

Independent Greece: the search for a frontier, 1822-35

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Introduction

Greece was no more than a geographical expression before 1830. There had never before been a single Greek state. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, though, the distribution of Greek-speakers – the vast majority of them Orthodox Christians – was particularly wide and embraced not only the Balkan peninsula but also western Anatolia/Asia Minor and Cyprus, as well as southern Italy. Many of the territories where they lived were part of the Ottoman Empire and had been so for upwards of 400 years, much longer than colonial rule in South America, say, or India. They were administered at the time through a patchwork of local arrangements – most of the Aegean islands under the *Kapudan Pasha* or High Admiral, for example, and the Morea under a *Mufassil* (an officer analogous to “Collector” in British India, though he purchased his position). Even though some of the local governors were extremely powerful, like Ali Pasha of Yannina, they were at least nominally appointed by the Sultan and ultimately answerable to Istanbul.

In 1821 a series of uprisings in the Balkan peninsula coalesced into a major insurrection. Both sides committed atrocities (St Clair 1972): the Muslims in the Morea were virtually eliminated in a process that we have learnt to call “ethnic cleansing”, whilst the Ottoman commander, Ibrahim Pasha, was accused of trying to exterminate the Christians. The insurgents enjoyed early success in the Morea/Peloponnese and southern Rumeli, but were contained elsewhere. Defeat seemed very close in 1826 when Britain, France and Russia decided to intervene. Destruction of the combined Ottoman and Egyptian fleets in the Bay of Navarino (20 October 1827) isolated the imperial forces in the Morea, whilst war with Russia (April-September 1828) threatened the imperial capital. These events

together put the necessary leverage on the Ottoman government to agree to Greek independence.

Independence, of course, needs expression in governmental and administrative structures. Independence also needs territorial definition. The rest of this paper outlines the story of how Greek independence was given territorial definition, not by the insurgents themselves but by the protectors of the new state. It is based on the diplomatic documents of the time.

First attempts at territorial definition (1821-27)

The Greek insurgents of 1821 had no clear territorial ambitions. They did, however, create "senates" or comparable governments for the Morea, Western Greece and Eastern Greece (Finlay 1861). Neither the first national constitution (the Constitution of Epidaurus, 13 January 1822) nor the subsequent declaration of independence (27 January 1822) referred to specific territories, though behind both lay some vague notion of *Héllénie* (*State Papers* 9, 621-32). By the end of August 1822, *Héllénie* had been clarified for the Congress of European leaders held at Verona. The Greek submission to the Congress said that the provisional government claimed those areas where "the banner of the cross flies victorious over the ramparts of the towns" (*State Papers* 10, 1021-2). Using terms from ancient geography, these areas were defined as the Peloponnese, Attica, Euboea (Evia), Boeotia, Acarnania, Aetolia, the greater part of Thessaly and Epirus, Crete and the islands of the Aegean Sea. But the claims lacked any more precise definition.

The European leaders tended to regard the Greek insurrection as an internal matter for the Ottoman Empire and were reluctant to become involved (Crawley 1930). They did not wish to be seen to support any apparent challenge to the principle of imperial sovereignty, lest it should encourage the liberal opposition within their own boundaries. Russia, however, claimed the right to protect the Orthodox Christian subjects of the Sultan (e.g. under the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, 1774, and the Treaty of Jassy, 1792; Crawley 1930: 1-2). It eventually took the initiative in making proposals for the "Pacification of Greece" (15 January 1824) (*State Papers* 11, 819-27). These suggested the creation of three Greek principalities. They would remain part of the Ottoman Empire, but would be allowed a degree of

autonomy similar to that enjoyed by the Danubian Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia, which were still part of the Ottoman Empire.

Eastern Greece would consist of Thessaly, Boeotia and Attica. Western Greece would comprise the coastal areas formerly under Venetian control (*l'ancien Littoral vénitien*) which had not already fallen under Austrian rule, together with Epirus and Acarnania. The third principality, Southern Greece, would consist of the Morea and possibly the island of Candia/Crete.

