more on the topic of Iran, and I hope today I can offer at least a down payment on what I owe you.

You probably already know that Iran represents one of the oldest nations and oldest civilizations on the planet. Human beings have lived in the region for hundreds of thousands of years. The first city in what is now Iran, Susa, was established over six thousand years ago, and the first unified Persian state emerged in the sixth century B.C.

And I want to pause here for a moment to discuss the question of “Persia” vs. “Iran” as the name of this nation. In the early twentieth century, all English-speaking peoples called this country

“Persia.” But the name “Persia” comes into English via the Greeks, who are the Persians’ traditional enemies. The people who live there have been calling their own nation “Iran” since ancient times. The name is cognate with the word “Aryan.”

Now, it’s not necessarily wrong for English speakers to call a foreign country by a different name than its inhabitants use. We say “Germany,” for example, while the Germans say “Deutschland.” But in 1935, the then-Shah, Reza Pahlavi, made a formal diplomatic request to other nations that his country be called Iran and not Persia in future legal and diplomatic communications. I considered calling it “Persia” on the podcast until we reached 1935, assuming we ever do, and then switching over to “Iran,” but I felt that was disrespectful. Here at *The History of the Twentieth Century*, we believe in calling people and places by the names they or their inhabitants prefer unless there’s a compelling reason to do otherwise. That’s why we say “Theodore Roosevelt” and not “Teddy Roosevelt.”

The sources seem to agree that in modern English, “Iran” is the preferred name in a diplomatic or political context, although “Persia” or “Persian” is still commonly used in historical, linguistic, or cultural contexts. So for example, we speak of “ancient Persia” or refer to the Persian language or Persian cuisine. So that’s the guideline I’m going to use for the podcast.

But the debate still isn’t over yet, because different English speakers pronounce “Iran” in different ways. I prefer “ear-RAHN” because that’s the pronunciation closest to how the Iranians say it, although the consensus among the sources I’ve consulted is that “ear-RAN” and “ear-RAIN-ian” are equally acceptable. On the other hand, in the United States, you also hear the pronunciation “eye-RAN” and “eye-RAIN-ian” and here the sources disagree. Some argue that frequent usage makes it an acceptable standard American English pronunciation, while others...don’t. I come down on the latter side myself. That may be because I can still remember as a boy hearing people call Italians “Eye-talians.” Even then it was regarded as at best evidence of ignorance and at worst a deliberate slur. “Eye-RAN” strikes me in much the same way, so I won’t be using it. I will stick to “ear-RAHN,” although you shouldn’t be surprised if I slip up now and then and let an occasional “ear-RAN” sneak through.

To recap the situation, Iran lies in the region of Asia where British and Russian interests clashed in the 19th century, the so-called “Great Game.” Recall that at the beginning of the twentieth century, most British leaders saw Russia as the British Empire’s greatest threat, and since Russia and British-ruled India both bordered on Iran, Iran became an arena of colonial competition. Russia fought two wars against Iran in the early 19th century, pushing the Russian-Iranian frontier southward, and giving Russia control of the Caucasus region. This in turn led to migrations as Christian minorities such as Georgians and Armenians moved northward, preferring rule by a Christian Emperor, while Muslim minority Turks and Iranians and Azeri tended to migrate southward into Turkey or Iran, altering the demographics of the region.

The Iranian rulers of this period, the shahs, had fallen heavily in debt to Western creditors, which is a story you've heard before on this podcast. A large foreign debt was often the grease on the skids that carried non-European nations down the slippery slope that led to European armies marching in, taking control of the custom houses, installing advisors, and eventually declaring a protectorate, a process the British delicately called "peaceful penetration." So much more civilized than out-and-out conquest, you see. Many a small country fell into this trap, and by the late 19th century, even large states like the Ottoman Empire and China seemed headed in this direction.

When the British and Russians reached their entente in 1907, they carved out Russian and British spheres of influence within Iran, in much the same way European powers were treating China, another ancient civilization. Internally, Iran experienced a political revolution beginning in 1905 in which liberal elements pushed for an end to absolute monarchy and the creation of a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, or *majlis*. A very similar political revolution was underway in Russia at the same time, the Revolution of 1905, which we've already discussed. In Iran, the revolution also took on a nationalist character, as one of the principal grievances against absolute power in the hands of the shahs was the foreign debt they had run up and their weakness in the face of foreign bullying.

