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[Greek-Bulgarian Relations, 1912-2006: A Historical Synopsis](#)

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By Ioannis Michaletos

In this detailed synopsis, Greek researcher Ioannis Michaletos outlines the key moments and trends in the history of Greek-Bulgarian relations from the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 through the Cold War, concluding with the unprecedented excellent relations enjoyed by the two countries today.

Introduction

Greece and Bulgaria have a long and colorful history of rivalry. The hostility between the two nations started in the 7th century and thus has been the longest, chronologically speaking, at least so far as the Western world goes. By comparison, the world famous rivalry between the Germans and French (1870-1962) covers only some 8 percent of this timeline. It thus seems that the Balkan terrain is a perfect ground for testing human endurance. The comparison holds if we consider that the German nation was fully constructed under the Second Reich. Even if previous German-French quarrels are to be counted, they don't go back further than the 17th century, and the 30 Years' War.

Another famous and long-running European conflict is that between the English and the Irish; it dates back to the 12th century, and is still to some extent unresolved. Although the Greeks and Bulgars have of late cemented a new and apparently enduring friendship, their history of former conflict still outstrips in lengthiness that of the English and Irish.

The most famous examples of Greek-Bulgar enmity date from the Middle Ages, when the national consciousness of both peoples' were not developed or construed as they are today. Nevertheless, seminal events like the victory of Byzantine Emperor Basil II (*Voulgaroktonos*, 'the Bulgar-Slayer' in Greek) over the Bulgars at Mt. Belasica in 1014 made their way into the collective memories of both nations. As political rulership changed over time, the direct military conflicts ceased and new forms of infighting - chiefly religious, under the Ottomans - came to the fore. However, at the dawn of the 20th century, a precipitous rise in ethnic nationalism bought the two great Balkan nations back to the battlefield - first as allies, and soon after as enemies.

1912: The Decisive Year

In the months leading up to the [First Balkan War in 1912](#), the Greek and Bulgarian government were still undecided as to whether to form a coalition along with Serbia and Montenegro in the fight against the decaying Ottoman Empire. There were many obstacles for further negotiations, and opposing views on crucial issues. Bulgaria at that time was the Balkans' prime military force, as far as infantry strength was concerned, with a total mobilized troop number of 300,000. The Bulgarians were known as the "Prussians of the East," having a very disciplined army that mainly followed traditional Prussian military technique and methodology.

The Greeks, for their part, had a much smaller infantry (130,000 men), though their formidable navy constituted a great strategic advantage. It would be decisive in the outcome of the Balkan Wars, blocking Turkish troop and logistic supply maritime movements from Egypt.

The clear aim of Bulgaria was expansion towards the Aegean Sea, thus enhancing their power by connecting an Aegean port presence with their existing Black Sea one. Bulgaria was a continental power, but was eager to obtain Thrace and Macedonia in order to expand its territory and at the same time become the major Balkan power by

controlling the strategic inland and coastal areas of the peninsula.

However, these goals conflicted with Greece's own ambitions. The latter wanted to secure its northern borders, and the nation was also captivated by the vision of the "Great Idea" (*Megali Idea*), which envisioned the inclusion of all Hellenes within a single state, including those of Ottoman-controlled Asia Minor. In a sense, this dream would be an attempt to revitalize the lost Byzantine Empire, encompassing an area stretching from Cyprus in the south to Istanbul (Constantinople) in the north. The imminent years of warfare between the Bulgarian and Greek states helped ensure that neither of their ambitions would ever be achieved.

British Intrigue

At a time in which no agreement or consensus was to be found among the regional powers, the almighty British Empire found a solution, and actively pressed for its implementation. In spring of 1912, a *London Times* journalist residing in Sofia, one J.D. Bouchier, met with Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos in Pilio. The secluded scenery of this mountainous area, close to the important Aegean port town of Volos, provided the ideal cover for discreet and high-stakes conversations that would help shape the course of Balkan events for decades to come.

For Bouchier was not just an ordinary foreign affairs columnist; many believe that he was also a key figure in the British intelligence services, commissioned at that time to forge an alliance between the two nations. Bouchier was both popular (the Bulgarian government went so far as to issue a [Bouchier postage stamp](#) in his honor) and instrumental in getting the Balkan League against the Ottomans created.

