

# British Withdrawal from Greece: Protecting Imperial Power



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## INTRODUCTION

On May 15, 1919, Greek forces began to occupy Western Anatolia (formerly part of Turkey in the Ottoman Empire) which was promised to Greece as a reward for aligning with the Allies during World War I. In the subsequent Greco-Turkish War of 1919, Britain supported Greece, because of British economic and military interests in Asia Minor. Since Greece was under strong British influence, her land concessions in Western Anatolia, Eastern Thrace, and the islands surrounding the International Zone of the Dardanelles Straits would provide Britain with access to crucial ports, trade centers, and strategic military bases.<sup>1,2</sup> However, three years later in 1922, Britain withdrew all military and financial assistance from the Greek endeavor in Western Anatolia.<sup>3</sup> Given British interests and her large, potential gains from a Greek establishment in the region, why did this occur? Here I shall argue that Britain withdrew support from Greece in order to protect her imperial power, which was endangered due to a shift in the imperial balance of power between the Allied Powers (France, Italy, Russia, and Britain).

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During World War I, Britain pursued a Greek alliance with the Allies mainly to counter the Turkish alliance with the Central Powers and to gain more control of Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> To induce Greek compliance, Britain offered Greece the “most important territorial

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, Harry N. *The Partition of Turkey: A Diplomatic History 1913-1923*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> Zetland, Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, Marquis of. *The Life of Lord Curzon*. v. 3. London: Ernest Benn, 1928.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Michael Llewellyn. *Ionian Vision: Greece in Asia Minor 1919-1922*. London: Allen Lane, 1973.

compensations on the coast of Asia Minor”<sup>5</sup> after the war as a reward for her services. This offer appealed to Greece, for it had long dreamt to create “a really big Greece, to include practically all the regions in which the influence of Hellenism has been paramount throughout the ages.”<sup>6</sup> However, Greek King Constantine I insisted on neutrality as his personal sympathies were with Germany (his wife was the Kaiser’s sister),<sup>7</sup> though Greek statesman Elefthérios Venizélos supported the Entente. Following Constantine’s exile in May 1917, due to an Entente intervention, Greece officially joined the war, led by Venizélos.

In the aftermath of World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed on August 10, 1920 at the Paris Peace Conference and granted to Greece the islands of Imbros and Tenedos, Eastern Mediterranean islands, Eastern Thrace, and all of Western Anatolia.<sup>8,9</sup> Greek control of these territories served British interests in the International Zone of the Dardanelles Straits, an extremely important waterway for trade and military leverage. Eastern Thrace, which was adjacent to the Zone of the Straits, provided Britain with a direct European land approach to Constantinople in the Straits, an immensely important city for international trade, as it connected Europe with the Middle East and Asia. Eastern Thrace would also serve to be a valuable military base for Britain, allowing it a powerful position in the region. Furthermore, the islands of Imbros and Tenedos contained ports that connected the Black Sea, Sea of Marmara and Aegean Sea, which served vital British interests with routes to the British

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<sup>5</sup> “Sir Edward Grey wire to Venizelos.” George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938. p. 1210-1211.

<sup>6</sup> Kinross, Lord. *Atatürk: The Rebirth of a Nation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964. p. 140.

<sup>7</sup> George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Treaty of Sevres*. 10 August 1920. <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/versa/sevres1.html>. (Accessed 26 April 2006).

Empire in India.<sup>10</sup> The islands would also give Britain a strategic military base, for they were located at the mouth of the Straits, which led to the Soviet coast in the Black Sea.<sup>11</sup>

However, Turkey refused to accept the terms of the treaty, so it was not yet ratified at the time of the Greek invasion of Western Anatolia, which was pursued to assert Greek dominion of the area and to induce Turkish compliance with the Treaty. Britain played a major role in shaping these events by convincing the other Powers in the Peace Conference to grant Greece her desired territories in the Treaty and her early invasion.<sup>12,13</sup>

## BRITAIN'S DOUBLE TROUBLE

The Greek advance in Western Anatolia did not begin or proceed as smoothly as desired, as Greek forces clashed with Turkish nationalist troops led by Mustafa Kemal. British aid was somewhat limited as her forces were already depleted from WWI and stretched thin afterwards in order to protect interests in other European and Middle Eastern post-war territories.<sup>14</sup> Thus, when the imperial balance of power between the Allied Powers shifted after an alliance formed between Russia, Turkey, France, and Italy, British imperial interests in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia were threatened, causing her to withdraw support from Greece to protect her imperial power.

