

‘Living in your Nation’s Myth’: Borders, Frontiers and Identities in Contemporary Greece (19th – 20th century)

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The Modern Greek State is, to a large extent, the spiritual offspring of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution (1789). However, it has also incorporated other elements mainly associated with the influence of the Greek Orthodox Church and the institution of the ‘Κοινότητες’ (Communities), which was preserved during the period under the Ottoman Domination. The Greek War of Independence (1821-1830) was the second uprising to occur in the Balkans, following the Serbian Revolution in 1805, but it was the first successful one and it resulted, nine years later, in 1830, in the creation of the Greek State.

The Greek example was followed in the subsequent decades of the 19th century by other people in the Balkans: namely the Serbs, the Romanians, the Montenegrins, the Bulgarians and the Albanians, who revolted in that order. Thus, in just about one hundred years, the multiethnic Ottoman Empire dissolved into smaller states and lost all its Balkan provinces.

The new independent Greek State, however, had little to do with the aspirations and the ambitions of the Greeks, who still remained under foreign yoke. Its territory was very limited (from the Gulf of Amvrakikos in the West to the Gulf of Pagasitikos in the East) and the Greeks who were living within its borders numbered only 823,773 people in 1839.¹ On the other hand, the number of Greeks living beyond the borders of the Greek State at that time exceeded 2 million. The creation of an independent Greek State within the 1830 borders was just the beginning. Many of the architects of the Greek War of Independence felt that the reconstruction of the Byzantine Empire would be an entirely natural development. It is also worth noting that a month before the Greek Revolution was proclaimed in Southern Greece, Alexander Ypsilantis, the Tsar’s adjutant,

¹ Nikolai Todorov, *The Balkan City 15th-19th century*, vol.2 (Greek translation Athens, 1986), p. 455.

took the lead of an armed group of Greek students and proclaimed the Greek Revolution in Iasio (Iași), Romania, and attempted to move with his group to Constantinople. Ypsilantis was defeated, but his project reflected the dreams of many Greeks at that time.

Thus, the main characteristic of the Greek State has been its irredentism; that is, the desire to liberate the Greek brethren who still remained under foreign rule and, consequently, the expansion of its borders. Greek irredentism had been a feature of Greek political ideology for about a century after liberation, until 1922, when the disastrous defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor put an end to the ‘Great Idea’ and drove Greece into a period of isolation and introversion.

Almost all Greek political parties in the 19th century were committed to the irredentist policy. The ‘Great Idea’ was formulated for the first time by Prime Minister Ioannis Kolettis in 1844 before the Greek National Assembly. Moreover, in 1834 Kolettis had suggested that Greece should not have an official capital, since the real capital of Hellenism was Constantinople. Furthermore, during the first celebration of the Greek Revolution in 1838 the assembled crowd kept cheering: “To Constantinople!”² Otto, the King of Greece at the time, was ready - quite impulsively - to launch a campaign to conquer Constantinople, but fortunately the sole steamboat of the Greek kingdom was undergoing repairs and the project never materialized.³ At the same time, Greeks were being carried away by popular legends and traditions of the 19th century, like the one claiming that

“In Constantinople, a very large marble plate is kept, on which there are inscribed all the villages, and even the fields, with their borders and everything.”⁴

The overwhelming majority of the press was also encouraging this spirit of irredentism. The following extract is a prime example:⁵

² Elli Skopetea, To ‘protipo vasileio kai I Megali Idea’. Opseis tou ethnikou provlimatos stin Ellada (1830-1880) [The Model Kingdom and the Great Idea. Aspects of the National Problem in Greece] (Athens, 1988), p. 274.

³ Idem. Op.cit., p. 274.

⁴ Ibid. p. 275.

⁵ Ibid. Op.cit., p. 285.

“The great, the rich, the populous Greece is not this little piece of land whose independence has been ratified by diplomacy, but the one whose capital was created many centuries ago and is located today and will for ever be in the city of Constantine.”

Even the moderate Prime Minister Charilaos Trikoupis believed that it was the duty of the Greek State to liberate all Greeks everywhere and ensure their reunification with their motherland.

Despite its adventurous elements, the Greek irredentist policy proved to be generally successful and this notwithstanding the various financial and social problems that face the Greek Kingdom. The Greek frontiers expanded gradually as follows: in 1864, the Ionian Islands were ceded to Greece; in 1881, Thessaly and a part of Epirus were liberated;



in 1912-13, as a result of the Balkan Wars, Macedonia, Epirus, Crete and the islands of the Eastern Aegean Sea were added;



in 1919, following the end of WWI, Western Thrace was incorporated into the Greek State; and, in 1947, so did the Dodecanese. In the period of 1919-22, Greece attempted unsuccessfully to conquer both Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace and came very close to the reconstruction of the Byzantine Empire and the transformation of the Aegean into a Greek sea.



