

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 194

“1919 – Turkey and Greece I”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In early 1919, Constantinople, the Ottoman capital, was not formally under Allied occupation. Not yet. But it may as well have been. Allied military and diplomatic personnel thronged the capital. The Golden Horn, the estuary that had once harbored Ottoman fleets that roamed the seas at will was now packed tight with the dull grey of Allied warships. The Sultan, Mehmet VI, lamented the sight of them, visible from his palace. “I can’t look out the window. I hate to see them.”

Mustafa Kemal, also in Constantinople, also saw the Allied fleet arrive, but his reaction was far more confident. “Just as they have come,” he said, “so too shall they go.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 194. 1919: Turkey and Greece, part one.

The mood in Constantinople in 1919 was somber. Everyone had given up. That Turkey would lose its Arab possessions was a given, and it was an open secret that the Allies were discussing a partition of Anatolia, the Turkish heartland. Pessimists feared the Allies would do to Turkey what the Russians and Austrians and Germans had done to Poland more than a century ago: partition it out of existence. Optimists heeded the Wilsonian language of self-determination and pinned their hopes on the emergence of a free and independent Turkish state from the ashes of the empire.

The Three Pashas, who had led the country during the war, had fled into exile. The Allies pressed the Ottoman government to prosecute those who led the mass killings of Armenians and Greeks during the war. Courts martial were held through 1919 and into 1920. These courts had no trouble convicting those who had already fled Turkish jurisdiction, but dragged their feet when it came to convicting anyone actually within legal reach. In 1920, the British lost patience with this process and transferred about sixty prisoners to Malta. Efforts were made to set up an

international tribunal there, but those efforts went nowhere. The concept of international tribunals and the prosecution of war criminals was still a new idea in 1920, and the mechanisms and procedures for such a thing had not yet been worked out. They won't be, until, perhaps, after some future war.

I told you the story of how Greece joined the war on the Allied side in episode 155. Let me just remind you that the story involved the Allies forcing the abdication of the Greek King Constantine, who they felt was too cozy with Kaiser Wilhelm. Once the National Schism was settled, Constantine's second son Alexander sat on the Greek throne, and the great Greek liberal-nationalist leader Eleftherios Venizelos was once again his prime minister. Venizelos led the Greek government during the final months of the war. It was the Allied Army of the Orient, attacking north from Greece, that had forced the Bulgarians to ask for an armistice, beginning the cascade of capitulations that ended the war. That army was commanded by a French general, Louis Franchet d'Espèrey, and it included French, British, Italian, and Serbian troops, but the largest single contingent was the Greek Army, about 300,000 soldiers in all.

So you could kind of say that it was the Balkan campaign of 1918 that brought down the Central Powers, and you could kind of say that the Greek Army was the backbone of that campaign, and therefore you could kind of say that the entry of Greece into the war had enabled the decisive blow that had won the war for the Allies and maybe also say that those Allies owe the Greeks quite a lot in return for their help.

This was the argument Venizelos was certainly prepared to make, and he was ready to ask the Allies for quite a lot in return for Greece's help. He traveled to Paris in 1919 to personally represent Greece at the peace conference and remained there for more than a year. Venizelos was by all accounts a learned and capable man and a gifted and persuasive speaker. Woodrow Wilson admired him above all the world leaders he met at the conference, while David Lloyd George and Venizelos would become close political allies.

Apart from the Greek contribution to the war and the personal skills of Venizelos, Greece could draw on a large reservoir of goodwill among the Allied powers. Greek history of the past century had been a story of plucky Christian Greeks fighting for their freedom against the ruthless Muslim Sultans of Constantinople, a tale that stirred the sympathies of Christian Europe and in the United States. And beyond all of this, the study of classics was considered an essential element of a university education in the nineteenth century, especially in the United Kingdom, where students at Oxford and Cambridge were expected to study ancient Greek literature and philosophy in their original language.

This naturally led the educated elites of the day to revere ancient Greece as the font of learning, the spring from which had flowed Western civilization. That their classical educations had little or no relevance to the actual facts on the ground in modern Greece appears not to have occurred to very many of them.

But it was good for Venizelos that he had all this goodwill to draw upon, because he had much to ask for. The past century had seen the birth and the growth of a new Greek kingdom. Nationalist Greeks had their own version of the Italian *Risorgimento*, a Greek irredentism that dreamed of uniting all ethnic Greeks into a grand and glorious Greater Greece. This dream was called the *Megali Idea*, which literally means the “big idea,” though I suppose the “great idea” would be a more poetic way of putting it.