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<sup>10</sup> Kinross, Lord. *Atatürk: The Rebirth of a Nation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Erhan, Cagri. *Greek Occupation of Izmir and Adjoining Territories*. SAM Papers. No: 2/99 Ankara: Center for Strategic Research, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938.

<sup>14</sup> Callwell, Charles Edward, Sir, Major-General. *Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, bart., G.C.B., D.S.O., His Life and Diaries*. v. i and ii. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1927.

## I. RUSSIA'S BOLSHEVIK THREAT

Aside from Turkey, which had to cede vast territories to Greece in the Treaty of Sèvres, the Treaty also severely disadvantaged Russia. Under Sèvres, the Zone of the Straits was internationalized as well as the Russian port of Batum (to which Persia—British territory under the Treaty—had free access), exposing Russia's entire southern coast in the Black Sea and her land around the Caspian Sea via Persia to possible attacks from other states.<sup>15</sup> This threat led Russia to unite with Turkey against the Greeks and Allies as a rejection of the Treaty.

The Turco-Russian alliance alarmed Britain, which foresaw a Soviet expansion into Europe, the Middle East, and Asia (considering the success of the Bolsheviks in containing the White Russian Movement thus far), where crucial British territorial interests lay (namely the Straits, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, and India). In a letter communicated to the British Foreign Office on March 17, 1921, Sir Robert Horne, Chamberlain of the Exchequer, reported, "The Soviet Government have made no secret in their public statements and in their official press that the main object of their eastern policy is the overthrow of British rule in India... A number of these [Indian frontier tribes] are now employed under Bolshevik auspices and maintained by Bolshevik funds in disseminating disloyalty in India and fomenting an anti-British feeling in countries contiguous to India, principally in Afghanistan."<sup>16</sup> In many later secret reports, British officials and allies in Asia reported active Bolshevik expansions

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<sup>15</sup> Howard, Harry N. *The Partition of Turkey: A Diplomatic History 1913-1923*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1931.

<sup>16</sup> "Sir R. Horne to M. Krassin.—(Communicated to Foreign Office March 17.) (Doc. 207)." p. 295-297. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, Pt. 2, Series A: The Soviet Union 1917-1939*. v. 4: *Soviet Russia and Her Neighbors, Nov. 1920 – Mar. 1921*. Frederick: University Publications of America, 1984.

and propaganda in India with Indian revolutionaries.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, not only were the Bolsheviks inciting anti-British propaganda in British imperial domains, but they were also advancing west into Europe, including Poland and the Black sea.<sup>18</sup>

A Soviet advance not only threatened British imperial power, but also clashed directly with Britain's Middle Eastern policy, the base of which was that Bolshevism must be contained by forming "a necklace of States extending from the Arctic to the Baltic Sea and thence to the Caspian, which will be a buffer against the westward spread of that which is objectionable in Bolshevism."<sup>19</sup>

Although Britain could have contributed more aid to the Greeks in an attempt to defeat the Turks and Russians, her forces were already depleted and stretched thin. As Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson wrote on June 17, 1920, "I told Winston [Churchill] that in my opinion we were heading straight for disaster in Constantinople, Dardanelles, Mesopotamia, and Persia. As I had over and over again pointed out, our policy had no relation to the forces at our disposal, and we were incapable of carrying out our commitments... I had not enough troops to carry out the Cabinet policy in Ireland, Constantinople, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Persia, not to mention England, Egypt, and India."<sup>20</sup>

These concerns lent to the view that diplomatic alliance with Turkey, rather than military action against it, was the most viable method of preventing a Bolshevik advancement

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<sup>17</sup> "G.H.Q., Simia, to D.M.I.—(Received May 19) (Doc. 108)." p. 109. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, Pt. 2, Series A: The Soviet Union 1917-1939. v. 5: Soviet Russia and Her Neighbors, Mar. –Oct. 1921.* Frederick: University Publications of America, 1984.