The shah was forced to allow the election of a majlis in 1906, and it promulgated a constitution that included limits on the power of the monarch. The shah himself was in poor health at this time and was induced to sign the constitution, but then he died five days later. His son succeeded him and became Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar who, with Russian and British support, sent the Persian Cossack Brigade, an Iranian military unit commanded and trained by Russian officers, to attack the Majlis. The building was shelled and the Majlis dispersed. In 1909, constitutionalists took control of Teheran, the capital, and deposed the shah, replacing him with his son, Ahmad Shah Qajar, who was eleven years old at the time.

Having a child shah on the sun throne made it easier for the Majlis to operate and legislate reforms. On the other hand, internal unrest and British and Russian interference made it hard for either the regent or the Majlis to enforce their wills on the country as a whole. Russian soldiers occupied northern Iran in 1911, ostensibly to maintain order and protect Russian interests. The British, meanwhile, had discovered oil in southern Iran, had built the largest oil refinery in the world at Abadan, and were very keen on defending those interests. Remember that Britain has no domestic oil production, and by this time it was becoming clear that petroleum was the fuel of the future.

The shah turned sixteen in January 1914 and was then able to rule in his own right, and as you know, the Great War began just a few months later. The war did not affect Iran directly at first, and the Iranian government declared its neutrality. But once the Ottoman Empire entered the war, the situation became distinctly awkward, since Iran borders on the Russian Empire, the British Empire and the Ottoman Empire. As a neutral power, Iran was obligated under

international law to bar belligerent military forces from its soil, but when the Prime Minister demanded a Russian withdrawal, the Russian ambassador merely asked what guarantee the Prime Minister could give that a Russian withdrawal would not simply lead to a Turkish invasion.

As you know, Russian and Turkish forces fought along the Caucasus front during the Great War, and some of that fighting spilled over into Iranian territory, as I have occasionally mentioned.

The presence of foreign soldiers on Iranian soil led some in the Majlis to conclude that Iran would be better off aligning itself with Germany, a distant power, rather than Russia or Britain, neighboring powers that seemed to have clear designs on Iranian territory. By 1915, this kind of talk had alarmed the Russians sufficiently enough that they began moving troops into the capital. The Majlis fled Teheran and set itself up at Kermanshah as the “Provisional Government.” The Central Powers recognized this “Provisional Government”; the Allies opposed it and the Russian Army eventually dispersed it.

As you know from episode 99, shortly after the Ottoman Empire entered the Great War, the Grand Mufti of Constantinople declared the war to be a jihad and called on Muslims everywhere to support the Central Powers and oppose the Allies. You also know that this declaration landed with a resounding thud in the Muslim world, with few outside the Ottoman Empire taking it seriously. Nowhere was the call to jihad taken less seriously than in Iran. That’s because Iran is a majority Shiite nation, the only one in the world at this time, in fact. Shia Islam had, and has, an entirely different system of religious authority than does the Sunni Islam of the Ottoman Empire. Suffice it to say that the Grand Mufti’s theological pronouncements carry as much weight in Iran as say, a theological statement from the Archbishop of Canterbury would carry in Italy.

All this was well understood in Constantinople. No one expected Shiite clergy to fall in line with the proclamations of the Sunni Grand Mufti. There were, however, Shiite clergy in the Ottoman Empire, notably in southern Mesopotamia, where there is a substantial Shiite population, and some of them bowed to the wishes of Constantinople and dutifully issued fatwas endorsing the jihad. These declarations were then brought into Iran in the hopes of persuading Iranian Shiites. It was not the Turks but the Germans who took the lead on this project. Recall that Kaiser Wilhelm fancied himself an authority on Islam and it has been German foreign policy for some time now to present Germany as a friend to Muslims and to build alliances in the Muslim world.

After the Great War began and jihad was declared, these efforts went into overdrive. German diplomatic and military figures in Iran played up German solidarity with Muslims and even put out the claim that Kaiser Wilhelm himself had converted to Islam and made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and was now to be called “Haji Wilhelm.”

Unfortunately for the Germans, their efforts produced little in the way of results. Most Iranian clerics were indifferent to the war and they told their followers that which side to support, if either, was matter of individual choice. A few of the more militant Shiites went further. Aqa

Sayyed Ali Sistani argued that the Ottomans were infidels and therefore no better than the British or the Russians. Another cleric, Aqa Sayyed Reza Quchani *avored* the Russians over the Ottomans on the argument that Christians were less of a threat to Islam than were the heretic Turks.

But even if Iranians themselves mostly avoided taking sides in the war, they couldn't avoid the war's impact. The war and the food shortages it created sparked increases in the price of food worldwide, which led to food shortages and hunger in poorer nations like Iran. In addition to the general price increases, the foreign armies operating in and near Iran bought up Iranian food production, or worse, simply confiscated it for their own use, along with the pack animals that were the country's main means of transporting harvests from rural areas to towns and cities. This led to hunger, food shortages, looting, and violence.

