

**Eleftherios Venizelos Agonistes:  
A Study in Cretan Leadership (1864–1910)**

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In memory of my friend  
and colleague, George Pilitsis,  
a Venizelist at heart.

I

In an open memorandum to King Constantine I, famous for its literary style rather than for its political impact, the well-known Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos reveals the agony and the soul-searching of the political right which, after the 1922 Greek debacle in Asia Minor, was still looking for the mythical Ulysses to deliver Greece to its "true spirit." This Ulysses was often seen in the embodiment of the king, while his opponent, Eleftherios Venizelos, was pictured as a man who, having sold his soul to the West, would deliver Greece to foreign domination, an outcome alien in spirit to what the right in Greece would consider as the just solution. To Sikelianos, Venizelos was

ὁ ἐπιτήδειος ἄνθρωπος, ὁποῦ στήν ἀλλαγὴ  
τοῦ κοσμικοῦ του πλαίσιου, ὅταν ξαφνικά ἀπὸ  
βρακοφόρος ἐβαφτίστη, φρακοφόρος, δὲ θὰ δίσταζε  
νά πνίξει ἢ νά πουλήσει καὶ τὴν ἴδια του μητέρα... ὁ  
ταπεινὸς ἀριβιστής, τὸ χάσμα τῶν διπλωματῶν τῆς  
Δύσης, ἢ ἐγγύηση τοῦ ὀριστικοῦ ἠθικοῦ θανάτου

τῆς Ἑλλάδας... ὁ ἄνθρωπος αὐτός ἐπροσπαθοῦσε  
νά ὑποτάξει τὴν Ἑλλάδα, αἰχμάλωτο τῆς Δύσης...  
καί νά τήνε παραδώσει... στό ὕστερο συμπόσιο  
τῶν φριχτῶν τῆς συφιλιδικῶν μνηστήρων καί  
ὕβριστῶν.<sup>1</sup>

In sharp contrast, the well-known critic George Katsimbalis quoted Periklis Yannopoulos, the young nationalist poet of the turn of the century, as having said to him in 1910 that

αὐτόν ἐδῶ, τόν νεοφερμένο Κρητικό, πρέπει νά  
τόν προσέξουμε πάρα πολύ. Ἦτανε κάτι ἄλλο,  
ἐντελῶς διαφορετικό ἀπό ὅλους τοὺς ἄλλους...  
τώρα πού ἦρθε αὐτός, ἐμένα πιά δέν μέ χρειάζεται  
ὁ Ἑλληνισμός. Γιατί ἐγώ, μονάχα διακηρύξεις ξέρω  
νά κάνω, ἐνῶ αὐτός ξέρεي νά φτιάχνει πράγματα  
καί νά τὰ πραγματοποιεῖ... ἐγώ εἶμαι πιά περικτὸς  
καί ἴσως βλαβερὸς γιὰ τό ἔθνος, μιά πού ἦρθε  
ἐκεῖνος.<sup>2</sup>

Periklis Yannopoulos committed suicide a week later, in April 1910.

These two startling quotations may serve as a warning to any biographer of Eleftherios Venizelos, the Greek statesman who lived between 1864 and 1936. Still, the life of Venizelos is a biographer's dream, a rare combination of political genius, personal magnetism, luck, audacity, success and failure, intermingled with the hero-worship of his numerous supporters and the often violent hatred of his equally numerous opponents; a small-town rugged life in the rough mountains of Western Crete, during revolt; the adulation of world statesmen at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919; the ups and downs of a politician's career, of a man – really an outsider – elected to the highest office in 1910 and defeated at the polls ten years later, after the preparation and signing of the most successful treaty in the history of Greece. A man who barely escaped two assassination attempts but whose photograph was placed next to icons in the homes of his

Cretan friends.

With the possible exception of Ioannis Capodistrias, the first President of Greece, there has, perhaps, been no personality in modern Greek history as enigmatic and controversial as that of Venizelos. Neither his contemporaries nor later historians have been able to agree on his character, his aims, or even the degree of success that he achieved in pursuing his objectives. It is easy to discount the more extreme verdicts, colored as they are by political bias, if not fanaticism, but it remains difficult to interpret a political leader, especially in his early stages of development, when his record is so inconsistent and his policies apparently – if not actually – contradictory. The contradiction in Venizelos' impressive career is that he was alternatively an audacious revolutionary and a thorough constitutionalist, liberal by education and principles, but intolerant by temperament, a popular agitator and a sober statesman, an outlaw and a prime minister. Venizelos was a man who started his political career as a revolutionary in a revolutionary situation and, having gained most of his political objectives by revolutionary means, was to become eventually a symbol of representative democracy; a man, however, who forever kept the option of revolt as an alternative to persuasion and majority support from Kania to Therisso, from Athens to Thessaloniki.

To most, Venizelos is known as the leader of the Greek Liberal Party, as the prime minister of Greece between 1910 and 1920, and again in 1928–1932, and as the statesman who succeeded in modernizing his country and expanding its frontiers subsequent to the Balkan Wars and the First World War. It is less known, though, that long before becoming Prime Minister of Greece, Venizelos proved a first-rate lawyer, a fiery journalist, a man of action “defying the consuls and the fleets of Europe in Akrotiri” – in the picturesque phrase of a foreign observer<sup>3</sup> – a politician capable of forming a popular party and of carrying out far-reaching policies, a bold Cretan



chieftain acting decisively, dramatically and effectively for the liberation of his native island of Crete from Turkish domination, and for its union to Greece. In short, a fighter, a reformist, a leader.

