

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 185

“1919 – Turkey and Greece II”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The signing of the Treaty of Sèvres, the last of the five peace treaties the Allies imposed on the defeated Central Powers, could be seen as the formal end of the Great War.

But although the Sultan’s government agreed to the terms, nationalist rebels in the interior of Anatolia led by Mustafa Kemal rejected the treaty and vowed to fight on, forcing the Allies, more than six years after the July Crisis of 1914, to face the prospect of yet more war.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 195. 1919: Turkey and Greece, part two.

The Treaty of Sèvres on its face reads like an Allied wish list. It contains just about everything the Allies could have asked for from the Ottoman Empire, but the one thing it does not guarantee is compliance. The Sultan’s government had agreed to it, but the competing provisional government in Angora vowed to fight on.

This confronted the Allies with a difficult choice. It has been almost two years since the Armistice, and over this two-year period, Allied leaders have become accustomed to the practice of simply dictating terms to their defeated opponents. They were able to do this because of the implicit—and sometimes explicit—threat that the victorious Allies could restart the war if they didn’t get their way, and having been forced to restart the war and fight on further would then demand even more painful concessions, so if you know what’s good for you, you’ll give it up right now.

But for the past two years, Allied militaries have been shrinking. The Allies are democratic states, with voting publics that are tired of war and have been hearing for some time now about

the glorious Allied victory. Allied political leaders would find it difficult to justify remobilizing their militaries and sending them back into combat.

The strains of the war had sparked revolution and upheaval in Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. But the Allies have domestic political unrest of their own to deal with. There were the economic dislocations of committing the nations' industries to total war, then reconverting to peacetime production afterward. Returning soldiers had to be reintegrated into their communities, which led to unemployment. The influenza pandemic had created widespread social and economic impacts. The prices of everything, especially food, were too high, and wages were too low, which sparked unrest, strikes, and violence. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, the more militant socialists everywhere sought to follow their lead, while even moderate left-wing and labor discontent was perceived as incipient revolution by the political right, who urged state violence in response. All this was true in Greece, in Italy, in France, in the United Kingdom, and in the United States. Economic and political disorder were widespread.

And while I'm on the subject of Bolshevism, I should remind you that by summer of 1920, the Turkish nationalists in Angora were in talks with the Russians. By this time, the Russian Civil War was winding down and the central government was asserting itself, which was an opportunity for Moscow and Angora both. The nationalists, in exchange for abandoning Turkish claims in the Caucasus, would receive money and arms from Moscow. It's not that the Turkish nationalists had Bolshevik sympathies. Far from it. They fought against communists in Turkey. But the Russian commissar for nationalities, Joseph Stalin, had been persuaded that ideological affinity was less important than seizing an opportunity to poke the Western imperialists in the eye with a sharp stick, and he was able to convince the rest of the Russian government to go along with this policy.

As Russian aid further empowered the Turkish nationalists, it also sent Western intelligence agencies into a panic. Was the Angora government covertly communist? Or perhaps this was the doing of Enver Pasha. Remember him? One of the Three Pashas who led the Ottoman Empire during the war? He had fled the country and was now living in exile in Russia. Some suspected the Russian was a sign the nationalist movement was being directed by Enver. In fact, it was being directed by Mustafa Kemal, who had no use for either communists or Enver Pasha, but had plenty of use for more arms.

The Allies needed to band together against this rising resistance in Turkey, but were the Allies even allies anymore? The United States, which was never officially a part of the alliance in the first place, was by 1920 turning inward. The US had its own domestic unrest to deal with, its Senate had failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and had declined to take up that mandate in Armenia. And the US had never officially been at war with the Ottoman Empire to begin with.

Italy was in similar straits. Its domestic political violence was much worse. Italians were disillusioned by the outcome of the war. So much fighting, so much bloodshed, and so little to show for it. The Arabs of Libya were still resisting Italian rule, and much Italian attention was focused on its claim to Fiume, on the Adriatic. We'll talk about that in a few weeks. The only gains Italy had gotten out of the Treaty of Sèvres was confirmation of its occupation of Rhodes and the Dodecanese, which had already been a done deal before the war, and a zone of "influence" in Anatolia. Whatever that means, it wasn't worth fighting over, not when there were so many other battles to fight.

