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The Agricultural Issue in Thessaly (1881-1923)—Thessaly between 1881 and 1930: Society and Ideas That Emerged

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Abstract

The incorporation of Thessaly into Greece in 1881 created a distinctive agricultural and social problem. Unlike earlier annexations, such as the Ionian Islands, the integration of Thessaly and Arta followed prolonged negotiations after the Berlin Conference (1878). Wealthy Muslims sold their estates to Greeks from the diaspora, while the state, unable to compensate departing Ottoman landlords, left peasants in a more precarious position than under Ottoman rule. Greco-Roman law facilitated evictions, undermining the customary protections of smallholders under Muslim law, and fueling tensions between landless farmers and large landowners. This conflict culminated in violent clashes, assassinations, and widespread mobilization demanding redistribution. The agrarian issue shaped both local society and national politics, with personalities such as Marinos Antypas, Dimitrios Bousdras, and Nikolaos Plastiras leading movements that eventually secured land reform. The dissolution of large estates in 1923 confirmed the superiority of family-based farming over estates, improving productivity and stability. This paper explores why the agrarian issue arose in Thessaly and how it influenced social ideas and political developments, highlighting the interplay between land ownership, rural struggles, and reformist leadership that transformed both the region and Greece more broadly. The Addendum provides a concise analysis of the underlying factors that led Thessaly and, by extension, Greece to pursue a developmental trajectory distinct from that of the other Balkan states.

Keywords

Thessaly, Land Reform, Sharecroppers, Agrarian Question

1. Introduction

The annexation of Thessaly to Greece in 1881 marked one of the most significant turning points in the country's modern history. Following the Berlin Conference of 1878, long diplomatic negotiations culminated in the Treaty of Constantinople (Kiepert, 1882), which ceded Thessaly and part of Arta to the Greek state. This expansion was celebrated as the realization of long-standing national aspirations. Yet, beneath the political symbolism, the incorporation of Thessaly revealed profound economic and social challenges, especially in relation to land ownership and rural society.

The roots of the so-called "agrarian question" in Thessaly lay in the transfer of large estates. Wealthy Muslim landlords, anticipating the political changes, sold extensive properties to Greeks of the diaspora, often absentee investors. The Greek state, unable to provide adequate compensation, effectively facilitated the consolidation of these estates under new ownership. For the local population—comprising crofters, sharecroppers, and landless peasants—this transition proved devastating. Unlike under Ottoman rule, where customary practices had provided relative security, the application of Greco-Roman law empowered landowners to enforce evictions and extract harsher terms of tenancy.

This new regime entrenched inequality and generated deep discontent. Peasants faced the loss of their traditional rights of residence and cultivation, while being forced to deliver a significant portion of their produce to landlords. Living conditions were poor, and the lack of investment in flood control, drainage, or land improvements further weakened agricultural productivity. These conditions undermined rural stability, leaving Greece unable to achieve self-sufficiency in basic crops such as wheat. The persistence of such inequalities created fertile ground for collective mobilization and political confrontation.

Over the following decades, the agrarian issue of Thessaly moved to the center of Greek political life. Popular protests, violent uprisings, and the assassination of reformist figures such as Marinos Antypas demonstrated the explosive nature of the conflict. At the same time, broader intellectual and political movements rallied to the peasants' cause, with leaders such as Dimitrios Bousdras and Nikolaos Plastiras shaping debates on social justice and reform. The culmination of these struggles was the agricultural reform of 1923, which redistributed land and confirmed the superiority of family farming over large estates. The objective of this paper is therefore twofold: first, to investigate the historical roots and persistence of the manor system in Thessaly, and second, to examine how this struggle reshaped social ideas and political developments across Greece.

2. Society and the Agricultural Economy

Sivignon (1975) recognized the autonomy of the Principality of Bulgaria, the independence of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro from the Ottoman Empire, while the border demarcation between Greece and the Ottoman Empire was

barely touched upon.

After three years of negotiations and under pressure from the Great Powers, the Porte signed with Greece the Treaty of Constantinople (Kiepert, 1882), which ratified the annexation of most of Thessaly, the fortress of Pounda in the Amvrakikos Gulf and part of the prefecture of Arta, east of the Arachthos River, to the Greek state (Kiepert, 1882). This Agreement is considered of major importance for Greece (Avelot, 1897), as it satisfied centuries of ardent desires and established a new borderline, expanding the Greek territories (Mille, 1898).

