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“Wreath, Anchor and Guns”. The Greek Army voting in 1920

The Greek elections of 1920 are one of the rare cases in history when national elections took place amidst conflict, namely, the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922. Resulting in the defeat of then Premier Venizelos, the elections took place while the National Schism between Liberals and their pro-Royalist opponents was at its height. Consequently, the elections have featured prominently in the collective memory and historiography of the Asia Minor Catastrophe. Ever since the war ended and the Venizelists returned to power, the elections became a convenient excuse to justify why a war that was going well until 1920 ended up a catastrophe. For them, one of the main reasons for the war's outcome was the return of Royalists to power and the subsequent changes in the manning of almost every branch of the Greek state apparatus. This view was established during the Trial of the Six and was then perpetuated in the pro-Venizelist historiography acquiring the status of a historical truth. But if that was true, how did an army, which was already since 1917 a reflection of a politically torn country, manage to maintain cohesion and fight for two more years rather than dissolve amidst internal strife? This paper questions the place of the elections in established historiography and reconsiders their importance by looking at them from the army's point of view. Based on the archives of the Army History Directorate, I initially examine the army's electoral involvement and behavior, the criteria with which they voted and the nature and extent of the changes the Royalists implemented. Then, I draw from untapped ego-documents to discuss how soldiers and officers experienced the electoral process and received the changes. Since it was the officer corps that mostly witnessed the changes, focusing on their testimonies not only allows for a better understanding of the extent of the changes but also allows for an “in-between” perspective. The officers acted as the intermediaries between rank-and-file soldiers and the higher leadership, and this position is reflected in their testimonies.

Via this combined approach, I argue that the changes in personnel were much less sweeping than historiography assumes and that the basic structure of the army remained intact. The army remained cohesive - although the experience of the elections greatly varied - largely because both Liberal and Royalist officers tried for the most part to keep political antagonism from the army and because some changes, such as the reinstatement of King Constantine even had an overall positive reception. I suggest that despite the deep cleavage and the violent persecution of anti-Venizelist officers in the preceding years, the “Great Idea” was still an ideology able to motivate the force. A socio-cultural approach on the interaction between politics and the military then, not only challenges the long-established argument according to which, the “extreme” changes after the elections ultimately proved fatal for the Greek army but, more importantly, it puts into question why a process of de-Venizelizing the Greek army was not as disruptive as the opposite process in 1917.

Ioannis Papadimitriou is a PhD candidate in History at Royal Holloway University of London. His previous MA in Turkish studies (SOAS, University of London) and BA in History and Archaeology with an emphasis on New Military History (University of Ioannina) has led him to undertake research on the cultural history of the Greek Turkish war of 1919-1922. Interested in new approaches and methodologies implemented in works pertinent to the “Greater War”, he works with ego-documents to trace the experience of soldiers and officers who took part in that conflict. He is equally interested in situating the conflict in the wider post-WWI period. His wider interests revolve around the study, approach and teaching of Military History as well as Art History. In particular, the utilisation of artworks as a historical source has been a constant theme in his previous research. Papadimitriou is a prolific historian with an uninterrupted record of studies, poised to continue contributing his knowledge to the general and academic public, acting as a bridge between contemporary worlds and the -often obscure - past.