The French were settling into their mandate over Syria and Lebanon. I should say their "mandate," because the French were there to stay, at least as far as they were concerned, unlike the British, who would soon be scheming for ways to wriggle out of Iraq and Transjordan. The French had also occupied portions of southern Anatolia, as far north as the Taurus Mountains, using French troops augmented with French Armenian legionnaires. By February of 1920, the nationalist Turks were attacking the French in the mountains. After taking hundreds of casualties, the French were forced to withdraw, leaving behind thousands of Armenian civilians who were then slaughtered by vengeful Turkish nationalists.

This violence was part of what spurred the Allies to occupy Constantinople outright the following month, which we talked about last time, but it also marks the end of French ambitions in Anatolia. The French were far more concerned with preserving their rule in Syria and Lebanon and were prepared to make concessions to the Angora nationalists in exchange for the Turks honoring French rule in the Levant.

This French withdrawal left only two Allied governments still willing to go to the mat for the Treaty of Sèvres: Britain and Greece. And that brings us back to the bromance developing between their respective prime ministers, David Lloyd George and Eleftherios Venizelos.

Now I mentioned that for about a half-century, British foreign policy had been to prop up the Ottoman Empire out of fear of the imperial free-for-all that would follow its collapse. In particular, the British did not want to see Russia get control of the Straits and become a Mediterranean naval power. Nor did the British want an increase in Austrian or German power in the region, or even French power, come to that. The British didn't want to see anyone else gain power in the region, hence the policy of propping up the Ottoman Empire. Never mind its reputation for persecution and violence against its Christian minority.

Well, I say that was British policy. More accurately, it was Tory policy. It's just that the British governments of this period were mostly Conservative, with only occasional interludes of Liberal rule. The Liberals had always been critical of this policy. To them, it was Britain's duty to defend the rights of Christian minorities against Ottoman oppression. This is one of those foreign policy debates liberal democracies often get into, between those who support limiting foreign policy to a narrow defense of our own nation's self-interests versus those who believe that liberal

democracies can and should act as defenders of human rights everywhere against oppressive and autocratic governments. These sorts of debates will continue throughout the twentieth century, and are still around in our own time.

David Lloyd George had grown up during these Liberal-Tory debates over the Ottoman Empire. He had entered parliament when the great Liberal lion William Gladstone was party leader, and then prime minister one last time. Now prime minister himself, Lloyd George was on the threshold of implementing the Liberal dream, in which the Empire's Christian minorities are liberated—the Slavs, the Greeks, the Armenians, all freed from the Sultan's yoke and in control of their own destinies. And a new Greek Empire to replace the old Turkish one as keeper of peace in the region, a Greek Empire allied with and indebted to the United Kingdom and functioning as its satrap.

Old Man Gladstone himself, who had passed away in 1898 at the ripe old age of 88, would surely have been pleased by how it was all turning out. Perhaps it was the glow of Gladstone's posthumous approval that blinded Lloyd George to the fact that he was leading a coalition cabinet in which the Conservatives provided most of the votes and held most of the portfolios. Those Tories remembered Gladstone rather differently, and remembered too their own party's legacy as supporters of the status quo in the Near East. In October 1919, the Conservative Lord Curzon became foreign secretary. Lloyd George and Curzon had never liked each other very much and were often in disagreement over government policy. Now Curzon was warning him that there could be no peace with Turkey unless steps were taken to accommodate Mustafa Kemal and the provisional government in Angora.

The Imperial General Staff agreed. They warned Lloyd George that to subdue all of Anatolia and impose British will upon the Turks by force of arms would require 27 divisions, a larger force than Britain could muster on its own, a larger force even than the Allies could muster collectively anymore, especially considering how Italy, France, and the United States appear to have given up on the project already.