In terms of population, Thessaly was less densely populated than southern Greece (Chararas, 1965). One tenth of the population in 1881 consisted of Muslims, who were mainly located in the plains according to **Table 1**[1].

Table 1. Muslims in Thessaly by region.

Province	Percentage of Muslims in total
Tyrnavos	30.0%
Larissa	23.8%
Farsala-Domokos	24.7%
Almiros	11.8%
Karditsa	4.9%
Agia	4.7%
Volos	2.4%
Trikala	2.4%
Kalambaka	0%

Source: National Statistical Service of Greece, 1881.

At the 1881 census Muslims accounted to nine percent (9%) of the total (it is certain that before 1878—Congress of Berlin—it was higher), one percent (1%) were Jews and ninety percent (90%) were Orthodox. The majority of Muslims were Turks and a small percentage were Albanians. The Jews came after their expulsion by Isabella and Ferdinand (after the Reconquista) in the early 1500s (Stavrianos, 1958).

It should be noted that although the governments did not persecute them (this was forbidden by the treaties); it is estimated that in the period 1878-1882 one fourth (1/4) of the Muslims emigrated from Greece (probably fear of reprisals or the inability to perform religious duties played a major role).

The population of Thessaly by region in 1881 was, according to **Table 2**, as follows:

Table 2. Population by region (1881).

Region	Male	% Male in year	Female	% Female in year	Total	% Department in district
Larissa	42,318	53.60%	36,635	46.40%	78,953	30.04%
Karditsa	30,261	51.02%	29,049	48.98%	59,310	22.57%
Magnesia	34,765	52.08%	31,988	47.92%	66,753	22.40%

[1]Data Sources: Most tables derive from the Hellenic Statistical Service (censuses for the respective years). Data are available in both Greek and French, e.g. Royaume de Grèce, Statistique Générale de la Grèce, Population de la Grèce, 1928, Athènes.

Continued

Trikala	30,375	52.55%	27,424	47.45%	57,799	21.99%
Total	137,719	52.40%	125,096	47.60%	262,815	100.00%

Source: Census 1881.

The living condition of the villagers, as will be noted in the following has resulted in low growth (Papaloukas, 1884). **Table 3** shows the evolution up to 1928[2].

Table 3. Population of Thessaly by Region (1889, 1896, 1907, 1920, 1928).

Region	1889	1896	1907	1920	1928
Larissa	83,279	86,513	95,066	140,589	144,428
Magnesia	83,210	91,828	102,747	103,124	125,861
Trikala	70,969	96,007	90,548	92,043	105,412
Karditsa	72,174	80,766	92,941	102,652	115,796
Thessaly	309,632	355,114	381,302	438,408	491,497
Greece	2,187,208	2,433,806	2,631,952	5,016,889	6,204,684
% Thessaly in Greece	14.2%	14.6%	14.5%	8.7%	7.9%

Source: Censuses of various years.

The Treaties of Constantinople, among other things, stipulated that Greece was obliged to pay compensation for the Turkish property in the ceded territories (Cherveau, 1882).

The Greek state was unable to afford to pay compensation for the large landed estates, and the three-year period which elapsed since the Congress of Berlin gave time for negotiations and favoured the sale of land. At that time, a number of expatriates—mainly Greeks from Constantinople and from the diaspora (i.e. Greeks who lived in European countries)—bought, from the Turks, estates together with the settlements they included (Chifliks[3]). The consequence of this action was not only that the agricultural issue in Thessaly remained unsolved, but also that it intensified.

The new masters—Greeks—applying the Greco-Roman law, appeared more demanding than the Turks, disregarding the small peasants (crofters or landless) rights of ownership and possession of the house and the small area of land, which the cultivators had considered theirs for an indefinite time period, according to the pre-existing regime based on Muslim law (Sivignon, 1975).

The living conditions for the small cultivators became even more unbearable, as they lived in slums, often together with their animals and were obliged to pay half of their production as rent (Cvijie, 1918). Every will of the land owner or the foreman, who was the second in command, was satisfied under threats and blackmail.