A fourth territorial unit was also recognised, the Islands. These would remain under the municipal-type regimes under which they were supposed to be run at the time, but with their privileges renewed and regularised.

The Ottoman government was to retain sovereignty over the Principalities and Islands and would be allowed to garrison a certain number of fortresses. Public positions, however, were to be filled by local people. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople would continue to represent them to the Sultan. An annual tribute was to be paid, but there would be complete freedom of trade and each principality would enjoy its own flag. The detailed arrangements, however, would be decided in "negotiations between the Porte, the Allied Courts and a Greek deputation ..." (*State Papers* 11, 822-3).

The Russian proposals were originally secret, but were leaked to *The Times* (*Wellington Papers* 1/855/20; 1/856/6; 1/856/8). The Sultan was indignant at this blatant attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of his Empire. The Greeks appealed to Britain to defend their independence.

To cut a long story short, the involvement of both Britain and Russia in what Wellington called "the Greek affair" (quoted by Crawley 1930: 121), led eventually to a Protocol between these countries (4 April 1826) (Hertslet 1875: no. 129). This reserved to them the right to settle "the limits of the Territory, and the names of the Islands of the Archipelago ..." which were "to be proposed to the Porte to comprise under the denomination of Greece". According to the British negotiator of the Protocol, the Duke of Wellington, the objective was to preserve the peace of Europe rather than to advance the Greek cause (*Wellington Papers* 1/900/4). Nonetheless, it is surprising that the Political

Constitution of Greece issued in May 1827 made no territorial claims, other than stating (Article II) that "Greece is one and indivisible" (*State Papers* 15, 1069-83).

The 1826 Protocol was put into effect by the Treaty of London (6 July 1827) (Hertslet 1875: no. 136). The signatories – France, as well as Britain and Russia – stated that they would use force if necessary to secure the compliance of the Ottoman Empire. The declared objective was reconciliation between the Porte and its Greek subjects, rather than independence. As also envisaged in the 1826 Protocol, this would be based upon the principle of "a complete separation between individuals of the two nations", i.e. Greeks and Turks. Thus, the allied negotiators accepted the fiction that most Muslims previously found in the territories under discussion were Turks in some ethnic sense, even though many were in fact speakers of Greek and converts from Christianity. Separation was to be achieved by allowing Greeks to acquire Turkish property (*a fait accompli* anyway). The Treaty, unlike the Protocol, specified that the boundaries of "the Territory upon the Continent, and the designation of the Islands of the Archipelago" were to be decided through negotiations involving the two contestants, as well as the signatory powers. The Treaty was presented to the Ottoman government in August, 1827 and rejected in November, despite what Prince Metternich called the "frightful catastrophe" of Navarino (quoted by Crawley 1930: 93), news of which had reached Istanbul only a few days earlier. The Greeks had already accepted it (3 September 1827). These matters rested for almost a year.

Renewed attempts at definition (1828-29)

On 26 April 1828 Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The cause was not the continued intransigence of the Ottoman government over Greece, but the Sultan's reluctance to withdraw troops from the Danubian Principalities as agreed by the Treaty of Ackermann of 25 September 1826. Russian success in the ensuing war was seen by the two western powers as likely to result in the Greeks being placed under the Czar's protection. Britain and France were unhappy at the prospect. Further efforts were made to settle the "Greek affair" by diplomacy. Following a conference in the British Foreign Office on 2 July 1828, chaired by

Lord Aberdeen ("Athenian Aberdeen") (Chamberlain 1983: 30-45), the Allied ambassadors to the Porte (who had temporarily withdrawn from Istanbul) were instructed to proceed to insurgent Greece. There they were instructed to discover the political and military situation in the country and to determine the detailed arrangements necessary for peace. A Protocol agreed by the July conference gave some guidance about the possible boundaries for Greece:

The limits of the Greek state, ought, perhaps, to include a fair proportion of the Greek population who have been in actual insurrection against the Porte. The Frontier should be clearly defined, and it should be easily defensible. The precise Boundary might be determined by the nature of the ground, and its local peculiarities: but it should be such as would be most likely to prevent future disputes between the Inhabitants of coterminous Provinces.