When it was Venizelos’ turn to appear before the Supreme Council in Paris, he laid out his wish list, and it was a lengthy one. A Greater Greece that encircled the Aegean Sea, including the old Kingdom of Greece plus the Macedonian territories it had taken in the Balkan Wars plus a slice of southern Albania—those people are really Greeks—plus Western Thrace, the lands north of the Aegean Sea currently controlled by Bulgaria—never mind, those people are also really Greeks—plus eastern Thrace, practically up to the gates of Constantinople. In Asia Minor, the western coast of Anatolia, and perhaps the Black Sea coast of Anatolia as well, plus Rhodes and the Dodecanese, currently occupied by Italy, and Cyprus, currently occupied by Britain.

Venizelos did not publicly ask for the city of Constantinople itself, though privately he believed that if Greece got everything else it was asking for, the eventual absorption of Constantinople into the kingdom was all but assured.

Even so, this is quite a wish list. But Venizelos argued it was all in accord with the new principle of self-determination of peoples. The peoples of these regions were all Greeks, Greeks who had been oppressed by the Ottomans for centuries and who now, with the fall of the old empire, were entitled to be ruled by fellow Greeks. In particular, Venizelos argued that there were as many as 1.5 million ethnic Greeks living in northern and western Anatolia who had every right to be part of the Greek nation.

That was debatable. While there is no question that there were a number of ethnic Greeks living in Anatolia in 1919, exactly how you tell the difference between a Greek and a Turk after centuries of their living in the same empire is not as simple a question as one might think. We saw these sorts of debates before, in Ottoman Macedonia during the Balkan wars, when arguments over who was Greek versus Serb versus Bulgarian could and did lead to bloodshed. For example, is a person who speaks Turkish but practices Orthodox Christianity a Greek or a Turk? There were many such people in Anatolia. Would a Greek or a Turkish state be a more dependable defender of their rights? What about Greek-speaking Muslims?

The Greeks were not the only member of the Allies with designs on Anatolia. The French would be occupying southern Anatolia, in the regions adjacent to the Levant, which they also claimed. And then there were the Italians. We’ll talk about Italy and its postwar claims in the Adriatic in a few weeks, but for now, just be aware that the British and French had promised Italy territories on the eastern coast of the Adriatic back in 1915 in return for entering the war, episode 111. Although Italy had not been a party to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British had made vague

promises that Italy might get some Ottoman lands after the war, perhaps in southwest Anatolia, near Rhodes and the Dodecanese, which Italy already controlled from its earlier war with the Ottomans.

By early 1919, the Italians were sending occupation forces into southwest Anatolia, much to the irritation of the British, French, and Americans at the peace conference. By this time, the British, as we have already seen, are coming around to the view that they took down the Ottoman Empire alone and therefore owed no one else anything. As Lloyd George said to Sidney Sonnino, the Italian foreign minister, in 1917, “You want us to do the work and hand it over to you at the end of the war.”

But in the heady days following victory, some of the more extreme Italian nationalists had visions that went far beyond reclaiming *Italia Irredenta*. Rome had once ruled the Mediterranean, and Asia Minor had been merely one of its provinces. Of course, the same Italian nationalists who cited ancient glory also dismissed the analogous Greek claims to the same lands on the basis of even older ancient glory. Italy and Greece were setting themselves up as rivals for control of the corpse of the Ottoman Empire.

In spring, the Italians walked out of the peace conference for a time, while their occupation forces in Anatolia continued to advance. Woodrow Wilson contemplated sending an American battleship to the region as a warning to the Italians, while Eleftherios Venizelos was about ready to explode. The Italians appeared to be advancing on Smyrna, the pearl of the eastern Aegean, and that was unacceptable to Greece.

The city that the ancient Greeks called Smyrna and the modern Turks call İzmir, is 4,500 years old, which makes it perhaps the oldest extant port city in the Mediterranean. It was sacked in the sixth century B.C., then rebuilt three centuries later by Alexander the Great. In the early Christian Era, it was home to substantial Jewish and Christian communities. Smyrna declined during the Byzantine and Ottoman eras, as it was conquered and reconquered by the Turks, the Byzantines and the Mongols.

The city experienced a renaissance during the Belle Époque. The Second Industrial Revolution and the boom in international trade made Smyrna the biggest city and seaport in Anatolia. Railroads brought in the harvests of Turkish farms, factories spun yarn and wove fabrics, and the docks loaded ships full of figs, textiles, and carpets bound for Europe.

