

The Megale Idea  
by James W. Cunningham

Greek Americans were caught up in the trauma of the Balkan Wars, 1912-1914, and the tragedy of World War I. In the Balkan Peninsula World War I lasted from 1914 until 1923, nine destructive years. Many Minnesota Greeks returned to the homeland to fulfill their patriotic duty. Peter Boosalis, president of the Minnesota Pan-Hellenic Union, recruited local volunteers and raised money to equip them and permit them to return home. Fr. Averkios Dimakopoulos, St. Mary's fourth pastor, provided stirring support for their efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Balkan Wars were the result of the long decline of the Ottoman Empire during which the Orthodox Church had kept alive both the religious tradition of the Christian population and their national identities. The Patriarchate of Constantinople had survived within the structure of Ottoman Turkey. The conquering Sultan, Mohammed II (1451-1481) had installed Gennadios Scholarios as Patriarch and Ethnarch over the Roman *milet* in 1454, an ecclesio-political structure that made the Patriarch responsible for the submission and good order of the Christian population. Though this arrangement led to abuse and oppression over the centuries, in the long run it had preserved the Orthodox and had served as the vehicle for their ethnic survival.<sup>2</sup>

That survival permitted the Greek leadership within the Ottoman realm to hope that they would one day recapture control of the Empire, especially after it went into what turned out to be terminal decline in the years 1683-1699. As the decline continued, however, the Empire began to disintegrate. The Greek Revolution, 1821-1832, was a major cause of the disintegration.

With this disintegration of the Empire, a new problem was created for the Orthodox Church -- the problem of "*ethnismos*". There were four significant nationalities in the Balkans who were predominantly Orthodox: The Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs and Rumanians. While all these nationalities competed for territory, it was the Greeks and the Bulgarians who had the largest overlapping territorial ambitions. In this contested area there was one Orthodox Church under the direct control of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople. In effect it was a Greek Church which controlled a mixed population which varied by region from mostly Bulgarian to mostly Greek. In this environment, the Bulgarians wished to use the Church to reenforce the Bulgarian national identity. They wished to establish an autonomous Bulgarian Church for the Bulgarians. Since the Bulgarians and the Greeks were a mixed population, there would have been two Orthodox churches in the same region - one for the Greeks and one for the Bulgarians. The Greeks called this situation *ethnismos*. After World War I, *ethnismos* became a problem for the Orthodox Church in America. But in the last quarter of the nineteenth century it was in the Balkans that Orthodoxy became a factor in the nationality conflicts as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated.

For the Greeks, the hope of taking over the entire Empire was reduced to the *Megale Idea*, the hope that a Greater Greece could be created. It would include Macedonia, the north coast of the Aegean, the city of Constantinople, and a significant portion of the coast of Asia

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<sup>1</sup>Canoutas, *O Ellinismos en Ameriki*, p. 209, 331; Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 533-543; Saloutos, "The Greeks," pp. 478-479; *Consecration Album*, p. 4; Moskos, Greek Americans, pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup>Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 165-207; Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople, 1453* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), pp. 145-191; Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 50-61.

Minor, most especially the area around Smyrna, besides the area that had been liberated during and since the Greek Revolution. These were areas in which Greeks either were the majority population or a substantial minority. The *Megale Idea* was predicated on the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire entirely.<sup>3</sup>

The *Megale Idea* ran into three major obstacles: the Third Rome idea of Russia, the concept of Greater Bulgaria, and Turkish revival. The first two obstacles appeared to be complementary of one another. The Russian idea had its genesis at the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the seizure of Constantinople by Mohammed II. It envisioned Russia's taking Constantinople and restoring the cross to the Hagia Sophia Cathedral which Mohammed had converted into a mosque. As it was elaborated over the centuries it came to include Russian control of the Straits and access to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>4</sup>

Greater Bulgaria evolved from efforts by Bulgarian leaders to secure an autocephalous church, governed by Bulgarians and using their language in the Liturgy. Greek leaders, both in the Ottoman Empire and independent Greece, were adamantly opposed. The Patriarchate initially refused to grant autocephaly, declaring that ethnismos was not a canonical basis for a separate administration. Bulgarian leaders pressed the matter by dropping the Patriarch's name from their Liturgies and substituting that of the Sultan instead. As the movement spread, the Patriarchate offered an autonomous Bulgarian Church in the area that lay between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains. The Bulgarians refused, demanding that areas in Macedonia and south of the Balkan Mountains be included, together with the Bulgarian church in Constantinople. Russian diplomats favored an autocephalous church, but did not wish to antagonize the Patriarchate or Greek leaders.

The Turks favored the autocephalous idea, on the one hand, because it would weaken the Patriarchate and the Greek elements within the Empire, but opposed it, on the other, because an autocephalous Bulgarian Church would become the agency around which Bulgarian nationalists would rally. Bulgarian nationalists, of course, sought an independent Bulgarian state that would include Macedonia and much of the north coast of the Aegean right to the outskirts of Constantinople.