Thousands of Iranian migrant workers crossed the border into the Russian Caucasus during the war to work in oil fields, factories, and in construction, but after the Russian economy collapsed in 1917, most of these migrants found themselves abruptly out of work and forced to return home, where there were no jobs and no food. The combination of famine and poverty with large numbers of soldiers and migrants moving around inevitably led to the outbreak of diseases like cholera and typhus. The death toll can only be estimated, but the estimates run in the range of one half to one million people by 1918, out of a prewar Iranian population of about ten million. As bad as that was, it would quickly get worse when the 1918 influenza pandemic reached Iran and more than doubled the death toll.

That means that overall, roughly twenty percent of the population of Iran died from war-related causes, including the flu epidemic. This is a shocking number for a country that wasn't even a belligerent.

[music: Ravel *String Quartet in F Major*]

And now I'd like to turn to the Balkans. Remember the Balkans? The place where the war started? The last time we looked in there, Serbia and Montenegro had been defeated and occupied by the Central Powers, episode 111, much to the relief of the Austrians, who had for a time there been facing a three-front war against Italy, Serbia, and Russia. The defeat of Serbia cut that down to a two-front war, at least, but that respite proved short lived. Less than a year later, Romania entered the war, episode 124, opening up a new third front.

But the German Army lent its assistance to Austria, and Romania was quickly put on the defensive and is about to be defeated. Still, if you guessed that the Balkans are not yet finished exporting history to the rest of us, then you are correct. Give yourself a cookie.

We turn our attention next to Greece, which I've already touched on briefly, but it's time to pick up that thread and see where it leads. I want to begin by introducing you, or rather I should say *reintroducing* you, to the two biggest names in Greek politics of this era. The King of Greece,

Constantine, and the prime minister, or maybe not, depending on who you talk to, Eleftherios Venizelos.

At this point in our narrative, the King of Greece—or to be more precise, the King of the Hellenes—is Constantine. I first mentioned him back in episode 69, when he was Crown Prince Constantine and led the Greek Army to victory and glory in the First Balkan War, almost doubling the population and land area of Greece. Constantine was hailed as a hero of the nation and made a field marshal.

It was during this war that Crown Prince Constantine had his first run-in with Eleftherios Venizelos, who was prime minister and war minister at that time, and therefore theoretically the Crown Prince's superior in the chain of command. At one point in the fighting, the Crown Prince wanted to take his army north to link up with the Serbian Army and attack the Ottomans at Monastir, which was a sensible move, militarily speaking. Venizelos, though, wanted the army to move to take the strategic port of Salonika, which would be more valuable to Greece in a postwar territorial settlement. This made for an awkward confrontation. In pure military terms, the war minister outranks any military officer in the chain of command. In civilian social terms, however, Constantine was royalty and Venizelos a commoner, and commoners do not give orders to members of the royal family. So this situation requires a delicate formality. Venizelos did his best, cabling the Crown Prince to tell him “political considerations of the utmost importance dictate that [Salonika] be taken as soon as possible.” Constantine replied, “The army will not march on [Salonika]. My duty calls me toward Monastir, unless you forbid me.” An infuriated Venizelos sent a tersely worded telegram in reply: “I forbid you.”

So Constantine marched his army to Salonika. The Ottoman garrison in Salonika was surprised; they had expected Constantine to go for Monastir, too. And the Bulgarians were surprised. They had an army marching on Salonika. They wanted a port on the Aegean Sea, but Constantine's army beat them there by a day, and Salonika was annexed by Greece instead, vindicating Venizelos' strategic judgment, but I mention this story because many people point to this moment as the beginning of the bad blood between the prime minister and the prince, which is going to have major political consequences for Greece.

Shortly afterward, King George was assassinated by an anarchist and Constantine succeeded him as King. The following year, the Great War began. Back in episode 111, I talked about the diplomatic pressure both of the wartime coalitions were putting on Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece. King Constantine wanted to keep Greece neutral, which may have been for high-minded reasons or something to do with the fact that he was married to Queen Sophia, sister of Kaiser Wilhelm. Or probably some of both.

The British, you'll recall, tried to entice both Bulgaria and Greece by offering them territorial concessions. The first offer was a complicated swap whereby Greece would cede to Bulgaria some of the territory it took in the Balkan wars and in exchange, Britain would arrange for

Greece to receive some Turkish territories after the war, specifically, regions along the west coast of Anatolia where there were Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians. King Constantine was unmoved by this offer, but Venizelos loved it. He was an ardent Greek nationalist who himself was born and raised in Crete under Ottoman rule and dreamt of the establishment of a Greater Greece that ruled over all the lands encircling the Aegean Sea.

