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TURKISH-GREEK BILATERAL MEETINGS AND RESULTS ON THE ISLANDS ISSUE BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR*

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* Arařtırma Makalesi / Research Article

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Abstract: In this study, it is aimed to clarify and evaluate the issue of the Islands, which is one of the most important disputes between the parties in terms of Turkish-Greek relations and remains up-to-date, after the decision of the Great Powers on this issue, especially within the framework of the Turkish-Greek bilateral negotiations.

The Islands occupied by Greece during the Balkan Wars had not returned to Türkiye, so this problem constituted the basis for the Islands issue. Although Türkiye has left the determination of the fate of the Islands up to the discretion of Great Powers according to the Treaty of London signed at the end of the First Balkan War, it declared that the Islands, which were inseparable parts of Anatolia, must remain at its disposal and hoped that the Islands issue would be resolved in accordance with its own sensitivities. However, the Great Powers did not take into consideration the vital interests of the Ottoman Empire, thus, deciding to leave the Aegean Islands other than Gökçeada, Bozcaada and Kastellorizo to Greece. The Ottoman Government and the Sublime Porte did not accept this decision and, relying on the decision to leave previously mentioned islands to Türkiye, declared that they would make efforts to fulfill their rightful and legitimate demands on the other Islands as well. Türkiye considered these Islands as indispensable parts of Anatolia, like flesh and bone, and did not give them up, so it made efforts to take back those Islands that were especially essential for its own security, whether through bilateral negotiations with Greece or through war.

BİRİNCİ DÜNYA SAVAŞI ÖNCESİNDE ADALAR MESELESİ KONUSUNDA TÜRK-YUNAN İKİLİ GÖRÜŞMELERİ VE SONUÇLARI

Öz: Bu çalışmada, Türk-Yunan ilişkileri bakımından taraflar arasındaki en önemli uyuşmazlıklardan birisi olan ve güncelliğini korusun Adalar meselesi, bu konuda Büyük Devletlerin vermiş oldukları karar sonrasında, özellikle Türk-Yunan ikili görüşmeleri çerçevesinde aydınlatılmaya ve değerlendirilmeye çalışılmıştır.

Adalar meselesinin temelinde, Yunanistan'ın Balkan Savaşları sırasında işgal ettiği Adaların Türkiye'ye iade edilmemesi hususu vardır. Türkiye, I. Balkan Savaşı sonunda imzalanan Londra Antlaşması ile Adaların geleceğinin tayinini Büyük Devletlere bırak

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makla beraber, Anadolu'nun ayrılmaz parçaları durumundaki Adaların mutlaka kendi tasarrufunda kalması gerektiğini açıklamış ve Adalar meselesinin, kendi hassasiyetlerine uygun bir şekilde çözüme bağlanacağını ümit etmişti. Fakat Büyük Devletler, Osmanlı Devleti'nin hayati çıkarlarını dikkate almayarak Gökçeada, Bozcaada ve Meis dışındaki Ege Adalarının Yunanistan'a bırakılmasına karar vermişlerdir. Bu karar Osmanlı

Hükümeti tarafından kabul edilmemiş, adı geçen Adaların kendisine bırakılmasını senet sayan Bab-ı Ali, öteki Adalar üzerindeki haklı ve meşru taleplerini gerçekleştirmek için çalışacağını ifade etmiştir. Türkiye, Adaları etle tırnak gibi Anadolu'nun ayrılmaz parçaları olarak görmüş, Adalardan vazgeçmemiş ve gerek Yunanistan'la yapılacak ikili görüşmeler yoluyla, gerekse savaşarak, bu Adalardan özellikle kendi güvenliği açısından elzem olanları geri almaya çalışmıştır.

Introduction

The tendencies and intentions of the Great Powers on the Islands began to emerge shortly after the Treaty of London was signed. On 10 June 1913, British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey revealed his ideas to France. Thereafter, Gökçeada and Bozcaada, located just at the opening of the Dardanelles, should be returned to Türkiye, and the other islands should be left to Greece. He question of islands should be merged with the problem of southern Albania, and these two problems should be dealt with together. In other words, With the exception of Gökçeada and Bozcaada, the other Aegean Islands should be left to Greece in response to the evacuation of the Albanian border. The British Foreign Secretary believed that Italy, Austria and Germany would agree to this idea.¹

Thus, ten days after the signing of the Treaty of London, Britain was used its influence on the issue in favor of Greece. It seemed that the idea of leaving Gökçeada and Bozcaada to Türkiye was put forward with the aim of appeasing and satisfying Russia. As Russia attached great importance to the freedom of passage through the Straits, favoring that Gökçeada, Bozcaada, Limnos and Samothrace Islands located at the opening Dardanelles should remain in Türkiye, which holds the Straits. Sir Edward Grey had partially satisfied Russia's desires by proposing that two of these four islands should be left to Türkiye. In order to break the opposition of the Triple Alliance States, namely Austria, Germany and Italy, Grey linked the Islands issue with the problem of Southern Albania, wishing that these two problems to be resolved together. Especially, Italy and Austria particular were very sensitive about the territory of Southern Albania. Because if these lands were to join Greece, Greece would dominate both sides of the Corfu Channel. This conflicted with the interests of Italy and Austria in the Adriatic. For this reason, these two states wanted Greece to withdraw from Southern Albania and resisted at this point. At this point, Britain argued that Greece should keep the Aegean islands in return for withdrawing from southern Albania, almost backing Austria and Italy into a corner.²

Following the efforts of Britain, the Six Great Powers (Germany, Austria, England, France, Russia, and Italy) notified their joint decisions on the issue of the Aegean Islands to Greece on February 13, 1914, and to Türkiye on February 14, 1914, with a diplomatic note.³

1. Decision Notified to Greece

On February 13, 1914, the Ambassadors of the Great Powers convened at the British Embassy and conveyed the following diplomatic note to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs at 7 p.m.:⁴

"The undersigned Ambassadors of Germany, Austria, France, England, Italy and Russia, on behalf of their Governments, shall make the following declaration:

¹ Şimşir, 1989: 8.

