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# Redefining the “Great Idea”: The Impact of the Macedonian Struggle 1904–1908 on the Formation of Athanasios Souliotis-Nikolaidis’ “Oriental Ideal”

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## **Abstract**

The article is a contribution to Athanasios Souliotis-Nikolaidis (1878–1945), a prominent Greek national activist in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who articulated a political and cultural concept for the future of Greece that became known as the so called “Oriental Ideal”. This concept is examined in the contemporary ideological context of Greek nationalism as of his personal conflict experiences in Macedonia which seems to have been crucial for its formation.

## **Keywords**

Greek nationalism, Modern Greek identity discourses, anti-westernism, imperial legacies, Greek-Ottoman dualism



## Introduction

This year, 2015, is the hundredth anniversary of the Greek “National Schism” (*Εθνικός Διχασμός*) that broke out about the question of whether the country in the ongoing World War should maintain neutrality, as King Constantine wished, or take part on side of the Entente powers, as Prime Minister Venizelos demanded. Finally, Greece entered the war and thereafter launched a disastrous campaign in Asia Minor (1919–1922) that is ingrained until today in Greek collective memory as the major catastrophe of the 20th century. The defeat of 1922 marked the end of a decade of military conflicts that had begun already 1912 with the First Balkan War and went along with dramatic demographic shifts and radical changes of boundaries not only in Greece but in the entire region shaping its political map until today. In historical retrospect from the distance of one century it is easy to conclude that these developments were to some degree inevitable if not predetermined in view of the strong dynamics of nationalism as the main ideological force that promoted them. But from the same perspective it is also easy to overlook, first, that nationalism itself is anything else than an unambiguous and logically consistent ideology, and second, that in the pre-war period of the “long” 19<sup>th</sup> century the nation state itself was not yet considered virtually uncontested as the only thinkable political model for a nation, but rather one possible organizational form amongst others. This is comprehensible if one takes into account that in Southeast Europe the national questions, and to some degree even the nations themselves, were generally much less perceived as closed cases than as projects for the future which could possibly succeed but also to fail.

As a matter of fact, the programmatic thinking of Balkan nationalists in this period was characterized by a quite impressive versatility of options, including integrative, confederative and dualist models.<sup>1</sup> These models reflected in their way an essential historical experience shared by all Balkan peoples: to be part of large scale multi-ethnic empires, be it the Hapsburg Double Eagle or the Ottoman Crescent. Actually, this imperial context constitutes a common political but also cultural heritage of the region even since Late Antiquity, beginning with Rome and continuing with Byzantium and the Slavic Czardoms of

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1 On the confederative idea see for example the classical work of Stavrianos (1942). See also Todorov (1995). On the idea of Greek-Ottoman dualism, respectively “Helleno-Ottomanism” see Skopetea (1988: 309–324); on the idea of Bulgaro-Ottoman dualism see Todev (1995) and Todev (1999). See also Stojanov (1999: 174–183) on the “Memoir” of 1866 of the Bulgarian “Secret Central Committee” founded in Bucharest the same year.

the Middle Ages, all of them being in self-definition and character not national but imperial state formations.

The present paper takes reference to this imperial context by means of a case study from the eve of the Balkan Wars, which is revealing also in regard to the ideological impacts of the Macedonian conflict in the first decade of the 20th century. It is about Athanasios Souliotis-Nikolaidis (1878-1945), a national activist in the first decade of the 20th century who undoubtedly counts to the celebrities of what became known in Greece as the “Macedonian Struggle of 1904-1908”, alongside with personalities like Pavlos Melas (1870-1904), Germanos Karavangelis (1866-1935) or Ion Dragoumis (1878-1920), with the latter he was also connected by personal friendship and close political cooperation during this period. However, it is not primarily his national agitation what makes Souliotis-Nikolaidis an interesting case in the present context, but rather his reflections on the conflict and the programmatic ideas he developed in this period about the political future of the region. This concerns particularly the so-called “Oriental Ideal” which Souliotis-Nikolaidis articulated after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 when he was in Constantinople together with Dragoumis, the probably most well-known ideologist of Greek nationalism, on whom Souliotis-Nikolaidis however exerted considerable influence. The following analysis is based on material from his personal archive, located today in the Gennadius Library in Athens, as well as on published sources including journalism, diaries, correspondence and memoirs.<sup>2</sup> It is useful however to begin with a short overview on his familiar and biographical background which is revealing for the socio-intellectual milieu he belonged to.