In any case, a hundred years after the creation of the Modern Greek State, Greece's territory had expanded more than two-fold and its population had also increased reaching 6 million people in 1930.

The territorial expansion coincided with the flow of many Greeks to the independent Greek Kingdom during the first quarter of the 20th century. At least 1.5 million Greek refugees came to Greece from Asia Minor, Eastern Thrace, Pontus, Eastern Roumelia and Southern Serbia, thus putting also an ethnologic end to the Great Idea.

The second characteristic of the Modern Greek State had been, at least for a century, its ethnic fragmentation. This element was characteristic of all the Balkan States. It was also an element to be expected, since the creation of the Nation States in the Balkans has mainly been the result of political and diplomatic interaction among the Great Powers. In addition, all Nation States in the Balkans originated from the breakup of the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, where religion had been the deciding criterion for division among the population, particularly for financial reasons. It is well known that Muslims were exempted from taxes, whereas the followers of other religions were heavily taxed. The other characteristics of the Nation State, such as a common national consciousness and language, made a late appearance in the region, in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Greeks in the 19th century were fully aware of the ethnologic variety of their country. This is why they turned to their past, to Ancient Greece, in order to devise arguments that would support their claim for supremacy. The well-known dictum of Isocrates, that all those who partook of Greek education were Greeks, became the slogan of the Greeks at that time. This allowed Greece to overcome its disadvantageous position, by using the language criterion to claim populations almost everywhere in the Balkan peninsula. The following view of the eminent 19th century Greek historian Konstantinos Paparigopoulos on the Albanians is particularly revealing:⁶

“Two races live in Greece, the Greeks and the Albanians. But is the Albanian race a nation per se? Does it have its own feelings,

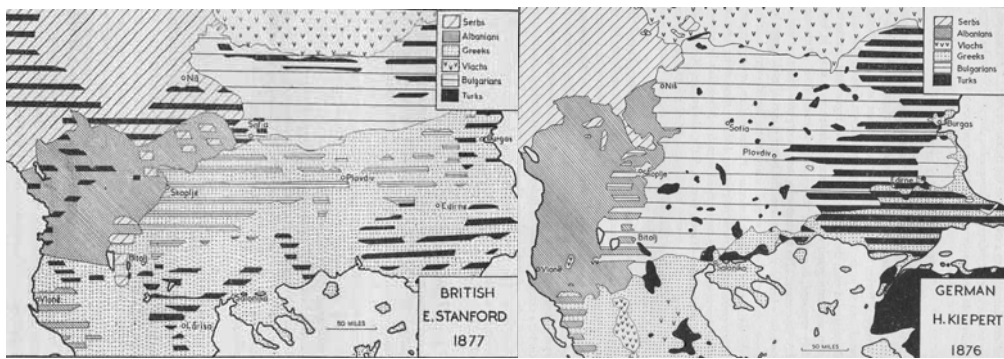
⁶ Skopetea. Op.cit., p. 188.

its own interests that are adverse to or simply different from those of the Greek race? Indeed, it used to be so, but this is not the case anymore... This is what I call the amalgamation of the Albanian race into the Greek one; this is what I call prevalence of the Greek spirit, together with the reinforcement of the Greek nation with the material forces that this race brought with it.”

I think that there is no better example of the implementation of this policy than the particular case of the geographic region of Macedonia.⁷ This was the place where the irredentist visions of almost all the Balkan States met and where the phenomenon of constant changes of the political borders and the cultural frontiers appeared at its largest scale. The majority of the populations that lived in the region were Orthodox Christians, be they hellenophones, slavophones, or vlachophones. An intense competition developed for the loyalty of these people, particularly the slavophones, mainly between Greece and Bulgaria. As already mentioned, the Greeks used the criterion of the national consciousness of the population, whereas the Bulgarians used the language criterion, obviously hoping to take advantage from the language affinity that they had with the slavophones. Politicians, diplomats and experts, from within and beyond the Balkans, took part in this competition in an effort to buttress the positions of that side that they were supporting. Ethnography was the science used to that end, as demonstrated by H. Wilkinson’s marvelous book *Maps and Politics. A Review of the Ethnographic Cartography of Macedonia*.⁸ Let me show you two ethnographic maps that were submitted by the Greeks and the Bulgarians during the Conferences of San Stefano and Berlin respectively in 1878 in order to support their national pursuits.