When a Russian brokered plan acceptable to the Patriarchate failed, the Sultan issued a firman in March, 1870, erecting an autocephalous Bulgarian Exarchate. Seventeen dioceses that were predominately Bulgarian passed immediately to the new jurisdiction, while others that had sizable Bulgarian populations could join if two thirds of their inhabitants voted to do so.

The decision had the immediate impact of embittering Bulgarian and Greek relationships - politically and ecclesiastically, weakening the Patriarchate, and deepening Greek suspicions of Russia. Patriarch Gregory VI excommunicated the Exarchate's hierarchy, headed by Metropolitan Ilarion Stoyanovich, and his clergy. The antagonism solidified as the Bulgarians won over several dioceses through the electoral process. As the Exarchate's jurisdiction

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<sup>3</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 162-177, 269-292, 467-468; Runciman, *The Great Church*, pp.360-406; Theodore Saloutos, *The Greeks in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 15-18, 169-176, 183-184.

<sup>4</sup>Sergei M. Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s Drevneishikh Vremen*, Kniga III (Moscow: Izdatai'stvo Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi literatury, 1960), pp. 351-352; W. Bruce Lincoln, *Passage Through Armageddon; The Russians in War and Revolution, 1914-1918* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), pp. 178, 358-360.

expanded, Bulgarian nationalists agitated for a coterminous independent state.<sup>5</sup>

Bulgarian national unity seemed to have been achieved as early as 1878 when Russian forces intervened in the Balkans to prevent large scale massacre of Slavic Christians by the Turks. The Russian army came within a few miles of Istanbul and imposed the severe Treaty of San Stefano upon the Ottomans. Greater Bulgaria was created. It included virtually everything between the Danube, the Black Sea, and the Aegean, including the greater part of Macedonia. Greater Bulgaria appeared to destroy the *Megale Idea*. Not only were Orthodox Greeks deeply disturbed, but so were Orthodox Serbians. Substantial numbers of both ethnic groups lay within the new Bulgarian frontier.<sup>6</sup>

Assuming that Bulgaria was to be a puppet of Russia, the great powers objected and forced the summoning of the Congress of Berlin, June-July, 1878. Bulgaria was carved up. The area north of the Balkan Mountains to the Danube survived, while the area south of the Balkan Mountains was returned to the Turks as a self-governing province, and Macedonia was returned to the Turks outright. No one was happy. The Bulgarians felt betrayed by the Russians. The Greeks and Serbs distrusted the Bulgarians. The *Megale Idea* was frustrated, Greater Bulgaria had been divided, and Russia did not possess Constantinople or the Straits.<sup>7</sup>

In 1885 Bulgarians on both sides of the Balkan Mountains took matters into their own hands and reunited their territories. Serbia tried to seize Macedonia, but was defeated by Bulgaria. The great powers, divided among themselves as to what course of action to take, let the reunion stand while making various weak efforts to appear non-supportive. Russia was embarrassed and was opposed to the reunion. Bulgaria demonstrated that she was not a puppet of Russia. She instead effected a rapprochement with Turkey. The Sultan thereupon transferred more Macedonian dioceses to the Exarchate. The Patriarchate was further weakened and the *Megale Idea* set back.<sup>8</sup>

The Balkan peninsula seethed with discontent. Orthodox ethnic groups longed to see the Turks expelled once and for all, but at the same time deeply distrusted each other. In that context Russian diplomacy skillfully stitched together a series of alliances in the second decade of the twentieth century which were designed to prevent the Orthodox peoples from fighting each other, but to direct their energies against the Turks instead. All Orthodox groups were alarmed at the rise of the Young Turk movement. The Young Turks seized control of Saloniki and Istanbul in 1908, and declared that no more territories would be ceded to the Orthodox states.

With the determined support of Eleutherios Venizelos (1864-1936), popular Prime Minister of Greece, a series of alliances were made in 1912 against outside intervention - meaning Turkey and Austria primarily - while the various territorial and church jurisdiction disputes were left to the future. Russian diplomacy also tried to reassure Austria that her interests in the area would not be overlooked. Collectively the alliances of the Balkan states

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<sup>5</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 366-375; Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar; The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 401-410.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 410-412.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 425-447, 521-524.

resulted in the Balkan League. Russia quickly discovered that the League would not be a tool of a major power's foreign policy despite Russian and Austrian efforts to control it.<sup>9</sup>

The Turks, faced with political dissension in their own ranks and the threat of an Arab insurrection in the Middle East, were no match for their enemies when the First Balkan War broke out in October 1912. Greeks and Serbs invaded Macedonia, crushing the Turks between them and western Thrace while the Bulgarians swept through Eastern Thrace towards Constantinople. The Treaty of London, May, 1913, saw Ottoman Turkey eliminated from Europe, save for the city of Istanbul and its immediate environs. Greece acquired Crete, Venizelos' home island, pushed her borders up into Epirus and Macedonia, and acquired Saloniki. The *Megale Idea* was alive and well.<sup>10</sup>

The postponed deliberations now became an immediate crisis. Several territorial disputes, mainly over Macedonia, brought Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria into conflict. Venizelos was able to work out Greece's differences with Serbia, but neither Greece nor Serbia could come to an agreement with Bulgaria. Neither could Romania over the Dobruja. Greece, Serbia, and Romania believed that Bulgaria should yield in Macedonia and the Dobruja because she had gotten more than she expected in Eastern Thrace. Bulgaria did not think so. She believed she should have most, if not all, of Macedonia, together with Saloniki and its hinterland. Russia warned Bulgaria to be moderate, but was ignored.