² Şimşir, 1989: XXIII.

³ Pazarıcı, 1986: 2-3; Gündüz, 1985: 19; Bayur, 1991: 247; Turan, 1965: 102; Hayta, 1996: 451.

⁴ "Atina'daki Tebligat", Tanin, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 1848: 1.

Pursuant to the fifth article of the Treaty of London concluded between the Governments of the Balkan Alliance and the Sublime State on 17-30 May 1913, and the fifteenth article of the Treaty of 1 November 1913 between the Government of Greece and the Government of Sublime Porte signed in Athens, the Government of Greece had promised to leave the decision on the future of the Islands at the discretion of the Great Powers. Consequently, the Great Powers decided that Gökçeada, Bozcaada and Kastellorizo would be given to Türkiye, whereas, all the other Greek-occupied Islands would be left to Greece.

The Great Powers also decided that the Greek Government would give certain assurances to both them and the Ottoman Empire not to fortify the before mentioned islands against the Ottoman Empire, and not to use these islands for military purposes, and to take effective measures in order to prevent smuggling between the Islands and Türkiye.

The Great Powers further committed themselves to exercise their influence over the Greek Government in order to honor the following conditions. Furthermore, they required the Greek Government to provide satisfactory assurances that the Greece would protect the law of the Muslims in the Islands under its responsibility in accordance with the above-cited decision.

The surrender to Greece of the Islands that the Great Powers had decided to cede to Greece would only take place after the withdrawal of the Greek troops from the Southern Albanian border pursuant to the Protocol of Florence and after Greece makes a firm commitment that it would not support the opposition in any way, against the situation established by the Six Great Powers in Southern Albania or make any opposition in this regard and that it would not provoke the people to resistance.

The evacuation of the southern Albanian border would begin in early March and continue until the end of the month.

The Six Great Powers trust that the above-cited resolutions will be faithfully complied with by the Greek Government.”⁵

1.1. Greek Response to the Great Powers

Greece responded to the Great Powers’ diplomatic note on the Islands issue on 21 February 1914.⁶

In the note issued by Greece as a response, after explaining the affiliation between the Epirus and Islands issues, it was declared that a solution was approached thanks to the Diplomatic efforts of the Great Powers regarding the issue related to the Islands under Greek occupation.

In the subsequent chapters of the note, the Islands issue and the records made against Greece in this connection were mentioned, and some concessions were requested from the Great Powers in return for the acceptance of the aforementioned records.

Greece declared that after the notification of the Great Powers was accepted by the Ottoman Government, it would also notify the Sublime Porte that the conditions of the Great Powers were accepted.

According to the response note, the following issues were stated in the subsequent chapters:

“Greece would like to express its gratitude to the Great Powers for resolving the issue of the Islands in a fair manner that is in the interests of both governments involved in this matter.

Greece agrees not to fortify the Islands and not to utilize them for military purposes. On the other hand, Greece believes that a decision will be adopted by the Great Powers assuring that these islands will not be assaulted. On the other hand, Greece, which also agrees to take effective measures in order to prevent smuggling between the Islands and Anatolia and to protect the Mus-

⁵ “Yunan’a Verilen Nota”, Sabah, 16 Şubat 1914, No: 8767: 1; “Hülasa”, İkdâm, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 6100: 1; “Siyasiyat”, Tercüman-ı Hakikat, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 11798: 1; “Atina’daki Tebligat”, Tanin, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 1848: 1; “Siyasiyat, Müşterek Nota”, Tasvir-i Efkâr, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 996: 1; Şimşir, 1989: 392.

⁶ Hayta, 1996: 451.

lim minorities in the Islands that joined Greece, considers itself justified in hoping that the Sublime Porte will give assurances regarding the Greek population living in Bozcaada, Gökçeada and Kastellorizo, which would be left to Türkiye. A general amnesty is requested for the people of these islands. Being forced to leave the three aforementioned islands, Greece cannot hide the sadness and impression it has felt because of this issue.”

In the response note, the Epirus border issue was mentioned and the following statements were expressed:

“The Greek Government found out the desire of the states to leave the Sazan Island to Albania pursuant to the Protocol of Florence Protocol, which determines the borders of Southern Albania.

The Greek grief and anguish due to the separation of this land, which has been nourished and nurtured by the feelings and civilization of the Greeks for thousands of years, is extremely severe. However, the Greek government will order its soldiers to evacuate the land abandoned to Albania at the appointed time, as per the states’ decision. The Greek Government undertakes not to cause any difficulties on this matter; however, it expects some minor border corrections and asks for assurances for the Greeks, who will continue living in Albania.

The Greek Government believes that the Corfu Channel should remain subject to the special conditions of neutrality.

