

Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών

Τόμ. 12 (1997)



The hellenic kingdom and the ottoman Greeks: The experiment of the "society of Constantinople"

Thanos Veremis

doi: [10.12681/deltiokms.82](https://doi.org/10.12681/deltiokms.82)

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Veremis, T. (1997). The hellenic kingdom and the ottoman Greeks: The experiment of the "society of Constantinople". *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών*, 12, 203–212. <https://doi.org/10.12681/deltiokms.82>

THANOS VEREMIS

THE HELLENIC KINGDOM AND THE OTTOMAN GREEKS:
THE EXPERIMENT OF THE
«SOCIETY OF CONSTANTINOPLE»*

Three years before the turn of the century a military defeat by the Ottoman forces in Thessaly, discredited the Greek state as the sole champion of the Greek nation. Three years after 1900, the dynamic presence of the Bulgarians in Ottoman-held Macedonia convinced the Greeks that the Slavic challenge required a drastic revision of Greek-Turkish relations. Both factors converged in generating a new outlook among the policy-makers of Greece and a new trend in the content of its nationalism.

No other individuals represented the generation that experienced the humiliation of 1897 and the threat of 1903 better than Ion Dragoumis and Athanasios Souliotis-Nicolaidis. A diplomat and an officer of the army, became the harshest critics of the state and eventually attempted to divorce the fate of their nation from what they considered to be the hopeless incompetence of the Hellenic Kingdom. Seeking an alternative to the irredentist spirit which had created 1897, the two men turned to the prosperous Greek millet of the Ottoman realm and deposited their hopes for Hellenism in a multi-ethnic state in which equal rights would be granted to all citizens irrespective of their creed and race.

Ion Dragoumis' idiosyncratic nationalism has not yet been placed in its western context. The offspring of a prominent family that had produced several public figures, he belonged to a social elite whose hallmark was education rather than wealth. He spoke several languages, travelled in western Europe and corresponded with some of the luminaries of his times. An exponent of the Nietzschean revolt against rationalism, Dragoumis in his diaries often refers to Hippolyte Taine, Herbert Spencer and Maurice Barres. The cult of the individual, the veneration of will and power, the primeval struggle for survival and the mystical properties of soil and climate are elements borrowed from his western mentors. Absent from his work are the racial overtones of Barres and his contemporaries.

* Conference on The Social and Economic History of The Greeks in the Ottoman Empire: «The Greek *Millet*. From the Tanzimat to the Young Turks» (Princeton 1989).

Dragoumis instead placed his emphasis on the force of culture as a primary factor determining communal behaviour. Although a critic of western rationalism his nationalist reaction to European influences in Greece was no less a product of the West than a recognition of its positive contribution.

The Macedonian struggle and nationalist strife inspired him with a sense of mission and became his escape route from the inertia and mediocrity of public employment. His intense involvement in Macedonia and his active presence in all national issues however, failed to keep him in tune with his times. He longed for a return to nature in a country that did not suffer from the negative effects of industrialization but from rural underdevelopment. He sought to revive traditions of communal life long ago abolished by the centralising impact of the modern state.

Not unlike the times in which he lived, there is considerable mobility and change in Dragoumis convictions. He began his career, as an exponent of traditional irredentism but gradually began to realise that the strength of the nation was not synonymous with the aggrandisement of the state. His term in Macedonia convinced him that the state he represented was incapable of unifying the imperilled nation and he blamed the «unredeemed» Greeks for expecting everything from Greece. Instead of trying to revive Ancient Greece and the Byzantine empire, he felt that the state ought to frame its boundaries according to the whereabouts of the nation.¹ After 1908 he noted in his diary that «the Great Idea was finally abolished... The political orientation of Hellenism is now the union of the nation in a state more confined than the Byzantine».²

Although it is unclear what Dragoumis meant by a «more confined» state, it is certain that since his Constantinopolitan experience he began to drift closer to Souliotis' multi-ethnic «eastern ideal». He was nevertheless concerned that submitting to a multi-ethnic state would entail the loss of national consciousness exemplified by the «levantine» inhabitants of the Ottoman ports.³

Dragoumis' flight from state-propelled irredentism did not lead him to embrace the spiritual authority of the Constantinopolitan Patriarch as an alternative source of leadership for the Greeks. His regard for the church was limited to a mere cultural affinity, and his secular nationalism was at odds with the ecumenical spirit of the Orthodox Patriarch. «Prelates of the church are not Greeks, they are Christians...»,⁴ he wrote. Whereas Joachim III viewed all the Orthodox people as his flock, Dragoumis as well as Souliotis appeared to believe that the Greeks were more compatible with the Muslim Turks than with the Orthodox Bulgarians.