Lloyd George talked it over with his BFF Venizelos, who had been hearing similarly pessimistic assessments from the Greek general staff. The two leaders agreed between themselves that both their respective militaries were being unduly pessimistic. These Turkish nationalist rebels were poorly equipped and organized. Over the previous summer, the Greek Army had advanced hundreds of miles inland from its beachhead in Smyrna, securing a large chunk of western Anatolia. Whenever the Turkish nationalists engaged the Greeks, the Greek Army, with its superior modern weapons, had usually been able to brush them back without too much difficulty. The Turks just melted away into the mountains.

Everyone who's familiar with guerilla warfare would be seeing a big blinking red light right now, but apparently neither Lloyd George nor Venizelos were in that category. Lloyd George asked Venizelos whether the Greek Army could take the lead and, with British support, move

into central Anatolia, clear out the rebels, and capture the provincial capital of Angora. Venizelos said it could, and plans were set in motion.

[music: "*Semera donla m'Paschalia*"]

You'll recall that the political situation in Greece had been uneasy during the war, with King Constantine favoring neutrality and Prime Minister Venizelos supporting intervention in the war on the side of the Allies. This led to two parliamentary elections in 1915, the National Schism, and the ouster of Constantine by the Allies, who replaced him with his second son, King Alexander, the current monarch.

Now, five years and one war later, and with Greece poised to dive into a whole new war, it was time to call a general election. Venizelos set the date for October 25, intending to get the election over and done with before serious combat began. If you remember back to the last Greek general election, which I covered in episode 155, Venizelos and his Liberal Party had actually boycotted that election. No doubt he was hoping for a convincing win and a broader base of support in the new parliament. He had every reason to think he would get it. Under Venizelos' premiership, Greece had joined the Allies, helped win the war, and had obtained significant new territories. The Greek PM was a respected world leader, hobnobbing with the Big Four in Paris. He was such a dominant figure in Greek politics that everyone else in Greek politics got categorized as either a Venizelist or an anti-Venizelist. How can this guy lose?

Perhaps we should take it as a sign that just two days after the signing ceremony at Sèvres, the high point of Venizelos' career, on August 12, 1920, two Greek military officers attempted to assassinate him at a Paris train station as he was preparing to head back home to Greece. The assassination attempt was seen at the time as a desperate act orchestrated by the exiled King Constantine to prevent a landslide Venizelist victory in the coming election.

The actual reigning King of the Hellenes at this time was, as you know, the exiled Constantine's second son, Alexander. Alexander had grown up never expecting to be king, what with having a big brother and all, until the Allies put him on the throne after deciding that his father and older brother were closet Kaiser-lovers. He reigned as an isolated king, cut off from his family and their closest supporters, who were in exile, and expected to comply with every Allied demand. His only role in government seemed to be to rubber stamp whatever Venizelos and the British wanted.

His personal life was...complicated. In 1915, back when Greece was neutral and no one ever expected a King Alexander, the then-21-year-old prince caught up with a childhood friend: a 19-year old Greek girl named Aspasia Manos, the daughter of one of his father's military aides and recently returned from boarding school in Switzerland. The prince fell in love with her. It seems the feeling was not mutual at first, but he was insistent, and soon they were secretly engaged.

Secretly, because in those days, a Greek prince needed the approval of the King and of the Archbishop of Athens to get married, and the couple had reason to doubt they could secure the permission of either, because Aspasia was a commoner. In 1917, the day after he took over the Greek crown, he told his father about Aspasia and asked his permission to marry. Constantine was lukewarm about the marriage and suggested the new King wait until after the war.

