



Borders Sovereignty Stamps

The Changes in Greek Territory 1830-1947

Konstantinos Tsitselikis

Department of Balkan, Slavic & Oriental Studies, University
of Macedonia, Thessaloniki (<https://www.uom.gr/en/kt>)

Published by the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation

Athens 2021

[in Greek, 336 pages, 240 images]

Since its foundation, in 1830, and up until 1947, the Greek state expanded dramatically, yet not without atrocities. Oftentimes Greek borders remained secure and territory permanent; other times they were marked unsuccessfully, and sovereignty failed. Expansion, was always related to state's national integration and homogenization agenda, and regardless the conflicting aspirations of the Great Powers. The stories of these borders are rich, and characterized by multiple claims, several conflicts, certainties and upheavals.

“Each border as any medicine, can be both a cure and a poison and therefore, it can be a matter of dosage”

Régis Debray

A clear symbol of power (its artistic content notwithstanding), the stamp played great role in the nationalization process of the territory, real and/or desired. As a matter of fact, the stamp was, and in fact it still is, the first exponent of border change and consolidation of power. It is argued that it embodies and reflects the ideological background of each state.

“The postage stamp is ideal propaganda. It passes from hand to hand and from city to city, reaching the most distant areas of the country and the farthest countries in the world”

Carlos Stetzer

Konstantinos Tsitselikis's work, *Borders, Sovereignty, Stamps, The Changes in Greek Territory, 1830-1947*, sets forth to investigate this interplay between sovereignty and territory and stamps. Through the particularities of stamps, the book provides a bird-eye view over the territory that defines today's Greece, with special attention at the same time to those lands that Greece claimed but failed to retain. A task that has never been systematically undertaken, *Borders, Sovereignty, Stamps* was published by the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation in 2021, the bicentennial year of the Greek War of Independence, and it raises the question of territoriality.

The book runs in **336 pages**. It contains **240 illustrations, mostly stamps and maps**, and it is divided into one extensive introduction and 9 chapters.



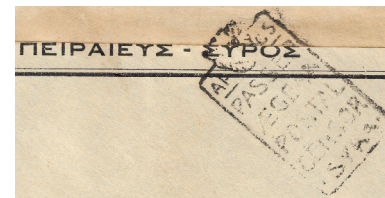


Introduction

The introductory chapter opens up discussing the relationship between the sovereignty and homogenization of the populace. It discusses the link between nationalism and territory in the making of modern states and the dissolution empires. It then turns to stamps, which in fact functions as a marker to make visible territorial changes occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Chapter 1: Territory and people, within, outside and around Greek borders

This chapter focuses on the various theoretical approaches that deal with modes of acquisition, occupation and sovereignty over land and people. The chapter focuses on the development of Greek borders just after the Greek Revolution and the first steps towards the achievement of *Megali Idea*, namely the expanse of the state to the “national territory”. Greek sovereignty suffered from restrictions and the involvement of the Great Powers. Chapter 1 draws upon the genealogy of Greek sovereignty, and exemplifies the role of the stamps and postmarks in this process.



British censorship to Greek civilian correspondence, Syros 1917.

Chapter 2: Safe and bloodless annexation

Greece had territorial “gains” –to quote national historiography- through bloodless annexation in two cases. The first is the Ionian Islands, which were offered to the Greek Kingdom by the British in 1864; and the second Thessaly, which became Greek in 1881, and only after the constant pressure of the Great Powers to the Ottoman Empire. After a failed offensive by the Greek army, the Ottomans regained it for a few months, in 1897. Thessaly was handed back to Greece, again without military confrontation under political pressure by Russia.



Ionian state, British protectorate, 1859. Annexed by Greece in 1864.



Ottoman occupation of Thessaly, 1897

Chapter 3: Sovereignty is not a given: The case of New Territories

This chapter carries on with permanent and successful –for Greece- territorial annexation after war. This was the case of the annexation of the so called “New Territories”, that is, Macedonia, Epirus, Eastern Aegean and Crete in the aftermath of the Second Balkan War in 1913. In all these cases, stamps were a marker of territorial status, namely occupation or sovereignty. Greek overprints over stamps of the freshly defeated administration are eloquent on the new status quo.



Special stamp for the New Lands, with strong message about the Greek-Christian character of the new sovereign, 1913. Annexation of New Territories 1913



Overprint “Greek administration” on Bulgarian stamp, Kavala 1913

Chapter 4: Regions in transition: From autonomous status or surrogate sovereignty to the Greek state

The chapter discusses the fascinating cases of territories that have experienced a special status before being annexed by the Greek state, such as: Crete, a semi-sovereign state (1898-1913); Samos, a principality (1832-1913); The Dodecanese islands (1911-1947); The island of Kastellorizo (1913-1947, under consequent occupation by Greece, France, Italy and Great Britain; Western Thrace, under various territorial statuses from 1913 to 1920.