The relevance of Venizelos' Cretan year to his later career, especially in matters of the dynamics of leadership in an important frontier region of unredeemed Hellenism on the eve of its self-determination, has not been adequately recognized by historians and political scientists. They seem to forget that Venizelos was already forty-six years old when, in 1910, he was launched in his political career in mainland Greece. We can then suppose that the attitudes, beliefs, work habits and policies he would follow for the rest of his life were already formed to a very large extent in the battleground of Cretan politics. Not even his Cretan biographers – or shall we say hagiographers – have attempted to convey the atmosphere and background of Venizelos' early life. Yet Venizelos was very much a man of his times and place, a product of his national and social milieu. At the time of his birth, Crete was experiencing a national revolution and the Cretan patriotic elite to which his family belonged were providing the national movement with important leaders. Venizelos grew up in an atmosphere of uncertainty and continuous anxiety. His family and their group of fellow-citizens in the city of Khania and all over Crete were marked by militant attitudes and hatred deriving from a long period of Ottoman rule and continuous revolutions. The desire of every Christian in Crete was to revolt and bring about union of the island with the free kingdom of Greece.<sup>4</sup> As a child, Venizelos witnessed revolts, exiles, massacres, the tremendous financial sacrifices and the fanatic patriotism – with undertones of obsession – of his family and other members of the rising Cretan bourgeois class – merchants, doctors, lawyers – and also of chieftains, rough mountaineers and plain peasants, and men of ὁρθή ψυχή (as Pandelis Prevelakis calls them), who were ready

to fight and die for one goal: to free Παντέρμη Κρήτη.<sup>5</sup> These men were hoping for an intervention from the Greek mainland and for the help of the Great Powers which, with variant interests in the matter, were cajoling or threatening the Cretans through their consuls and other agents in the island.

## II

In a sense though, Venizelos was a privileged child, because he was born into a special historic opportunity. A young man able to exploit popular grievances without losing sight of broader horizons could hope to make his way almost as rapidly in Crete, and eventually in Greece, as another young provincial of genius had done in late revolutionary France. Consequently, to understand the career of Venizelos and the conditions that prepared him for leadership, one has to observe the world of his native Crete, the world of "this unique race, unyielding as a copper engraving,"<sup>6</sup> and to understand "the responsibility to be a Cretan," as only Kazantzakis and Prevelakis did. One should also place the famous Cretan Question – that is, the desire of the Cretans to achieve «Ἐνωσις», union with Greece – within the framework of Greek politics at the time, and within the broader problems of the Eastern Question and the aspirations of the Great Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean. In short, to make it possible for the personal factor to become historically important, one has to delve into these linkages and the interactions of the personality with the social environment and the political situation.

As a biographer one must also recognize the modern explorations of the unconscious, which have opened up new, although ambiguous, provinces for biographical knowledge. For example, Erik Erikson's psychohistorical approach can be useful, if used with caution.<sup>7</sup> It shows us the structure of



aspiration in the formative years of Venizelos, his so-called "psychosocial identity" – who and what he was, his goals, his beliefs about what he could, should and would achieve – or his personal myth. Obviously, such a novel and exciting approach offers dangers and pitfalls since by concentrating so much of our attention upon the personality of Venizelos, we may in effect convey a simplified picture of the part this factor played in influencing the course of his island's history. Yet we cannot disregard the vital role that Venizelos' charisma and heroic leadership played at this particular time and place. I also believe that we cannot disregard the legend of Venizelos, which is as important as the reality. For many, Venizelos was and still is the hero-leader who was able to convert personal followings into new political movements and durable programs by combining charismatic qualities with ideological commitment. So, in the case of Venizelos, it is difficult to follow the usual approach of biographers who try to sublimate any inspired sense of history to a desire to be dispassionate at all costs. Venizelos' image is black or white, never grey. These *μαντινάδες* illustrate the point:

Ὅτι στό κόσμο γεννηθῇ ἔχει ἀρχή καί τέλος  
Ἐνα θά μείνῃ ἀθάνατο – ὁ γέρο-Βενιζέλος

Ἀπ' ὅλα τ' ἄστρα τ' οὐρανοῦ τό πιό μεγάλο ἀστέρι  
ἀστράφτει κί ἀχτινοβολεῖ στό τάφο τοῦ Λεφτέρη

Σ' τεῖα μέ τό Κορνάρο σου  
Κάστρο μέ τή Κνωσσό σου  
Ρέθεμνο μέ τ' Ἀρκάδι σου  
Χανιά μέ τό Θεό σου<sup>8</sup>

In preparing the portrait of the Venizelos of the Cretan years I had to rely, in part, on conventional sources: state archives, newspaper articles, periodical literature. But in order to understand the real Venizelos, the Cretan chief and leader,

in order to understand Crete ἐκ τῶν ἑνδόν, I inverted the usual order which places special emphasis on foreign reports and official papers and instead concentrated on two basic but rather untapped areas, Venizelos' own writings and his collaborators' accounts.<sup>9</sup>