<sup>18</sup> *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, Pt. 2, Series A: The Soviet Union 1917-1939. v. 3: Soviet Russia and Her Neighbors, Apr. –Oct. 1920.* Frederick: University Publications of America, 1984.

<sup>19</sup> "Memorandum by the British Delegation in Paris on a Suggested Policy for Russia (Doc. 17)." p. 82-92. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, Pt. 2, Series A: The Soviet Union 1917-1939. v. 1: Soviet Russia and Her Neighbors, Jan. 1917 –Dec. 1919.* Frederick: University Publications of America, 1984.

<sup>20</sup> Callwell, Charles Edward, Sir, Major-General. *Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, bart., G.C.B., D.S.O., His Life and Diaries.* v. i and ii. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1927. p. 244.

into the Middle East and Asia Minor. Containing a Bolshevik expansion was necessary to protect British imperial domains and interests in the Middle East and Asia.

## II. FRANCE AND ITALY SWITCH SIDES

As Britain gained increasing influence and control over Asia Minor and the area around the Straits through her ties with Greece as the Greek advance continued, France and Italy became increasingly resentful over British domination of the region.<sup>21</sup> Italy had long detested Britain's role in securing territorial concessions in Asia Minor for Greece—which were originally promised to her in the secret treaties of 1915 and 1917 between the Allied Powers<sup>22,23</sup>—since “a larger Greece, with ports on the Coast of Asia Minor and with a maritime population, would always be a constant menace, when allied to more formidable naval powers (such as Britain), to the control of the Mediterranean, which has been Italy's historical aim.”<sup>24</sup> The early Greek invasion of Western Anatolia, which essentially subdued Italy's claim of the region during the writing of the Treaty of Sèvres (since Greece had already established herself there), was accomplished due to British intervention. British Prime Minister Lloyd George wrote in his diary, “There was a race between the Italians and the Greeks as to which of them should be the first to land a garrison in Smyrna. Prompt action taken by Wilson, Clemenceau and myself enabled Venizelos to get a Greek force into the town whilst the Italians were hesitating.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Howard, Harry N. *The Partition of Turkey: A Diplomatic History 1913-1923*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1931.

<sup>22</sup> “Signor Tittoni, Paris. (No. 6, Note. 14.)” p. 24-25. *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939, First Series, v. IV: 1919*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1952.

<sup>23</sup> Kinross, Lord. *Atatürk: The Rebirth of a Nation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964.

<sup>24</sup> George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938. p. 1248.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 1250.

France desired Syria, which was under British rule. Although Britain had agreed to cede the state to France in agreements formed during and after the war,<sup>26</sup> the transition in imperial rule proved to be a lengthy and rocky process. There was “disturbance in Syria created by the apprehension that France intended to annex the country”<sup>23</sup> and reports from every Syrian district indicating that “the people were bitterly hostile to the French and that their occupation of the country would lead to bloodshed.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, “[the French] believed in their hearts that [British] officers had stirred up Syrian antipathy to the French in order to save Syria for Britain.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, when King Constantine returned from exile to power in 1920, both France and Italy withdrew their support to the Greeks under the pretext that Constantine had betrayed the Allies during the war by aiding Germany after Venizélos had already pledged Greece to the Entente.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, this change in Greek government rendered void all the promises to Greece under the Treaty. Instead, “the Italians sold arms to Mustapha Kemal to fight the Greeks, and were paid out of money supplied by Moscow. The French Government negotiated a secret Treaty with Kemal behind the backs of the British Ministry.”<sup>30</sup> In doing so, both solidified long-brewing separate agreements with Turkey to gain more territory through a revision of the Treaty that would transfer territorial concessions from Britain and Greece to France and Italy.<sup>31</sup>

The French and Italian betrayals against the Entente alliance further threatened Britain’s imperial interests. The combination of French, Italian, and Russian aid to Turkey

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<sup>26</sup> “Policy of His Majesty’s Government in regard to Syria and Palestine before the First Conference of London. May 30, 1919—February 12, 1920.” p. 241. *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939, First Series, v. IV: 1919*. London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1952.