But Alexander and Aspasia weren't willing to wait. After multiple unsuccessful attempts, the couple finally was able to arrange a secret marriage. But the secret didn't keep, resulting in a scandal, which led to Aspasia leaving the country for Paris. Alexander was finally able to join her there in the spring of 1920, and the two of them enjoyed a Parisian honeymoon, after which they both returned to Greece. A deal was struck to legitimize the marriage as morganatic, meaning Aspasia would not hold the title of queen and children of the marriage would not be in line to inherit the kingdom. Which is a pity, since not only were the Allies leery of the Greek royal family for being too close to the Kaiser, but there were a lot of Greek republicans who saw the royals as a German dynasty foisted upon Greece by the Concert of Europe. Had an actual Greek king married into an actual Greek family and produced actual Greek heirs, it might have gone a way toward securing the future of the monarchy. But this was not to be.

In July 1920, King Alexander visited Greece's newly acquired territory in western Thrace and attended a ceremony in which the town of Dedeagach was renamed Alexandropolis, in his honor.

In September came the official call for a general election, to be held on Monday, October 25. A few weeks later, on October 2, with the election campaign in full swing, King Alexander was taking a walk on the grounds of his estate, accompanied by his pet dog, a German Shepherd named "Fritz." Fritz was a rescue. He had been discovered by British soldiers when they captured an abandoned German trench on the Western Front in 1918 and he had been presented to the King as a gift. But on this particular day, when they were walking through the royal estate, a Barbary macaque belonging to one of the groundskeepers attacked Fritz. The King waded into the fight to separate the animals, and was bitten on his own leg for his troubles.

All of this becomes an important historical event, because the bite became infected and the King fell ill. In this era when there were no antibiotics, and after three weeks of fever and agony, King Alexander died at the age of 27 on October 25, the scheduled date for the general election. His widow was at that time four months pregnant with their only child, a girl who will be named Alexandra.

Take the ongoing rivalry between pro- and anti-Venizelos political factions, a legacy of the Greek National Schism, inflamed by an election campaign, add in a sudden and unexpected death of the sovereign, and you have a recipe for another round of political turmoil. Prime Minister Venizelos postponed the election for a week and it was finally held on November 1.

When the votes were counted, the result was stunning. Venizelos' Liberal Party won just over half the vote nationwide—50.3%, to be exact—but these votes were concentrated in a relatively

small number of constituencies, mostly in Greece's newly acquired territories, so that an absolute majority of the popular vote translated into just 110 seats in the Greek Parliament. The other parties in the election, which were running a combined campaign under the banner of the "United Opposition," took all of the other 260 seats, giving the opposition over 70% of the seats in Parliament, despite losing the overall popular vote.

The election result is still a bit of a head-scratcher, even in our time. But with the benefit of hindsight, we can spot some of the reasons. The opposition accused Venizelos of seeking to embroil Greece in another war, which is ironic in view of what's about to happen, but the Greek people were tired of war, and tired of the economic and social costs of keeping the Greek Army at full mobilization while all the other Allied nations were already demobilized. Like every other nation, Greece was suffering those economic aftershocks of the Great War. And the opposition were able to band together under the leadership of the man who is about to replace Venizelos as prime minister, the 53-year-old Dimitrios Gounaris.

Gounaris had served as prime minister once before. In fact, he had succeeded Venizelos once before. He was King Constantine's pick to replace Venizelos back in 1915 and had served as the royalist prime minister during the days of the National Schism, on the side of those who resisted Greek intervention in the war. These views had gotten him exiled for a time, after Greece actually entered the war, but it also solidified his reputation as anti-war and pro-Constantine, which was exactly the direction in which the pendulum of the national mood was swinging.

And speaking of the monarchy, the question of who would replace Alexander as King cast a long shadow over the election. Alexander's unborn child was not eligible, but the Allies vehemently opposed restoring Constantine or his firstborn son, Prince George. Constantine had one other son, his third, Alexander's younger brother, Prince Paul, but Paul refused the crown, deferring to the superior claims of his father and older brother.

The public wanted Constantine. He was still remembered fondly as the hero of the Balkan Wars and the opponent of Venizelos' grand but exhausting ambitions for a Greater Greece. The new Greek government quickly organized a referendum, held just three weeks after the general election, which returned a virtually unanimous result favoring the restoration of King Constantine. He was back in Greece before the year was out.