### Biographical sketch

Athanasios Souliotis-Nikolaidis was born in Ermoupolis on the island of Syros as first son of a middle-ranking administrative officer whose family roots were in Souli, Epirus, as the surname indicates.<sup>3</sup> This family origin from beyond the

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2 See *Αρχείο Σουλιώτη-Νικολαΐδη* [Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive], Dossiers 4/4 III, 8/8 II, 9/9 I-II, 14/9 II, 14/14 I-II, 20/20 I and IV, 22. See also Suliotis-Nikolaidis (1906): this text circulated one year later also in Bulgarian with Greek letters under the title *Πρεσκαζάνιε να γκόλεμ Αλεξάντρ* [Preskazanie na golem Alexandr]; for a comparative text analysis see Tokić (2009); Suliotis-Nikolaidis (1908); Idem (1959); Idem (1962); Dimaras (ed.) (1971); on his activities see Panayotopoulos (1980a); Veremis - Bura (eds.) (1984); Zelepos (2002: 208-235).

3 The original family name, Koliiodimitris, was changed by his grandfather to the - presumably more prestigious due to the legendary fights of the Souli-clans against

state boundaries, “heterochthon” according to contemporary Greek terminology, was very typical for the local society of Ermoupolis which was actually a recent settlement of refugees during the Greek War of Independence that developed afterwards into the most important commercial port but also the most western styled city of Greece, competing Athens/Piraeus in both aspects quite successfully until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This family background from beyond the state boundaries may explain also the strong nationalist commitment of Souliotis-Nikolaidis, given that indeed many of the prominent activists of Greek irredentism in this period had heterochthon origins, as was the case with Dragoumis (Macedonia) and Melas (Epirus), whose father coincidentally was also a native of Syros. After graduating from the gymnasium in Ermoupolis in 1894, Souliotis-Nikolaidis began to study Law at the University of Athens, something that probably would have opened him a civil career similar to his fathers. But he changed mind very soon and enrolled even the following year, 1895, at the Military Academy in Athens where he graduated in 1900 as army second lieutenant. Having been detached for some years to various military commands in the Greek capital and in the northern border region, where it seems that he took also the opportunity to learn some Bulgarian and Turkish, he was released from regular troop-service and moved to Macedonia, something that was not uncommon for a low-ranking officer in these years, except that Souliotis-Nikolaidis did not go as leader of an irregular armed band like most of his colleagues, but masked as a commercial representative for sewing machines. In Thessalonica he founded in 1906 a secret association, the “Thessalonica Organization”, whose activity focus was on nationalist agitation including propaganda, boycott-campaigns and occasional political murdering. Two years later, just still before the outbreak of the Young Turk Revolution in July 1908, he set up the “Constantinople Organization” in the Ottoman capital which in regard to its internal structure was a copy of the “Thessalonica Organization”, though its aims became different as the political situation changed in the following years.<sup>4</sup> The “Constantinople Organization” took shape in the first year of her existence by the intense cooperation between Souliotis-Nikolaidis and Dragoumis, with whom he had made acquaintance already two years earlier in Dedeğaç (i.e. Alexandroupolis) and who was in 1908/1909 in Greek diplomatic

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Ali Pasha – “Souliotis” when he settled in Syros after the Greek War of Independence. Likewise, “Nikolaidis” was actually a cover name he initially used during his secret activities in Macedonia and Thrace before the Balkan Wars but maintained thereafter as regular part of his surname. For biographical information see generally Souliotis-Nikolaidis (1959: vii–viii).

4 For a concise depiction see Kamouzis (2013: 26–29).

service in the Ottoman capital. Besides a brief return to Athens in 1909<sup>5</sup> after the failed counter-coup and following deposition of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, Souliotis-Nikolaidis remained in Constantinople until the beginning of the First Balkan War in 1912, when he resumed active military service as Greek liaison officer at the Bulgarian Army until March 1913. His return to the troops turned out ephemeral however, because already in June of the same year he was sent again to Constantinople and later to Paris as a member of diplomatic missions. He did not take part as officer in the First World War nor in the Asia Minor Campaign, obviously due to his anti-Venizelist affiliation which took him even a few months of exile in 1918/1919.<sup>6</sup> He was officially discharged from the Army with the rank of a lieutenant colonel in 1921. From this time on he committed himself mainly to writing and political journalism, as he had done also in the years before. In the 1930's, he served occasionally as high-ranking official in the state administration, 1934 as prefect of the district of Florina in Western Macedonia, 1935 as governor general of Thrace, but it does not seem that he had ever any serious involvement in Greek interwar politics. He died in spring 1945 a few months after the end of the German occupation of Greece.