Four possible boundaries were listed:

1. "... a line from the mouth of the Gulph [sic] of Volo to the mouth of the Aspropotamos ..."

2. "... from the Pass of Thermopylae, following the ridge of Mount Oeta to the west, and approaching the Gulph [sic] of Corinth by including the mountains which form the group of Parnassus"

3. "... should comprise Attica and Megara, by following the well-defined ridges of Parnes and Cithaeron, and which should not extend farther west than the strong ground north of the isthmus of Corinth"

4. "... is limited to the Morea, or rather to the Mountain Passes which command the approach to the Isthmus from the north".

At the same time it appeared reasonable

to include a large proportion of the Greek islands, not only those in the immediate neighbourhood of the Morea, but the numerous assemblage comprising the ancient Cyclades. This should embrace nearly all the Islands which are to be found between the 36th and the 39th parallels of latitude, and which lie between the Continent of Greece, and the 26th degree of longitude. It is probable, however, that on either side of the Line, thus arbitrarily traced, some deviation may be necessary; more

especially, since within the assigned limits is situated the important Island of Euboea, almost entirely occupied by a Turkish Population, and which has therefore taken no part in the insurrection (*State Papers*, 17, 87-91).¹

The conference between the allied ambassadors and representatives of the Greeks took place at Poros between September and December 1828 (Lane-Poole 1888: I, 471-82). Whilst it was in progress (16 November 1828), the Allies placed the Morea, the adjoining islands and "those commonly called Cyclades" under their provisional protection (*State Papers* 17, 131). The final report of the Poros Conference, dated 12 December 1828, gave its conclusions on the boundaries of Greece (*State Papers* 17, 405-31). Under the influence of the French Ambassador (Lane-Poole 1888: I, 475), Lt. Col. Comte Armand-Charles Guilleminot (1774-1840), a distinguished soldier and political geographer, they proposed that on the mainland the boundary should run from the Gulf of Arta and the Pass of Makrynoros, in the west, to the chain of Mt Orthrys near the entrance to the Gulf of Volos, in the east. As for the Islands, the conference accepted that the boundaries suggested in the July Protocol included, with the exception of Samos, "all those islands which by virtue of their population, the ownership of property, the part taken in the Insurrection, and their complete lack of Turks, had a right to be part of the Greek state". The report recommended, however, that three other islands should be included: Samos, because it had been independent of the Porte for some eight years; Candia/Crete, because it contained a Greek majority and had suffered like the rest of Greece, and because inclusion within Greece would prevent the Porte from using it as a base for aggression against Greece; Euboea/Evia, because of its position near the proposed frontier. No one commented that the 26th meridian east bisects the island of Chios, notorious then and since for the massacre of Christians in 1822; but then it had remained under Ottoman control throughout the conflict.

A reconvened London Conference accepted the proposals from the Poros Conference (March 1829) with the exception of those about Crete and Samos (Hertslet 1875: no. 142). Samos was duly

¹ The information about Euboea/Evia was incorrect.

returned to the Ottoman Empire, which provided it with a new status. In 1830, Crete was granted to Mehmet Ali of Egypt as a reward for his support against the Greeks.

The Conference's decisions were conveyed to the Porte on 9 July 1829. They were haughtily rebuffed. Instead, the Sultan issued a *firman* offering to pardon his subjects in the Morea and to restore the previous administrative arrangements, but requiring the return of Muslim property and the surrender of the fortresses. This was unacceptable to the Allies, as well as to the Greeks. The Allies continued to pressure the Ottoman government, and on 15 August 1829 it accepted the London proposals, though confining their application to the Morea and the Cyclades (Crawley 1930: 162 and n. 15). The advance of Russian forces to the Aegean coast at Adrianople (Edirne) persuaded them to reconsider. Under Article X of the Treaty of Adrianople (14 September 1829), the Porte finally accepted the terms of the Treaty of London of March 1829 (Hertslet 1875: no. 145).