Greece finalized its diplomatic note with the following words: We have confidence in the idea of justice and equity among the Great Powers and there is hope that the words of Greece will be taken into consideration.”⁷

The Great Powers responded to Greece’s diplomatic note of February 21, 1914, on the date of April 25, 1914. In this reply note, it was stated that the Great Powers were prepared to exert the necessary pressure before the relevant governments to protect the education and religious rights of the Greeks living on the islands left under Ottoman rule and the Turks in the areas left under Greek rule and to give a “friendly warning” that Sublime Porte should not disturb the Greek Government about the ownership of the islands they ceded to Greece as a joint decision and that the Ottoman Government should respect the decisions on this matter.⁸

According to Muvaffak Galib, the Great Powers mentioned the issue of the islands in their notes to Greece, and they were content with two words, a sentence that would avoid meddling, and it could not be deduced from this sentence that the Islands issue was settled definitively and that there was no need to deal with direct negotiations on this problem anymore. Because the purpose of the Great Powers was to caress the Greek pride with a few words and thus ensure the evacuation of Epirus as soon as possible. Galib continued: “From this point of view, we are subjected to a warning again on the Islands issue. “The Great Powers are claiming that they will exercise their friendly influence before the Sublime Porte so that their joint decision on this issue is respected and Greece is not entrenched on the Islands.” We deem the use of such friendly influence to be highly preposterous. Because the Islands issue is far from close to an armed conclusion today. The efforts are being made so that the issue is settled amicably. Especially, it is known with certainty that Sublime Porte cannot embark on adventures at a time when it is struggling to bring order to its internal state organization.”

In addition to this, Muvaffak Galib states that while there are such clear indications to justify Türkiye’s view, it is really strange for states to discuss how they can exercise their friendly influence on Türkiye, that it would not matter if the states were to declare that they would exercise their friendly influence if the Islands issue is to be resolved by war, and that this

⁷ “Yunan’ın Cevabı”, Sabah, 23 Şubat 1914, No: 8776: 1; “Yunanistan’ın Cevabı”, Tasvir-i Efkâr, 23 Şubat 1914, No: 1004: 1; “Adalar Meselesi, Yunanistan’ın Cevabı”, Tanin, 23 Şubat 1914, No:1856: 1; “Yunanistan’ın Cevabi Notası”, İkdâm, 23 Şubat 1914, No: 6108: 2; “Siyasiyat, Yunanistan’ın Cevabı”, Tercüman-ı Hakikat, 24 Şubat 1914, No: 11807: 1; “Şark İşleri, Fezleke, Yunanistan’ın Cevabı”, Peyam, 23 Şubat 1914, No: 99: 1; Şimşir, 1989: 419.

⁸ Küçük, 1998: 56.

diplomatic note can be interpreted as a sign of great spiritual disappointment or even resentment for Europe.⁹

The Great Powers did not give the assurance expected by Greece. They were just planning to issue a friendly warning.¹⁰ The sentence that states “will exercise all their influence”, on the other hand, was changed to “friendly influence” by Germany.¹¹

On the other hand, the Greek Prime Minister Venizelos decided on the annexation of the Islands to Greece upon the issuance of a royal ordinance. According to the officials of the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the issuance of a royal ordinance by Venizelos on the annexation of the Islands to Greece aimed to put pressure on the states by means of a legal fait accompli. Venizelos believed that they could obtain assurance from the European states for the definitive acquisition of the Islands. Political circles thought that the Greek Government, with some initiatives, intended to force the Sublime State to close the Straits, thus to compel the intervention of the relevant states and the settlement of the Islands issue.¹²

While discussing the royal ordinance published on the annexation of Chios and Lesbos islands to Greece, the Neue Freie Presse newspaper stated that this decision by Greece would undoubtedly exacerbate the tension in Ottoman-Greek relations.¹³

Greece, making efforts to get the support of Europe by plotting a number of handyworks for the definite acquisition of the Islands, on the other hand, secretly arming the islands under its occupation.¹⁴

In addition, thousands of people migrated to Anatolia as a result of the Greek atrocities against the Muslims living in the regions conquered by Greece in Rumelia, and thus leading to the emergence of the immigrant issue.

It is evident that the situation will become more tense when, on the one hand, the issue of the Islands cannot be resolved, and on the other hand, it is understood that a good result will not be achieved in this way along with the emergence of immigrant issue.

2. Decision Notified to the Ottoman Empire

In the morning of 14 February 1914, the ambassadors of the Great Powers gathered at the Austrian Embassy under the presidency of Marquis Johann von Pallavicini, as he was the overmost ambassador, and they discussed the note to be delivered to the Ottoman Government, including the decision of the Great Powers on the islands under Greek occupation.

At half past two in the afternoon, Austrian Ambassador Marquess Pallavicini, with the capacity of the foremost ambassador, arrived at the Sublime Porte and delivered the note to the Grand Vizier and Minister of Foreign Affairs Said Halim Pasha.

Grand Vizier Pasha declared that they would respond after negotiating the note in the Council of Ministers.¹⁵

The following statements are included in the joint note notified by the representatives of the Six Great Powers to the Sublime Porte:

⁹ Muvaffak Galib, 26 Nisan 1914: 1.

¹⁰ Küçük, 1998: 56.

¹¹ Şimşir, 1989: 473.

¹² BOA, HR. SYS, nr. 1988/3, lef 3.

¹³ BOA, HR. SYS, nr. 1988/2, lef 70.

¹⁴ “Adaların İlhakı”, İkdâm, 18 Haziran 1914, No: 6223: 2.

¹⁵ “Düvel-i Muazzama'nın Notası”, İkdâm, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 6100: 1; “Nota Dün Tebliğ Edildi”, Tasvir-i Efkâr, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 996: 1; “Sadrazam Paşa'dan Mülakat Talebi, Bab-ı Ali'de”, Peyam, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 92: 1.