The British were hoping to get the Bulgarians and the Greeks into the war by the time of the Gallipoli landings, but that never happened. In Greece, Venizelos resigned the premiership, triggering a general election in the summer of 1915 that returned Venizelos and his Liberal Party to power and thus gave Venizelos' war policy the stamp of public approval.

Then Bulgaria joined the Central Powers and attacked Serbia. That made it easier for the British to try to bribe the Greeks, because now they could offer Greece Bulgarian territory along the Aegean plus western Anatolia, plus most of Thrace, almost to the gates of Constantinople. To Venizelos, this was the dream come true. For the Allies, it was an opportunity to open a new front in the war, northward from Greece, to reclaim Serbia and invade Bulgaria. But the Allies didn't have the soldiers to take advantage of this opportunity. In October 1915, Britain and France sent one division each to Salonika. Officially, this was to secure a supply line to beleaguered Serbia, now under attack by Germany, Austria and Bulgaria. Unofficially, the Allies were securing Salonika as a foothold in the Balkans, following the withdrawal from Gallipoli. As part of the understanding with the Venizelos government, the Allies would land these forces without Greek permission, but the Greek government would limit its response to diplomatic protests. Not coincidentally, the British at this time added Cyprus, which Britain controlled, to the gift bag of territories to be handed over to Greece in exchange for her support.

The Greek parliament narrowly approved this policy, but King Constantine did not and he dismissed Venizelos despite his parliamentary majority. The King would call another election, but this time Venizelos and his Liberal Party would boycott the election, and 1916 saw the installation of a new government in Athens, one that the King approved of but was seen as illegitimate by Venizelos and the Liberal Party. Serbia fell at about this same time; the Allies evacuated the Serbian government to the Greek island of Corfu in the Adriatic, and transported some 150,000 Serbian soldiers to that Allied enclave at Salonika, where they rested and were re-equipped by the British and the French. By the end of 1915, the Allies held the city of Salonika out to a perimeter that stretched eighty miles around the city. The Allied soldiers occupying this enclave took to calling it the "Birdcage."

A few months later, in May of 1916, German and Bulgarian units began moving into eastern Greek Macedonia, occupying lands that the Greeks had won in the Balkan Wars. The King and the Army and the government in Athens took no action against them. Greek soldiers in east Macedonia were ordered not to resist the incursion, but to withdraw to the port city of Kavala, a hundred miles east of Salonika. The soldiers withdrew as ordered, and the Germans marched into Kavala and took them prisoner.

The King's inaction infuriated Allied commanders. There was by this time a substantial Allied force in Salonika, but now with German soldiers advancing toward them and a Greek government that seemed to fall somewhere between indifferent and hostile, the situation was spinning out of control. The Allies concluded that, whatever his public position, Constantine was de facto aligning with the Germans.

The sight of foreign soldiers marching unopposed into Greek territory was also too much for some in the military, who broke with the senior leadership. The territorial gains of the Balkan Wars three years ago had been a great victory for the then-Crown Prince and the entire Greek nation. Now King Constantine seemed content to sit back and do nothing while the Bulgarians reversed his own military triumphs. Just days before the fall of Kavala, dissident soldiers banded together with Venizelos and his supporters to set up a rival government in Salonika, calling themselves the "Provisional Government of National Defense," and began organizing their own "Army of National Defense." Some of the more radical military officers pressed Venizelos to proclaim the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a Greek republic, but he refused, saying, "We are not against the King, but against the Bulgarians."

And thus began what is known in Greece as the National Schism, an uneasy coexistence of two Greek governments and a de facto split of the Greek nation into a northern state and a southern state. When Romania entered the war, the commander of the Allied forces in Salonika, a French general named Maurice Sarrail, wanted to advance north and link up with the Romanians, or at least harry the enemy in the Balkans, but a split developed within the Allied ranks when the British refused to allow their units to participate. French and Serbian armies advanced out of the Birdcage anyway. The Serbian units in particular fought skillfully as the Allied force (minus the British) advanced all the way to Monastir, pushing the front line back into what had been Serbian territory before the war.

But the rapid Romanian collapse quashed any hope of a linkup, and the British and the French agreed to hold their current positions until the 1917 campaign season.