<sup>27</sup> George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938. p. 1044-1045.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*. p. 1349.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, Michael Llewellyn. *Ionian Vision: Greece in Asia Minor 1919-1922*. London: Allen Lane, 1973.

posed a formidable opposition to Greece, which Britain was still supporting. The likelihood of a Turkish victory was high, which would result in a revision of the Treaty, through which Britain could lose large amounts of territory to the French, Italians, Russians, and Turks, threatening British imperial power.

Italy had long had her sights set on Western Anatolia as well as certain African colonies, but Italian possession of these territories would severely cripple British influence in the Straits and endanger British imperial power in the Middle East and Asia. “The setting up of an Italian Empire, half as big as British India, in the north-eastern corner of Africa... would cut right into the heart of that great sphere of British influence extending from the centre of East Africa through the Sudan, Egypt, Arabia and the Persian Gulf to India.”<sup>32</sup> Other territories of British interest could easily go to France, or worse, Russia.

Moreover, Britain needed Italian, and especially French, cooperation for the successful application of her Bolshevik containment policy. As Wilson wrote regarding how to put pressure on the increasing Bolshevik expansion, “...our only way out of all these troubles (lack of troops in the Rhine and Middle East, the Bolshevik threat, steadily diminishing economic and military resources, etc.) is in a new and firm alliance with France.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to existing tensions with France over Syria, territorial disputes also existed between France and Britain over the Rhine in Germany,<sup>34</sup> so a further exacerbation of the Anglo-Franco rift by continuing to support Greece would only complicate matters more and harm British imperial interests in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Thus, the French and Italian foreign policy changes, resulting in a Franco-Italian-Soviet-Turkish alliance, shifted the

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<sup>32</sup> “Lord Miller’s letter.” George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938. p. 898-901.

<sup>33</sup> Callwell, Charles Edward, Sir, Major-General. *Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, bart., G.C.B., D.S.O., His Life and Diaries*. v. i and ii. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1927. p. 257.

<sup>34</sup> Howard, Harry N. *The Partition of Turkey: A Diplomatic History 1913-1923*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1931.

imperial balance of power to weigh heavily against Britain, provoking the vital question of whether or not continuing assistance to Greece would truly benefit British interests.

### III. TOWERING TURKS, GRAVITATING GREEKS

After the Russian intervention and French and Italian betrayal, the British debated the merit of supporting the Greeks, which essentially depended upon the probability of a Greek victory under the new circumstances. However, with Russian and Italian military and financial aid, the Turkish forces under Kemal were consistently defeating and driving out Greek troops in Asia Minor.<sup>35</sup> It became quite clear that the Greeks were losing, the Turks were winning, and that to continue supporting Greece could mean war against Turkey, Russia, France, and Italy, a war for which Britain did not have the resources to wage or win.

Furthermore, if British support remained with Greece and the likely outcome of a Turkish victory occurred, Turkey could refuse to cede Cyprus to Britain and the other three Powers could eliminate British claim to Mesopotamia and Palestine in a revision of the Treaty. This would be disastrous to British imperial interests in the Middle East, for Cyprus was vital for protecting British imperial connections with India.<sup>36</sup> Also, “the potential strategic importance of Cyprus is great, both from a naval and from an air point of view...the danger of its falling into the hands of a stronger Power cannot be wholly disregarded,” as stated by the British War Office.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cosmetatos, S.P.P. *The Tragedy of Greece*. London: Stephen Austin and Sons, 1928.

<sup>36</sup> Kinross, Lord. *Atatürk: The Rebirth of a Nation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964.