⁷ For a comprehensive analysis over the population variety in Macedonia and the Balkan irredentist visions on it see Ioannis Koliopoulos. *I ‘peran’ Ellas kai oi ‘alloi’ Ellines (1800-1912) [‘Yonder’ Greece and the ‘Other’ Greeks]* (Thessaloniki, 2003).

⁸ H. Wilkinson. *Maps and Politics. A Review of the Ethnographic Cartography of Macedonia* (Liverpool, 1951).



Commenting, rather mockingly, on the intertwining of politics and cartography, the French traveler Victor Bérard wrote:⁹

“The races in the Balkan peninsula can be classified into three major groups: the Turkish group, the Slav group and the Pelasgian or Greco-Latin group. All three groups are represented in Macedonia. This is one of the rare truths acknowledged by everybody. Indeed, let us have a look at the maps or the documents of all parties. Each one claims that it represents the majority but none has been able to deny the existence of some, albeit very few, adversaries. Maps printed in Sofia reduce, as much as possible, the share of the Greco-Latin group. Maps printed in Athens are no less inaccurate: Slav nuclei, limited in number and small in size, are represented with a rather indeterminate color (pale purple) that disappears in the immensity of the blue of the triumphant Greeks. Serb geographers, for their part, push the Bulgarians towards the Rodope Mountains, the Albanians beyond the Pindus Mountains and the Greeks to the borders of Thessaly. There are, however, some inhibitions that halt the Serbs, the Greeks and the Bulgarians and force them to respect some foreign clusters, here and there, in parts that are sufficiently remote from the present kingdom or that are well-known to Europeans. The Turks are more decent and do not put any color to their rights of possession. Ethnography is a ‘giaour’ science which they despise. However, by granting berats (appointments) to bishops, they admit the survival of a few Christians among the ‘Romylians’, and their oscillations between Bulgarian and Greek bishops constitutes further proof of their intimate thought that they may be ruling over both Greek and Bulgarian Christians in Macedonia. Thus, the existence of these three races is not contested by anybody and conflicts occur at the particular moment when each one begins to formulate its claims.

We should, however, note that Serbs, Bulgarians and Greeks agree on one point, even in their most imaginative maps: that is, they more or less attribute to the Turks their right and due position.

⁹ Victor Berard. Turkey and Hellenism. Travelogue to Macedonia (Greek translation, Athens, 1987), pp. 191-192.

For those three very Christian people, the Turks are a people forgotten by God, so destined to devastation, so close to their death rattle, that there is no risk in acknowledging what they had been. They exist no more. Besides, the Turks are doing them all some favors. When the Slav consciousness retreats in the face of a claim that is too bold, then the attribution to the Turks of Greek areas is as useful to the right cause as an outright annexation. In addition, when the Greek shrewdness realizes that claims to genuine Bulgarian areas would render suspicious as exaggerated all other Greek calculations, it quickly puts some Turkish color on those areas! The adversary's position is reduced to the same degree. Europe looks with a positive eye at this generous behavior towards the Turks. A Christian map that shows such charity towards the Infidels is considered to be more trustworthy. Thus, Europe satisfies its deepest aspirations. How it would wish that everything was Turkish in Turkey and that the ethnographers had not discovered this terrible puzzle that is called the Eastern Question!"

I believe that this brief analysis demonstrates the importance and the interactions in the shaping of frontiers and identities in Greek history. This explains why Greek historiography dealt extensively with these phenomena. Particularly since the beginning of the 1990s, the scholars' interest in Modern Greek history increased in a spectacular way. This was due to the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the revival of the Macedonian Question, which - justifiably or not - increased the feeling of insecurity of the Greek public opinion. Hundreds of experts, historians, social anthropologists, international relations scholars, sociologists, political scientists, etc. have studied the history of Macedonia, its borders and the identities of its inhabitants. It is no joke to say that, ten years ago, one could meet more scientists than locals in the remote villages near the borders of Northern Greece! This was no doubt a demonstration of the Greek phenomenon of exoticism.