Venizelos' writings are numerous and extremely revealing. They consist of his informal diary and notes, which are housed in the Benaki Museum,<sup>10</sup> a short but incisive essay on the abortive Cretan revolt of 1889,<sup>11</sup> his speeches in the Cretan assembly,<sup>12</sup> his legal briefs between 1888 and 1910,<sup>13</sup> his editorials in the Cretan newspapers,<sup>14</sup> as well as in some Athenian newspapers,<sup>15</sup> his correspondence with his father during his childhood and adolescence, and his prolific letter-writing to friends and collaborators.<sup>16</sup>

Nowhere better than in these letters – directives to collaborators would be the better description – written in his free-flowing longhand writing, can one see Venizelos' integration into his age and his society – a mind at work amid the sort of problems it enjoys. One should certainly rely on these notes and letters when building the story of his early life. They provide many missing facts and show Venizelos in action as a shrewd observer of persons and events, and in his true associations with his trusted Cretan friends: people like Klearkhos Markandonakis, his alter ego; Yiannos Iliakis, his law partner and later coeditor; Ioannis Sfakianakis, his old mentor; Vassilis Skoulas, his confidant and personal doctor, and many others including Nikos Pistolakis, Spiros Moatsos, Kostis Fournis, Kostas Mitsotakis, the Kolokythas family, the Moundakis family; people who, in fact, exercised more power and influence than previously suspected. These letters and notes provide the historian with an inside story never committed to official documents, and they give clues to the distinctive leadership qualities that distinguished Venizelos from alternate leaders on his native island who were better known and better connected than he was at the time.



Most significantly, in researching Venizelos I relied heavily on oral history; that is, interviews with members of the Venizelos family and friends whose parents or relatives had been close to Venizelos (since his own collaborators are a rapidly passing group). I also interviewed families who had opposed him – pro-Prince George, anti-Venizelist families such as the Mikhelidakis family from Iraklion. Although highly partisan and varying in quality, these testimonies can be used constructively after much weeding and a careful cross-checking of the information. All these people supplied me with the base material, material that gave, in Catherine Bowen's terms, "the proof of life,"<sup>17</sup> and which provides the βίωμα of the man, his idiosyncracies, his habits, his human needs and limitations, his small oddities and manners, even his legend – all invaluable ingredients to any biographer.

It is based on this material and on some more recent monographs and memoirs<sup>18</sup> that a critical and balanced biography of the early Venizelos is now more or less possible, including all the "hells and damns," as Whitman would say.

### III

Venizelos' Cretan political career started in 1889 and ended in 1910 when he completed his difficult march to political supremacy in Crete and won recognition from the Greeks on the mainland.<sup>19</sup> Yet his political thinking and actions in Crete cannot be viewed in isolation, since they were strongly influenced by his other two early careers in law and in journalism. The study of these dual careers has been generally neglected, since his legal and journalistic work is not as accessible or as glamorous as his political activities. It is then interesting to explore them, since the qualities required in political writing and legal analysis added to Venizelos' intellectual development and helped in the crystallization of his ideas in ways that are quite discernible in his later political

career.

Venizelos opened his law firm in Khania in 1888, after returning to Crete at the end of his law studies at the University of Athens. He soon became one of the best lawyers in town and won a large clientele among both Christians and Moslems, a rather unusual phenomenon in Turkish-occupied Crete.<sup>20</sup> His success as a lawyer is attested by his numerous briefs and legal documents – over four thousand – that one can study in various archives and libraries in Athens and Khania.<sup>21</sup> These documents show an acute analytical intelligence and a solid legal knowledge coupled with a perceptive political judgment of liberal, if not reformist, leanings. Although he never offered a systematic explanation of his legal views, Venizelos, in his various law cases and commentaries on laws, appears to have been deeply committed to the idea that law must serve the changing interests of society. The desire to protect the individual against the arbitrariness of government appears with great frequency in his legal work. Time and again he reiterated his conviction that the rule of law is the best means for the substitution of physical force with special legal rules conceptually accepted by the citizen.<sup>22</sup> In this he followed the liberal-minded lawyers and politicians of his time, a fact that shows that, despite his daily preoccupations with legal cases and tribunals, and despite the fact that he was not able to study abroad, Venizelos always sought to be up-to-date with contemporary international legal thought. In scanning his personal library, now located in the public library of Khania, one is amazed at the amount of reading he had done, attested by his marginalia in legal books and in books on political theory, from Aristotle to Pareto. He was also fully aware of the intellectual currents in Europe, while his knowledge and love for Greek poetry and literature was excellent.<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that Venizelos' legal preparation and the experience he had in an active law career were of great



help to him in his political life, both in Crete during his short but brilliant performance as Councilor of Justice, and later in Greece. His experience as a lawyer and as a jurist strengthened his grasp of public affairs, gave him an inside view of how the government worked and helped him develop habits of responsibility and decision.