“The undersigned Ambassadors of Austria, Italy, England and the Charge d’Affaires of France, Germany and Russia shall furnish the following notification to the Ottoman Government in accordance with the orders of their governments:

Pursuant to the fifth article of the Treaty of London signed between the Governments of the Balkan Alliance and the Sublime State on 17-30 May 1913, and the fifteenth article of the Treaty of 1 November 1913 between the Government of Greece and the Government of Sublime Porte concluded in Athens, the Ottoman Government left the authority to decide on the future of the Islands to the Great Powers. Therefore, after carefully negotiating and exchanging views on the matter, the Great Powers decided that the Greek Government should return Gökçeada and Bozcaada to Türkiye and preserve the other Greek-occupied islands definitively. Even Kastellorizo will be returned to Türkiye.

The Great Powers also decided that the Greek Government would give certain assurances to both them and the Sublime State not to fortify the Islands against the Sublime State, not to use these islands for military purposes, and to take effective measures in order to prevent smuggling between the Islands and Türkiye.

Apart from this, the Great Powers will also require the Greek Government to provide sufficient assurances that it will protect the law of the Muslim minorities in the Islands.

The Great Powers also undertake to use their influence over Greece so that these conditions would be fulfilled.

The Great Powers trust that the above-cited resolutions will be faithfully complied with by the Ottoman Government.”¹⁶

2.1. Ottoman Response to the Note of the Great Powers

The decision of the Great Powers on the Islands issue caused great sadness in the Ottoman Government. Türkiye was once again deeply disappointed. Two days later, the Grand Vizier and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Said Halim Pasha, in deep grief, responded to the joint note of the Great Powers.¹⁷

At the introduction of the response note, it was stated that “His Majesty the Sultan declares that he has received the joint note issued by the Austrian, Hungarian, Italian, British Embassies, by the Charge d’Affaires of France, Germany and Russia, on the fourteenth day of the month.” Although Türkiye has left the determination of the future of the Islands up to the discretion of Great Powers according to the note, Türkiye rigorously explained and expressed its considerations that the Islands around the Dardanelles and the Islands, which are inseparable parts of Anatolia, must be at its disposal. Therefore, Türkiye hoped that the Islands issue would be resolved under the mandate of the Great Powers in accordance with the virtual interests of the parties involved in this issue. However, the Great Powers did not take the vital needs of the Ottoman Empire into consideration. This was accepted by the Ottoman Empire with a great sorrow. The Ottoman Government, which was aware of its duties and the great benefits of peace, deemed the decision to leave Gökçeada, Bozcaada and Kastellorizo to Türkiye as a bond. However, they would also strive to achieve their just and legitimate aspirations on the other Islands.¹⁸

As is seen, although the Great Powers notified that they decided to leave the Aegean Islands other than Gökçeada, Bozcaada and Kastellorizo to Greece, this decision was not accepted by the Ottoman Government, and the Sublime Porte, relying on the decision to leave Gökçeada,

¹⁶ “Siyasiyat, Devletlerin Notası”, Tanin, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 1848: 1; “Nota’nın Sureti”, İkdâm, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 6100: 1; “Notanın Mahiyeti”, Tasvir-i Efkâr, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 996: 1; “Siyasiyat, Son Nota”, Tercüman-ı Hakikat, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 11798: 1; “Notanın Meali”, Peyam, 15 Şubat 1914, No: 92: 1; Şimşir, 1989: 394.

¹⁷ Şimşir, 1989: XXVII-XXVIII.

¹⁸ BOA, HR. SYS. 1987/5, lef 22; “Notanın Metni”, Tasvir-i Efkâr, 16 Şubat 1914, No: 997: 1; “Hükümet-i Osmaniye’nin Cevabı”, Sabah, 16 Şubat 1914, No: 8769: 1; “Cevabi Nota”, İkdâm, 16 Şubat 1914, No: 6101: 1.

Bozcaada and Kastellorizo to Türkiye, declared that they would make every effort to put across their rightful and legitimate claims.

There is no doubt that the decision of the Great Powers was a source of deep distress and even a heavy blow for Türkiye. But it must be admitted that Türkiye also took the wrong steps in the Islands issue. In the face of the incompatible attitude of the Balkan States, especially Greece, in the London peace talks, Tefvik Pasha, the then ambassador of Türkiye to London, urged the Sublime Porte to resort to the mediation of the Great Powers. The ambassador uttered these words: "It seems that there would be no possibility of making peace with the Balkan allies. If the allies resist their excessive demands, it would be appropriate to resort to the mediation of the Great Powers." In fact, Tefvik Pasha presented this idea, which was put forward by the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Sublime Porte as if it were his personal opinion. Pasha was an old Ottoman statesman, who had also served as a grand vizier before. His words were highly influential. The idea put forward by the Pasha was quickly adopted by the Sublime Porte, resorting to the decision of the Great Powers on the Islands issue, which was accepted and included in the Treaty of London. However, the peace treaty could be signed by suspending the dispute about the Islands, and it would be preferable for Türkiye and Greece to negotiate this issue mutually at the table in the future. It would probably be appropriate not to formally involve the Great Powers in this issue. However, upon the infusion of Tefvik Pasha, Türkiye lost its control on this matter to the Great Powers, especially England. Now they were bitterly experiencing hand over of the Islands to Greece.¹⁹

