

A snapshot of the diplomatic history of Sason

Dimitrios Merkourios Kondis

The Island of Saseno (or Sasseno), now Sazan Island, is quite a small island lying west of Valona. During the 18th and 19th centuries it was, from the geographical and political point of view, considered as belonging to the Ionian Islands.¹

The Treaty of Campo Formio of 17th October 1797, under which the Ionian Islands were ceded to France, established the principle of the geographical and political unity of this island group by stipulating that Corfu, Zante, Cephalonia, Leucas, Cythera and, in general, the former Venetian positions in Albania, situated south of the Gulf of Drino, should be included in the territory to be transferred to the sovereignty of France.

Similarly, the Treaty of Constantinople, concluded on 21st March 1800, between Russia and Turkey, provided for the inclusion of the seven Ionian Islands into the territory administered by the Ottoman Government.

The Treaty of Paris of 17th November 1815 specified that the authority of the Ionian Government, which was placed under British protection, should extend to the large islands “with their dependencies as enumerated in the Treaty of 21st March 1800, concluded between Russia and Turkey.”

In addition to the above-mentioned international instruments, the two Constitutional Charters of the Government of the Seven Ionian Islands, dated respectively 30th November 1803, and 28th August 1817, explicitly state that “the Government of the Seven Islands” is comprised of all islands, large or small, inhabited or uninhabited, until recently belonging to the Venetian Government and facing the coast of the Peloponnesus and Albania ...”

It follows from this explanation that the Island of Saseno, being geographically a part of the Ionian Islands, shared the same fate with them during the 18th and 19th centuries. When, under the terms of the Treaty which was signed in London on 24th March 1864, Great Britain ceded the Ionian Islands to Greece, the Island of Saseno passed to Greek sovereignty.

Therefore, the British Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands had also assigned Saseno to Greece but being barren and unable to support an active population, it was difficult to prove that Greece indeed administered the island between 1864 and the First Balkan War.² Furthermore, it was not in the intention of Greece to establish a naval base on the island. The Greek Government refrained during this period from sending even an ordinary garrison to Saseno. Under the terms of the 1864 Treaty of London, the Ionian Islands of Corfu and Paxo, as

¹ The history of Saseno in this article follows the facts presented by the Greek Delegation during the Paris Peace Conference in 1946. For the complete analysis refer to <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v04/d182>

² Κόντης, Δημήτριος-Μερκούριος. Τα Νησιά του Αιγαίου: 7+1 Απαντήσεις στον Τουρκικό Αναθεωρητισμό. Θεσσαλονίκη: IMXA, 2023, σελ. 236

well as their Dependencies, had been allotted to Greece under the protection of the Guaranteeing Powers, Great Britain, France, Russia, in perpetual neutrality.³ The Island of Saseno was not explicitly mentioned in this treaty, however its position near the Bay of Valona made the Greek Government to refrain from its militarization “in order to prevent any misunderstandings as to its intentions”.⁴

During the Balkan Wars, Greece came in possession of all territory east of Corfu Channel. Also, Saseno was occupied by a detachment of Greek Marines. These actions stirred the reaction of the Italian Government which at the time saw Greece as a rising naval Power in the Mediterranean, potentially interfering in Italian affairs in the Adriatic and the Aegean. In May 1913 the Italian Government issued an ultimatum to Athens stating that Italy could not allow Greece to hold both sides of Corfu Channel and would make war to prevent it. Furthermore, at the London Conference of the Ambassadors, the Italian conditions for Greece to receive the Aegean Islands was that all inland territory across Corfu and Saseno should be awarded to the newly formed Albanian State.⁵

On 13th February 1914, in a note addressed to the Greek Government, the Great Powers made the award of the islands of the Aegean to Greece dependent on the withdrawal of Greek troops from any territory situated outside the line recommended by the Protocol of Florence of 17th December 1913. Since this line was intended to define the frontier of Albania, the Island of Saseno was included in the area which was to be evacuated. The Greek Government felt obliged to comply with this proposal and ordered the Greek troops to evacuate Northern Epirus and the Island of Saseno.