As one of the publishers of the liberal local newspaper *Λευκά Όρη* (White Mountains) a paper founded by his brother-in-law Kostas Mitsotakis, Venizelos was also preoccupied with his second career: journalism. He contributed many editorials on political and financial topics. In this capacity he quickly earned a wide reputation as an outspoken critic of Turkish policies in Crete, but also as a critic of Cretan factionalism. Since these editorials are the precursors of his Cretan policies, they are of great value to us.<sup>24</sup> Venizelos wrote both as a teacher and as a reformer trying to educate Cretans in political affairs, while simultaneously spelling out the priorities for Crete in the near future: "the development of the moral and material forces of the Cretan people and the end of party infighting with an ultimate goal: the Union of Crete with Greece."<sup>25</sup>

Time and again in his articles, Venizelos returned to the theme of reconciliation and peace on the island with the ultimate goal of enosis. He never tired of insisting on the need for harmony between the Christians and the Moslems of the island, a rather bold and controversial stand in those days of political butchery and violent nationalism. Many of these articles are low-key, well-argued expositions on specific internal and international problems, while others are polemical and full of emotional patriotism.<sup>26</sup>

It is strange that those who have written on Venizelos have failed to emphasize the extraordinary precocity in his legal activities and the informed outlook which he exhibited in his editorials. They have tended instead to interpret his career as a gradual evolution from that of a narrow Cretan provincial

environment to that of cosmopolitan statesmanship. This interpretation is false. Venizelos started with a broad outlook and with a number of basic concepts and ideological positions which he expressed in his legal briefs and in his newspaper editorials. These remained remarkably constant throughout his life. As he began his law practice simultaneously with the practice of political journalism, the techniques and interests in one field favorably reinforced the other. It is then virtually impossible to separate Venizelos the lawyer from Venizelos the political analyst. The two overlap, mainly because purposeful breaches of the law and editorial polemics were regarded in Crete as acts of political defiance; well publicized and successful pleading on behalf of some patriotic Christian or well-reasoned unionist positions could rapidly propel an attorney and journalist to the status of a hero in Crete.

By the spring of 1889, at the age of twenty-four, and with only one year's standing as a lawyer and journalist, Venizelos took a big step in practical politics: He contested the province of Kidhonia for the Liberal Party in the Cretan general elections of April 1889 and won the election. This was the beginning of his active participation in the political and national movement of his country and added a third profession to the two others he was already practicing.

#### IV

The entrance of Venizelos into the active politics of his island came at a difficult time. Following the Cretan Revolt of 1866-69, the Sultan had granted the Cretans the Organic Statute, which freed them from heavy taxation and which introduced a comprehensive system of administration. In October 1878 and in response to new pressures from the Christians, the Organic Statute was amended under the Pact of Khalepa to become a much more equitable system of administration for the Cretans.<sup>27</sup>



The political thought of Venizelos was nurtured in the post-Khalepa period that saw the gradual solution to the Cretan Question. As Venizelos reflected in his manuscript on the 1889 revolution and as we can follow in the interesting memoranda that Gryparis, Greek consul in Crete, addressed to Stefanos Dragoumis,<sup>28</sup> the then-Greek foreign minister, four elements characterized the post-Khalepa period:

1. Turkey showed a reluctance to implement the Khalepa Pact;<sup>29</sup>
2. The Cretan parties started intensely infighting;<sup>30</sup>
3. The Greek government and the Greek parties played an increasingly important role in directing Cretan affairs and policy;<sup>31</sup>
4. The Great Powers' positions vis-à-vis Crete was confused and confusing.<sup>32</sup>

In the short-lived Cretan Assembly of 1889, we see Venizelos give his first fights and first speeches as the representative of the moderate wing of the Liberal Party, the Λευκορεότες. He is the superbly-trained young lawyer, arguing the cases one by one, elucidating procedural matters, carefully trying to follow the letter of the law and to educate his colleagues in democratic procedures, even if this meant siding with the conservatives at times.

The role of Venizelos in the series of intricate and interlocking steps by which Crete passed from Ottoman domination to autonomy and then to union with Greece, has been alternatively praised and criticized. To some, his policies seem inconsistent, if not ruthless; to others they look original and farsighted. This is due to a basic misunderstanding and a lack of distinction between his strategy and his tactics. Viewed as a strategist, Venizelos has always been consistent: his main aim was to fulfill the national aspirations of the Cretans, i.e. union, *ένωσις*, with Greece. He never wavered from this position whether explaining it to Joseph Chamberlain<sup>33</sup> in 1886 as a twenty-two-year-old law student, or stating it in

the first issue of his newspaper Λευκά Όρη.<sup>34</sup>

He comes back to this point in his essay on the 1889 revolt where he reiterates that, "It is well known that as concerning their national aspirations, the Cretans always wanted national liberation and they are willing to fight and die for it."<sup>35</sup>

Time and again in his articles and in his speeches as a rookie politician in 1889, he returned to this point – *ένωσις* – which he considered basic to a final solution for Crete. Later, he proved his belief in that policy as a fighter in Akrotiri in 1897,<sup>36</sup> while a member, and later the president, of the Revolutionary Assembly that followed the Akrotiri revolt,<sup>37</sup> and also with his participation in the revolt of Therisso in 1905.<sup>38</sup>

So Venizelos' objective in Crete was clear: first, Cretan liberation and then union with Greece. How this was to be achieved, and by whom, was the real question. In this, Venizelos confused both his friends and his critics with his equivocations, his constant policy shifts and his apparent indecision. In 1889, his advice was caution: the Cretans should first seek economic development while acquiring political maturity and then, seek liberation. In 1895, he wanted out: he did not take part in the Koundouros movement. Then, suddenly, he appears in 1897 as the uncompromising unionist and as the fighter in Akrotiri, as a rabblouser and agitator, confusing the plain fighters with his complicated reasoning. He even appeared an unlikely-looking insurgent – dissonant – as he was so well described by Pandelis Prevelakis in his superb trilogy, *Ο Κρητικός* ("The Cretan").<sup>39</sup> Introducing Venizelos in his first entrance as a young leader, he writes:

Τί ήθελε; τί γύρευε; δέ θάξερε κανείς νά πει.  
Είταν ένας παράξενος, σάν έξωμερίτης, ανάμεσα  
στούς Κρητικούς. Τά ρούχα του τά Φράγκικα, τά  
ματογυάλια του, ή ψιλή φωνή του, τόν ξεχώριζαν  
άπό κείνους... μόνο άν έκανε νά σαλέψη, νά τηδήση  
...γνώριζες τή φυλή του, ξεχνούσες τά φράγκικα



καί τά γυαλιά, κι ἔβλεπες ποῦθε γονοκρατιόταν  
κεῖνος ὁ γατόπαρδος, ποῦχε τά μουστακόγενια  
σγουρά καί τά μάτια γαλανά.<sup>40</sup>

The contradictions in Venizelos' policies are not surprising, however, given his intellectual makeup, his education and his legal training. The continuous corrections to his policies which were considered by his opponents as erratic behavior were, in effect, only tactical corrections. Perhaps these constant changes in tactics were more rapid than his people and the other Cretan leaders could accommodate. Probably he was too impatient to explain these changes clearly to them, to tolerate slowwittedness. They could not grasp his dual approach – guns and negotiations, (“ντουφέκι καί παζάρι”) – and so started singing in their *mantinades*,

ἀλλά-λεγεσ ἀλλά 'κανες, ἀλλά-πες κι ἄλλα κάνεις  
ἄλλα λογιάζεις κι ἄλλα λές κι ἄλλα στό νοῦ σου  
βάνεις<sup>41</sup>

Yet these were not haphazard changes, attributed to his mercurial character, as his opponents suggested, or due to his hunger for power, his duplicity, or his hysteria (although we must admit that Venizelos looks at this stage in life to be a high-strung young man, stubborn, impatient and a poor loser).

Most probably the changes in his policies and in his thinking, especially between 1897 and 1908, resulted from the pressure to respond to the necessity of the moment and from his will to dominate a situation by flexible tactics, while always remaining inflexible in his purposes.

“Modifying the details, but not changing the ideals.”<sup>42</sup> Such modifications resulted from his tremendous capacity for reassessing situations as they were developing and changing, and were due to the continuous updating of his facts, to his uncanny capacity to gather, sift and use information in an effective way. As a true lawyer, he felt a professional need to

satisfy himself that a powerful argument could be constructed and presented for the problem at hand. We see this in 1897, in his dealing with the admirals of the Great Powers,<sup>44</sup> in his argumentation in the famous series of the newspaper *Κῆρυξ* (Herald) between 1901 and 1902,<sup>45</sup> where, after being dismissed by Prince George as an alleged anti-unionist, he elucidates his position by presenting a conceptual basis for his political actions.

But few understood him and few followed him then. He was still the heretic, the rowdy outsider. Even Prince George of Greece, the High Commissioner in Crete, never understood his position. It was not a matter of feigning; the Prince was just not able to follow the subtle distinction Venizelos was making between the ongoing autocratic, dynastic government in Crete under foreign tutelage and the complete autonomy, free of foreign interference, with a governor appointed by the Greek government that Venizelos was advocating as the best step toward the achievement of ἔνωσις.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the Prince's strong opposition to him.

It is remarkable that the foreign representatives and foreign correspondents on the island, who were in close contact with Venizelos since his early days in Khalepa, were able to understand and interpret his policies to their home governments. People like Dillon and Bouchier, the famous correspondents of the London Times, the Dutch journalist van der Brule, the consuls of France and England, Blanc and Graves, and later Maurouard and Howard, and even Colonel Lubanski, the commander of the French forces during the Therisso revolt, indicated in their reports a clear understanding and a high degree of esteem for Venizelos, although in many instances they disagreed with his policies.

Blanc writes of Venizelos, “Today, I talked to one of the counselors of the Prince, who is my personal friend and whom I consider as an extremely intelligent and serious person.”<sup>46</sup> Adds Lubanski in 1906, “I don't think that Venizelos wears



a mask dissimulating hidden thoughts. His program and his conduct are simple and easy to define, he desires annexation but without impatience."<sup>47</sup>

Contrary to the widely-held suspicion, that Venizelos was the spokesman – if not the “tool” – of the Great Powers in Crete, these reports and Venizelos’ correspondence indicate that the contrary is true: that it was the Great Powers who were often influenced by the ideas and policies of Venizelos and that, in fact, it was they who were unwittingly becoming his spokesmen. According to Blanc, “Venizelos cannot be the agent of any government. He is too independent-minded.”<sup>48</sup>