### **Ideological background and formation of the “Oriental Ideal”**

Souliotis-Nikolaidis belonged to a generation of Greek nationalists who as young men were strongly influenced by the experience of the humiliating defeat Greece had suffered 1897 in the war against the Ottoman Empire, a defeat which they perceived not just in political but much more in socio-cultural as well as in ideological terms.<sup>7</sup> For most of them the military setback was nothing else than an external symptom of a deeper crisis that concerned Greek society in general and particularly the state as institution which obviously had proven to be incapable to carry out its assumed national mission. But criticism extended even further in the field of contemporary Greek culture, which was

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5 Although he seems to have been in contact with officers of the “Military League” at this time, there is no evidence for any personal involvement of Souliotis-Nikolaidis in the movement of Goudi, a coup d'état that took place in August 1909 and opened the way to Venizelos' ascendance to power one year later. See on this Panayotopoulos (1980a: 343–344).

6 Souliotis-Nikolaidis had first personal contact with Venizelos already in 1910, before latter's election as prime minister, but the initial political consensus between the two men seems to have turned very soon in opposition, see on this Panayotopoulos (1980a: 345).

7 On the intellectual impacts of the War in Greece see Augustinos (1977).

considered by some nationalist intellectuals as being distorted due to foreign influences which they located in the “West”.<sup>8</sup> Such views corresponded to an old ideological pattern in the Greek identity discourse, which had roots in traditional Orthodox anti-westernism but ironically found inspiration as well in contemporary civilization criticism articulated by Western European intellectuals like Maurice Barrès or Friedrich Nietzsche, the latter enjoying at this time considerable attention by those circles in Greece.<sup>9</sup> This is true also for Souliotis-Nikolaidis who seems to have been particularly impressed by the Nietzschean Zarathustra as prophet of a new belief – a role which he probably found appealing even for himself.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, the anti-western attitude was fashionable amongst nationalist intellectuals in the first decade of the 20th century. It usually went along with more or less essentialist projections of Greek identity, that found sometimes very radical expressions as was the case with Periklis Giannopoulos (1869–1910), who argued not only for the uniqueness of Greek civilization or “Greekness” but also its fundamental incompatibility with Western European culture which he regarded as barbaric by nature.<sup>11</sup>

Although Souliotis-Nikolaidis, like many of his compatriots, was influenced by Giannopoulos and even admired him personally,<sup>12</sup> it seems that he differed

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8 This cultural criticism had also a great impact on the Greek language question, see on this Tziouvas (1986).

9 See Augustinos (1977: 86ff.). See also Lamm (1970), and Voutouris (2006). However, the perception of Nietzsche by Greek intellectuals was generally rather selective and even diametrical in regard to his anti-nationalist philosophy.

10 See for example his *Σημειωματάριον* (*Notebook*), Dimaras (ed.) (1971: 103), where he describes himself as prophet of a new ideal. Similar text evidence is also found in Ion Dragoumis’ autobiographic and programmatic novel *Όσοι ζωντανοί* (*Those who are alive*), Dragoumis (1992 [1911]: 73), where Souliotis-Nikolaidis, who figures there as “comrade and partner” (*σύντροφος και συνεργάτης*), denotes himself as prophet of a new belief.

11 Giannopoulos articulated his rather eccentric views in newspaper articles published in Athens between 1902 and 1907, e.g. *Η ελληνική γραμμή* (*The Greek Line*), 1903, and *Το ελληνικό χρώμα* (*The Greek colour*), 1904. It is characteristic that Giannopoulos, who ascribed even to Shakespeare and Michelangelo only a parochial rank in world culture, had taken his most important literary impulses in Paris where he had spent much time as young man. On his contemporary ideological impact see Augustinos (1977: 66–83). Giannopoulos was rediscovered in the interwar-period by literati of the so-called “Generation of the ‘30s” like Giorgos Theotokas (1906–1966) who were attracted by his essentialist concept of “Greekness” (though much less by his pronounced anti-western stance), see on this Tziouvas (1989), and Idem (2011).