About 300,000 people lived in İzmir and about half of them were ethnic Greeks. Another segment were Armenian. Only a quarter to a third of the city was Turkish. There was also a considerable foreign presence, owing to all that international trade. The Europeans had forced on the Ottoman Empire the so-called “Capitulations,” under which foreign traders were exempt from Ottoman taxes and Ottoman law, similar to the Western concessions imposed on China in this same period.

In 1919, Smyrna was the largest Greek-speaking city in the world, measured by population of Greek speakers, larger even than Athens, the Greek capital. Venizelos was adamant that Smyrna should properly be part of the Kingdom of Greece. Didn't the principle of self-determination demand that?

Well, maybe. Maybe not. Here we see again the same complications we've been seeing in trying to apply this principle of self-determination. Yes, the city was majority Greek, and would likely vote for union with Greece in a referendum, but Smyrna does not exist in isolation. First of all, Smyrna needs to eat, and the rural farmland around Smyrna is overwhelmingly populated by Turkish farmers. Venizelos wanted those lands for Greece as well, but hey, those farmers have rights, too. And this region includes some of the best farmland in Anatolia. Turkey is supposed to just give it up?

And consider this: Smyrna is at the mouth of a river of commerce flowing from the interior of Turkey to foreign markets. Drawing a border across this flow of trade would be like damming the river, to the economic detriment not only of Turkey, but of Smyrna as well.

No final decision had been made at the Paris Peace Conference regarding the settlement with Turkey, but with the Italians moving in, the other Allies feared Italy was about to make the decision unilaterally. Then on April 24, the Italians walked out of the peace talks in Paris, for reasons unrelated to the situation in Anatolia. Again, I'll save that story for when we get to Italy, but for Venizelos, this was an unexpected opportunity. He went to his totes bestie, David Lloyd George, and proposed that the Greek Army occupy Smyrna. The official reason would be to protect the Greek population of the city. The actual reason would be, in the short term, to keep the Italians out, and in the long term, as the first step on the road to Greek annexation of western Anatolia. The Supreme Council, minus Italy, approved the Greek occupation on May 6; the protesting Italians would be told, well, it was an emergency and you guys weren't there.

The decision to move forward with a Greek occupation of Smyrna would have huge consequences, far beyond anything foreseen on that May day in Paris. The Greeks landed on May 15, supported by Allied naval vessels, including the shiny new US Navy dreadnought battleship USS *Arizona*, which I mention because those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century already know we'll be talking about this ship again in a future episode. No spoilers here, though.

The Greek soldiers were met by cheering crowds of Greeks waving flags, and Turkish protestors banging drums. The Metropolitan of Smyrna, that is, the Orthodox bishop, was on hand to bless the Greek soldiers as they marched into the city. Then a single shot was fired at Greek soldiers near a Turkish barracks. One of them fell dead. The Greeks began firing at the barracks, assuming, apparently incorrectly, that the shot had come from a Turkish soldier there. The soldiers inside the barracks surrendered; the Greek soldiers marched them to the waterfront beating and bayoneting them along the way. There they were imprisoned aboard Greek ships.

Civilian onlookers joined in. About thirty of the Turkish soldiers were killed, including their commanding officer. Their bodies were thrown into the harbor. Hundreds more Turkish soldiers were injured.

Over the days that followed, violence and looting broke out across Smyrna, then escalated to rapes and killings, mostly targeted against Turks. About 300 Turkish and 100 Greek civilians died in the rioting, and many more were injured. In the countryside around Smyrna, Turks attacked Greeks in retaliation.

This eruption of violence was a PR disaster for Greece, as it undermined the entire rationale for the occupation, which was to protect the civilians. The violence also undercut the Greek claim for permanent Greek rule. And this would be just the beginning of an escalating spiral of violence between Greeks and Turks in the region.

[music: *Istanbul Twilight*]

The news of the Greek occupation and the subsequent violence sent shock waves across Turkey. No one in Turkey doubted that, having arrived, the Greeks intended to stay. In Constantinople, crowds marched in protest against the occupation. It is said that upon hearing the news of the Greek landing, the Sultan wept.

Also in Constantinople at this time was Mustafa Kemal, returned to the capital following the demobilization of the Thunderbolt Army Group he had commanded at the end of the war. Now he was assigned to an administrative post in the war ministry. Outwardly apolitical, Kemal had been meeting in secret with many like-minded army officers to discuss the organization of a national resistance. When government ministers discussed a formal protest to the Allied governments, Kemal asked them scornfully, “Do you think your protest will make the Greeks or the British retire?”