By the end of 1916, the Allies had finished re-equipping the Serbian soldiers in Salonika into seven divisions that were ready for combat alongside the six French and seven British divisions there, as well as another two or three divisions' worth of Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and Russian soldiers, and a smattering of Albanian and Montenegrin fighters. These units were organized together as the Allied Army of the Orient under the command of Maurice Sarrail. The Allies upgraded the port facilities at Salonika in preparation for a push northward.

But in the meantime, there was still this uneasy standoff between two competing Greek governments. The official Greek Army had mobilized and was sitting in the mountains of Thessaly, just south of the land held by the Allies, where it was poised like a dagger. Any Allied advance northward would be vulnerable to a Greek stab in the back from the south.

For the British and the French, this was intolerable, and they ratcheted up the pressure on King Constantine's government. There were those in both Britain and France who wanted Constantine deposed, but the Russian Emperor Nikolai II opposed this move. So in late November 1916, Allied diplomats in Athens presented an ultimatum: the official Greek Army must surrender its mountain positions overlooking Allied troops outside Salonika, or else the Allies would land forces in Athens and seize government positions in the capital. Still the King would not give in, and on December 1, an Allied contingent landed at Athens. They were expecting little or no resistance, but the Greeks put up a stiff fight, though by the end of the day, the Greek government agreed to withdraw its forces from Thessaly.

The next day, the Allies expressed their displeasure with Athens by recognizing the Venizelos government as the lawful government of Greece and putting up a naval blockade of southern Greece. The King expressed his displeasure in return by issuing a royal warrant for the arrest of Venizelos and just in case the point wasn't clear, had the Archbishop of Athens anathematize him. There followed three days of violence in Athens aimed at Venizelos supporters, 35 of whom were murdered and hundreds arrested, including the mayor of Athens. Venizelos declared, "Between me and the King, there is now a lake of blood."

Spring came in 1917 and the Allies, with their rear secured, now attempted to renew their offensive in the north, but the German and Bulgarian forces were able to hold the line. Casualties were heavy. Summer brought an outbreak of malaria in Salonika. Disease combined with poor living conditions and low morale led to unrest and mutiny among the French, Russian, and Serbian units, forcing a disappointing end to the 1917 campaign in the Balkans.

But it was also the end of the reign of King Constantine. After the February Revolution had deposed Constantine's only supporter in the Allied camp, in June 1917, the Allies demanded and secured Constantine's departure under threat of military intervention. Constantine did not formally abdicate, but he went into exile in Switzerland, along with his eldest son, Prince George, who was seen by the Allies as another German sympathizer and therefore unacceptable as a successor, which meant that Constantine's 23-year old second son would take the throne as King Alexander. Alexander was forced to accept Venizelos as prime minister and Venizelos promptly declared war. Greece was now one of the Allies.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Edward for making a donation, and thank you Laura, for becoming a patron of the podcast, and happy anniversary, Laura! If any of you would like to join Randall and Laura's anniversary celebration by becoming a donor or patron, I'm sure they'd be glad to have you. Just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we return to Russia. Now that the Bolsheviks have taken control of the Russian government, let's ask

ourselves what exactly do they control? That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. All the chaos and death in Iran led inevitably to post-war political turmoil in that country. After the war, the Bolshevik government in Russia renounced all Russian claims in Iran, while in 1919, the British attempted to impose a so-called "Anglo-Persian Agreement" that would guarantee British rights to Iranian oil fields.

In 1920, the Bolshevik-influenced rebels in northern Iran declared the "Iran Socialist Soviet Republic." With Russian support, a group of about 1,500 communist rebels began marching on Teheran.

The British had taken control of the Persian Cossack Brigade following the Russian Revolution and had appointed their own hand-picked commander, a man named Reza Khan, to become the first Persian commander of the unit. They also made him the Iranian war minister. Under Reza Khan's command, the Cossack Brigade marched into Teheran and seized control in February 1921. Reza Khan appointed himself prime minister, leaving the now-23-year-old Ahmed Shah, who never had been a strong ruler, largely a figurehead.

Reza Khan, despite his British support, also opposed the Anglo-Persian Agreement, which made him popular within Iran. He restructured Iranian government, centralizing rule in the capital. The now-powerless shah traveled to Europe in 1923, ostensibly for health reasons, but he never returned to his homeland. In 1925, Reza Khan got the Majlis to depose the shah on the grounds of his poor health and prolonged absence from the country. Ahmed Shah would live out the rest of his life in Europe, dying in France in 1930, at the age of 32.

Meanwhile, the Majlis proclaimed Reza Khan the new shah of a new dynasty and he would rule Iran as Reza Shah Pahlavi until his abdication in 1941.

[music: Closing War Theme]