As per the words of the Greek Government during the Paris Peace Conference of 1946-47, “a grave injustice and, at the same time, an even graver error was thus committed.”⁶ In December 1914, profiting by the international situation resulting from the First World War which had already begun and by the chaos caused in Albania after the departure of the Prince of Wied and the insurrection organized by Essad Pasha, Italy occupied Valona and the Island of Saseno. The Italian policy during 1913-14 was to coerce Great Britain and France into awarding key territories in the Eastern Mediterranean to Albania, as this eventually paved the way for the Italian penetration of the Balkans. This is evident by examining the Italian policy in Albania between 1914-20.⁷

In January 1920, the Albanian National Movement inspired the Congress of Lushnjë, where a new Government was formed determined to oppose the partition of Albania between Greece, Serbia/Montenegro and Italy. The new Albanian Government first came to an arrangement with Eleftherios Venizelos under the Protocol of Kapestica and then turned towards the Italian occupation in the Valona area. At the time Italy was plagued with serious internal problems, which forced the Italian Army to withdraw from Albania in August 1920. However, it

³ https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/diethneis_symvaseis/1864_london_treaty.doc

⁴ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v04/d182>

⁵ Κόντης 2023, σελ. 170.

⁶ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v04/d182>

⁷ Κόντης, Δημήτριος-Μερκούριος. «Ο Βενιζέλος και το Ζήτημα της Κορυτσάς στο Παρίσι, 1919-1920 και η αντιμετώπιση της Ελληνικής Εθνικής Μειονότητας από το νέο αλβανικό κράτος,» academia.com (2024).

should be noted that the (secret) Protocol which was signed by Italy and Albania in Tirana on August 2nd, 1920, provided for the evacuation by the Italian Army of the entire territory of Albania with the exception of the Island of Saseno.

The island remained in Italian hands until WWII, when it fell under Albanian occupation in October/November 1944 due to the actions of the partisans of Enver Hoxha.⁸ In August 1945, one month before the London Conference of Foreign Ministers, the issue of Saseno was deliberated between the Foreign Office and the Department of State.

The recommendation of J. E. Jacobs, Head of the U.S. Special Mission at Tirana was that the Island should be returned to Albania due to its position lying at the entrance of Valona harbor and as “it is so obvious that Saseno belongs to Albania.”⁹ Newly appointed Secretary of State Francis Byrnes of the Harry S. Truman administration concurred that Saseno was included in the 1913 Albanian Frontiers and these Frontiers were confirmed by the Conference of Ambassadors on November 9, 1921, and again on July 30, 1926, with certain modifications not related to Saseno. According to Byrnes, Italian claims in the past regarding the sovereignty of Saseno which rested on the Italian interpretation of the secret Preliminary Protocol of Tirana of August 2, 1920, were never accepted by Albania, or accorded formal international recognition, although the long occupation of Saseno by Italy apparently was never openly protested by other Governments.¹⁰ As a result, the U.S. position as recorded in the Memorandum by the United States Delegation to the Council of Foreign Ministers in London, dated September 14, 1945, was that “Saseno will go to Albania.”¹¹

At the time the U.S. were opposed to Greek claims over Southern Albania (Northern Epirus), while the Foreign Office was more sympathetic to the Greek Cause. The American Ambassador in London saw “no need for the U.S. to be overly sensitive to these Greek claims. We should be more concerned in gaining the goodwill of the Albanian people and the regime we propose to recognize, some of which we shall assuredly lose if we follow the Foreign Office suggestion.”¹² However, regarding Saseno, the viewpoint of London was aligned with Washington’s, and in the Memorandum by the United Kingdom Delegation to the Council of Foreign Ministers dated September 12, 1945, Italy was to recognize Albania, as a free and independent State and the island of Saseno as belonging to Albania.¹³

At the London Conference of Foreign Ministers, Vyacheslav Molotov (U.S.S.R.) accepted the joined proposal of Byrnes (U.S.) and Bevin (U.K.) regarding the fate of Saseno Island during the Third Meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers, held September 14, 1945.¹⁴ However, the decision on the disposition of the island was not made public.¹⁵ Furthermore, a Greek delegation

⁸ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d33>

⁹ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d35>

¹⁰ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d36>

¹¹ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v02/d76>

¹² <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d45>

¹³ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v02/d61>

¹⁴ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v02/d71>

¹⁵ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d42>

was not permitted to present the Greek claims at the Conference due to the objections of the Soviet Delegation, which at the time did not consider the Greek Government as “democratic”.¹⁶

When the U.S. intentions regarding Saseno were leaked on the New York Times in October 1945, the Greek Ambassador in Washington presented to the State Department a memorandum setting forth the claim of the Greek Government for the return of the Island of Saseno to Greek sovereignty and its argumentation that the allocation of the island should not be considered a part of the Italian settlement but should be considered as a Greek claim against Albania to be considered in connection with the question of Northern Epirus.¹⁷