1. Ion Dragoumis, *Ἡ Ἑλληνισμός μου καὶ οἱ Ἕλληνες*, Athens 1927, p. 118.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

3. Ion Dragoumis, *Ἅλλοι Ζωντανοί*, Athens 1926, pp. 48-58.

4. *Ἡ Ἑλληνισμός*, op.cit., p. 22.

Athanassios Souliotis, an officer with a romantic inclination for adventure, spent most of his years in active service setting up clandestine organizations, first in Thessaloniki⁵ and then in Istanbul. His main preoccupation was with the slavish threat to hellenism and believed that Greeks and Turks could collaborate in a multi-ethnic empire to stem the slavish tide. He was sent to the Ottoman capital early in 1908 by the «Eastern Section» of the «Macedonian Committee»⁶ in Athens, to coordinate Greek activities against the «Bulgarian Committee» in Thrace. That same year the independent —minded officer posing as an insurance dealer, founded with the support of Athens, the «Society of Constantinople», and gradually developed his own blueprint of action.

Although it is certain that during its initial years the S. C. kept the «Eastern Section» posted on all its activities, the official Greek view on relations with the Turks remains unclear. According to the Greek Military Attache in Istanbul, a Greek deputy arrived in 1907 bearing propositions for a Greek-Turkish alliance which however proved without substance.⁷ There is also evidence that during 1907 members of the Young Turks movement as well as officials of the Imperial government, approached Greek diplomats and Orthodox prelates in order to secure support against each other. It appears that the Greeks failed to encourage either side and remained neutral in this conflict between Ottomans.⁸

The S. C. was the hybrid of certain official views in Greece and the initiative of individuals whose perceptions had been formed during the Macedonian struggle. Souliotis cooperated with Dragoumis while the latter was serving in the Greek Embassy of the Ottoman capital. They discovered that they shared their faith in the individual and a dislike for the levelling effect of Socialism. Furthermore they believed that the nation was a catalyst of all social action and an «instrument for the perfection of the individual».⁹ Their relationship with the «Eastern Section» (later «Pahellenic Organization») was smooth. Colonel Danglis admonished them against the use of violence and they managed to allay official fears that they were distributing firearms to their members.¹⁰ Yet they never managed to convince either the Greek Ambassador in Istanbul or the Greek Foreign Ministry that they were not acting on their own initiative.¹¹

5. A. Souliotis-Nicolaidis, *Ὁ Μακεδονιζὸς Ἀγών*, Thessaloniki 1959. «Nicolaidis» was his assumed name.

6. This was a semi-official organization which coordinated the Greek bands of the Macedonian struggle. The eastern section was headed by Colonel P. Danglis. See P. Danglis, *Recollections, Documents, Correspondence*, Vol. I, Athens 1965, pp. 310-311, 328-342.

7. P. Kondoyannis, *Ὁ στρατὸς μας καὶ οἱ Τελευταῖοι Πόλεμοι*, Athens 1924, p. 149.

8. A. J. Panayotopoulos, «Early Relations between the Greeks and the Young Turks», *Balkan Studies* 21/1 (1980), pp. 87-95.