The government in Constantinople was helpless; they were virtually Allied prisoners. But in the wide expanses of Anatolia dwelled many patriotic Turks who were not prepared to stand idle while their homeland was carved up among European empires. They lacked only an organization. And a leader.

They got their leader the next day, and ironically, the British helped provide him. The situation in the interior of Anatolia had become chaotic. We're at about the same time now in Turkey as we were in Russia back in episode 166, and circumstances here in the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire are not much different from those in the wreckage of the Russian Empire just next door. The central government's authority is limited to nonexistent. Law and order is breaking down. You have demobilized soldiers returning home, some of them to take up arms in various militias: nationalist or regionalist or ideological or just plain self-defense. And in many of these cases, “militia” is just a euphemism for “gang of bandits.” The British were pressing the Sultan's government to do something about this escalating lawlessness.

And so, on the day after the Greeks landed at Smyrna, and with British approval, Mustafa Kemal, the hero of Gallipoli, was appointed Inspector General of the Ottoman Ninth Army, which was at that time stationed in Erzerum, in eastern Anatolia. Kemal and the Ninth Army were tasked with suppressing these armed bands and restoring order in the east.

But within days after he left Constantinople for his new appointment, British intelligence picked up on the fact that Kemal was something more than the neutral army officer he claimed to be. Along with a number of other disgruntled military officers, he aspired not to suppress the armed bands but to unite them into a new nationalist force capable of resisting Allied attempts to occupy or partition the Turkish homeland. To that end, Kemal began meeting with a number of other nationalist-minded military officers, including Rauf Orbay, the naval commander who had negotiated the Armistice of Mudros, episode 167. Back then, Rauf had been persuaded to trust the goodwill of the British, a decision he now bitterly regretted.

When Constantinople sussed out what Kemal was actually up to, the war ministry moved to strip him of his authority. Kemal resigned his commission. Rauf Orbay also resigned from the navy. Soon the Ottoman government issued a warrant for Kemal's arrest. By August, these disaffected officers were organizing openly at Erzerum, proclaiming a set of nationalist principles that called for an independent and united Turkish state and declared the Constantinople government unable to carry out its responsibility to defend the rights of the Turkish nation.

Nationalist anger was rising among the Turkish people, stirring them in a way the Great War itself never had. Everyone knew the Great Powers of Europe had coveted Constantinople and the Straits. Now that Allied soldiers and ships were there, would they ever leave? And in addition to the *de facto* occupation of Constantinople, there were Italian and French occupations in the southwest. There was talk at Paris of creating an independent Armenian state in the east, under an American mandate, to start with. Perhaps an independent Kurdish state as well. And above all, there was the unfolding violent Greek occupation of Smyrna. And the Greeks were surely in Anatolia to stay. Few Turks had any doubts about that.

Over the course of 1919, this series of developments turned up the nationalist heat until the Turks reached their boiling point. And it made Kemal's task of weaving together disparate and disgruntled Turks into a national movement all the easier. On October 22, the nationalist movement won a key political victory when the Sultan's government in Constantinople agreed to one of the demands of Kemal and his movement: that new elections be held for the Chamber of Deputies, the Turkish Parliament, and that the new body meet not in Constantinople, which was swarming with foreigners, but in the city of Sivas, in eastern central Anatolia, a safer location, far removed from Allied militaries and well outside the range of Royal Navy guns. There the Chamber could meet without being subjected to Allied pressure.

The Committee on Union and Progress, which had been the ruling party during the war, was gone, its leaders in hiding, in exile, or in Malta. In Turkey's present state, it was difficult for

anyone to organize any kind of traditional political party, but when the ballots were counted, members and sympathizers of the burgeoning nationalist movement took most of the seats.

The new Chamber of Deputies gathered on January 12, 1920, in Constantinople, contrary to the will of the nationalists, but before the month was out, the Chamber would meet in secret session and vote a set of six principles taken from the nationalist movement. This set of principles would become known as the National Pact, and they would be made public a couple of weeks later.

The National Pact declared the right of the Turkish people to a free, independent, and sovereign Turkey in all places where there was a Turkish majority. The status of border regions to the east, south, and in Thrace, where the ethnic makeup was unclear, to be determined by referendum. The Turkish state would respect the rights of minorities within its borders, provided that neighboring states did the same for minority Turks within their borders, but Turkey would insist on control of the Straits in consultation with the other countries concerned.