3. Brussels Talks

Just in this tense atmosphere, Greek Prime Minister Venizelos agreed to meet with Türkiye.²⁰ At that time, Dr. Dillon, the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, attempted to mediate. While the Minister of Internal Affairs, Talat Bey, was in Izmir, he traveled from Athens and met with the minister on behalf of Venizelos.²¹ In a telegram he sent from Izmir to his newspaper, he noted that the dangers of combat had now perished and that Europe should be pleased that an Ottoman-Greek battle had been prevented thanks to the efforts of Talat Bey and Venizelos.²²

It also seemed that Venizelos calculated the timing of the meeting very well. It was reported that the Reşadiye-class battleship, which was constructed in England, would be delivered to Türkiye on August 1, 1914. The battleship of Sultan Osman was also supposed to be delivered in the autumn. The meeting would coincide with the days before these battleships joined the Turkish navy. Then the overall mood in Europe suddenly changed. On 28 June, the Austrian Crown Prince was shot in Sarajevo, and Greece's ally Serbia was on the brink of war. Serbia, which was expected to come to Greece's aid in case of a Turkish-Greek war, was dealing with its own troubles this time. Rather than catching up to help Greece, Serbia itself needed help. Seeing this environment, Venizelos seemed very eager to meet with the Grand Vizier Said Halim Pasha and especially with the Minister of Internal Affairs Talat Pasha. It was decided that the meeting would be held in Brussels. However, the Grand Vizier was taking things a little slow, as if to gain time. First, he postponed the meeting, claiming that he should be in Istanbul on July 24, which was then celebrated as a National Day in Türkiye. Later, he explained that he could not stay away from Istanbul during the Ramadan Feast, which coincided with the same days. Venizelos, on the other hand, set off on July 21, without the date of the meeting being determined. On the way, Venizelos would linger, waiting for news from the Grand Vizier, and when he learned what day the Grand Vizier would arrive in Brussels, he would catch up with him on the same day. Two days after Venizelos set off, on July 23, Austria

¹⁹ Şimşir, 1989: XXVIII.

²⁰ Şimşir, 1989: XXXI.

²¹ Dillon'un aracılığı hakkında bkz. Bayur, 1991: 266-269.

²² "Hükümet-i Osmaniye-Yunanistan Münasebatı, Doktor Dillon'un Telgrafı", Tanin, 25 Haziran 1914, No: 1978: 1; "Dillon'un Telgrafnamesi", Sabah, 29 Haziran 1914, No: 8902: 1.

issued an ultimatum to Serbia. Venizelos learned about this news in Trieste. Europe was heading for a great war, but the Greek Prime Minister did not return immediately. He went from Trieste to Munich. While waiting for news from the Grand Vizier at Munich, he received two decipherers from the Greek King on July 27. These were secret correspondence between the German Emperor and the King of Greece.

The German Emperor had secretly found out that Greece was suddenly preparing to attack the Dardanelles. While declaring that Türkiye intended to join the Triple Alliance, he strongly appealed to the King of Greece to abandon the attack against Türkiye, a friend of the Triple Alliance. The Greek King, in his response to the Emperor, notified him that Greece had no claims from Türkiye, that Türkiye had an attitude against Greece in terms of the Islands, but that the Grand Vizier and Venizelos would soon negotiate the issue of the Islands.

The king conveyed these messages to Venizelos, who was in Munich at the time, and ordered him to meet with the Grand Vizier and reach an agreement on the issue of the Islands. But the next day, on July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Thereon, Venizelos immediately returned to Athens. Thus, the summit meeting regarding the Aegean Islands, which was decided to be held in Brussels, did not take place.²³

4. Initiatives of Cemal Pasha in France

In the meantime, it is necessary to mention the trip of Cemal Pasha to France in July 1914 to participate the naval maneuvers of the French navy. During this trip, the Ottoman Government asked Cemal Pasha to emphasize the importance Türkiye attaches to the French friendship and to obtain the help of France for the final settlement of the Islands issue, which was of vital importance for the Ottoman Empire.²⁴

When in France, Cemal Pasha discussed the issue of the islands with Monsieur de Margerie, Director of Political Affairs at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Cemal Pasha claimed that France always pursued a policy towards protecting the Greeks, however, if a map was to be opened and analyzed, it would be understood that Türkiye could one day be needed more than Greece, he expressed expressed the opinion of the Ottoman Government as follows:

“The objective of French and British politics is to enclose the central powers within a steel circle. All sides of this circle are completed except for the southeastern part. The reason why this last part is incomplete is because of Türkiye and Bulgaria. If Türkiye joins the Triple Alliance, Bulgaria, which will remain alone in the Balkans, will definitely have to join this arrangement. Here, if you wish to see that this steel circle is completed, please cast about for a solution to the Islands issue between Greece and Türkiye. Then protect us from the terrible blows that we expect from Russia by enclosing us within the circle of your alliance. Have a strong ally in the orient by ensuring our advancement in a short time!”

The proposal of the Ottoman Empire was free of all kinds of doubts and hesitations: Finding a way to reach an agreement between Greece and Türkiye on the Islands issue, and completely blocking the oriental path to Germany by making an alliance with Türkiye.

Upon this statement, Monsieur Margerie asked what kind of solution Türkiye was considering for the settlement of the Islands issue, and Cemal Pasha, on the other hand, stated that the Dodecanese Islands to be returned from Italy should be added as well, and that they could all be granted benefits such as administrative autonomy under the rule of the Ottoman Government, spending all their income on the development of the Islands, and pardoning the local people from military service.

²³ Şimşir, 1989: XXXI-XXXIII.