9. Dragoumis, *Ἵσοι ζωντανοί*, p. 81.

10. Danglis, pp. 332-336.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 390-394.

The original mission of the S. C. was to combat the Bulgarian threat in Thracian cities and towns in the Edirne region and diminish its propaganda in areas devoted to the Patriarchate. Souliotis deviation towards the «Eastern» ideal was no doubt caused by the festive spirit that prevailed during the first weeks of the Young Turkish revolution and the promise of a constitutional regime. «The fact that a promise which was not particularly sincere, could cause people of different nations that used to look at each other with suspicion, to fill the streets holding hands, convinced me that nations with so much in common could find ways to cooperate, join forces and live in amity».¹²

The differences between Souliotis and Dragoumis over the nature of a future state to host the Greek nation, were less subtle than their friendship allowed them to appear. Souliotis clearly favoured a merger of the Balkan ethnicities to form a single «eastern not Turkish state».¹³ He went as far as to profess the assimilation of all nations into a new race of «eastern» people defined by the common features of their cultural background.¹⁴ Dragoumis was less enthusiastic with such a prospect. Even when he agreed to consider the possibility of a multi-ethnic state as one of alternative solutions,¹⁵ he maintained that the Greeks would offer their culture as the catalyst in a union of people and would become the heart of a state to include Balkan and Anatolian elements. He insisted that recipients of «Greekness» were all the beneficiaries of the particular culture as well as of the geographic and climatic factors that influenced its development.

According to the two men it would be necessary to persuade the Young Turks to accept the scheme of a state that would guarantee the rights of all ethnicities in the empire. If this failed Souliotis proposed an alignment with other Turks-be they liberal or Moslem in their affiliations. Once differences between ethnic communities were resolved, he felt that the states could begin to merge into federal or confederal entities.¹⁶

Shortly after the proclamation of the Ottoman constitution, Dragoumis and Souliotis sent a letter to Greek Foreign Minister G. Baltatzis, urging him to work towards an alliance with the Ottoman state under the following terms: That Greece would surrender any future claims on Ottoman territory and the Ottoman state would guarantee the rights of Greeks as citizens and as an ethnic community which would be responsible for its own religion and education.¹⁷

12. A. Souliotis-Nicolaidis, *Ἡ Ὀργάνωσις Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, Athens 1984, p. 62.

13. Dragoumis, *op.cit.*, p. 116. See also A. J. Panayotopoulos, «The Great Idea and the Vision of Eastern Federation: A propos of the Views of I. Dragoumis and A. Souliotis-Nicolaidis», *Balkan Studies* 21/2 (1980), pp. 331-365.

14. *Ibid.*

15. The other two being, 1) the expansion of the Greek state, 2) the continuation of the existing state of affairs (*op.cit.*, p. 144).

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 272-273.

Their message received no reply but official relations between the two states improved dramatically in 1908 with exchanges of official visits and the circulation of Hellenic newspapers in Istanbul. Yet this new liberalisation was laden with dangers for the Ottoman Greeks because once they expressed their sentiments towards Greece openly they ran the risk of being accused for lack of dedication to their Ottoman fatherland.

Soon the Cretan issue became a cause of friction between Greece and Turkey and exposed the Ottoman Greeks to abuse by the Turkish authorities. Souliotis who had advised his government to maintain the autonomous status of Crete and discourage pleas for unification with Greece, complained that he was being ignored.¹⁸

The Ecumenical Patriarchate traditionally provided the spiritual leadership for all Greeks in the empire and as «Millet Bashi» the Patriarch continued to feel responsible for their welfare. The institution had never viewed the secularising effect of the nineteenth century Tanzimat reforms with favour and on various instances had come at loggerheads with the priorities of the Greek state. Since the influence of the patriarch diminished with every enlargement of Greece, he had little incentive to identify with Hellenic irredentism.

Joachim III was no ordinary Patriarch. During his first term in office (1878-1884) he had favoured cooperation among the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans and opposed Greece's efforts to mend its differences with the Ottoman empire in order to create a barrier against a Slavic incursion in Macedonia and Thrace. True to his ecumenical mission, Joachim strove to bring the Bulgarian Exarchate (which had unilaterally and hence uncanonically declared its autocephaly in 1870) back into the fold of the Great Church. He thus failed to appreciate the significance of rising Balkan nationalisms and was forced to retire in 1884 after being exposed to official Ottoman displeasure.¹⁹ He ascended his throne again in 1901 and expressed his opposition to the Young Turkish revolt in 1908. Given his past history, it was natural that Joachim should view any secular intrusion into his flock with hostility and even more so by a «society» which he considered an instrument of the Hellenic Kingdom. Souliotis took pains to convince the obstinate prelate that their objectives were complimentary and went out of his way to enhance the Patriarch's image and even to avert demonstrations by Joachim's opponents in the Ottoman Greek community.²⁰ The division of the Greek community of Istanbul into supporters and enemies of Joachim has not been examined adequately but the significance of the phenomenon transcends a mere com-

