

# ENOSIS, THE UNION OF CRETE WITH GREECE

*by George K. Dalidakis*

It was on a Sunday, the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, 1913 that the Greek flag was raised on top of the fortress of Firka, on the western side of the harbour of Chania, in front of the King of Hellenes, Constantine, the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos and a tearful, emotional and enthusiastic crowd of proud Cretans. The struggle to reach to that moment had been a bloody and very long one. A plaque that was once affixed at the location said:

## TURKISH OCCUPATION OF CRETE

1669 – 1913

267 YEARS, 7 MONTHS, 7 DAYS

YEARS OF AGONY

Although the whole period was one of a difficult and often bloody struggle, the last ninety years were the most difficult for all Cretans to bear because Greece, after enormous sacrifices, following the revolution of 1821, achieved independence from the Turkish yoke, but not Crete. Cretans had fought equally hard to overthrow the Turkish occupier, had made similar sacrifices, had shed in similar ways their blood for freedom, but the Great Powers had prevented Crete from joining Greece in becoming part of the new nation.

### Independence for Greece but not for Crete

Greece was recognised as a new nation at the signing of the “Protocol of London” on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 1830 but Crete was left out of it. Crete was caught in the middle of power politics between the Great Powers who were circling the slowly dying Ottoman Empire and taking position to enable them to capture whatever they could. Crete was given to the Regent of Egypt to administer in recognition of services provided to the Sultan during the Greek revolution in Peloponnese. The Egyptian administration lasted 10 years and it was a relatively quite period in comparison to the previous ten years. This was primarily due to the Egyptian ruler’s long term plan to achieve permanent control of the island and did not want to give any cause to the Great Powers to interfere with the affairs of the island during his administration. In 1833 the island experienced an uprising but that was put down harshly and swiftly by the Egyptian troops by arresting and hanging the leaders of the uprising. The war between the Regent of Egypt and the Sultan in Syria in 1840 and the defeat of the Egyptians put an end to the Egyptian administration of Crete. The Great Powers convened again and still being in favour of keeping the Ottoman Empire intact they signed a new “Treaty of London” in July 1840 ceding Crete from Egyptian control and bringing it again under direct Turkish control. While that was happening, a number of Cretan leaders who had been in exile in Greece decided to return to Crete to organise a new uprising. This uprising was declared simultaneously in a number of places all over Crete on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1841. Unfortunately the uprising did not last long as Crete was not prepared for another long struggle, Greece was not in a position to help and the Great Powers were pressing for an end to the bloodshed. By April many of the surviving rebels left the island for the safety of Greece and another long period in exile. A number of other uprisings were to follow with the biggest one

being the 1866 – 1869 during which Crete experienced one of the bloodiest and harshest periods of repression. The holocaust of the Monastery of Arkadi was to become a legend and an example of the type of sacrifices that Cretans were prepared to make in their struggle for their freedom and for “Enosis”, the union with Greece.

Concessions earned following bitter struggle  
The Organic Act and the Halepa Agreement

The Sultan being urged by the Great Powers to bring an end to the carnage, introduced a number of concessions under what became known as the “Organic Act” of 1868. The uprising continued and it was not until pressure from the Great Powers on Greece to stop providing assistance and supplies brought an end to it early in 1869.

The Turkish- Russian war that broke out in 1877 provided the Cretans and the Greek government with a new opportunity for a new uprising that first started early in January 1878 in the west of Crete and soon spread to the rest of the island. The defeat of the Turkish army and the intervention of the Great Powers resulted in a new Treaty of San Stephano in February 1878 that imposed upon Turkey an obligation to comply with the provisions of the Organic Act. As for the Cretans, the Great Powers insisted on a cease-fire on the basis of further negotiations for a new treaty that was to take place a few months later in Berlin. Unfortunately for the Cretans, no further gains came out of the Berlin conference. The Cretans continued with their struggle but shortages in ammunition and supplies prevented them from achieving any further gains. The Great Powers pushed for a resolution of the situation and the Turks agreed for the mediation of the British consul. In October 1878 a new agreement was reached between the leaders of the Cretan uprising and the Turks. This became known as the “Halepa Agreement” providing a new constitution for the island that made it a semi-autonomous province with specific privileges. These included a Christian Governor General, an elected Assembly with a guaranteed Christian majority, a Cretan gendarmerie, and other benefits including certain tax exemptions.