The Second Balkan War broke out in late June, 1913, when Bulgarian troops attacked Serbian and Greek forces in Macedonia. Romania attacked Bulgaria in the Dobruja and the Turks attacked in Eastern Thrace. The war was over within a month. Bulgaria was defeated. She lost most of Macedonia, most of the Dobruja, and most of Eastern Thrace.<sup>11</sup>

Minnesota Greeks, like their countrymen from around the United States, had flocked to aid their motherland in these struggles. Up to 3000 were reported ready to return home from Minnesota; 45,000 departed nationwide. In Minnesota their departure shrank the size of the Greek communities in the Twin Cities and Duluth while smaller groupings of Greeks in other communities virtually disappeared.<sup>12</sup>

The Balkan Wars led directly to World War I. Austrian fears that Slavic agitation would cause the empire to disintegrate, plus suspicions that Russia stood to gain most from whatever happened in the Balkans, together with Serbian frustrations and ambitions, led to the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, June 28, 1914, and Austria's declaration of war against Serbia, July 28. The arrangements of the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente went automatically into effect and general war ensued.<sup>13</sup>

Disenchanted, Bulgaria joined Turkey on the German-Austrian side of the conflict. Greece wavered as to which side she should support. King Constantine (1868-1923) whose

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 474-477, 524-535.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 535-537.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 537-543.

<sup>12</sup>Saloutos, "The Greeks," pp. 478-479; Saloutos, *Greeks in the United States*, pp. 111-117; Canoutas, *O Ellinismos en Ameriki*, p. 202; Moscos, pp.31-33.

<sup>13</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 545-556; H. W. Koch, *The Origins of the First World War* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1972).

queen, Sophia, was a sister of Kaiser Wilhelm II, wished either to remain neutral or to enter the war on Germany's side. His brother-in-law put great pressure on him to join the Austro-German side. Eleutherios Venizelos, on the other hand, remembered that Russia and Great Britain had guaranteed Greek independence and anticipated that Germany and Austria would be defeated. He wished to support the allies. The *Megale Idea*, particularly acquisition of Eastern Thrace and Constantinople, would be served if Greece were on the winning side.<sup>14</sup>

The Greek dream ran headlong into conflict with the Russian dream. Russia opposed Greek intervention, especially in the Dardanelles expedition, because she did not want Greek forces in Constantinople. Russia's Third Rome aspirations would be frustrated. It took until 1917 for Venizelos and the Allies to get Greece into the War, at the price of forcing Constantine to abdicate.<sup>15</sup>

When the War ended, the Treaty of Sevres granted Eastern Thrace and Smyrna and its environs to Greece, thanks to the persuasive diplomacy of Venizelos. Constantinople and the Straits were to be demilitarized, but left to the Turks because the new Bolshevik regime had repudiated Russia's claims. The *Megale Idea* seemed close to fulfillment.

It failed, however, thanks to the charisma and leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938), one of the leaders of the Young Turk revolt of 1908. The Young Turks finally destroyed the *Megale Idea*. Trained by German advisors who restructured the Turkish army, Kemal took advantage of the panic that swept the Turkic population when the Ottoman Empire finally collapsed and it appeared that Turkey might vanish altogether. A new nationalism, as fiercely anti-Greek as the old Ottoman loyalties had been, united the Turks in the early 1920s. By September 1922, the Greek army had been driven out of the Smyrna enclave and Eastern Thrace. The Treaty of Lausanne, July 1923, undid the Treaty of Sevres and permitted Turkey to remilitarize the Straits and Constantinople. A codicil to Lausanne provided for an exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey. Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace were denuded of their Greek population, while Macedonia and Western Thrace saw a substantial reduction in Turkic inhabitants.

The *Megale Idea* was dead.<sup>16</sup> The eleven year turmoil, 1912-1923, reverberated among Minnesota Greeks. St. Mary's parish was divided among those who supported republican forces and Prime Minister Venizelos and those who supported royalist forces and King Constantine. Divisions in Greece were reflected among Greek Americans. Two Greek language newspapers, the *Atlantis* and *Ethnikos Kyrix* (National Herald), supported different sides. *Atlantis* supported King Constantine, while *Ethnikos Kyrix* supported Venizelos. Feelings became particularly tense, during and after the defeat in Asia Minor and the collapse of the *Megale Idea*, when the partisans of each side blamed the leadership of the other for the debacle.

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<sup>14</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 542, 566-568.

<sup>15</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 557-560; Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801-1917* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 706-708; Lincoln, *Passage Through Armageddon*, pp. 358-359.

<sup>16</sup>Stavrianos, *The Balkans*, pp. 582-592; Runciman, *The Great Church*, pp. 407-412; Papaioannou, *From Mars Hill*, pp. 47-48.