What was the British interest in such tacit intervention? Britain was pulling for Greece's entry into the war because it assumed that this junior naval ally power

would act as a frontal force for the larger one - Britain - and so help make this important peninsula free of either Russian or German control. In exchange, Venizelos unofficially agreed to strictly follow the UK's policy in any potential Europe-wide conflict, and to never make engagements of any sort with Germany, then reasserting itself as a world power.

After finishing his meeting with Venizelos, J.D. Bourchier rushed to Sofia where after cajoling, pressing and persuading the generals he finally got the affirmative answer he had been asking for. However, he didn't mention to the Bulgarian authorities that Britain would be more pleased if Greece took hold of Thessaloniki - the most important city in the southern Balkans - instead implying that most likely the stronger Bulgarian army would be the first to reach the city in the dawning war.

The First Balkan War and a Mysterious Assassination

The first war started in October 1912 with fierce battles conducted on all fronts in Macedonia. In only a matter of days the Balkan coalition had captured most of Macedonia and Thrace from the crumbling Ottoman forces. As dawn broke on the 26th of October, the Greek army marched through Thessaloniki's main thoroughfares just a few hours before the disappointed main Bulgarian army division. They captured the city, symbolically enough, on the day of Thessaloniki's patron saint, Dimitrios. In an agreement made afterwards, the dejected Bulgarian regiment was allowed to camp in the outskirts of the city.

While the victorious Greek capture of Thessaloniki sparked animosities that helped to lead to the Second Balkan War, in which the allies would become antagonists, until March 1913 Greek-Bulgarian relations could be described as relatively calm. Still locked in their fight against the Ottomans, the two nations didn't have time to address their outstanding differences. But turbulence was looming in the heavy Balkan air.

The mysterious assassination of King George the First on

March 18, 1913, thought by some to be an act of the Bulgarian secret services, ignited strong sentiments of national revenge from the Greek side. Some supported the view that either German or Austrian services were behind this act.

In Greece, from 1913 up to the present it has been widely assumed that it was a plot carried out by Bulgarians, Austrians or Germans. The king was a staunch supporter of Anglo-Greek dominance in the Balkans, and had significant influence in various circles in Europe. His assassin, a man called Shinas, "committed suicide" by falling from the balcony of Thessaloniki's police station the day after the attack.

The king's successor, son Constantine, was fiercely pro-German and anti-British. That fact would have great significance the following year (1914) when Greece refused to side with the Entente, and a pro-German stance became prominent in Greek politics. Constantine also ousted Prime Minister Venizelos. Thus is it is likely that the Allied forces in WWI would have won the war faster had King George lived. In any case, the royal residence located in Chania, Crete, right next door to Venizelos' historic home, nowadays stands neglected, while the latter's has been maintained well and turned into a museum; the Cretans' respect for their favorite son and disdain for his supplanter, deriving from these turbulent days of almost a century ago, can still thus be seen.

Following the impressive gains of the Balkan Alliance against the Turks, Bulgaria was unsatisfied with its lot. Although it had achieved its goal of extending its borders to the Aegean, it felt that it had been short-changed in Macedonia, in comparison to its heavy infantry losses. Although hubris is more commonly associated with the Greeks, who coined the term in the first place, the Bulgars at that moment displayed the fatal syndrome and started a disastrous and crippling conflict with their erstwhile allies.



In 1912, British fixer J.D. Bourchier was honored with a Bulgarian postage stamp; today, Tony Blair warrants only a babushka in Sofia's flea market (photo: Christopher Deliso)

In May 1913, Serbia, Greece and now, Romania, were forced to declare war on Bulgaria in what became known as the Second Balkan War. The exhausted, demoralized Turks wisely sat out the conflict but did make incremental recoveries due to the Bulgarian overextension of forces. Bulgaria was bitterly defeated and lost any hopes, for the moment at least, of securing the most precious maritime stretches of the Balkan Peninsula.

The Great War and the Inter-bellum Period: Treaties, Skirmishes, Population Exchange

When World War I broke out a year later, Bulgaria sided with the Central Powers and its troops fought on the Macedonian front against Greece, France, Britain and Serbia.