12 When he learned of the spectacular suicide of Giannopoulos in 1910, Souliotis-Nikolaidis was obviously shocked and wrote a twenty page obituary in which he



in a central aspect from his – and most of his compatriots – views, namely in regard to the essentialist conception of Greek culture and in extension of the Greek nation. An illustrative example for this is found in his cultural-philosophical considerations about arts: Souliotis-Nikolaidis argued in a manner highly reminiscent of Giannopoulos, that Western European music was primitive in structure and therefore not suitable for higher development. But as contrastive paradigm for artistic elaboration he did explicitly not refer to Greek but to “Oriental” music, having actually in mind classical Ottoman court music – a reference not rather common, particularly in Greek nationalist circles.<sup>13</sup> It was, however, characteristic for Souliotis-Nikolaidis who had paid already in his first literary work *Γράμματα από τα βουνά* (*Letters from the Mountains*), published 1905 under the pseudonym “Thales” in Athens, a similar tribute to Ottoman architecture.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of whether it was primarily owed to an anti-western attitude or to genuine aesthetic preferences, his obvious admiration for Ottoman art which he perceived as part of a common cultural heritage of the whole region is without question significant in view of the “Oriental Ideal” which Souliotis-Nikolaidis began to articulate since 1908. The aesthetic-cultural factor was however only one aspect at that, while the other was of political character. Of virtually catalytic importance for the formation of the “Oriental Ideal” seems to have been the personal experience of the conflict in Macedonia and its brutal realities with whom Souliotis-Nikolaidis came in touch during his activities in Thessalonica, something that becomes apparent in the often very detailed personal notes he made at this time, but also in his memoirs and other writings. There he stated for example:

*I grew up and lived, like anybody of us, with the dream of the Great Idea. For two years I also fought in the tough Macedonian struggle. But a lot of impres-*

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praised him as one of the great minds of his time, see *Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive*, Dossier 14/14 II.

- 13 *Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive*, Dossier 20/20 IV. According to Souliotis-Nikolaidis, the future role of Greek music should have been to bridge the gap between what he considered “Occidental primitivism” and “Oriental complexity”.
- 14 Dimaras (ed.) (1971: 1–2). The narrative begins with a detailed description of the Kurşun Camii, built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the famous architect Mimar Sinan (1489–1580) in Trikala, Thessaly, where Souliotis-Nikolaidis were stationed around 1902/1903. This is remarkable in itself when compared with contemporary Greek novels of this type, e.g. Ion Dragoumis’ *Σαμοθράκη* (*Samothrake*), published in 1909, where the main focus of the author lies in the emphasis of the exclusively Greek character of this islands during the centuries, a motive completely absent in Souliotis-Nikolaidis’ *Letters from the Mountains*.

sions from the first day, the day when I arrived in Thessalonica, made me to see every day further things and to think over [...]”<sup>15</sup>

The following passage is quoted as an illustrative example for such a personal experience:

*It was a beautiful spring morning in Thessalonica. I walked down the Hamidie Boulevard, the trees were deep green as were the shutters of most houses [...] While walking, I noticed a crowd of people gathered at the small promenade where the street ends. And suddenly I became aware that over their heads there hung a man on a gibbet. It was first time for me to see such a scene. I got closer. The hanged was a slim old man. The knot of the loop was high over his neck and his beard touched his thorax. [...] His hands hanging on both sides, hands of a villager, a peasant, his thick wool socks had slid down from his slender legs. Quiet and lightweight he was like any slim old man someone can meet in Athens. I was sure that he was a Greek, but somebody read the Turkish inscription and I became aware that he was a Bulgarian komitadji. And I was taken by something like shame and fear, a feeling that wanted to cancel everything and to start again in another way. Then I watched the soldiers who guarded the gibbet with their bayonets. They had the usual military attitude in such circumstances, the attitude that tells: “It’s my job, what can I do? I’m an executive organ, I’m not a bad guy, I’m a soldier.” In other uniforms they undoubtedly could also have been soldiers of my platoon.*<sup>16</sup>

In a similar case he noted in the same sense though more sarcastically:

*A very Greek [ironical] chieftain of Macedonia shouted at his execution: “Long live the nation!” – in Bulgarian because he did not speak Greek.*<sup>17</sup>

And on another occasion:

*Every day it becomes clearer to me how many affinities exist between men who belong to the nations of the Orient. They are much more numerous than*

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15 Veremis – Bura (eds.) (1984: 60–61).