18. Souliotis, *Όργάνωσις*..., p. 272.

19. Evangelos Kofos, «Patriarch Joachim III (1878-1884) and the Irredentist Policy of the Greek State», *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 4/2, October 1986, pp. 115-118.

20. Souliotis, *op.cit.*, p. 72. The «S.C.» included devoted friends of Joachim such as P. Kosmidis and opponents such as Theocharidis.

munal incident. The seeds of communal disarray were already planted in the late nineteenth century. The intrusion of Greece's policy in the Ottoman realm and the armed struggle in Macedonia among peoples of the same religion, diminished the conciliatory role of the Patriarch and increased the prestige of activist clergymen who upheld their right to promote Greek nationalism over ecumenical orthodox values.

The letters of Chrysostome, Metropolitan of Drama to Ion Dragoumis in 1908 exemplify the most outspoken form of rebellion against the Patriarch and betray Chrysostome's willingness to follow instructions from the «national center» rather than the authority of his canonical superiors in the Church.²¹ Dragoumis replies are unknown to this author but the Metropolitan no doubt assumed that his friend was a loyal servant of the state he represented. Dragoumis loyalty to the state was, at least in philosophical terms, questionable but not his devotion to the nation.

He had a keen eye for spotting elements in Joachim that defied his own nationalist imperatives and made the following observations about the shepherd of the Greek-Orthodox: «He does not identify himself with Hellenism more than it is necessary to secure his high office. He has his own grand priorities. He is the patriarch of the Orthodox and claims all the orthodox flock as his own or would like to dominate it spiritually. He is a Byzantine Greek. In order to maintain himself in his throne he is capable of sacrificing many Greek interests without an afterthought».²²

Thus the antagonism between nationalism and the ecumenical spirit embodied in the institution of the Patriarchate, threatened to divide the Ottoman Greeks even further if it had not been for the Young Turks themselves who unwittingly acted as agents that gradually forced most factions to unite.

It was the intransigence of the CUP which was ultimately responsible for the rapprochement between the Patriarch and the «S. C.». In the summer of 1908 the «S. C.» founded the «Greek Political League» to promote its goals openly and prepare Greeks for the first Ottoman elections in the Autumn of that year. The task of the «League» was to campaign for particular candidates and alert the voters to their rights. Emancipating Ottoman Greeks from the «raya» mentality was no easy task. Moreover backstage scheming and methods of intimidation on the part of the CUP and to a certain degree the compliance of the ethnic communities, resulted in a pre-fabricated electoral outcome.²³ In the course of the elections the «League» succeeded in averting the Ottoman Greek constituency

21. P. Kitromilidis, «Τὸ τέλος τῆς ἔθναρχικῆς παράδοσης», *Ἄμπελος στὴ μνήμη Φώτη Ἀποστολόπουλου*, Athens 1984, pp. 486-507.

22. Ion Dragoumis, *Ὁ Ἑλληνισμὸς μου καὶ οἱ Ἕλληνες 1903-1909*, Athens 1927, p. 120.

23. Souliotis, *op.cit.*, pp. 75-80. See also Noel Buxton, «The Young Turks», *Nineteenth Century*, Jan. 1909.

from abstaining and Joachim declared his detachment and referred representatives of the CUP to the «League» for consultation.²⁴