The next ten years were marred by internal political disputes that led to the elections of 1888 but electoral irregularities further split apart the two main political parties. In May 1889 one of the parties tabled a motion in the Cretan Assembly calling for the union of Crete with Greece. This was an illegal move, forcing the dissolution of the Assembly, but its supporters fled to the mountains and declared a new uprising. The Turks with this opportunity declared martial law and installed as Governor General a Turk General and revoked the “Halepa Agreement”. Military courts, death penalties and mob violence were to follow, unmaking all the benefits that were achieved ten years earlier. The following five years represented one of the worst periods of Turkish rule on the island; Turkish terrorist groups roamed the countryside causing death and destruction, followed by Cretan rebels seeking revenge wherever they could get it. The intensification of the acts of violence all over the island prompted the Great Powers to step in and insist for the Sultan to provide a new constitution for the island. The terms of the new constitution were negotiated on the island with all the parties and a new agreement was reached that also contained all the benefits of the previous “Halepa Agreement”. Thus this uprising finished in August 1896. But not for long.

## Events leading to the granting of autonomy to Crete

The Turks were determined to undermine the new constitution and mob violence soon escalated against the Christians. A new Cretan gendarmerie was set up under the command of a British officer, Major Boor, but they were unable to control the massive violence that was aimed against the Christian population. The Greek government pressured by public opinion and not seeing any intervention coming from the Great Powers decided to send warships and personnel to assist the Cretan population. The Great Powers then had no option but to proceed with the occupation of the island, but they were somewhat late. A Greek army force of 1,500 men had landed at Kolymbari on 1 February 1897 and its commanding officer, Colonel Timothy Vassos declared that he was taking over the island in the name of the King of the Hellenes and announced the union of Crete with Greece. This led to an uprising that spread throughout the island immediately. The Great Powers finally decided to land their troops and stopped Vassos from approaching Chania. At the same time their fleets blockaded Crete preventing both Greeks and Turks from bringing any more troops on the island. By March the island was partitioned into separate areas of control by troops from the Great Powers but this did not stop the fighting between Christians and Turks. What seemed as an unfortunate development for the Cretans, a new war had broken up between the Greek and the Turkish armies in Thessaly, on the Greek mainland. This forced Greece to recall its troops from Crete to join the rest of its army on the mainland. The Turkish army was better prepared for this war and soon the Greek army was in retreat. The Great Powers again intervened and an armistice was signed on May 1897. According to the peace treaty that was signed on 4 December 1897, the Turkish army handed back Thessaly to Greece. But what was significant for Crete was that it was to gain autonomy as part of these negotiations, which in many Cretans mind was the first step towards union with Greece. The offer for autonomy that was negotiated by the Great Powers was initially rejected by the Cretans who wanted union with Greece, but eventually, at a meeting of the General Assembly on the 16 October 1897, they agreed to the autonomy option, as an interim solution. Negotiations between the interested parties on the selection of a suitable eminent person for the position of the High Commissioner went on for a while and eventually Britain and Russia convinced the Sultan to accept their nomination of Prince George, second son of the king of Hellenes, for the position of High Commissioner.



The High Commissioner, Prince George

The agreement provided that the High Commissioner would recognise the higher authority of the Sultan and would arrange for participation in the governing of the island by both Christian and Muslim Cretans. In the interim, until the High Commissioner was to take office, an Executive Council was formed with one of its six officers being Eleftherios Venizelos. Their task was to manage the administrative functions of governing the island together with the Council of the Commanders of the