Italian Dodecanese (1911-1943), 1934



Cretan state (1898-1913), 1900



Chapter 5: Incomplete, temporary and failed occupation of a foreign territory by Greece

The Greek administration was temporarily exerted to certain lands before it withdrew, a result of a military defeat or a diplomatic retraction. The examples are ample, and the role of the stamps crucial:

- Northern Epirus/Southern Albania (1913-1916/ 1940-1941),
- Eastern Thrace and Karaağaç (1920-1922), Imbros Tenedos (1912-1922)
- The Smyrna/Izmir zone (1919-1922), The Sason island (1864-1914)



Greek administration of Gkioumoultzina/Komotini. Overprint on Ottoman stamp, August 1913



Greek occupation of Kioutahia (Asia Minor): Improvised overprint "Greek occupation" on Ottoman stamp, 1921

Chapter 6: Greek military presence abroad. Peace-keeping and participation in military missions

Greek military forces have been based abroad in a series of cases: The military mission in France (1916); Military mission in Bulgaria (1919-1920); Military mission in Constantinople (1919-1922); Military Force of Cyprus (1960-).

Postmarks and stamps declare the presence of a third state (the Greek one) in a period of political instability.



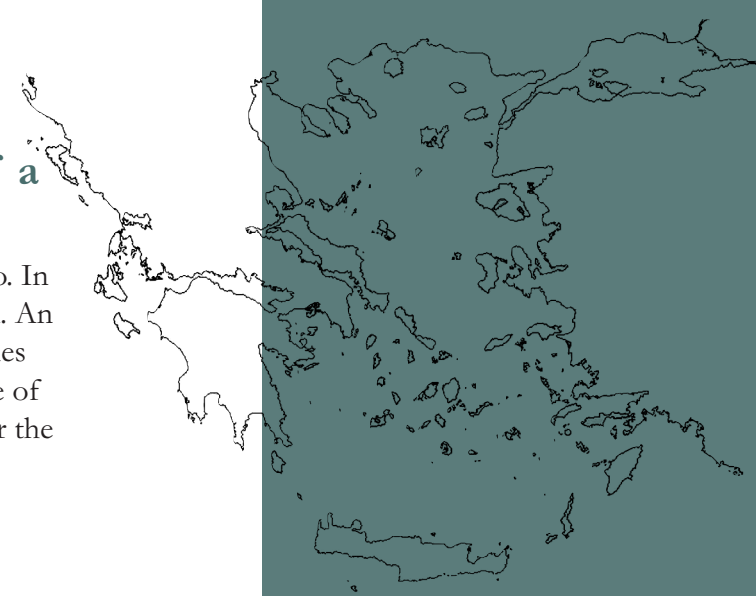
Greek military mission in Sofia, 1919



Greek military mission in Constantinople, 1920

Chapter 7: Foreign ally presence: administration or co-dominance of a Greek territory

Allied forces exerted special competences on Greek territory, sometimes challenging Greek sovereignty too. In other cases Greek and an allied forces exerted together occupation on a territory that finally became Greek. An allied army can constrain the local sovereignty, or even impose occupation. Such are the cases of: The allies during the First Balkan War (1912-1913); the presence of the Entente in Greece (1915-1917); the presence of the Serbian government and army in Corfu and Thessaloniki (1916-1918); the British army before and after the Greek Civil War, 1946-1949.



Bulgarian post office of Thessaloniki, March 1913



Italian post office of Corfu, May 1917

Chapter 8: Enemy occupation. Agonizing situations, minor and large

According to international law, occupation does not mean acquirement of sovereignty. Stamps depict this volatile situation between the occupying state and the defeated state. Cases of occupation of a Greek territory after a military conflict or war are: the annexation of Western Thrace by Bulgaria (1913-1919); the Italian occupation of Corfu (1923); the occupation by the axis forces (1941-1944): the German and the Italian zones of occupation and the Bulgarian annexation.



Italian occupation of the Ionian islands, Improved overprint on Greek stamps, 1941



German military stamps, Rhodes 1944



Chapter 9: Temporary exertion of political and military power vested with territoriality

Lastly, this chapters deals with revolutionary groups, rebels and revolutionary governments that aim to overthrow the central government, as well as exiled governments, which try to draw internal boundaries of their own territory. The revolutionary government in Therisos (Crete, 1905), the “trinity government” of Thessaloniki (1916-1917) and the guerilla groups active during the National Resistance against the axis occupation(1941-1944) issued stamps to mark their political authority over the territory.



Revolution of Therisos,
Crete, 1905



National Liberation
Front (EAM), 1944

Conclusions

The changes in Greece's borders can be differentiated between those that were crucial or insignificant, permanent or temporary, or of historical cardinal importance; those that were occasional or failed; those that can be considered successful today and those that were mistaken. These assessments are certainly Greek-centric.

Within the fluidity of territorial change and the contested power, stamps functioned as an ideologically loaded messenger of the new limits of the territory, the new ruler and the new sovereignty. The borders were changing, bilaterally exclusionary, in a territorial dance determined by the rhythm of history whose next steps no one can know.