This regime of slavery seemed self-perpetuating. The sharecroppers[4] exercised their right to vote and maintained, by voting visibly, at the behest of the state

[2]It is noted that in Greece with the regions that initially formed the Greek state, and after the struggles for independence, the phenomenon of immigration was extremely intense. Around 400 thousand people had emigrated mainly to the United States between 1890-2010.

[3]Chifliks: Ottoman institution resembling the Western manor system.

[4]Sharecroppers: Smallholders with minimal land who worked in villages owned by large landlords.

owners, and under the threat of expulsion, Members of Parliament who refused to pass a property expropriation law.

The expatriate landowners, for their part, put pressure on the government to legislate in their favour, threatening that they would be granted Muslim citizenship. In that case they would receive more favourable treatment and adequate compensation, making investment in the ceded land—which did not seem to be paying off productively—more profitable, rather than putting up with forced expropriation. The pressure of the landowners brought the governments, after the annexation, to their side, which in turn, with the help of the gendarmerie and the army, suppressed any voice opposing their interests (Morgan, 1933).

In Prime Minister Trikoupis' view, in fact, the distribution of land to the small cultivators would give the impression of political instability in the country, preventing foreign investors from bringing in their capital.

All this was happening at a time when the country needed to modernize and was turning to foreign investors for major public works[5]. Moreover, it should not be overlooked, that the land owners were covered by the constitutional provision protecting their property, and several of them being Members of Parliament, no majority was formed to change this provision[6].

It was soon found that the food problem was not solved[7] by the forced servitude regime. The lack of incentive to increase the productivity of the small peasants, who were cultivating a foreign land, the miserable working conditions and the absence of flood control, drainage and other improvement works, which could not be undertaken by private individuals, resulted in poor harvests, which were not sufficient to make Greece self-sufficient in corn.

The experience of the distribution of the national lands in Old Greece in 1871 proved the positive results of family exploitation of land, which were greater than those of large landholding[8]. Moreover, this was the reason, combined with the

[5]The digging of the Corinth Canal, the railway network, extensive port facilities, etc., took place during the Tricoupian period.

[6]The Constitution of 1911 in comparison to that of 1864 offered to governments greater ease in the matter of land redistribution.

[7]Most people considered that the cession of the region of Thessaly would solve the problem of insufficient wheat production and improve the trade balance. In the Peloponnese mainly raisins were cultivated.

[8]Agricultural Production Statistics (1920-1925): While cultivation in the *chiflik* system was relatively extensive, it became more intensive under the family farm structure. This is evident in the yield per stremma*, as shown in the following table:

Product	Indicator	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925
Hard wheat	Area (thousand stremmas)	2450	2670	2820	2940	3050	3120
	Production (thousand tons)	345	375	410	435	465	480
	Yield (kg/stremma)	141	140	145	148	152	154
Soft wheat	Area (thousand stremmas)	1100	1150	1220	1260	1310	1340
	Production (thousand tons)	145	158	170	180	198	205
	Yield (kg/stremma)	132	137	139	143	151	153
Cotton (seed)	Area (thousand stremmas)	290	305	320	340	360	375
	Production (thousand tons)	66	72	78	84	90	95
	Yield (kg/stremma)	228	236	244	247	250	253

*stremma = 1/10 of a hectare; Sources: *Statistique Annuelle Agricole de la Grèce* (1922-1926), Vergopoulos (1975). Ploumidis (2017).

pronounced relief of the terrain, why the feudal institution did not extend to the Balkans. Seeking popular support in the midst of National Schism, Venizelos counted on the increased profitability of family exploitation when, he promised the property expropriation, which was later carried out.

The huge sums allocated by the Venizelos government and the subsequent increase of arable land for the so-called productive projects prove that it was impossible for these to be done by individuals. The undertaking of the land improvement projects by the state also dragged the rest of the capital, with the consequence of the improvement of the Stock (Table 4).

Table 4. Agricultural capital stock in Thessaly (in million drachmas 1970).

Years	Public	Private	Total fixed Capital	Livestock	Plants	Capital stock
1911	…	95	95	1250	940	2285
1923	110	260	370	2320	1060	3750
1930	320	480	800	3040	1120	4960
1938	744	770	1514	2930	1210	5654

Source: Papailias (1992), memo.

However, indicative of the above is that several manors (in Turkish Chifliks), in the period up to the Balkan wars, were bought by the inhabitants of the villages[9]. In 1881 there were 460 Chifliks, while in 1902 only 281 remained. In contrast, the number of free villages increased from 198 to 301 in the same period.