This remarkable chain of events, set in motion by a monkey bite, quickly leading to a radical reshaping of the Greek political landscape, is not yet finished messing with our narrative. Winston Churchill would later write that "[i]t is perhaps no exaggeration to remark that a quarter of a million persons died of this monkey's bite." Churchill wrote this because he believed the Greek tragedy to come could have been avoided if only Alexander had survived.

This perhaps was an exaggeration. As we've already seen, Italy and France had grown impatient with Messrs. Lloyd George and Venizelos and weary of their own Anatolian adventures. How much more support they would have been willing to give the Greeks in different circumstances is

debatable. But the restoration of Constantine, the King that Allied propaganda had spent the past five years accusing of being Kaiser Wilhelm's puppet, certainly provided them an easy out. France and Italy were *so over* enforcing the Treaty of Sèvres. They concluded, perhaps reasonably, that they had more to be gained by building a relationship with Kemal's provisional government in Angora than by propping up a Greek government led by a king who was really a German.

[music: "Tou Mageirou (Achtsiska)"]

Despite the French and the Italians bailing and even the skepticism within his own government, David Lloyd George kept on insisting the Britain could, should, and would enforce the Treaty of Sèvres. Never mind the troubles in Ireland or India or Egypt, the labor unrest and strikes at home, or the struggling British economy. Eleftherios Venizelos, now a private citizen, advised Lloyd George that the establishment of Greater Greece was now inevitable. Even if the new king and government in Athens decided to abandon the Greek enclave in western Anatolia, it would scarcely matter. The Greeks in Smyrna would take up arms and create their own independent Anatolian Greek republic, if they had to.

But in fact the new government in Athens would not abandon the enclave at Smyrna. Despite what they said during the election campaign, the anti-Venizelist government would soon green-light a Greek Army incursion deeper into Anatolia, to begin in January 1921. This was the dead of winter and not exactly the ideal time to begin an offensive, and indeed the Turkish nationalist forces were able to push back against the larger and better armed Greek Army twice.

Put a pin in that for a moment, because first I want to direct your attention to the goings-on in Eastern Anatolia, where the Treaty of Sèvres demanded an independent Armenian state as well as a Kurdish, well, some kind of Kurdish autonomy, at least. Maybe. But that Armenian state was under continual military pressure from the Turkish nationalists in the east, who in September, just a month after the signing of the treaty, crossed the line drawn by Woodrow Wilson and pushed into what was supposed to be independent Armenia.

It was a bold statement by Kemal and the Angora government that they had no intention of respecting the treaty. The Armenians received minimal support from the Allies, and by November, were forced to agree to a ceasefire, with most of what was supposed to be Armenia back under Turkish control. The remaining sliver of Armenia was soon occupied by the Red Army and would become the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic within what we are soon going to be calling the Soviet Union. In March 1921, the Turkish provisional government and the Russian government signed a treaty setting the border between them, which has remained the eastern border of Turkey ever since.

As for the Kurds, the Allies had never formulated a clear goal. Was there to be an independent Kurdish state? Or merely an autonomous Kurdish region within Turkey? By now it scarcely mattered. The Allies had not intervened to prevent the dismantling of the Armenian state they

had carefully designed; by 1921, no one believed the Allies were prepared to fight for the Kurds. The fact that Britain had incorporated the predominantly Kurdish Mosul region into Iraq was a clear indication that even Britain was not going to oppose reincorporation of Kurdish lands farther north back into Turkey.

And so that was the situation by March of 1921. The eastern frontier of Turkey was secured. Now the Angora nationalists could consolidate their military on the western front, facing Smyrna. We've already seen the first effect of this consolidation; the Turks were able to hold off those two Greek attempts to move deeper into Anatolia.

But even as the Greeks were being stymied in the west, and the Angora government was concluding its peace agreement with Moscow, talks were being held in London to try to salvage something out of the Treaty of Sèvres. Those talks failed. The Kemal government saw no reason to compromise on its declared terms, the National Pact. They had the quiet support of Moscow and the French and Italian governments were making it clear they were prepared to abandon the treaty and cut separate peace agreements with Turkey, and indeed both of them soon will.