## V

All this leaves us with a vast question: What was the Cretan Venizelos? Was he a young leader, was he a rebel, or was he a “professional revolutionary?”<sup>49</sup> One cannot call him a rebel in the sense the word is usually defined, as “a man defying the law of the country and resisting by force the authority of a government to which he owes allegiance.”<sup>50</sup> When he was fighting as a revolutionary in 1889 and again in 1897, he was fighting against foreign domination and control. This was not an internal but a national revolt. In Therisso he was obviously an outlaw. Yet even Therisso was not a real revolt, “it was a kind of staged revolt, a clever political move to allow Venizelos to reinstate his credentials as a unionist, credentials that he had lost between 1901 and 1905.”<sup>51</sup> It was both a declaration of unionism and an anti-dynastic move, despite his assurances to the contrary.<sup>52</sup> Yet Venizelos was a rebel, but in a broader sense. He was a rebel who would follow his own ideas regardless of the “common stance” and regardless of their acceptance by the “common man.” He was a rebel in that he never waited for a majority verdict to go ahead with his policies – had he waited for a majority verdict, he would have never started the Therisso

revolt. From the very first steps of his career he took risks without concern for the outcome. He rebelled against Prince George, the High Commissioner of Crete, when he realized that the Prince’s good intentions and love for Greece could never counterbalance his inability to resolve the Cretan Question, or change his rigid and conservative internal policies. Unlike his contemporaries, who were trying to stay within the accepted norms of political behavior, he tried to introduce a novel political methodology and overturn archaic procedures that were hindering the realization of his goals. He was a nonconformist, a man of bold thinking. Still, he understood the existing needs of his Cretan compatriots, “he understood their soul and loved it. He did not want to change it but to guide it.”<sup>53</sup>

Venizelos tried to mobilize within his compatriots newer motivations and aspirations. He was a young leader, willing to advance new positions and new solutions to old problems. And in this he fits Kissinger’s remarks on leadership:

Leadership...is the willingness to define purpose perhaps only vaguely apprehended by the multitude. A society learns only from experience: it “knows” only when it is too late to act. But a statesman must act as if his inspiration were already experience, as if his aspirations were “truth.” He must bridge the gap between a society’s experience and his vision, between its tradition and its future.<sup>54</sup>

Accepting these definitions, we can then say that Venizelos is also a leader. Yet the characterization that would most fit his personality and actions is, I think, that of an “Agonistes”:<sup>55</sup> in the ancient Greek meaning, a man in a state of tremendous agitation and of continuous readiness to work for difficult and demanding solutions, a man in a state of anticipation asked to react almost perpetually to the demands of the moment and to respond to crisis situations. Often, while in Crete, we see Venizelos making a new study on the spot, a sort of comprehensive overview of policy problems and



of alternate solutions, a quick but systematic canvassing of possible positions and simultaneously an analysis of the consequences of alternative possibilities. Then he simplifies the situation to the point where action is possible and acts. No wonder he never had time to develop a concrete political philosophy, since he never had the leisure for conceptual abstraction.

## VI

But for the events associated with the military coup d'état of Goudhi in 1909, Venizelos might have continued the political career, which he had managed with such distinction in Crete since 1889. It is certainly hard to imagine any reason for him to leave Crete in 1910. But when the Military League in Athens sent for him, Venizelos was ready by long experience and by his intelligence. Had that invitation not come, he might not have achieved international fame but his life would still be of interest to those who seek to understand the dynamics of leadership of a small but crucial region of the world, whether this was the Crete of the start of the century, or the island of Cyprus of today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Angelos Sikelianos, *Ἡ Ἐπιστολή τῆς Ζωῆς. Ἀνοικτό Ὑπόμνημα στή Μεγαλειότητά του* (The letter of life. Open memorandum to his Majesty) (Athens, 1922). My rough translation: "This clever man, who in his transformation from Cretan baggy pants to tails would not hesitate to drown or sell his own mother; this lowly arriviste.... This man attempted to subdue Greece, a prisoner of the West...and to deliver her to the last supper of her horrible syphilitic suitors and revilers." I would like to thank G. P. Savidis for giving me this reference.

<sup>2</sup> From T.D. Frangopoulos' article in the issue of *Nea Estia* dedicated to George Katsimbalis, Θ. Δ. Φραγκόπουλος, "Μία συνομιλία μέ τόν Γιώργο Κατσιμπαλή," (A conversation with George Katsimbalis),

*Nea Estia* 1 (October 1980), 1383. My translation: "We have to watch this Cretan newcomer quite closely. He differs from all other politicians. Now that he has appeared on the scene, Hellenism has no need for me. For I only know how to make 'declarations' while he knows how to produce conditions in which to maneuver successfully..., now that he came, I feel superfluous and perhaps even harmful to the nation."

<sup>3</sup> A.W.A. Leeper, "Allied Portraits: Eleftherios Venizelos," *The New Europe* 1 (1916), 184.

<sup>4</sup> By the London Protocol No. 23 of February 3, 1830, Crete and the island of Samos were excluded from the new Greek State for reasons deriving from the policies of the Great Powers. See the valuable report of Alfred Scrimshire Green, "Memorandum Relative to the Island of Candia, 1821-1862," F.O. 286/238, files 273-287. For the text, see, G. B. Herslet's *State Papers*, XVII, 191.

<sup>5</sup> To understand Crete of the nineteenth century, one has to read the historical novels of Pandelis Prevelakis, *Παντέρμη Κρήτη* (Forlorn Crete) (Athens, 1945), a poetic tale of the 1866 insurrection and a triptych subdivided into three parts, and *Ο Κρητικός* (The Cretan) (Athens, 1948-1950), where Venizelos appears as the symbol of the liberation of Crete at the turn of the century.