For this epic struggle, the Bulgarian armed forces mobilized 750,000 men, whilst the Greeks, who arrived late on the scene due to political infighting between supporters of the Royalists and of Venizelos, mustered only 350,000. But the two countries never saw much direct combat, owing to the general stalemate prevailing [along the Macedonian front](#) through much of the war. So

while the Bulgarians invaded Macedonia and remained entrenched there for much of the war, buttressed by German and Austrian support, they were eventually dislodged by the Allies in 1918, [when a Serb-French breakthrough](#) crossed up the central Vardar corridor and broke the back of the occupying forces.

The collapse of the Second German Reich was devastating for the Bulgarians, and a triumph for the Greeks. To the former, it seemed that once again they were suffering in the extreme, in comparison to their losses, while the latter were once again being rewarded with more than they deserved. Bulgaria was completely stripped of its armed forces and had to pay severe reparations to the allies, and once again its longstanding ambitions in Macedonia had come to naught.

Greece, on the other hand, briefly managed to expand its control in Minor Asia, following the lead of the Italians, very nearly securing the vision of the *Megali Idea*. The Ottoman Empire was officially dead and it appeared that the substantial Greek population in Anatolia could somehow be liberated and returned to Greek Christian rule for the first time since the age of Byzantium.

But first there was the Bulgarian question to be taken care of. All though it is rarely mentioned, the treaty between the Allies and Bulgaria [signed at Neuilly-sur-Seine on 27 November 1919](#) was the first in modern experience to formally regulate the exchange of populations - orderly, codified ethnic cleansing, you could call it - so that the Greek population living on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast was exchanged for the Bulgarian one in Thrace and Macedonia. This operation involved roughly 50,000 people on each side. For the first time in history, such population movements were made in an official manner and set a precedent for others that would unfortunately soon be executed in the region.

While Bulgaria was left to lick its wounds, it was still treated with suspicion by the Greeks, themselves fired up for more gains. In 1923, during the [Lausanne Treaty](#)

negotiations, Greece was prepared to invade the eastern Thracian territories in order to achieve concessions from the Turkish side. Yet it didn't, despite its local firepower superiority, out of fears that Bulgaria might suddenly sweep down from the North. Out of uncharacteristic timidity, the Greeks missed what was perhaps their best chance to pressure the Turkish side- though it also could have just as well ended in disaster, too.

In any case, at the Lausanne summit the French and the British delegations skilfully overplayed the Bulgarian threat in order to secure the neutrality of the Bosphorus Straits; this condition would become threatened in the case of any Greek occupation. They were especially wary considering that the Greek government at that time was a military one, born of a revolution, and highly unfavorable to Western political calculations.

Despite the rapid series of definitive wars between the two nations, enmity still continued to simmer. In 1925, Greek troops invaded the border town of Petric in Southern Bulgaria as a form of retribution for Bulgarian commando-style excursions into Northern Greece. A heavy fine of 50,000 golden pounds sterling was awarded to Greece by the League of Nations. It is interesting to note that Bulgaria was the only country to be fined for an occupation of a foreign land in the short and sorry history of the League of Nations.

Repercussions of the Second World War and the Greek Civil War

World War II pulled the Bulgarian and Greek states in opposite directions once again. Bulgaria for the second time sided with Germany, and Greece with its traditional British allies. Together with the Nazi forces, Bulgaria invaded Greece and occupied part of its territory. It was one of the worst pages in the history of the two nations. Thousands of Greeks were killed in the fighting and by execution, while the Bulgarian authorities imposed their language in all official documents, even in Greek names written on graveyard plaques. In World War II, an estimated 60,000 Greeks, mostly civilians, lost their lives

due to Bulgarian hostile action.

The Bulgarians and their German allies were also responsible for the deportations of thousands of Jews in areas of Thrace and Macedonia under their control, leaving an irremediable scar on the region. Cities such as Thessaloniki, which had always had a lively and economically vital Jewish population, were changed forever. However, a popular outcry at home forced the government in Sofia to defer its final "shipment," consisting of Jews from Bulgaria itself, for as long as possible. To this day it is not known whether the authorities would have gone through with their signed obligations to the Nazis, because the Bulgarian capitulation on September 9, 1944 occurred one month before the scheduled deportations, which were thus cancelled.