16 Ibid., 135. The passage quoted is the beginning of the second part of the book, something that points to the significance the author ascribed to it. It is noteworthy that statements like the above are very rare in personal writings, memoirs etc. of national activists in this period.

17 Ibid., 136.

*usually assumed. Fanatically national-minded Greeks of Constantinople have closest relatives in Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania and Albania, who are most fanatic Albanians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians.*<sup>18</sup>

The motive of a specific relationship and even kinship between the “nations of the Orient” is generally dominant in Souliotis-Nikolaidis’ writings of this period. The following passage is representative in this respect, particularly because it takes reference to the imperial context and gives a hint to the cultural-geographical dimension of his concept of the “Orient”:

*But the nations of the Balkan Peninsula and of Asia Minor are [...] much more akin than our fanatic education makes us believe. Generations and generations of our ancestors intermingled [...] so today you may divide us either along nations either along states, in any of which you will find different anthropological types, but you can distinguish all of us very easily from other Europeans or Asians. Generations of our ancestors lived as subjects of the same state, the Byzantine for more than thousand years and now the Ottoman. So we have so many cultural elements in common, that all our specific cultures together form a specific cultural type in the framework of world civilization.*<sup>19</sup>

In 1908, having moved already from Thessalonica to Constantinople, he wrote:

*I felt deepest sorrow and wanted to cry with indignation [...] What is it that petrifies their minds [...] so that they kill in this way their father, their brother? Like the crude and stupid head of an ugly Medusa is this fraud, this mistake. The mistake that there is anything else responsible for our nations of the Orient misery but the fact that separated and hostile to each other we are an easy prey for the Europeans.*<sup>20</sup>

The term “Europeans” is used contradictory to the previous quotation, which seemingly included the “Orientals” (distinguishable from *other* Europeans), but Souliotis-Nikolaidis had in mind here of course the Great Powers. The

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 61. See also Panayotopoulos (1980a: 361). The geographical outline given here, i.e. the Ottoman Balkans and Asia Minor, corresponds to a hand-drawn sketch in his unpublished texts, see *Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive*, Dossier 20/20 IV (only the western part of Asia Minor included).

20 *Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive*, Dossier 20/20 I.

same criticism was articulated even more pointedly in his political pamphlet *Η Μεγάλη Ιδέα* (*The Great Idea*), published 1908 in Athens:

*Today strong foreigners intervene in the Orient in pursuit of their own interests. But the era of conquests, may they be even only economic by nature, has gone for Europe. The paralysis and weakness of Turkish rule is the only reason, though a transient reason, for the interventions which take place today in the conquered area.*<sup>21</sup>

The motive of an allegedly imminent decline of European power that becomes apparent in the above sentence was articulated also in his *Σημειωματάριον* (*Notebook*) in an even broader cultural context and with a strong teleological bias:

*Those who do not understand our Oriental Ideal, do they not understand at least how harmful it is that we, the men of the Orient which is going to resurrect, want to adopt the mentality of the Occident which is going to sink?*<sup>22</sup>

The “Oriental Ideal”, which is named here explicitly, seems to have been embedded for Souliotis-Nikolaidis in a macro-historical theory of organic character, according to which the region he had in mind oscillated between political fragmentation and unity, the present time being a period of fragmentation, due to the Balkan national states, which would be overcome in the future by unity in the sense of the ideal.<sup>23</sup>

The proclamation of the Ottoman Constitution in July 1908 as a result of the Young Turk Revolution seemed at least initially to open a real perspective for such a development, and Souliotis-Nikolaidis saw it undoubtedly as a possible stage towards realization of his vision, although he obviously was also well aware of the dangers the new situation had generated, particularly in regard to the dynamics of Turkish nationalism:

21 Souliotis-Nikolaidis (1908: 3–4).

22 Dimaras (ed.) (1971: 75). The passage quoted is the very beginning of the text. It has to be mentioned that in the Greek original there is a play of words with the nouns ‘Orient’ – ‘resurrect’ (in the sense of sunrise) and ‘Occident’ – ‘sink’ (in the sense of sunset).

23 Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive, Dossier 20/20 IV, with the following note: *Have in mind the at times dissolutions of the Orient in smaller states and its reunifications: Greek city states – Alexander the Great; successors of Alexander the Great – Romans; dissolution of the Roman State – Byzantium; Frankish crusaders and small states – Turks; Balkan States – ?* The question-mark at the end indicates the relative obscurity of the future political shape but it becomes sufficiently clear that the Balkan (national) states are considered only as a period to be replaced by something else.