<sup>6</sup> Yiorgchos Manoussakis, *Ἡ Κρήτη στό λογοτεχνικό ἔργο τοῦ Παντελῆ Πρεβελάκη* (Crete in the literary works of Pandelis Prevelakis) (Athens, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> According to Erikson selfhood or "psychosocial identity" formed in youth has a prospective dimension. See Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1963); *Insight and Responsibility* (New York, 1964); and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Here is a free translation of the "mandinadhes" (Cretan folk songs) on Venizelos:

- All that's born in this world has a beginning and an end. But one thing will remain immortal – old Venizelos.

- Of all the stars in heaven, the largest shines and radiates on Lefteris' tomb.

- Sitia with your Cornaro [the author of the epic poem *Erotokritos*]  
Kastro with your Knossos [Iraklio with your old palace of Minos]  
Rethymno with your Arkadhi [the 1866 holocaust of Arkadi]  
Khania with your God [meaning Eleftherios Venizelos].

<sup>9</sup> In what follows I present the methodological problems encountered in my research on Venizelos along with some findings and the narrative.

<sup>10</sup> Benaki Museum, Athens. 431 Files: a) Archive of Eleftherios Venizelos; envelope 264 (1895-1930); b) Archive of Klearkhos Markantonakis; c) Archive of E. A. Benakis.



<sup>11</sup> E. Venizelos, *Ἡ Κρητικὴ Ἐπανάστασις τοῦ 1889* (The Cretan revolution of 1889), ed. I. G. Manolikakis (Athens, 1971).

<sup>12</sup> Κρήτη. Ἐφημερίς τῆς Γενικῆς Διοικήσεως Κρήτης (Crete: Journal of the General Administration) (Khania, 1879-1897); Κρητικὴ Πολιτεία. Ἐπίσημος Ἐφημερίς τῆς Κρητικῆς Πολιτείας (1899-1909); Ἑστενογραφημένα πρακτικά τῆς Βουλῆς (Cretan State: Official Journal of the Cretan State (1899-1909); Parliamentary Records, (Khania, 1899-1909).

<sup>13</sup> The legal documents of Venizelos are scattered in libraries, archives and private collections. I was able to find and study the following: 85 briefs in the Liberal Club of Athens; 18 briefs in the private collection of Errikos Moatsos; 30 briefs in the Municipal Library of Khania; 10 briefs (probably copies) in the Historical Archives of Khania; miscellaneous papers in the offices of the Law Association of Khania.

<sup>14</sup> The most important of these are Λευκά Ὀρη (White Mountains), December 19, 1888 - June 27, 1889; Κῆρυξ (Herald), December 7, 1901 - March 14, 1903, and April 27, 1908 - May 29, 1914.

<sup>15</sup> Especially in Ἀκρόπολις (Acropolis) and Τό Νέον Ἄστυ (The New City).

<sup>16</sup> The entire early correspondence of Venizelos with his father between 1873 and 1883 (156 letters), as well as letters of friends and relatives of Venizelos with his answers, and the correspondence of Venizelos during the Therisso revolt, were collected by the late Errikos Moatsos. The entire collection has been lately sold to the University of Crete in Rethymno, Crete. Family letters, letters to and from friends, and official correspondence can also be found in the private collections of M. K. Fournis, T. Mitsotakis, V. Skoulas and many others.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Bowen, *Adventures of a Biographer* (London, 1959), Introduction.

<sup>18</sup> Besides the old memoirs and monographs, one has to take into account the invaluable recently-published memoirs of P.S. Delta, Ἐλευθέριος Βενιζέλος. Ἡμερολόγιο, Ἀναμνήσεις, Μαρτυρίες, Ἀλληλογραφία (Eleftherios Venizelos. Diary, memoirs, testimonies, correspondence) (Athens, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> I. G. Manolikakis, "Venizelos in Crete (1908-1910)" (unpublished paper, Athens, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> This even-handed policy of Venizelos cost him politically while in Crete. For more, see the anti-Venizelist libels: S.M. Vistakis, Τό Ἔργον τοῦ Βενιζέλου (The performance of Venizelos) (Iraklion, 1911); S.M. Papadakis, Κρητικαὶ Σελίδες (Cretan pages) (Athens, 1911); K. Khrisoulakis, Ποῖος πραγματικῶς εἶναι ὁ Βενιζέλος (Who is the real Venizelos) (Athens, 1915).

<sup>21</sup> See *supra*, note 13.

<sup>22</sup> K. N. Avraam, "Ὁ Βενιζέλος καὶ ἡ Δικαιοσύνη" (Venizelos and justice), *Ergasia* 7th year, vol. 326 (29 March 1936), 295-296.

<sup>23</sup> D. Kaklamanos, "Ἐλευθέριος Βενιζέλος. Ὁ ὑπέροχος πολιτικός καὶ διανοούμενος" (Eleftherios Venizelos. The superb politician and intellectual), *To Bema* 18 (March 1948).

<sup>24</sup> Venizelos wrote the weekly article signing with the pseudonym Λευκορδείτης (The White Mountaineer).

<sup>25</sup> Λευκά Ὀρη (White Mountains), 19 December 1888, 6 February 1889, and 17 April 1889.

<sup>26</sup> See especially his articles of 19 December 1888 and of 3 April 1889.

<sup>27</sup> For full texts of these decrees see Sir Edward G.B. Herslet, *The Map of Europe by Treaty*, 4 vols. (London, 1875-1891).

<sup>28</sup> The Stefanos Dragoumis Collection, housed in the Gennadius Library, is currently being catalogued. I wish to thank the officers of the library and the Dragoumis family for the permission they gave me to consult it.