The situation became rapidly complicated with the liberation of Yugoslavia by Tito's Partisan forces. In 1944, the whole of Greece was also liberated, as Bulgaria fell under the Soviet sphere of influence. The reconstituted Bulgarian government quickly switched sides, joining the Allies for the final stretch of the war, thus ensuring that its pre-war borders would be respected.

While the Yalta Agreements cemented the division of influences between West and East, the ideological battle raged on in Greece for three years after the end of World War II, with the Greek Civil War causing widespread destruction. During the Greek Civil War of 1946-1949, Bulgaria supported the Communist rebels by providing money and weapons and, it is believed, small partisan fighter groups. Also during the civil war period, new Yugoslav ruler Josip Broz Tito briefly dreamed of creating a Balkan Communist federation that would include the modern Bulgaria, Albania, the Yugoslavia federation and the would-be communist state of northern Greece.

The Bulgars agreed, and was even considering giving the Pirin Macedonia sector of southwestern Bulgaria to the Yugoslav republic of Macedonia; but after 1948, when Tito decided to break with Stalin and no longer support

the outside rebellion, Bulgaria reduced its assistance to the Communists and the dreams of a grand Communist alliance fell apart. Had the plan succeeded, and had it survived until the fall of the Soviet Union, the Balkan wars of the 1990's could have been spectacular and widespread, perhaps even provoking a much larger conflict.

At the same time as the new Communist administrations were fomenting unrest in northern Greece, American and Great Britain were supporting the Greek anti-Partisan forces, expediting a decisive victory for the latter and the end of the Communist threat to Greece in 1949.

In the aftermath of the war, around 15,000 Greek Communists escaped to Bulgaria and were given political asylum there. Most of them returned to Greece in the period 1974-1989, and granted pardons by the Greek governments of that era.

The conflict resulted in the almost total displacement of the Slavic populations from Greek Macedonia. Most were sent to Yugoslav Macedonia and became known as the *begaltsi* (refugees, those who fled), thereby in a way eliminating the traditional excuse that Bulgaria had always used to justify its westward expansion - just as the elimination of the Greek population of Anatolia and forced migration to Macedonia three decades earlier had ended once and for all Greece's traditional justification for expansion to the east. Thus one outcome of the Greek Civil War was thus that it ensured Bulgarian territorial aspirations, should they recur at any point in the future, would most likely be fixed on Yugoslavia, not on Greece. An important and historical point of pressure was thus lifted for the Greeks.

This has indeed turned out to be the case today, where after the end of Communism Bulgaria has taken a strong interest in the former Yugoslav Macedonian state, nowadays staking its influence not through war but through displays of "soft power" such as offering passports to Macedonian citizens who will declare

themselves Bulgarian.

The Iron Curtain that existed until the independence of Bulgaria from the USSR would define the relations between the Balkan states for almost 50 years. With the Slavic issue settled by the Greek Civil War, and Greece firmly a part of NATO and Western interests, there was until the mid-1970's no real interaction between Bulgarians and Greeks, and the borders were effectively closed. Ironically, it would take a resurgence of an old animosity between hypothetical allies to bring the two towards a thaw in relations.

Greece and Bulgaria: From Cyprus 1974 to Modern-Day Friendship

The 1970's were of paramount importance for the Balkans, and many decisions made back then still preoccupy Balkan politics. Apart from the Greek-Bulgarian rapprochement, the contours of Yugoslav disintegration started to emerge. In 1971, the first grievances appeared in Kosovo, while nationalist forces in other parts of the federation began to regroup for the first time since their suppression in World War II. In 1978 under Enver Hoxha, Albania shut itself off from the world completely by abandoning the Chinese model, after it had previously broken with the Soviet one.

However, of most importance for the region was the fracture in relations between Greece and Turkey, which almost resulted in the unthinkable - an armed conflict between two NATO states. The crisis erupted in 1974, over the [Turkish invasion and occupation of northern Cyprus](#).

For all of its negative repercussions, this action had the immediate effect of bringing the two Balkan neighbours - and one-time allies against the Turks - a step closer. The then-Greek prime minister, Constantine Karamanlis, was faced with the worrying reality that a fellow NATO member state like Turkey could prove even more hostile to Greek stability than a Warsaw Pact one. The

indisputable, almost scandalous support of NATO leader America for the Turks inspired Karamanlis to make the unorthodox decision to reach out to the Soviet bloc. He thus proceeded to form a liaison with the Bulgarian Politburo.