With the effort to rehabilitate the refugees (League of Nations, 1926) and after the annexation of Eastern Rumelia by Bulgaria, the established Agricultural Fund of Thessaly bought 57 Chifliks (in the years 1907 to 1914) covering an area of 1 million square meters. The agricultural reform which was announced in 1917 but took shape in 1923 resulted in the elimination of large land holdings (Sion, 1934).

Table 5 shows the extent of the agricultural reform throughout the country (mainly in Thessaly and Macedonia).

Table 5. Number of expropriated Chifliks[10].

Region	*Number of Chifliks*
Thessaly	584
Macedonia	818
Epirus	410
Western Thrace	84
Old Greece	363
Total	2259

Source: 1928 Census.

[9]Tobacco cultivation and livestock allowed to many villagers to buy off the lands they cultivated.

[10]Generally, there are different views. According to Pronza (1992) *Chifliks* covered 2/3 of the thessalic land (6 million acres). The number of landless peasants and *parakededes* (mobile workers) amounted to 18 thousand families (Parakededes: An Ottoman institution (of Persian origin) referring to itinerant impoverished laborers employed occasionally for seasonal work).

In 1928, when the land redistribution had not been completed, the legal relationship of the cultivators was as follows Table 6:

Table 6. Legal relationship of farmers.

Legal relationship to the cultivators	*By region*		*Total*
	Larissa	*Trikala*	
Owners	33,689	31,468	65,157
Implanters[11]	1481	218	1699
workers	2673	1071	3744
Crofters	852	1165	2017
Those who received an invitation	99	159	258
Exchangeable*	0	0	0
occupants*	0	0	0
usufructaries*	0	0	0
Other properties	0	2	2
Unspecified	2094	2071	4165
Total	40,888	36,154	77,042
Minus dual properties	385	214	599
Grand Total	40.503	35.940	76.443

Source: Census, 1928.

The cultivated areas in 1928 were distributed as follows Table 7. Cultivated areas and seedlings (in stremmas).

Table 7. Arable land and trees (in stremmas).

Arable land	*Vegetables*	*Other garden crops*	*Fallow land etc.*	*Grapes for wine*	*Grapes for tables*	*Olive trees*	*Fruit trees*	*Citrus trees*
2,012,732	40,972	44	1,124,593	78,257	5722	95,002	45,944	446

Source: Census, 1928.

3. People and Ideas

The above developments were the reason for the emergence of people who sought to change the social and economic situation of the region with their ideas and action.

In the period 1881-1923, dynamic personalities such as Marinos Antipas, Dimitrios Bousdras and Nikolaos Plastiras, who contributed to the expropriation of Chifliks in 1923 through their actions were present.

Marinos Antipas, born shortly before the annexation of the Ferentinata of Kefalonia in 1872 and influenced by the ideas of his teacher, Stavros Kallergis, leader of utopian socialism, fought and was wounded during the Cretan Revolution in 1896[12].

[11]Implanters: Cultivators who planted crops on land they did not own and received a share of the proceeds.

[12]The following year, he blamed King George and the Great Powers, in Omonia Square, for the unfortunate Greco-Turkish war of 1897. This was the reason for his annual imprisonment. Despite the negative atmosphere that there was against him, he continued to attack on the kingdom through the newspaper "Anastasis", which he erected. Then, having been disappointed by these evolutions, he settled into Bucharest in 1903, and persuaded his uncle, named Georgios Skiadaresis, who was a wealthy merchant, to invest in a small estate in the Thessalian plain. Returning to Kefalonia, he erected the "People's Reading Room", a center for the dissemination of socialist ideas. (Tzouganatos, 1978)

Failing in the parliamentary elections in 1906, he went to Thessaly as a foreman on his uncle's estate. He stood out soon by implementing a number of declarations such as increasing the share of the landless peasants from twenty-five (25%) to seventy-five percent (75%), as well as measures aimed at burden relief.

His action extended beyond the Chifliks, which he oversaw (Loukatos, 1980). He roamed around the Thessalian plain, trying to rally the cultivators into a united front (KefaloniaView.gr, 2020, Ermes of Ilias, 2020).