<sup>29</sup> E. Venizelos, *op. cit.*, 48-50.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Correspondence Dragoumis-Gryparis 1888-1889. Private Archive of S. Dragoumis, The Gennadius Library, Athens.

<sup>32</sup> *London Times*, 1889, especially the article of 30 October 1889.

<sup>33</sup> The interview was published in its entirety in *Νέα Ἐφημερίς* (New Newspaper), of 5 November 1886. It was mentioned later by the British ambassador in Athens, F.O. 371, S. Waterlow to J. Simon, March 19, 1935.

<sup>34</sup> Λευκά Ὀρη (White Mountains), 19 December 19 1888.

<sup>35</sup> E. Venizelos, *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Two attempts were made against his life at the time because of his unionist views. Private communication of M.N. Kokoloyiannis.

<sup>37</sup> See the famous episode of Arhanes of July, 1897, where Venizelos' obstinacy almost cost him his life.

<sup>38</sup> Venizelos' position after 1901 had been characterized as anti-unionist and pro-autonomy. His revolt in Therisso was meant to reinstate his credentials as a unionist. See *infra*, note 51.

<sup>39</sup> The third volume of *The Cretan* which deals with the role of Venizelos in Crete is dedicated to his memory.

<sup>40</sup> P. Prevelakis, *Ὁ Κρητικὸς* (The Cretan), vol. 2, 137ff.

<sup>41</sup> Roughly translated: "You said this and did that, you promise something and do the opposite. You think of this and say that and your thoughts are quite different."

<sup>42</sup> D. Alastos, *Venizelos: Patriot, Statesman, Revolutionary* (London, 1942).



<sup>43</sup> After a cogent analysis of his position, a young English officer who was present was convinced enough to say admiringly: "Damn it all! The beggar is right and I hope we shant have to shoot him" (H.A. Gibbons, *Venizelos*, 2nd ed. [Boston, 1923]).

<sup>44</sup> Κῆρυξ (Herald), 7 December 1901 to 14 March 1903.

<sup>45</sup> He makes this clear in this correspondence with Markantonakis during the Therisso revolt. See Private Archives of Errikos Moatsos. Most important are the letters of 26 April, 6, 11, 13 July, 5 September, 19 October 1905.

<sup>46</sup> Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Crète, NS 40, Blanc à Delcassé, 25 Décembre 1900.

<sup>47</sup> "Personne ne pense ici que cet homme ait un masque apparent dissimulant une arrière-pensée toute autre. Son programme et sa conduite sont faciles à définir: Il desire l'annexion mais sans impatience..." Archives de l'Armée, Paris, 7N/85, Lubanski au Ministre de la Guerre, 27 Janvier 1906.

<sup>48</sup> Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Crète, NS 34, Blanc à Delcassé, 2 Avril 1901.

<sup>49</sup> This is what Venizelos said about his early career at a banquet given in his honor by the foreign press at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919: "After I finished my studies in Athens I returned home and hung my shingle. I had not tried many cases in the court of my home island before it became necessary for me to take up arms against the Turkish government.... I soon reached the point where I had to decide whether I ought to be a lawyer by profession and a revolutionary at intervals or a revolutionary by profession and a lawyer at intervals.... I naturally became a revolutionary by profession." Alastos, op. cit., 38.

<sup>50</sup> *The Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (New York, 1977), the article 'rebel.'

<sup>51</sup> M. K. Foumis to author. Taped interview, Khandia, Crete, August 1981.

<sup>52</sup> Unpublished letter of E. Venizelos to K. Foumis, 26 April 1905. Private Archive of M. K. Foumis.

<sup>53</sup> P. Prevelakis, *Ὁ Κρητικός* (The Cretan), vol. 2, 460.

<sup>54</sup> H. A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York, 1969), 247.

<sup>55</sup> See the definition of ἀγωνιστής (combatant, competitor in games, master in any art of science, one who struggles), H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. H. Stuart Jones, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1925-40.

## The American Near East Relief (NER) and the *Megali Catastrophe* in 1922

HARRY J. PSOMIADES <sup>1</sup>

### The Destruction of Smyrna

The long awaited Turkish offensive began on August 26, 1922 southwest of Afyonkarahisar, at the most vulnerable point on the Greek front. Hopelessly outnumbered, the Greeks were overcome and within a few days the Turks succeeded in cutting the rail link to Smyrna, occupying Afyonkarahisar and totally disrupting the principal Greek route of communications and supplies. The Greek forces were cut in two and in full retreat. While those in the northern sector, some three divisions, skillfully retreated to the Sea of Marmara and embarked for Greece, the larger concentration of forces, in the southern sector, was completely routed. Disoriented and in disarray, they fled to Smyrna and the coast, accompanied or followed by some 150,000 destitute and panic-stricken refugees from the interior, who, in search of security and sustenance, camped on the city's quay.

In an attempt to calm the population, the Allied consuls of Smyrna gave formal assurances to the Greeks and Armenians that they need not fear for their lives, although they were not prepared to take concrete steps to ensure the safety of the city's civilian population. Only the American Consul General, William Horton, who was an old Near East hand, refused to give such assurances and indeed, on September 4, he cabled the US High Commissioner in Constantinople (Istanbul), Admiral Bristol, "in the interest of humanity and