The focus of the interest of so many experts and representatives of various international organizations on the region, its history and its people benefited scientific knowledge in multiple ways, but it also often resulted in contradictions and confusion, since - unfortunately - in several cases one could detect the resurgence of the 19th century phenomenon of the intertwining of science and politics. A characteristic example is the estimation contained in the reports of various organizations that increased the slavophone minority in Greek Macedonia

to 1 million people, thus reproducing the most extreme versions of Slavomacedonian nationalism, reducing its number a year later to no more than 50,000 people.¹⁰

The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Department of History and Archaeology, and the various research centers¹¹ that come under its supervision, have been leaders in the study of these phenomena. I will not be the one to evaluate their contribution. I would just like to present to you in a few words the most important of the revisions its scholars undertook. We all know that history is nothing more than research in the past in order to supply answers to present questions. Based on this principle, old archival sources were read anew, and the availability of new and valuable archives proved very helpful in this effort. In my opinion, the most important revision was the one that had to do with the study of the confrontation in Macedonia, and particularly in its rural areas, in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, as a sort of civil conflict among its Christian inhabitants, where the choice of a national side (Greek, Bulgarian, Serb or Romanian) amounted to joining a political party.¹² As a result, the fluidity and the change of identities were a daily - and often a family - phenomenon, a consequence of pressure, opportunism or vested interests. Let me give you some examples. In a village in Eastern Macedonia, a notable, whose son was not admitted on a scholarship in a Greek school, decided to enroll him in the corresponding Romanian school, thus creating a Romanian community in the village. A year later, the situation repeated itself with the second son of the same notable, only this time the son was enrolled in the Bulgarian school, thus creating a Bulgarian community.¹³ In addition, the Greek Consul in Thessaloniki, at the beginning of the 20th century, wrote that the opposition in the same villages had become Bulgarian and converted the illiterate peasants to supporters of Bulgaria.

¹⁰ Vlas Vlasidis & Veniamin Karakostanoglou. 'Recycling Propaganda: Remarks on the Recent Reports on Greece's Slav-Macedonian Minority', *Balkan Studies*, 36/1 (1995), pp. 159-160.

¹¹ Among them, the most outstanding are the 'Centre for Macedonian History and Documentation' and the 'Institute for Balkan Studies'.

¹² Basil C. Gounaris. 'Social Cleavages and National Awakening in Ottoman Macedonia, East European Quarterly, 29/4 (1995), pp. 409-426.

¹³ Perikis Argiropoulos. 'O Makedonikos Agon. Apomnhmoneumata' [The Macedonian Struggle. Memoirs] Institute for Balkan Studies, *The Macedonian Struggle. Memoirs* (Thessaloniki, 1984), p. 46.

Finally, there are many cases where one son of a family belonged to the Greek side, while another belonged to the Bulgarian side.¹⁴

Other important changes based upon the fluidity of consciousness deal with the revision and contestation of various national statistical data on the composition of the population and the demonstration of how deeply influenced they were from a political point of view,¹⁵ while more recent studies deal with the presentation of the cultural frontiers within the various communities and the contribution of family traditions in their development.¹⁶

“ДА ЖИВЕЕШ В СВОЯ НАЦИОНАЛЕН МИТ”: ГРАНИЦИ И НАЦИОНАЛНИ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В СЪВРЕМЕННА ГЪРЦИЯ (XIX- XX ВЕК)

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(Резюме)

Определянето на границите и идентичностите в модерната гръцка история се определя от сложния и противоречив характер и наследство на Източния въпрос и поради това гръцката историография се концентрира върху свързаните с него проблеми. При създаването на независимата гръцка държава през 1830 г., извън нейните граници стават два пъти повече гърци отколкото в тях, така че иредентизмът става основна характеристика на нейното развитие. Гръцкият национален проект е повлиян от “мегали идея”-та - възстановяване на Византийската империя, освобождаването на всички гърци и присъединяването им към родината. През първата четвърт на XX век национален проект приключва с идването в кралството на 1.5 млн. гърци обитаващи съседни райони. Втора основна характеристика на модерната гръцка държава е етническата фрагментация, която е валидна и за останалите страни на Балканския полуостров. Пресечна точка на техните иредентистки аспирации става Македония. С разпадането на бивша Югославия македонският въпрос се възроди и отново привлича широко внимание, като заедно се завръща и друг феномен на XIX век, обвързането на науката с политиката.

¹⁴ Konstantinos Mazarakis-Ainian. ‘O Makedonikos Agon. Apomnhmoneumata’ [The Macedonian Struggle. Memoirs] Institute for Balkan Studies, The Macedonian Struggle. Memoirs (Thessaloniki, 1984), p. 203.

¹⁵ Iakovos D. Michailidis. ‘The War of Statistics: Traditional Recipes for the Preparation of the Macedonian Salad’, East European Quarterly, 32/1 (1998), pp. 9-21.

¹⁶ Iakovos D. Michailidis. ‘On the Other Side: Greek History and the Defeated Slavophones’, Jane Cowan & Keith Brown (eds). Macedonian Inflections (Pluto Press, London, 2000), pp. 68-84.