²⁴ Cemal Paşa, 1959: 116.

Monsieur Margerie, who believed that the Ottoman proposal for the settlement of the islands issue would be plausible and considered that the issue could be definitely resolved in the context of these principles, declared that he would convey these views to his allies, and that for the time being, France would not be able to take any initiative on its own.

The meeting was concluded with complete disappointment. It was obvious that France believed that there was no way Türkiye could break away from the clutches of Russia and was not willing to help Türkiye at no cost.²⁵

5. Venizelos' Initiatives

Shortly after returning to Athens, at the beginning of August, Venizelos also sought ways to meet with the Grand Vizier Said Halim Pasha. This time, he asked for a meeting not in Europe, but at sea, near Gökçeada. The Grand Vizier noted that he could not leave Istanbul during those days of depression. He demanded that meetings be held in Bucharest between the Turkish and Greek delegates. Upon Venizelos' question, he notified what Türkiye expected from these talks, that is, what he demanded from Greece: The Sublime Porte wanted the islands of Lemnos, Lesbos, Chios and Samos to be returned to Ottoman rule. In return, he claimed, the Islands would be given autonomy, and a Christian governor would be appointed over these islands.²⁶

In the meantime, the response given by Serbia to the Austrian note was deemed insufficient, and Russia declared a general mobilization in response to Austria's partial mobilization, and then even Germany and France announced their mobilization. On August 1, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia.²⁷ The British Navy Ministry prevented the Ottoman flag from being hoisted on the "Sultan Osman" battleship, which was supposed to be delivered to Türkiye on August 2, 1914 and whose last installment was paid the day before, and commandeered both "Sultan Osman" and "Reşadiye" battleships.²⁸ The pact of alliance between Türkiye and Germany was signed on August 2, 1914, by the Grand Vizier and Foreign Minister Said Halim Pasha and the German Ambassador to Istanbul, Baron Von Wangenheim.²⁹ On the same day, a full mobilization was declared in Türkiye. On August 5, Britain declared war on Germany. On August 10, Germany's "Goeben" and "Breslau" battleships entered the Marmara from the Dardanelles Strait.³⁰ It was announced that these battleships were purchased by Türkiye with the offer of Halil Menteşe, the Chairperson of the Chamber of Deputies.³¹ While Goeben was named Yavuz, the Breslau battleship was named after Midilli (Mytilene), the Ottomans wanted to liberate from the Greek occupation.³²

Stating that the news of the acquisition of the Yavuz and Midilli Battleships brought indescribable joy to the Turkish people, İkdam Newspaper announced that the Turkish nation, which was hopeless and deeply resentful in the heart of the impression caused by the unjust and ruthless usurpation of the Sultan Osman and Reşadiye battleships by the British, was overjoyed

²⁵ Cemal Paşa, 1959: 118-120.

²⁶ Şimşir, 1989: XXXIII.

²⁷ Cemal Paşa, 1959: 130.

²⁸ Rauf Orbay, 1993: 15. (İngilizlere verilen gemi siparişleri ve bu el koyma hakkında bkz. Öke ve Mütercimler, 1991).

²⁹ Ali İhsan Sabis, 1991: 106. (Türk-Alman İttifak Antlaşması hakkında bkz. Keleşyılmaz, 1999: 25.)

³⁰ Küçük, 1998: 59 (Their arrival in Türkiye, on the other hand, was actually a precaution against the Russian navy's superiority in the Black Sea and the possibility of taking any action towards the Straits, among other reasons. Because from the point of view of the Turkish-German alliance, the arrival of these two battleships is not accidental. Enver Pasha had already expressed that the Turkish side had such a demand and expectation which was communicated to Berlin by his interlocutors in Istanbul. Upon the instruction given from Berlin, the two mentioned battleships turned their route to Istanbul. Since Enver Pasha knew that these ships would arrive, he informed the Bahr-i Sefid (Mediterranean) Strait Command on August 4, 1914 with a "very private" instruction that German and Austrian battleships should be allowed to enter the strait. Is it another detail indicating the importance of the Yavuz and Midilli that the order given from Berlin coincided with the British decision to seize "Sultan Osman" and "Reşadiye"? This is an issue worth thinking about. (Keleşyılmaz, 2002: 396.)

³¹ Talat Paşanın Hatıraları, 1946: 27.

³² Ali İhsan Sabis, 1991: 227.

with this good news. The newspaper further declared that all Ottomans immediately appreciated this and that they read this gospel in the newspapers several times with great enthusiasm and tried to convince themselves whether it was true or not.

According to the aforementioned newspaper, this gospel was so unexpected, so hopeful that people could not believe it all of a sudden, and first thing in the morning, everyone was giving each other the following good news on the roads, trams and ferries:

“- Have You Heard?”

Reflecting the feelings of the nation regarding the acquisition of the Yavuz and Midilli Battleships as stated above, İkdam Newspaper also revealed the following views:

“The addition of Yavuz Sultan Selim and Midilli battleships to the Ottoman Navy is not dependent on any warlike purpose. In fact, as it is known, our battleships, Sultan Osman and Reşadiye, were unjustly usurped, they would have been in our port these days if this had not happened. The Ottoman State’s desire to reinforce its navy is not new, it has been longed for some time. The purpose of this desire was not war, but peace. Our country is in need of improvement and public works right now, thus, it is necessary to be protected from aggression and be as strong as possible.