<sup>37</sup> “War Office Memorandum.” George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938. p. 1238.

Mesopotamia and Palestine were likewise significant, containing valuable oil reserves and also serving to connect British trade routes with her empire in India.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, as a British Foreign Office Memorandum stated, “The War has shown that Palestine is really the strategical buffer of Egypt, and the presence of [another] foreign Power in Palestine might seriously affect the position of Great Britain both on the Suez Canal and in the adjacent Arab areas.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, if Britain continued her alliance with Greece, she risked losing large and valuable concessions in the Middle East and Asia Minor, which would severely debilitate her imperial power in the region as well as in Asia, allowing France, Italy, and Russia to gain leverage.

In light of these new circumstances, a Cabinet meeting on June 9, 1921 resulted in the agreement amongst British politicians that “it was impossible to bolster up the Greek army, and that the only thing of real importance was to make Turkey friendly.”<sup>40</sup> In 1922, Britain withdrew all support from Greece and worked to procure a peace agreement between Turkey and Greece, collaborating with the other Powers to rewrite the Treaty of Sèvres with conditions to which the Turks would agree.<sup>41</sup> As Wilson wrote to the Secretary of State regarding the British evacuation from Asia Minor, “...inform Kemal that, so far as we are concerned, he was welcome to take over Smyrna, the Straits, Constantinople, Thrace and Adrianople, and that we would clear out of Turkey altogether and resume our old role of Friend. Then tell the Greeks that they had tried expansion under the direction of

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<sup>38</sup> Kinross, Lord. *Atatürk: The Rebirth of a Nation*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964.

<sup>39</sup> “Foreign Office Memorandum.” George, David Lloyd. *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*. v. i and ii. London: Purnell and Sons, 1938. p. 1151-1155.

<sup>40</sup> Callwell, Charles Edward, Sir, Major-General. *Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, bart., G.C.B., D.S.O., His Life and Diaries*. v. i and ii. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1927. p. 295

<sup>41</sup> Zetland, Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, Marquis of. *The Life of Lord Curzon*. v. 3. London: Ernest Benn, 1928.

Venizelos...to their own ruin and to everybody's danger, and therefore they must contract again."<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Britain essentially reversed her policy to befriend the Turks and abandon the Greeks for the same reason that she had supported the Greeks in the first place—to protect her imperial power. After the British withdrawal, Turkish troops soon overwhelmed the Greeks, forcing them to resign, and established a revised treaty—the Treaty of Lausanne—on July 24, 1923, under which Greece lost nearly all of her promised territorial concessions and Britain gained significantly less than she would have under the original Treaty of Sèvres.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Despite the considerable losses Britain was forced to accept by backing out of Greece during the Greco-Turkish War of 1919, she did so to protect her imperial power, which was threatened after Russia, France, and Italy joined forces with Turkey, tipping the imperial balance of power unfavorably against Britain. Failure to withdraw could have resulted in even greater losses through a revision of the Treaty of Sèvres that ignored British interests than would retreating early and relinquishing potential gains from a Greek establishment in Asia Minor. While acting in one's own self-interest is logical and understandable, Britain's quick shift of loyalty from supporting the Greeks to making peace with the Turks questions the nature and solidarity of international state alliances. If a state forms and breaks alliances with other states to further its own political and economic interests, do those ties mean anything more than tools for maintaining or gaining power? If not, how solid and reliable are such pacts in the constantly changing realm of international politics?

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<sup>42</sup> Callwell, Charles Edward, Sir, Major-General. *Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, bart., G.C.B., D.S.O., His Life and Diaries*. v. i and ii. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1927, p. 313.

<sup>43</sup> *Treaty of Lausanne*. 24 July 1923. <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1918p/lausanne.html>. (Accessed 26 April 2006).

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\* This source consists almost entirely of lengthy excerpts, and often whole entries, from Sir Henry Wilson's diary. There is very little commentary by the author, but I list it as a secondary source, as not all the excerpts are completely whole entries.