He supported the eight-hour working day, the Sunday holiday and the reduction of the withholding from the landowners and, in addition, the debt relief and reclamation. The latter alarmed the authorities, who sought to improve the living conditions of the landless peasants, but hesitated with reclamation. A wave of sympathy developed towards the landless peasants and of disgust towards the Owners of the Chifliks throughout the country, and for this reason the episode between Antipas and Schliemann assumed nationwide proportions[13].

The hostility towards him led to his assassination (Kougianos, 2007, Ethnos, 1997), in Pyrgetto Rapsani, in 1907, by the caretaker of the co-owner of the Chiflik[14]. The culprit was acquitted, but his battle, as well as his murder, affected the inhabitants in and out of Thessaly (Kapsalis, 1986). The later uprising of Kapsalis (1986) and the official establishment of the Sunday holiday (1910) are a tangible legacy.

The agricultural reform that was to be launched vigorously in 1923 was the largest across of Europe and represented his vindication (Wogazli, 1919).

Inspired by the action of Antipas, Dimitrios Bousdras, a lawyer from Karditsa (Bar Association of Karditsa, n.d.), aimed at collective action for the vindication of farmers and founded the Pedino Agricultural Association in 1909. He was even elected president of the Pan-Thessalian committee (Kardaras, n.d.) that would activate the farmers (Grivellas, Karafyllis, & Magopoulos 2006), whom he sought to mobilize with his sermons (Morning Post of Karditsa, 1999).

Despite the fact that, in the protest of February 27, 1910, in Karditsa, there were a dead man and many injured persons, he continued his action, organizing Pan-Thessalian mobilization. With sobriety he called on the members of the League to participate in a peaceful struggle that would not allow violent interventions by the police and the army against the demonstrators.

The protest in Larissa on 9 March, the deaths and injuries in Killeler and Tsoular, the clashes in Larissa and Farsala resulted in his being indicted as an instigator, by the Dragoumi government, only to be subsequently acquitted after the general outcry. By lobbying in a legal manner, through rallies and demonstrations, he sought to raise the issue of the expropriation of the Chifliks. He fought for this issue from the parliamentary seat he won in 1910. He won the seat in 1912, 1915 and 1920, and was later elected senator. In 1916 he followed Venizelos in the National Schism movement.

His struggles for the expropriation of large estates and for the improvement of

[13]Agamemnon Schliemann, a significant landowner and a member of parliament, was the son of archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. Antipas slapped him publicly. For this reason Antipas has been prosecuted.

[14]Antipas managed half of a manor. The other half belonged to another· his caretaker killed Antipas Papasotiriou (2014).

the living conditions of cultivators made him known throughout Greece (Archaeological Museum of Karditsa, 2014). He influenced the government of Venizelos and he was, after Marinos Antipas, the most important supporter of land redistribution. His struggle was vindicated by the expropriation of large land holdings by his compatriot Nikolaos Plastiras in 1923.

Nikolaos Plastiras was a military man and after the Second World War he became involved in politics. Born in Morfovouni, Karditsa, in 1883, Nikolaos Plastiras joined the army in 1903[15].

On September 11, 1922, he was the leader of the military movement in Chios, with Gonatas in Lesvos and Fokas as the representative of the navy.

On September 12, the rebels set off for Athens by ship. They demanded, among other things, the resignation of King Constantine, the dissolution of the Parliament, and the strengthening of the front in Thrace.

On the 14th of September the rebels entered Athens being cheered (by the crowds), while Constantine resigned (Dafnis, 1955). After the elections held in December 1923 he handed over power to the new government and the following month he resigned from the army, having received the rank of lieutenant general (Meynaud, 1965). His actions had a catalytic effect on the political situation in Greece[16]. Apart from his political activities (revolution of 1922, national reconciliation effort—period 1950-1952), Plastiras played an important role in the issues of agricultural reform in 1923 and women's suffrage, influencing the social life of the country.

In Thessaly in particular, in 1925, observing the heavy rainfall in his hometown, he envisioned the creation of the Tavropou dam and through special technical reports in 1928 he proposed the creation of an artificial lake that would limit flooding and improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of the region.