Independence accepted: a territory defined (1830-35)

By a Protocol of 3 February 1830 (Hertslet 1875: no. 149) Britain, France and Russia declared that Greece was now a totally independent state and that its independence was guaranteed by each Power. They also declared that the form of government would be an hereditary monarchy, an idea which the Allies – themselves monarchies, of course – had favoured for some time and which had even been accepted by Ioannis Capodistrias (1776-1831), who had been elected President of Greece for a term of seven years by the Greek National Assembly on 14 April 1827.² The Protocol offered yet another line for the boundary of Greece. This was an attempt to meet the Ottoman request for a reduction of the frontiers suggested by the Protocol of March 1829 as a *quid pro quo* for the Porte's acceptance of complete independence for Greece (Article 2). The actual line proposed was apparently first suggested by Lord Grey of Reform Bill fame (9 September 1829) as a possible compromise between the

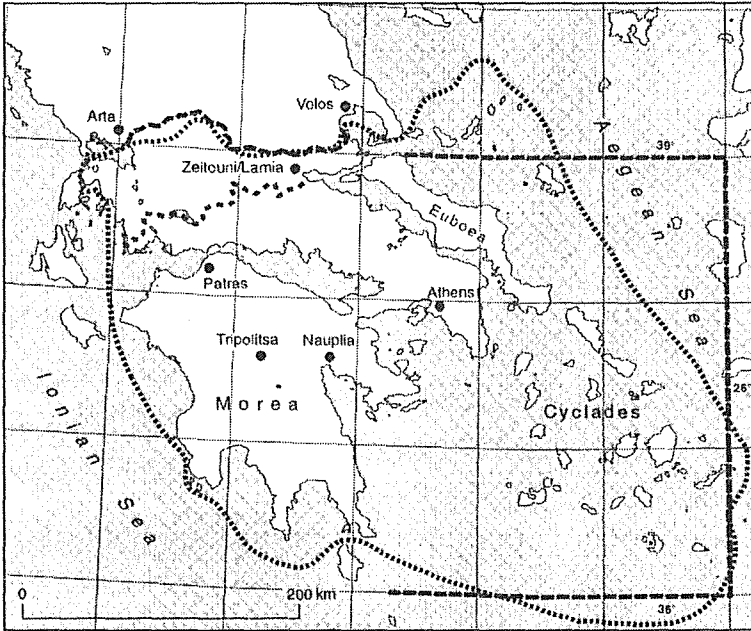
² Capodistrias was a nobleman from Corfu who had served in the government of the Septinsular Republic before joining the Russian diplomatic service, where he had risen to the rank of joint Foreign Secretary (1816-22) with Count Karl Robert Nesselrode.

generous frontiers of the March Protocol favoured by France and Russia and the impossibly narrow boundary of the Morea preferred by the Duke of Wellington (Trevelyan 1920: 229). Demarcation, however, proved impossible when the boundary commissioners set to work on the ground (*State Papers* 18, 633-7). The map used to plot the boundary in February 1830 was shown to be defective. Attempts were made to adjust the original proposals to the actual topography of central Greece, but without success. The Allied Ambassadors to the Porte were therefore asked to renegotiate the Volos to Arta line originally proposed in the Protocol of 22 March, 1829, to include Negroponte (Euboea/Evia) in the new state and to offer an indemnity to the Porte for the further loss of territory and tribute. Negotiations dragged on. Greece – the territory within the new state – lapsed into chaos: the Mani had been in revolt since May 1831; Hydra and Spetsia were demanding huge indemnities for their part in the War of Independence; the Cyclades refused to accept the authority of President Capodistrias, who was in any case opposed by many of the leaders of the original insurrection on the mainland; and on 9 October 1831 Capodistrias was assassinated. Ottoman garrisons remained in Athens and Evia (Crawley 1930: 189-201).