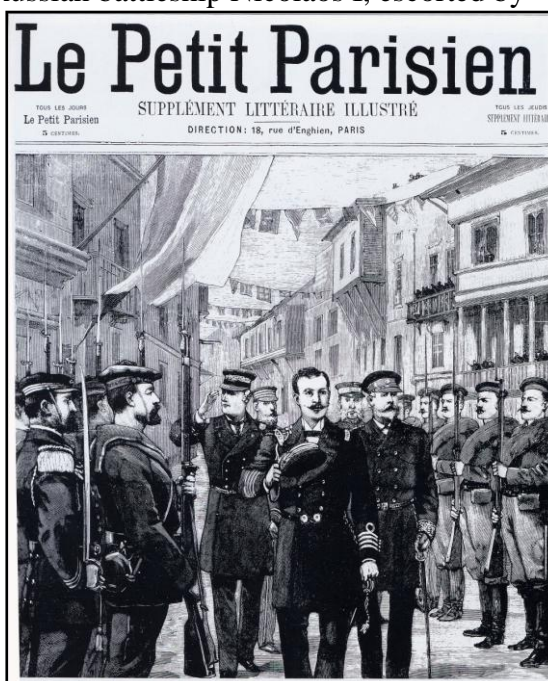
forces of the Great Powers, until the arrival of Prince George. Unfortunately the killings and massacres continued, the last and most tragic one took place at Heraklion on 25 August 1898. On that day while a British army detachment was leading certain officials to their accommodation at the tax office building, an angry Turkish mob attacked them, killing 17 British soldiers, the British Consul and some hundreds of Christians, setting fire and looting many stores. The British reacted immediately, arrested and hanged 17 of the ringleaders and arrested and jailed or sent to exile a large number of others. The British fleet under Admiral Noel sailed into Heraklion and demanded that all Turkish army, both from Heraklion and other parts of the island, leave Crete immediately. On 2 November 1898 the last Turkish soldier left the island. A month later, on 9 December 1898 the High Commissioner, Prince George arrived at Suda Bay.

### Prince George in Crete and the early years of the autonomy period

The Prince arrived at Suda Bay aboard the Russian battleship Nicolaos I, escorted by the battleships of the other Great Powers. The welcoming by the enthusiastic crowds was unprecedented. The admirals of the four Great Powers were also there to welcome him and the chairman of the Council of the Commanders of the forces, the French admiral Pottiers, escorted him to Chania where they first attended a thanks giving mass and then moved on to the government house where the admiral handed to him officially the control of the island. The new Cretan flag was raised and the event was saluted by canon fire from the naval ships anchored outside the harbour.

In a short period of time the Prince appointed a committee consisting of 12 Christian and 4 Muslim leaders, under the chairmanship of Ioannis Sfakianakis,

to draft a new constitution for the island that was to be submitted to the Cretan assembly for approval. Elections were also called for 24 January 1899 during which a new Cretan Assembly was elected consisting of 138 Christian and 50 Muslim Cretans. The Assembly sat for its first session on 8 February 1899 and approved the new constitution, which after being ratified by the High Commissioner and the Great Powers came into effect on 16 April 1899. On 27 April the High Commissioner appointed the first government that consisted of five ministers. They were: Eleftherios Venizelos as minister of Justice, Manousos Koundouros as minister of foreign affairs, Nikolaos Yamalakis minister of public education and religion, Constantinos Fomis as minister of economic affairs and Hussein Yenitsarakis as minister of public order. The previous chairman of the interim governing committee chose not to participate having had a disagreement with the High Commissioner on the proposed format of the government.



The arrival of the High Commissioner, Prince George, as depicted in the foreign press at the time.

The new government immediately started addressing the many tasks on hand. By 18 May Venizelos submitted the proposed new legal framework for the island and other initiatives were introduced, including a new currency, the formation of a central bank, public health and education initiatives as well as the formation of a new gendarmerie. The Prince on his own initiative went visiting Moscow, London, Paris and Rome trying to convince the Great Powers to push for the union of Crete with Greece, but all the four were unwilling to move away from the status quo. Venizelos had different views on how union could be achieved, favouring a gradual and steady move towards that goal, and the differences between the two men soon became public knowledge. The conflict between the two became so big that the Prince eventually dismissed Venizelos on 18 March 1901. (after refusing to accept Venizelos' resignation which was submitted to him twice).