That left Britain and Greece. If Turkey had no incentive to compromise, neither did the Greeks, not so long as David Lloyd George was backing them to the hilt. In Athens, Constantine and his royalist government made the determination that to give into the Turkish nationalists would be political suicide at home, and chose instead a high stakes gamble: in the summer of 1921, the Greek Army would attempt to march all the way to Angora and depose Kemal's provisional government by force.

Within the British Cabinet, Lloyd George was still all in, but the number of other ministers who supported his pro-Greek policy was growing slender. Even Winston Churchill had expressed his doubts. But Lloyd George never wavered from his staunch support of the Greeks. Let me remind you again that for the past fifty years, Liberal policy had been to support Christian minorities against Turkish oppression, while Conservative policy had been to prop up the Sultan's empire. Lloyd George no doubt saw the Treaty of Sèvres as the final triumph and vindication of the Liberals and he was determined to protect it.

But in his fervor for the old Liberal principles, and perhaps with a certain measure of arrogance, Lloyd George was overlooking that he was the leader not of a Liberal government, but of a coalition government that got most of its votes from Tories. Now he was pressing ahead with a policy opposed by many, perhaps most, within his own coalition.

By 1921, Lloyd George needed a win. His government was in trouble on a number of fronts. The settlement with the Irish in July 1921 was unpopular, especially with Tories. The British economy remained in its postwar slump, and the government had gotten mired in a scandal revolving around the sale of honors. I haven't had a chance to get to any of those issues yet, but for now, suffice it to say that Lloyd George has suffered a series of setbacks and badly needs something in the win column. Like a compulsive gambler who should have cut their losses a

while ago, but can't help but keep coming back to the table, Lloyd George bet heavily on the Greeks to accomplish what the Allies could not: the humbling of Kemal and his nationalists, and the preservation of what had been gained in the Treaty of Sèvres. In effect, he had taken all his remaining chips and put them on 14 red.

There was nothing left to do but spin the wheel, and see what happened next.

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 Ayun for his donation, and thank you, Richard, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Ayun and Richard help keep the lights on around here. They also help keep the podcast ad free. You know, I used to think I'd like to run ads on the podcast someday, but I'm very happy with the way it's working out: ad free and with voluntary contributions helping to pay the bills and buy me a few research materials, so thanks to all of you who have chipped in to help, and if you'd 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 and Greece. The two nations fight an ugly war, with an ugly outcome. The Greco-Turkish War, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I explained that war crimes trials weren't yet an established procedure in 1920, and as a result, many key figures involved in the genocide of Armenians escaped justice. But not all of them escaped vigilante justice. A left-leaning Armenian nationalist group called the Armenian Revolutionary Federation spent the years of 1920 to 1922 conducting a covert assassination campaign targeted against Turkish and Azerbaijani political and military figures the ARF believed played a role in the killings of Armenians.

It was called Operation Nemesis, after the ancient Greek goddess who was said to punish mortals for their hubris. Operation Nemesis was responsible for the deaths of at least half a dozen political figures, including Talaat Pasha and Jamal Pasha, two of the Three Pashas who led the Ottoman government during the Great War.

The third, Enver Pasha, fled to Russia. Despite those Allied suspicions that Enver was somehow pulling the strings of the Turkish nationalists in Angora, in truth, Mustafa Kemal blamed Enver for the Empire's defeat in the war and opposed Enver's wish to return to Turkey.

In Russia, Enver managed to win the trust of Lenin and was sent to central Asia to help put down anti-Bolshevik resistance in Turkestan. Once there, Enver promptly defected to the rebel side. A few months later, in August 1922, Enver and a small guard of guerillas were ambushed by a Red Army cavalry brigade under the command of Yakov Melkumov, an ethnic Armenian. Melkumov later claimed he personally killed Enver, though that claim is disputed.

[music: Closing Theme]

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