On 7 May 1832 Britain, France and Russia concluded their negotiations with the King of Bavaria for making his second son, Prince Frederick Otto, the King of Greece and guaranteed the independence of the new state (*State Papers* 19, 1831-32, 33-41). Just over two months later the Porte gave in to Allied pressure and accepted the new proposals for the Greek frontier in return for Allied support against a new threat to the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. Mehmet Ali of Egypt had decided to expand into Syria.

Although the Treaty of Constantinople (21 July 1832) (Hertslet 1875: no. 161) sketched out a new boundary for Greece, the demarcation of a precise line was left to commissioners appointed by Greece and the Ottoman Empire, as well as by Britain, France and Russia. Six months were originally set for this work, but definitive maps could not be exchanged until 9 December 1835 (Crawley 1930: 211 n. 21).

Fig 1: Proposals for the Frontier of Independent Greece



- Frontier Line accepted in 1832
- - - Frontier Line suggested by Lord Grey, 19 September, 1829
- . - . Frontier Line suggested by the Protocol of 22 March, 1829

Conclusion

Eleven years had lapsed since the Russians had made their original proposals; fourteen had passed since the start of the insurrection out of which the Greek state emerged. Throughout this period, Britain, France and Russia had dictated the terms on which the new state would be allowed to exist, even though the precise content of their plans had to change to meet the situation as it developed on the ground and to some extent to meet the interests of the other Great European Powers, the Austrian Empire and – to a smaller degree – Prussia. The Greeks themselves were barely consulted.

In retrospect we can see that, though there were rivalries between the Allies, a number of principles guided their policy-making over “the Greek affair”.

The first principle was a wish to ensure that the rights of sovereigns over their empires were not challenged; the Ottoman Sultan really should be allowed to decide the fate of his Greek-speaking Orthodox subjects. The allies were not entirely successful in this, and by allowing a subject people to form a state based on community identity they opened the way to the breaking up both of the multi-community empires in south-eastern Europe, Austria-Hungary no less than the Ottoman Empire.

The second guiding principle was the preservation of peace in Europe. This was to be achieved by avoiding conflict between the Russian and Ottoman Empires because war between them would inevitably bring in the Austrian Empire, which also shared common frontiers, and effect the political and economic interests of Britain and France in the eastern Mediterranean as well. On the whole, the Allies were successful, at least in preventing a major European war.

In addition to enlightened self-interest, the Allies were guided by concern for the Greeks. They genuinely wished to recognise the success and the sufferings of the insurgents. They were moved partly by humanitarian feelings (horror stories circulated freely in the 1820s), but also by romantic notions of the glories of ancient Greece and the possibility of their being revived. There was also a degree of anti-Turkish, that is anti-Muslim, feeling as well. It was important, then, as a fifth principle to separate the two “peoples”, Greeks and Turks, Christians and Muslims, who could no longer apparently live

with each other. Accordingly, a sixth principle came into play. That was the requirement for defensible frontiers. The attempt to abide by those two principles delayed an agreement on the final boundary between Greece and the Ottoman Empire, though there were practical considerations too.

A final principle was unique to British policy formation. Britain wished to retain her protectorate over the Ionian Islands. This had been established at the Peace Settlement reached at the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1814-15) following the freeing of the Septinsular Republic from French rule by British forces and their continued occupation of the Islands (Hertslet 1875: no. 39). Retention of the Seven Islands, together with Malta, gave Britain control of the strategic seaways of the central Mediterranean. It also provided an ideal listening post. Much of the international mail of the eastern Mediterranean went through the Ionian Islands where it was routinely delayed, opened and read (Chamberlain 1983: 216). British colonial rule lasted until 1864 when the Ionian Islands were transferred to Greece (Hertslet 1875: nos. 357, 358, 361, 369).

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