Venizelos formed an opposition party that remained very critical of the way the High Commissioner was interfering in the process of government. The Prince, upset by the continuing criticism by the Venizelos camp in both the Cretan and Greek press, became more authoritarian, banning the freedom of the press and harassing and arresting leading members of the opposition. The island had reached another crisis point.

### The Theriso uprising

On 26 February 1905 the opposition members issued a declaration demanding change to the Cretan constitution to free the island of authoritarianism and to pursue the objective of union with Greece, with an interim step the attainment of full independence. They stated also that in pursuing these objectives they were prepared to resort even to an armed uprising. A few days later on 10 March 1905 the opposition members, under the leadership of Eleftherios Venizelos, Konstantinos Fomis and Konstantinos Manos, gathered at Theriso, on the north foothills of Lefka Ori, the White

Mountains, together with an armed force of about one thousand men where they declared the commencement of an armed uprising in pursuit of union with Greece and raised the Greek flag. The rebellion spread very quickly throughout the island but the gendarmerie

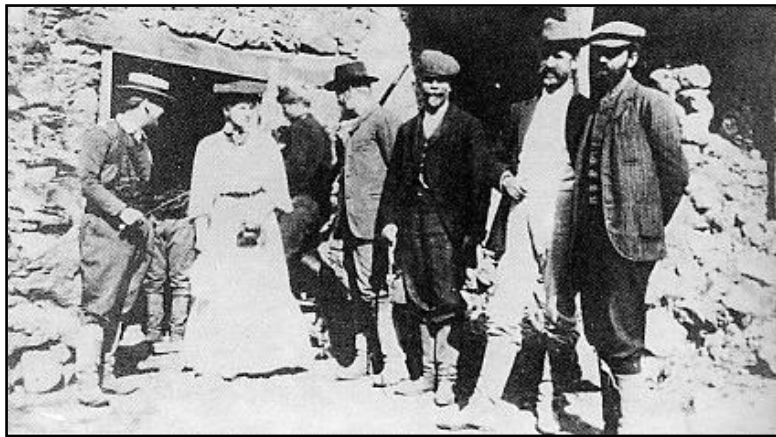


Cretan rebels at Theriso

remained loyal to the Prince. The Great

Powers showed restraint and were not prepared to interfere at that stage with the exception of the Russians who in support of the Prince commenced bombarding some of the rebel positions.

The Prince issued a 36 hour deadline for the rebels to lay down their arms and when that passed he declared martial law, with the permission of the Great Powers. He called for a meeting with the diplomatic representatives of the Great Powers and asked them to urgently take all necessary measures to put down the uprising. They in turn send a message to the rebels to lay down their arms, otherwise they were prepared to use their armed forces to put an end to the uprising. In response to this threat, more representatives from the Assembly in Chania went to Theriso to join the rebel government. In the meanwhile, Venizelos formed a caretaker government, organised government departments, issued bonds to raise funds, issued postage stamps and published a new newspaper, the Theriso. The Great Powers at that stage were unwilling to enter into an armed conflict with the rebels and the Prince had no other means of taking on the rebels other than with the 1,000 strong gendarmerie that was clearly insufficient for such an action. The representatives of the Great Powers, seeing the lack of public support for the Prince, decided to pursue a diplomatic solution and went to Mournies, just south of Chania, to meet the leadership of the caretaker rebel government. Negotiations continued on and off for months, with a final agreement for the end of the uprising being reached on 15 November 1906. This was going to be only a first step to a protracted series of negotiations between Venzelos' opposition party and the Great Powers that were being handled on behalf of all the four powers by Sir Edward Law. His final recommendations were for a restructure of the gendarmerie and the formation of a new militia, both to come under the control of officers seconded from the Greek army; the departure of all foreign troops after law and order had been restored; provision of



Venizelos, third from the right, at Theriso, during the visit by a foreign journalist.