A range of Greek newspapers are sold in Sofia today, and vice versa in Greece (photo: Christopher Deliso)

The middlemen in this deal were members of the Hellenic Communist Party, which had been recently legalized; the group helped Karamanlis in his venture by exchanging their services for political favors in the domestic political arena. The Americans, of course, were not pleased by this turn of events. Yet after their indirect but effective support for the short-lived [Greek Junta of the Colonels](#) and Turkey's subsequent invasion, their foreign policy had been discredited in the minds of Greeks.

The best side effect, the silver lining as it were of the Cyprus catastrophe, was that Greek-Bulgarian relations became more normalized over the next 15 years than they had been at any time since the 7th century. In developing its relations with Bulgaria, Greece had been in a way prepared by the events of 1974 for those of 1989. The former had been, as it were, a trial run, meaning that when the final collapse of the Soviet bloc came, Greece was in a favourable and prepared position to welcome its old rival to the world of the free market. Tens of

thousands of Bulgarians were also eager to taste the fruits of capitalism, many illegally, by working in Greece.

The Bulgaria that emerged in 1989 was thus one with great economic and social worries, but with none of the old hostilities towards Greece. The relationship between both nations was further bolstered by their mutual wariness of Turkey (a substantial Turkish minority with unknown aspirations remained in Bulgaria), and more so by the existence of the fledgling Macedonian state - a classic example of a buffer state that absorbed the tensions of its neighbors and brought about excellent relations between, especially, Greece and Serbia.

Thus while Greece placed an embargo on the government in Skopje over the name issue in the early 1990's, and the Bulgars hovered both protectively and predatorially in the wings, Greek investment poured in to Bulgaria. At first, the industrial sector was especially targeted. Even joint military exercises, something that would have been unimaginable since at least 1912, began to be held. The borders were opened, transit regulated, and the free flow of goods and people began.

The spirit of good cooperation continues today, and it appears that this will be permanent - an anomaly given the 1,300-year legacy of mistrust and war, but one that nevertheless seems to have little possibility of evaporating now. By 2005, approximately 1,800 Greek corporations were in operation in Bulgaria, and the bilateral commercial relations amount to 1.3 billion euros.

Today, 130,000 Bulgarian citizens live and work in Greece, and 10,000 Greeks study in Bulgarian universities. Around 300,000 Greeks visit Bulgaria each year as tourists, and some 400,000 Bulgarians spend a few days each year soaking up the sun on Greek beaches.

From all appearances, large-scale economic cooperation will continue to grow. The Burgas-Alexandroupoli pipeline that is going to transfer Russian oil from the Black Sea to the Aegean was officially signed as a project in October

2005. It is estimated to cost 800 million euros. When the project is completed around 2010, it will facilitate the exporting of Russian oil to the West, bypassing the environmentally sensitive Bosphorus Straits, and further consolidate Greek-Bulgarian economic cooperation. Ironically, the same countries that were vying to control those famed waters exclusively are now uniting to exclude themselves from them!

Today, economic cooperation continues on a high level and the two nations have strong relations. The Bulgarian goal of EU entry has been fully supported by Greece, and the territorial pretensions and old, nationalism-fed desires are a forgotten relic from an earlier time. It seems that good relations between states, even if rivers of blood set them apart, can be achieved if both of them have something larger to look forward to - that is, collective security and prosperity.

Further Reading and Information

[Macedonia and the First Balkan War](#), by Carl Savich

[Greek Nationalism, the 'Megale Idea' and Venizelism to 1923](#), by Stephen W. Sowards

[The Exchange of Minorities: Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey](#), by Stephen P. Ladas

[The Holocaust in Greece](#), by Carl Savich

[Red Acropolis, Black Terror: The Greek Civil War and the Origins of Soviet-American Rivalry, 1943-1949](#), by Andre Gerolymatos

[Bulgarian Relations with Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece and Turkey](#)

[A Concise History of Greece](#), by Richard Clogg

["Greek-Bulgarian Defense Cooperation"](#), MPA (March 20,

2006)

[Bulgarian Society for British Studies \(BSBS\)](#)

[Centre for SouthEast European Studies](#)

[Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki](#)

Military Operations Macedonia: the Official British History ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)), reviewed by Christopher Deliso

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