During the Paris Peace Conference, the allotment of Saseno to Albania was strongly opposed by Italy¹⁸ and Greece.¹⁹ While the legal and political arguments that the Greek delegation presented during the Conference deserved to be considered, the prior London deal between the Powers could not be undone. Greece was also willing to commit to a demilitarization regime under the control of the United Nations if the island were to be returned to Greece. The Greek proposal was rejected by the Soviet Delegation in the 34th meeting of the Political and Territorial Commission for Italy. The Albanian Delegation was also present. In the end, the Greek amendment to Article 22 regarding Saseno was rejected by 13 votes to 2. Article 22 was thereafter adopted by 15 votes to 1, with 4 abstentions.²⁰ It was later renumbered as Article 28 in the final draft of the Treaty:

“Article 28. — Italy recognises that the Island of Saseno is part of the territory of Albania and renounces all claims thereto.”²¹

Regarding the legal position of Greece presented during the Paris Peace Conference, there are five points/questions that should be examined in detail, as the de jure possession of Saseno by Albania seems to be based on the decisions arrived at during the London Conference of 1912-13:

1. Does the November 1921 decision of the Conference of the Ambassadors in Paris regarding the Albanian Frontiers explicitly include Saseno, as at that time it remained under the de facto occupation of the Italians?²²
2. Does the Protocol of Florence of December 1913 pertain to Saseno as it seemingly refers only to land borders between Greece and Albania?
3. Were the arrangements of the London Conference of the Ambassadors during 1912-13 and the Decision of Six Powers valid regarding Saseno, as in the end the Powers backed from their agreement with Venizelos regarding the allotment of the Aegean Islands to

¹⁶ Κόντης 2023, σελ. 190-91 ; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v02/d67>

¹⁷ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d312>

¹⁸ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v03/d9>

¹⁹ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v07/d101>

²⁰ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v03/d246>

²¹ <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2177&context=ils>

²² <https://archives.ungeneva.org/lalbanie-m-jules-cambon-president-de-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-paris-informe-la-societe-de-la-decision-du-9-novembre-1921-par-laquelle-lempire-britannique-la-france-litalie-et-le-japon-ont-fixe-en-vertu-de-leurs-pouvoirs-les-front>

Greece by not enforcing their decision on the Ottoman Empire and by not including the Dodecanese Islands.

4. The decision of the Greek Parliament, which allowed the Greek Government to cede Saseno to Albanian sovereignty was published in the Official Gazette on June 7/20, 1914.²³ However, it is well known that at the time Albania was plunged into civil war and there was no Albanian Government to meet with the Greeks to enforce this decision.
5. While the Greek Government ratified the Paris Peace Treaty, she had clearly expressed its reservations regarding Saseno. Furthermore, the joint minority report regarding article 21 [27 in final treaty] by the United States and Greek Delegations stated that “It is well-known that one of the United Nations and member of the Paris Conference has territorial claims against Albania which are not now under consideration by this Conference. The frontiers of Albania are not up for consideration by the Conference and any implication in the Treaty that present Albanian frontiers have been confirmed by the Conference is erroneous, misleading and outside the Conference terms of reference.”²⁴

In July 1946 the Department of State was notified by the Italians that an agreement had been signed at Tirana between the Albanian Government and the Soviet Minister by which the former would cede the Island of Saseno to Russia.²⁵ This agreement occurred before the ratification of the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947, based on the September 1945 London decision, which was respectively based on the verdict of the Department of State that Saseno belonged to Albania since 1913.

The short-sighted decision of the U.S. and British Governments to award Saseno to Albania placed Italy at the mercy of the Soviets, **disaffected Greece** and legalized the expansion of Russian control into the Mediterranean. Eventually the island was used in conjunction with Valona as a submarine base by Russia. In 1948 a group of Soviet officers and army engineers arrived at the port of Valona. The U.S. was late in realizing the strategic position of the island, as per a contemporary CIA report, Saseno’s position could completely block the Adriatic Sea just as the Gibraltar Rock could potentially block access to the Mediterranean.²⁶

²³ Κόντης 2023, σελ. 131-32.

²⁴ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v04/d62>

²⁵ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v03/d9>

²⁶ <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00809A000600370971-3.pdf>