additional foreign loans; and a review of the Cretan constitution. Finally the Great Powers conceded to the King of Hellenes, George I, the right to appoint the High Commissioner, subject to the agreement of the Great Powers. This decision was made public on 14 September 1906 and a few days later the King announced the resignation of Prince George and the appointed Alexander Zaimis as the new High Commissioner, a well experienced and respected Greek political figure, having served previously as Prime Minister of Greece. Soon a new government was formed, a new constitution was passed by the Cretan Assembly, a new civil guard was established and by July 1907 large parts of the foreign troops had departed from the island. The rest were to leave the island over the following twelve months after receiving guarantees for the safety of the Muslim population

Enosis – Union with Greece

From the middle of 1908 certain events started unfolding that was to have a significant impact on the situation in Crete. Firstly the Turkish opposition movement, known as the “Young Turks” won power in July that year. On 5 October the

Bulgarians taking advantage of the confused situation in Turkey proclaimed their full independence annexing the eastern part of Macedonia. Next day the Austro-Hungarian Empire unilaterally annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina. The outrage about those events in both Athens and Crete was unprecedented, with public demonstrations condemning those actions and demanding immediate union of Crete with Greece. In Crete events moved very fast, with public meetings passing resolutions declaring the immediate annexation of Crete to Greece. On 6 October the Cretan Assembly passed a resolution forming an interim government to govern the island in the name of the King of the Hellenes, under the laws of the Greek state, until such time as the King of the Hellenes was ready to assume control of the island himself. The Cretan flag was lowered and in its place the blue and white flag of Greece was to be hoisted at the fort of Firka in Chania. The Greek government, although in full support of the moves in Crete, refrained from officially recognising the action of the Cretan Assembly, as it firstly wanted the full support of the Great Powers. The Great Powers appeared to be accepting the developments in Crete but the Young Turks were demanding that the Greek government disavow the Cretan moves. The Great Powers were not prepared to aggravate the delicate diplomatic situation with the new government of the Young Turks and following insistent complaints from the Turks they demanded from the Cretan government that the Greek flag be lowered from the fort of Firka. Finally, when they saw that there was no intention by the Cretan government to obey to this instruction, they landed a military detachment at Chania and cut down the flagpole supporting the Greek flag.

The situation remained unresolved for a while. The Greek government was overthrown by a coup d'état by a group of young military officers that had formed a "Military League" and who had forced the Greek Prime Minister to resign. Recognising that they lacked political expertise they invited Venizelos to join them as their political advisor. Venizelos being ready to join the Greek political scene accepted the invitation and joined them in January 1910. At the next elections in September he was elected to the Greek Assembly and by October 1910 he was the new Prime Minister of Greece. In the meanwhile Crete was going through a number of changes with its interim governments while at the same time Greece was unwilling to proceed to recognise the annexation of Crete, as it was trying to avoid any open conflict with either the Great Powers or Turkey. Venizelos' refusal to accept any participation of Cretan representatives in the Greek Assembly led to another uprising in Crete in January 1912

The start of the first Balkan War against Turkey in October 1912 was the catalyst to this difficult situation. The Greek Assembly immediately invited the deputies of the Cretan Assembly to join the Greek Assembly as a first step towards full annexation. The defeat of Turkey and the Treaty of London on 30 May 1913 provided, amongst other, for Turkey to relinquish her title to Crete. In a separate treaty between Turkey and Greece, signed on 1 November 1913, the Sultan renounced all claims over Crete, thus ratifying the annexation of Crete to Greece. One month later, on 1 December 1913, the Greek flag was flying again on a new flagpole at the fort of Firka, in front of the King of the Hellenes Constantine, the Prime Minister of a united Greek nation, the Cretan Eleftherios Venizelos and an ecstatic and tearful Cretan crowd. They had all been waiting for that moment for 267 years, 7 months and 7 days.



The raising of the Greek flag at the fort of Firka on 1 December, 1913

*Note:* This article was firstly published in the Crete Gazette of January and March 2006 and in [www.explorecrete.com](http://www.explorecrete.com) and subsequently in the KRHTH magazine of December 2006-January 2007, of the Pancretan Association of America.