This peaceful purpose and reformism of our government were so evident that no one had the right to doubt them. The public rejoicing in the acquisition of the Yavuz and Midilli Battleships was due to the engagement of the whole nation in the government’s ambitions in this regard.”³³

In fact, this was not the case at all. The truth was that the Ottoman Empire was preparing for war and was expecting the army to complete its mobilization process before entering the war.³⁴

6. Bucharest Talks

Shortly after these two German battleships joined the Turkish navy, on August 15, 1914, the Turkish delegation, which was supposed to participate in the meeting in Bucharest, set off for Edirne.³⁵ The delegation included the Minister of Internal Affairs, Talat Bey (Pasha) and the Chairperson of the Chamber of Deputies Halil Bey (Menteşe). The Turkish delegation, which stopped by Bulgaria on their way, concluded an alliance with Bulgaria, believing that it would be to their advantage in the Bucharest negotiations. The purpose of this alliance was to take the islands by war, if the islands could not be reclaimed by peace while the Europeans were in conflict. The Bulgarians were supposed to take Macedonia. But, first, Romania’s neutrality would be ensured.³⁶

According to Talat Pasha, the proposal to Greece to start negotiations in Bucharest to discuss the Islands issue was made in order to preserve appearances. The main goal was to beat Bulgaria.³⁷

At the Turkish-Greek talks held in Bucharest, Greece was represented by Alexandre Zaimis, former Prime Minister, and Nikolas Politis, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁸

In Bucharest, Turkish delegates would officially bring to the table their proposal, the fundamentals of which were already communicated to Greece: They demanded the return of the Lemnos, Lesbos, Chios and Samos islands to Ottoman rule. On the other hand, they also notified the Sultan that that a Christian governor would be appointed to the Islands, administrative

³³ “Yavuz Dretnotu ve Midilli Zırhlı Kravazörü”, İkdam, 12 Ağustos 1914, No: 6277: 1.

³⁴ Cemal Paşa, 1959: 138.

³⁵ Şimşir, 1989: XXXIII.

³⁶ Halil Menteşe’nin Anıları, 1986: 210.

³⁷ Talat Paşa’nın Hatıraları, 1946: 27.

³⁸ Küçük, 1998: 60. (Bükreş Görüşmeleri hakkında bkz. Bayur, 1991: 121-133.)

autonomy would be granted, and no soldiers would be recruited from the people of the Islands.³⁹

After correspondence with Athens, the Greek delegates declared that they would recognize Ottoman sovereignty only in Lesbos and Chios.⁴⁰ However, they also demanded that these Islands to be rented to Greece for fifty years and that a Greek governor to be appointed to the Islands. If the lease was not terminated by the parties, it would be automatically extended at the end of the fifty-year period.⁴¹

The Greeks intended to maintain and rivet their occupation of the Islands under the guise of “renting.” The counter-proposals from Greece were far from satisfying Türkiye.⁴² Upon these proposals, Talat and Halil Beys made the following statements to the German and Austrian ambassadors: “We are determined to march with the Bulgarians against Greece and Serbia. We would like to know the views of the German and Austrian governments on this issue. Please, send a telegram to your government.” On the evening of the first day of September, the German Ambassador arrived at the hotel and announced that his government was not in favour of Türkiye’s marching on Greece.⁴³ Leaving Halil Bey in Bucharest, Talat Bey returned to Istanbul on September 1⁴⁴, and met with the British Ambassador in Istanbul. Talat Bey indicated that if they fail to secure tangible rights on the Islands issue, Türkiye would declare war on Greece. The British Ambassador, however, explained that Britain is firmly opposed to the war against Greece. In other words, both Germany and England favored and protected Greece. They were against Türkiye declaring war on Greece because of the islands issue.

In Bucharest, Turkish delegates asked Greek delegates for clarification on two matters: Does the Greek counter-proposal only cover Chios and Lesbos, or would it also include Samos and Lemnos, and would the right to hoist the Ottoman flag be granted on the islands that will be returned to Ottoman sovereignty on condition of renting?⁴⁵

Greece stated that Ottoman sovereignty would be accepted over Samos as well as Lesbos and Chios, provided that they were also rented. Lemnos was being excluded from the Greek proposals. Even on the condition of renting, Ottoman sovereignty over Lemnos would not be accepted.⁴⁶ If the Turkish delegates resisted the right to hoist the Ottoman flag on the islands, the Greek delegates would ask Athens for new instructions on this matter.

It was clear that Greece did not intend to make any further concessions. According to Türkiye, Greek counter-proposals were inadequate.⁴⁷

On September 9, 1914, Halil Bey received the following telegram from Grand Vizier Pasha:

“Upon the decision of the Council of Ministers, it is notified that it would be appropriate for the meeting to be postponed for the time being and that your excellency would return to the country, since the proposals of renting and appointment of Greek governor practices would not be in line with the Ottoman interests and would not have a good effect on the Ottoman public opinion at this period.”⁴⁸

On 10 September 1914, Turkish and Greek delegates convened for the last time in Bucharest. The Turkish delegate, Halil Bey, informed the Greek delegates that they would not accept the

³⁹ Galip Kemali Söylemezoğlu Hatıraları, 1946: 212; Halil Menteşe'nin Anıları, s. 210; Şimşir, 1989: XXXIV.

⁴⁰ Halil Menteşe'nin Anıları, s. 210.

⁴¹ Bayur, 1991: s. 127.

⁴² Şimşir, 1989: XXXIV.

⁴³ Halil Menteşe'nin Anıları, 1986: 210.

⁴⁴ Talat Paşanın Hatıraları, 1946: 28.

⁴⁵ Şimşir, 1989: XXXIV.