*The new Constitution was an opportunity. Its proclamation made an atmosphere of fraternization among the nations of Turkey i.e. the nations of the Orient [...] Hellenism of Turkey would follow a political programme [...] whose ultimate goal was the federation of the nations and states of the Orient [... they] would try to come to an arrangement with the Young Turks on this basis. [...] But if we find that an understanding with the Young Turks is impossible, we will try to ally and to cooperate against the Young Turks with all the nations of Turkey including the Muslims [...].*<sup>24</sup>

Strengthening political participation of the Greeks in the new constitutional framework and especially in the Ottoman parliament became indeed the main goal of the “Constantinople Organization” in the following years.<sup>25</sup> But in the same degree that the ethnocentric-exclusive wing of the Young Turk movement became more and more dominant, Souliotis-Nikolaidis turned his efforts to the second variant mentioned in the above quotation, an alliance of all nationalities in the Ottoman Empire as a counterweight to the “Committee of Union and Progress”. Theoretically he may have had in mind Christians and Muslims alike but practically his efforts concerned mainly the former, first of all the Bulgarians.<sup>26</sup> This approach was actually not approved by official Greek authorities because it was in open contradiction to the political doctrine of the Greek

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24 Veremis – Bura (eds.) (1984: 63f.).

25 See Veremis (1997). It is indicative that in the Crete-Question which posed a serious impediment to this programme – the island that since 1898 enjoyed semi-autonomous status had declared in 1908 on occasion of the Young Turk Revolution unilaterally union with Greece – Souliotis-Nikolaidis expressed himself definitely against this act of secession from the Ottoman Empire, see i.a. Veremis – Bura (eds.) (1984: 142-144, article in the periodical *Πολιτική Επιθεώρησης (Political Review)* published 30-5-1910) and *ibid.* (1984: 205-207, letter to Dragoumis from 5-1-1910).

26 Panayotopoulos (1980a: 348, 352). See in contrast, Xanalatos (1962), who is biased however in limiting his text sources exclusively to the pro-Turkish statements Souliotis-Nikolaidis made in this period while avoiding any reference to his efforts to seek cooperation with the Bulgarians especially since 1909. The seriousness of these efforts is proved by numerous documents concerning the “Constantinople Organization”, see for example Veremis – Bura (eds.) (1984: 151-156, Memorandum to the Greek Government from 15-1-1911) and *ibid.* (1984: 189-190, Agreement of mutual electoral support of Greek and Bulgarian Deputies in the Vilayets of Bitola, Salonica, Adrianople and Kosovo from 18-1-1912). On the Bulgarian contacts see also the *Memoirs of a member of the “Constantinople Organization”, Antonios Chamo[u]dopoulos; Chamodopulos (1946: 41-47)*. It is noteworthy that in a letter to Dragoumis (9-4-1909, *Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive, Dossier 22*) he stated that by founding the “Constantinople Organization” he took inspiration from the IMRO and made also positive mention of Yane Sandanski (1872-1915) in this context.

state in this period.<sup>27</sup> It becomes therefore obvious that the “Constantinople Organization” operated autonomously and its activities expressed essentially the individual political ideas and preferences of its leaders. This was much less the result of a leadership deficit of the Greek government than the manifestation of a general ideological stance. It was a specific distance towards the Greek state, which Souliotis-Nikolaidis considered to be nothing in comparison to the nation, as he stated on many occasions.<sup>28</sup> In this aspect he was in absolute consensus with Dragoumis who expressed the same views even more radically in his contemporary political writings. These texts show a considerable influence of Souliotis-Nikolaidis’ “Oriental Ideal”, which Dragoumis adopted to some degree, though with some initial reluctance and with a stronger focus on essentialist projections of “Greekness”.<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted that distanced and even contemptuous attitudes towards the existing Greek Kingdom were highly characteristic, if not a main feature of Greek nationalism throughout the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose main protagonists were mostly individuals, acting alone or in private associations usually decorated with sounding patriotic names, that claimed for themselves moral autonomy from the state and were accordingly little willing to subordinate their political activities to governmental commands.<sup>30</sup> The humiliating Greek defeat of 1897, which by the way was to a considerable degree due to the machinations of such an association, the 1894 founded “Ethniki Eteria”,<sup>31</sup> without any doubt fostered the nationalists attitudes of contempt of the state, but in the thinking of Souliotis-Nikolaidis this took on a new quality insofar as he tried

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27 For an overview of official Greek foreign policy in this period see Svolopoulos (1992: 15–54); see also Panayotopoulos (1980b: 87–95), and Kamouzis (2013: 27).