The Allied response was a military crackdown. Allied troops seized control of key locations in Constantinople, including the post office and telegraph offices and the Ottoman war ministry, making the *de facto* occupation official. Nationalist political figures in the city were arrested, including deputies of the Chamber, and about 150 of them were shipped off to Malta. The parliament was dissolved. This would be the end of the last parliament of the Ottoman Empire, although no one yet knew this. What was left of Ottoman government was now once again in the hands of the Sultan, who was virtually an Allied hostage.

These actions further strengthened the position of Mustafa Kemal, who responded to the arrests of nationalists in Constantinople by ordering the arrest of every Allied military officer who could be found in the Anatolian interior, about two dozen in all. He called for new elections and the creation of a new Grand National Assembly, which would also welcome those Ottoman deputies who had fled Constantinople ahead of the Allied takeover. There were about a hundred of those. On April 23, 1920, the Grand National Assembly convened in the city of Angora, which was chosen for its location: also in central Anatolia and safely out of Allied reach, but closer to Constantinople than Sivas. Kemal was elected Speaker of the Assembly and declared it the only legitimate Turkish government.

While these events were playing out in Turkey, British, French, and Italian leaders were meeting to hammer out the final version of the peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire, more or less disregarding the political developments in Turkey. The Allies drafted this treaty the same way they drafted the other four peace treaties that ended the Great War; that is, they decided on the treaty terms among themselves and then simply presented the document to the former enemy to be approved as is, without further negotiation. This is how treaties were presented to the other Central Powers, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria. All of these treaties were named after various Paris suburbs where the signing ceremonies were held. This treaty would be known to

history as the Treaty of Sèvres, and chronologically, it was the last of these five peace treaties to be signed.

So you can mark August 10, 1920 as the “official” end of the Great War, if you like, the date the Treaty of Sèvres was signed, only there are a couple of problems with looking at it this way. One is that the United States won’t ratify any of these treaties and will remain technically at war with Germany, Austria, and Hungary for a while yet. The other problem? Let’s just say that Sèvres, the town where the treaty was signed is noted for its porcelain, and take note of the fact that porcelain is a material noted for its fragility.

The treaties drafted at the Paris Peace Conference historically have the reputation of having been excessively harsh. And surely the last of the five was the harshest of them all. Besides forcing Turkey to accept the Allied plans for the Empire’s Arab holdings, that is, Egypt and Hedjaz and Palestine and Iraq and the French mandate in the Levant, the treaty mandated an independent Armenia and called for a referendum on the future of Kurdistan. It gave Thrace to Greece, except for Constantinople itself, and laid out Italian, Greek, and French zones of influence in southern and western Anatolia. It gave the Aegean islands to Greece, apart from the Dodecanese, where it affirmed Italian control, it called for war crimes trials for the perpetrators of the mass killings of Armenians, and restricted the size of the Ottoman military. It affirmed the pre-war Capitulations and gave the Allies control over the administration of the Empire’s huge foreign debts.

And as for the most contentious question, the disposition of those strategic Straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, the Treaty of Sèvres mandated that the Straits be kept open to all vessels of all nations at all times, in peace or in war, subject only to regulation by the League of Nations.

The Ottoman government agreed to the treaty, but it generated howls of outrage from the nationalists in the interior. The provisional government in Angora repudiated the treaty and every Turk associated with it and reiterated its position that the Sultan and his government were Allied captives and therefore unable to properly represent the Turkish nation.

The Allies, Britain, France, Italy, and Greece, all pretty much got their wish lists out of the Treaty of Sèvres. But whether they could make the treaty terms stick was a whole other question. Before the ink was dry, Allied leaders, particularly Lloyd George and Venizelos, began to recognize that if they wanted this treaty, they might have to fight a whole new war to get it.

But that is next week’s story. We’ll have to stop here for today. Thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Michael for his donation, and thank you, Greg, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Michael and Greg help keep the lights on around here, so if you have a few bucks or whatever you use for currency units rattling around and would like to help out, please visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of postwar Turkey. As the other Allies fall away, Britain and Greece remain determined to enforce the Treaty of Sèvres, in the face of an increasingly militant nationalist Turkish opposition. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The US was not involved in these talks, since it had never declared war on Turkey in the first place, and I haven't had the chance to tell you yet about all that's been going on in America during this period—believe me, it's a lot—but by spring of 1920, it was becoming apparent that the US was unlikely to ratify the peace treaties already signed. On May 24, 1920, President Wilson asked Congress for authority to create an administration for an Armenian mandate, but the request was defeated in the US Senate on June 1 by a vote of 23 ayes and 52 nays.

[music: Closing Theme]