Out of the 253 deputies in the Ottoman parliament which convened in December 1908, 23 were of Greek ethnic background, 15 of which were members of the «S. C.». They met with Souliotis at his office, or the adjacent offices of the «League» and exchanged views with Dragoumis there until his departure in February 1909. Although both Souliotis and Dragoumis were employed by the Greek State, they could hardly be considered its mouthpiece. The Greek Minister's failure to respond to their advice²⁵ and the candidature of Historian Paul Karolidis as deputy of Smyrna, indicated their declining credit with the national center. A celebrity of Greek Academia, Karolidis became the choice of the Greek Foreign Ministry to represent its views in the Ottoman parliament. Failing to understand Ottoman reality the opinionated and self-centered, Karolidis hardly promoted the ministry's objectives and merely obstructed the work of the «S. C.». At various times he favoured the executive authority of the Sultan, a centralised Ottoman State and the CUP and opposed a Greek-Bulgarian alliance, the formation of a Greek political party in the Ottoman parliament and cooperation with the Liberals.²⁶

There are no indications that the Greek Foreign Ministry had a clear view of the success of the «S. C.» with the upper and middle bourgeoisie of Istanbul. During the first years of its operation, the organization made considerable headway in the middle class community of the Constantinopolitan Greeks, but there is little evidence of its impact on the lower middle class, the working class and the agrarian population. The membership list of the organization (although the profession of more than half of its 370 members is not stated) indicates that the most numerous occupational groups are industrialists and merchants (37), doctors (32), lawyers (21), clergymen (17) and teachers (12). Clerks (10), Pharmacists (5), Journalists (5), engineers (2), coffee-shop owners (3), money lenders (4), sailors (2), bank employees (3), employees in shipping firms (2) and one tailor are the rest of the occupational groups listed.²⁷

Although Dragoumis and Souliotis vision of an Ottoman state in which all ethnic groups would enjoy equal rights, was never developed in theory, it was certainly compatible with Prince Sabaheddin's²⁸ liberal philosophy. In the «Con-

24. Souliotis, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

25. See above.

26. See unpublished paper of Kirki Georgiadou, *Προσέγγιση στη ζωή και το έργο του Παύλου Καρολίδη (1840-1930)*, Thessaloniki 1985. Also P. Karolidis, *Λόγοι και Ύπομνηματα*, Athens 1913.

27. Souliotis, *op.cit.*, pp. 219-230.

28. The son of Damat Mahmut Pasha, brother-in-law of Sultan Abdul Hamid, who fled the empire after failing to convince the sultan to restore the constitution of 1876.

gress of Ottoman Liberals» held in Paris between 4-9 February 1902, he invoked alleged past practises of Ottoman rule to justify his own equalitarian designs²⁹ but his attachment to decentralization and individualism were clearly based on western prototypes. Sabaheddin's «League of Private Initiative and decentralization» would promote the kind of regime that would «assure the rights of Moslem and Christian alike to participate in local government»³⁰. The prospect certainly struck a cord with prominent Ottoman Greeks. As the Committee for Union and Progress made its intention of opposing the rights of the millets increasingly clear, members of the S. C. and the Patriarchate began to close ranks in support of the Liberals and Sabaheddin.

Georgios Skalieris, son of a prominent banker in Istanbul with contacts in Greece, bears evidence of official Greek preference for the Prince. Throughout his correspondence with Stephanos Skouloudis, (former Constantinopolitan banker and later deputy in the Greek Parliament and Prime Minister briefly in 1916) Skalieris insisted that the Liberals and Sabaheddin constituted Greece's best hope for friendly relations with the Ottomans. Although it is unclear if the Greek government responded to Skalieris pleas for financial support to the Liberals, there is little doubt that Skouloudis shared his views fully.³¹ Furthermore in a report to Georgios Streit, prominent Greek banker and politician, Skalieris pointed out that when the Liberal (Ahrar) party was founded in 1908, the government of Theotokis as well as the leaders of the opposition parties, Rallis, Mavromihalis and St. Dragoumis, agreed to support it.³²