28 See for example the aforementioned (Fn. 25) letter to Dragoumis from 5-1-1910.

29 See for example *Όσοι ζωντανοί* (*Those who are alive*), Dragoumis (1992 [1911]: 137), where he described how he imagined an exemplary school teacher: [...] *he will reject the Helladic state while he will show to his pupils that there are endless political shapes a nation can take, if it preserves its essence [...]*; see also *Ελληνικός πολιτισμός* (*Greek Civilization*), Dragoumis (1991 [1914]: 39): *The state is the shirt of the nation [...] that never covers it completely [...]* *But the nation is not obliged to wear this shirt [...] and it is even possible that nations in their millennial life may change many shirts, own or others*. Similar views were expressed also in Dragoumis’ *Ο Ελληνισμός μου και οι Έλληνες* (*My Hellenism and the Hellenes*); see also his political article *Τιμή και Ανάθεμα* (*Honour and Curse*) published 29-12-1912 (*Νουμάς* No. 497) in the aftermath of the First Balkan War, where influences of Souliotis-Nikolaidis’ thoughts become apparent in his rigorous distinction between “Hellenic” (i.e. “national”) and “Helladic” (i.e. “state-owned”) policy and the condemnation of the latter.

30 See Zelepos (2002: 70–85).

31 *Ibid.*, 186–199.

to integrate this in a broader theoretical framework that reflected his experiences in Macedonia. Regarding the political future of the region he declared programmatically:

[The motto] “*the Orient for the Orientals*” should become a dogma and according to its physical law should be shaped also its political laws, conventions etc. that are to regulate the relations between the different Orientals. These laws and conventions must not imitate the Franks [i.e. Western Europeans] because otherwise the Orientals will tyrannize each other and the Franks will exploit them. I believe that the basic principle for the Orient has to be an as much as possible perfect separation of state and nation. [...]<sup>32</sup>

The criticism of the (nation-)state as inappropriate form of political organization for the “Orient” was expressed in another context after Venizelos’ rise to power in 1910: *Nonetheless, politicians today don’t see anything else than states. This is a fraud that can’t entail nothing else than disaster. Venizelos is also in this respect aping the foreign [i.e. Western European] politicians.*<sup>33</sup>

In such and similar statements it seems that the widespread 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist aversion to the Greek state as being essentially a product of Western European powers was translated by Souliotis-Nikolaidis into a fundamental rejection of the principle of nation states as a product of Western European civilization. It should be noted, however, that the anti-western resentment articulated in this context was not traditionalist by character but rather an expression of the contemporary ideological crisis of Greek nationalism that since the appearance of the Bulgarian national movement and the following irredentist conflict over Macedonia experienced a permanent undermining of its former theoretical premises, i.e. the alleged ecumenicity of Greek identity and the belief in a civilizing mission as it had been expressed about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the somewhat blurred motto of the “Great Idea”.<sup>34</sup> In this regard the “Oriental Ideal” of Souliotis-Nikolaidis, whose 1908 published pamphlet hardly by accident bore the title “Great Idea” (Fn. 21), is to be interpreted not the least as an attempt to (re)establish a more integrative concept of Greek identity against a growing tendency towards ethnocentric-exclusive patterns with a strong anti-Bulgarian emphasis.<sup>35</sup>

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32 Dimaras (ed.) (1971: 121f).

33 *Souliotis-Nikolaidis Archive*, Dossier 20 IV/3/1496.

34 Skopetea (1988). See also Politis (1993).

35 Zelepos (2002: 155–178). See also Livianos (2003).

The political rapprochement pursued by the “Constantinople Organization” had however only few visible results. Such were the formation of a parliamentary alliance between thirty Greek, Bulgarian, Armenian and Christian Arab deputies in January 1911 and the publication of the journal *Tribune des Nationalités* as political mouthpiece of the Ottoman nationalities which started at the end of the same year.<sup>36</sup> But on the whole it failed because other political tendencies inside the Ottoman Empire as well as beyond its borders turned out much stronger. Souliotis-Nikolaidis welcomed the formation of the Balkan League in 1912 because he believed that it would function as a vehicle to counter the Turkification policy of the Young Turks and to safeguard equality of the nationalities inside the Ottoman Empire as a step toward a future confederation. It seems however that he did not realize the essentially offensive character of this alliance and there are even indications that he was virtually taken by surprise by the outbreak of the War in October 1912.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no question that the “Oriental Ideal” can to some extent be characterized as an expression of political romanticism, particularly in regard to its cultural-ideological framework which was marked by a very biased and latently essentialist perception of the “West” and “Westernness” as counterpart of what was imagined here as “Orient”.<sup>38</sup>