⁴⁶ Cevdet Küçük, 998: 60.

⁴⁷ Bilal N. Şimşir, 1989: p. XXXV.

⁴⁸ Halil Menteşe'nin Anıları, 1986: 211.

Greek counter-proposals in accordance with the directions received from Istanbul. In this case, he asked for the negotiations to be postponed to a “more convenient time”. Negotiations were postponed indefinitely. In the telegram sent to Athens that day, the Greek delegates reported that the negotiations had been postponed to a more favorable time and that they “parted amicably” with the Turkish delegates.⁴⁹

On September 11, Halil Bey received the following telegram from Talat Bey:

“As notified by the Supreme Grand Viziership, they unanimously agreed to postpone the meeting.”⁵⁰

The result was that it failed to resolve the Islands issue as desired by the Ottoman Empire, and the Aegean Islands problem was still suspended at the onset of the First World War.

Conclusion

On May 30, 1913, Türkiye renounced all its rights on the Island of Crete in accordance with the fourth article of the Peace Treaty signed in London between Türkiye and the Balkan states, on the other hand, pursuant to the fifth article, Türkiye also agreed that the Great Powers would decide on the Aegean Islands under Greek occupation.

Immediately after the signing of the Treaty of London, the views of the Great Powers on the Aegean Islands began to emerge. According to the British Foreign Minister, Gökçeada and Bozcaada should be returned to Türkiye, while, the other Aegean Islands should be ceded to Greece. The Islands issue should have been merged with the issue of Southern Albania (Epirus) and resolved together. In other words, the Aegean Islands should have been ceded to Greece in return for Greece’s evacuation of Epirus. Thus, Britain was thinking of persuading Austria and Italy, which believed that Greece’s dominance of the Corfu Channel was against their interests, and exerted their influence on Greece’s side in the solution of the Islands issue at the beginning.

As for Türkiye, it would thoroughly reject the British proposal on the Aegean Islands. Türkiye would not accept the surrender of the islands close to Anatolia to Greece and would make every effort to claim the islands back. Türkiye, which also opposed connecting the Islands issue with the Albanian issue, did not accept that the Great Powers should decide on the Dodecanese Islands, and claimed that these islands would already be returned to them in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne (Ouchy).

Unfortunately, Türkiye’s objections were not taken into consideration, and the joint decision of the Six Great Powers on the Aegean Islands notified to Greece on February 13, 1914 and to the Sublime Porte on February 14, 1914 was the same as drafted by the British Empire. Accordingly, Gökçeada, Bozcaada and Kastellorizo would be left to Türkiye, while the other Greek-occupied Islands were given to Greece. Greece was banned from arming, using and fortifying the Islands for military purposes and would take the necessary measures to prevent smuggling between the Islands and Anatolia.

This decision of the Great Powers, which did not mention Rhodes and the Dodecanese, led to great disappointment and deep sadness in the Ottoman Government, and two days later, on February 16, the Sublime Porte responded to the joint diplomatic note of the Great Powers. In this reply, while Türkiye accepted that the Great Powers should decide on the Islands, it expected that the Islands around the Dardanelles and the Islands, which are indivisible parts of the Anatolian mainland, would be given to Türkiye, that the Islands issue would be resolved in accordance with its own interests, whereas the Great Powers did not pay regard to the vital interests of the Ottoman Empire and that they were deeply saddened by this. It was further

⁴⁹ Şimşir, 1989: XXXV.

⁵⁰ Halil Menteşe’nin anıları, 1986: 212.

stated that relying on the decision of leaving Gökçeada, Bozcaada and Kastellorizo to Türkiye, it would make every effort to impose its rightful and legitimate wishes on the other Islands.

It was clearly understood that the Great Powers had not taken into account Türkiye's sensitivities and expectations and had ceded the islands to Greece. However, Türkiye also made mistakes in reaching this point. As emphasized by Bilal Şimşir, leaving the decision to determine the future of the islands to the Great Powers was a big mistake. During the signing of the Treaty of London, a peace treaty could be signed by leaving the disputed Islands issue for later, and it would be preferable to settle the issue through bilateral negotiations between Türkiye and Greece, and thus it would be more appropriate not to interfere with the Great Powers. On the other hand, although the German Ambassador and some Turkish officials warned the Ottoman statesmen that the decision would be made in this way before the signing of the Treaty of London, leaving the authority to decide on the future of the islands to the Great Powers was also behavior that should be questioned. Perhaps there was no other remedy in the existing circumstances, and it was believed to be the best decision that could have been made. How could one consent to this? It was presumably relied upon that Türkiye's sensitivities would have been taken into consideration. Somehow, Türkiye had lost its control to the Great Powers in this matter, and was now experiencing, to great disappointment, that the Islands were ceded to Greece.

Although Greece accepted the decision of the Great Powers by describing it as a "fair" decision, the Ottoman Empire did not accept the granting of the Islands to Greece, therefore, the joint decision of the Great Powers remained insufficient to resolve the Islands issue. In the following period, although efforts would be made to reach an agreement on the issue until the First World War by holding two more meetings, no result would be achieved and the Islands would remain in the possession of Greece.

It is evident that the Ottoman Empire, inter alia other measures, failed to take the measures concerning the Aegean Islands, especially the navy, in a timely manner and left the solution at the discretion of the Great Powers, causing the issue to evolve into an international problem. Unlike Greece, it was not successful in pursuing an effective policy and, unfortunately, was on the losing side in this long-term struggle, which was of vital importance for the country.

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