The Patriarch who had initially failed to see eye to eye with the S.C. on issues that required rallying the Ottoman Greeks, was eventually obliged to seek the society's support. In July 1910 the Ottoman parliament passed a law concerning the churches of Macedonia which made new concessions to the Bulgarian Exarchate. Joachim responded in anger and summoned a national assembly of Ottoman Greeks to decide on the issue.³³ The assembly lacking official permission was dissolved by the authorities but the incident pushed the Patriarchate further in the direction of political activism. In 1911 an able priest, Chrysanthos Filippidis (later Metropolitan of Trebizond) was appointed director of the Patriarchal Archives and editor of the *Ecclesiastiki Alithia*, a weekly published by the Great Church. Chrysanthos became a close friend of Souliotis and a member of the S. C.³⁴ In this

29. Ernest E. Ramsaur Jr., *The Young Turks. Prelude to the Revolution of 1908*, New York, Russel and Russell, 1970, pp. 66-67.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

31. Correspondence between Georgios Skalieris and Stephanos Skouloudis (1908-1917) *Skouloudis Papers*- The Gennadion Library.

32. Skalieris Report is dated 14 November 1915 – *Skouloudis papers*.

33. Souliotis, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

34. See Souliotis, *op.cit.*, for membership list of the S. C. p. 229.

editorial in the *Ecclesiastiki Alithia* of 10 September 1911, he warned the Ottoman government that the intransigence of the Young Turks and their failure to recognise the rights of the ethnic communities were driving Greeks, Serbs and Bulgars together. He castigated the CUP for following the German rather than the Austrian example of statecraft and predicted that like the Germans of Austria, «the Turks under the pressure of the coalesced ethnicities will feel obliged to recognise their rights».³⁵

The mounting nationalism of the CUP became increasingly evident since 1910. According to British Ambassador Sir Gerald Lowther: «That the Committee has given up any idea of Ottomanizing all the non-Turkish elements by sympathetic and Constitutional ways has long been manifest. To them «Ottoman» evidently means «Turk» and their policy of «Ottomanization» is one of pounding the non-Turkish elements in Turkish mortar...».³⁶

It is clear from the Souliotis papers and correspondence that the plan of cooperating with the other Balkan people to put pressure on the CUP began to acquire momentum in 1910 but his set of priorities did not change:³⁷

1. To persuade the Ottoman Greeks to take full advantage of the Constitution in order to achieve equal political rights with the Turks and to strive to attain positions in the administration of the state in accordance to their numbers in the empire.

2. If that failed, the Greeks should cooperate with the other ethnic communities of the empire and strive to convince the Young Turks to accept them as full citizens and acknowledge their rights as ethnic groups. «If either of the above efforts succeed, an alliance between Greece and Turkey would be possible. This alliance would become the nucleus of a Balkan Federation».³⁸

3. If all else failed, the Balkan states should exert pressure on the Young Turks to recognise the rights of their ethnic brethren. War against the empire would be the last resort of the Balkan states and with the ultimate aim of including it (as well as Romania) in a Balkan federation.

In another point of his manuscript he noted: «The Federation will be to our best advantage if it begins with an alliance between Greece and Turkey. This alliance would be possible if political equality and recognition of their ethnic status is granted to the (Ottoman) Greeks and also if Greece and Turkey truly recognise the autonomous status of Crete».³⁹

35. *Εκκλησιαστική Αλήθεια*, Vol. 31, No. 36, 10 September 1911.

36. Quoted in Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 218-219.

37. Unpublished manuscript in the *Souliotis-Nicolaidis Papers* Dossier No. 5-1 (plus) at the Gennadiou Library in Athens.

38. Souliotis-Nicolaidis papers, *op.cit.*, p. 250 of the manuscript.

39. *Op.cit.*, p. 249a of the manuscript. Souliotes advised Greek officials that the Cretans

The heyday of Souliotis' dream for a multi-ethnic «Eastern Empire» was brief, quickly followed by a period of inflamed and conflicting nationalisms in the Balkans. After the outbreak of the first (18 October 1912) of a series of wars that would change the political map of the region, Souliotis wrote to his lifelong friend, Dragoumis: «Its a pity and a waste of all that we've done».⁴⁰

should abandon unification with Greece and maintain their autonomous status to avoid inflaming relations with the Ottoman empire.

40. Undated letter of Souliotis to Dragoumis —probably written in October 1912. The last in the dossier of their correspondence with the label «Society of Constantinople».