Souliotis-Nikolaidis was however anything else than an utopian dreamer without a sense of reality but, in contrary, a political activist with first-hand experience of the nationalist struggles of his time in which he also played a prominent role. It is exactly this background that makes him such an interesting case. It is true that his project of a Balkan confederation including the Ottoman Empire appears in historical retrospect utopian and thus doomed to fail. It should be seen however in the context of the various confederative concepts articulated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century which, as mentioned above, can be

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36 See Bura (1983).

37 See Suliotis-Nikolaidis (1959: vi), and Panayotopoulos (1980a: 350, 353).

38 In this respect it appears almost like an “Okzidentalist” inversion of what Edward Said decades later called “Orientalism” in his famous (though likewise biased) monograph of 1978. It is to be mentioned in this context that Souliotis-Nikolaidis perceived the “Orient” as distinct cultural-geographic entity not only from the “West” (see Fn. 21) but also from “Asia”, see for example a picturesque passage in his *Σημειωματάριον* (*Notebook*), Dimaras (ed.) (1971: 122): “I do not fear the Russians, they are Asians. The Greek is an Oriental.”



understood as reflections of the imperial heritage of that region. In this respect the “Oriental Ideal” was a late – actually the last – articulation of this “imperial strand”, though still corresponding then with tangible political realities. It should be taken into account that in the specific setting of the Ottoman Balkans during the first decade of the 20th century things looked quite different than at the end of the second. There was first of all a lack of visible political alternatives to the existing status quo. In 1908 estimates may have differed whether the Young Turk Revolution would lead to an improvement for the Ottoman nationalities or not, as it turned out later. But scarcely any contemporary could seriously have believed at that time that the Balkan States would be able on their own to expand their territories by military force in a foreseeable future, as no one was able to predict that just ten years later the Ottoman Empire would have finished politically alongside with the Empires of the Hapsburgs, the Romanovs and even the German Kaiserreich as a most dynamic Great Power in the pre-war period. From this perspective it seems that the idea of national co-existence of the regions’ peoples in the political framework of a reformed Ottoman Empire, despite its romantic substratum, was not totally an unrealistic option, regardless of its eventual failure.

The actual purpose of the present paper, however, is not to contribute to a quite hypothetical discussion about the political feasibility of the “Oriental Ideal” of Souliotis-Nikolaidis, but to put it in the broader context of nationalist ideology. In this respect, it is less interesting whether it was *feasible* or not, than that it was *thinkable* at all in the framework of Greek nationalism – and there is no doubt that Souliotis-Nikolaidis was in fact an ardent nationalist, as is only natural for his epoch and the social milieu he belonged to. As for most contemporaries personally involved, the violent conflict in Macedonia was a catalytic experience for him and it is obvious that it influenced significantly his political ideas, although it led him to quite different conclusions than most of his comrades-in-arms.

In contrast to them he did not take the personal experiences and observations he made in Macedonia as an alleged verification of the national stereotypes with whom he “[...] grew up and lived, like anybody of us [...]” (see Fn. 15), but in contrary as an occasion to put into question what “[...] our fanatic education makes us believe [...]” (see Fn. 19). His particular criticism was directed against state-nationalism and the concept of the nation-state in general which he considered not only to be an inappropriate organizational pattern for the peoples of the “Orient” but also a vehicle for possible exploitation of the region by foreigners. Although there is no evidence that his criticism finally led him to renouncement of nationalism, Souliotis-Nikolaidis undoubtedly understood

its ideological mechanisms as few of his contemporaries, including socialist thinkers, and it seems that he was conscious about the dangers a partition of the region among rival nation states would entail. He was obviously more successful in analyzing and foreseeing future problems than in his attempt to find a viable political alternative. It is however this attempt itself and not its failure, that makes Souliotis-Nikolaidis and his “Oriental Ideal” a remarkable example for the ambiguous character of Southeast European nationalisms, but also against deterministic perceptions of their historical impact, something not less topical today than a hundred years ago.

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