The unstable political situation (frequent changes of government, Metaxas dictatorship and the Occupation by German) did not allow the implementation of the idea. In 1951, Prime Minister Plastiras incorporated the project into the de-

[15]He took part in the Macedonian struggle (1907-1908) and in 1910 he was admitted to the School of Non-Commissioned Officers—in 1912 he served as a 2nd-lieutenant. He participated in the Balkan wars with the 5th Infantry Regiment. Because of his braveness he was promoted to lieutenant and soon he was promoted to captain. Not having official permission, he sought to participate in the struggle of the Northern Epirus. As he was exceptionally beloved among his colleagues they helped him to avoid the accusation of disobedience in the military court that investigated it. Being charismatic he promoted more rapidly, even more after his attachment to the Venizelos camp. After the beginning of Venizelos's movement (National Defence), he fighted on the Macedonian front with the Entente units. He was wounded and promoted to major and later to lieutenant colonel. In 1919 with the 5/42 Evzone Regiment he took part in the campaign against the Bolsheviks in Russia. Having been defeated, he left Ukraine, where he was fighting, and went to Smyrna. He distinguished as a leader of the 5/42 Evzone Regiment, during the Asia Minor campaign owning to the coordinated retreat, at the same time that most of the army units had been collapsed. Ten years later, on the night of the 1933 elections, while Venizelos' Liberal Party were defeated by the Monarchists, he tried in a coup to overthrow the result. However, he didn't succeed and took refuge in France (Chiclet, 1989). Despite the fact that he was living there, he participated in Venizelos's movement of March 1, 1935. His failure led to his death sentence in absentia (Dafnis, 1955). Venizelos was been sentenced to the same penalty. He returned to Greece in 1945, in the midst of a civil war, having been appointed Prime Minister by the British (January 3, 1945). The British were looking for a Greek politician similar to de Gaulle (Anastasiadis, 2000). The Varkiza Agreement (February 12, 1945), which ended the December conflict, was signed by him. He resigned on April 8. In 1950 he founded E.P.E.K. (National Progressive Center Union) (Anastasakos, 2009). On April 15 of the same year, he formed a coalition government with Sophocles Venizelos and George Papandreou. With the new elections (1951) EPEK won a relative majority. Thus, he took over as Prime Minister again (November 1, 1951-October 11, 1952). He died on July 26, 1953.

[16]Koutras (2021).

velopment plan of the rural economy.

He himself did not see the realization of the project, which lasted between 1955 and 1959. The dam was inaugurated under the government of Karamanlis and was named in his honour (Lake Plastiras).

4. Conclusion

The agricultural issue of Thessaly, which emerged after the annexation of 1881, was not merely a regional phenomenon but a national challenge that reshaped Greece's political, economic, and social development (Wace & Thomson, 1914). The persistence of large estates under new ownership created conditions of exploitation for sharecroppers and landless peasants, whose position became more precarious under Greco-Roman law than under Ottoman rule. What began as a local struggle over land tenure gradually escalated into one of the most critical social conflicts of modern Greece.

The prolonged contest between landlords and cultivators highlighted the limits of the Greek state in managing social integration and economic modernization (Andreadis, 1918). By prioritizing political stability and foreign investment over social justice, successive governments delayed meaningful reform. Yet, the inability to resolve the agrarian question intensified rural unrest, fostered popular mobilization, and forced the state to eventually adopt expropriation policies. These dynamics underscore how unresolved economic inequalities can become catalysts for political transformation.

At the same time, the Thessalian experience illustrates the importance of individual and collective leadership in shaping historical outcomes. Reformist figures such as Marinos Antypas, Dimitrios Bousdras, and Nikolaos Plastiras gave voice to the grievances of the peasantry and mobilized public opinion across Greece. Their ideas, actions, and sacrifices bridged local struggles with national politics, transforming the agrarian question into a wider debate on democracy, social justice, and modernization.

The agricultural reform of 1923 marked the culmination of this process. By redistributing land and recognizing the efficiency of family-based farming, Greece aligned its rural economy with broader European trends. The reform not only improved productivity and living conditions but also redefined the relationship between state, society, and agriculture. Ultimately, the resolution of the Thessalian agrarian issue demonstrates how conflicts over land can become vehicles for broader political and social change, leaving a lasting legacy on national development.

5. Addendum: The Agrarian Question in the Balkans and the Case of Thessaly

5.1. Bulgaria

As in the rest of the Ottoman Empire, large estates (çiftliks) owned by Muslims constituted the dominant agrarian structure. The establishment of the Bulgarian

state in 1878 resulted in the emergence of a large class of smallholders, although these lacked the necessary capital for modernization. In the early twentieth century, Aleksandar Stamboliyski sought to promote land redistribution and to strengthen agricultural production through the creation of cooperatives. Upon becoming prime minister in 1919, he adopted a series of measures in favor of the peasantry. This reformist experiment was brought to an abrupt end in 1923 with the overthrow of his government, the assassination of Stamboliyski and other agrarian leaders, and the subsequent reassertion of large landowners' dominance. The consequence was the stagnation of the agricultural sector and the perpetuation of widespread rural poverty.

5.2. Romania

In Moldavia and Wallachia, the feudal system remained entrenched well into the nineteenth century. Reforms undertaken before 1877 abolished serfdom and produced a substantial population of smallholders, coexisting with powerful landowning elites. In 1907, acute rural poverty—stemming from insufficient capital and the extremely small scale of peasant holdings, which confined most cultivators to subsistence—provoked a massive uprising, which was brutally suppressed with heavy loss of life. The agrarian reform of 1921 redistributed land, yet the persistence of fragmented, non-viable holdings ensured low productivity and sustained a severe social problem throughout the countryside.

5.3. Yugoslavia

In Serbia, small-scale ownership was the norm. In Bosnia and Croatia, however, Austro-Hungarian rule had preserved large estates and entrenched peasant dependence on landlords. In northern Macedonia, the çiftlik system closely resembled that of Greece. The agrarian reform carried out between 1920 and 1931 redistributed the large estates to the landless and impoverished peasants, thereby eliminating the last vestiges of feudalism. Nonetheless, the agrarian structure that emerged was marked by fragmentation, limited capital resources, and chronic underinvestment—features that continued to define the rural economy up until the Second World War.

5.4. Thessaly in Comparative Perspective

When compared with these Balkan cases—societies which shared the common historical experience of Ottoman domination—it becomes evident that Greece followed a divergent trajectory. Its closer integration with Western Europe, rooted in both historical and cultural circumstances (notably the intervention of the Great Powers during the War of Independence in 1821-1830 and the wave of Philhellenism that accompanied it), conferred a distinct advantage. Greek political culture was less tolerant of land concentration: in 1871, for instance, the government distributed the "national lands" (former Muslim estates) to the landless cultivators, rather than maintaining them as state-rented properties. This precedent foreshadowed the expropriation of Thessalian estates and underscored the indi-

vidualistic orientation of Greek rural society and distinguished the country from the rest of the Balkans and the Near East

Following the abolition of the Thessalian çiftliks, the Greek state sought to reinforce agrarian development through the establishment of the Agricultural Bank and substantial investment in land reclamation and irrigation projects. These initiatives, which continued into the 1980s, enabled Greece to overcome to a considerable extent the structural difficulties that continued to burden its Balkan neighbors.

6. Final Conclusion: Comparisons with Other Balkan Regions

Greece's historical relationship with the West generated a strong wave of *Philhellenism,* culminating in the Battle of Navarino (1827), when Britain, France, and Russia destroyed the entire Turco-Egyptian fleet. The subsequent Russo-Turkish War (1828) compelled the Sultan to accept the creation of the Greek state.

As a result, Greece's institutions and overall environment differed markedly from other Balkan countries, which were economically, politically, and culturally less developed and gained independence nearly fifty years later.

Despite internal resistance, reforms were ultimately accepted by nearly all political forces—a development not seen elsewhere in the Balkans. Consequently, the redistribution of large estates proceeded smoothly and became the most extensive in the region.

Likewise, the *subsequent strong state investments in infrastructure and public lending through the Agricultural Bank enjoyed cross-party support. In this respect, the case of Thessaly was unique in the Balkans, representing a rare example of coordinated agrarian and institutional transformation.*

Methodology and Sources

The paper is based primarily on extensive archival research and the use of hard-to-access statistical data. Especially during the period 1912-2022, and 1940-1949 the triple occupation by German, Italy and Bulgaria, and the civil war destroyed part of the archives.

Most of the bibliography is in Greek. To facilitate international readers, several foreign sources are also cited, such as the monograph by Sivignon (1975), the social and political analysis by Meynaud (1965) in French, the political study by Chiclet (1989) in English, and the work of Kiepert (1882) on diplomatic relations in German.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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