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GREECE IN 1940 : THE POLITICAL SITUATION

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1940 the year so closely examined in this Conference marks the entry of Greece in the war followed by a series of successes in the military field, no one could anticipate ; especially at a time when the allies were facing a particularly bleak military situation.

In the political field the year 1940 signals the collapse of the Metaxas dictatorship and inaugurates a decade during which the Greek people apart from the vicissitudes of war, experience a harsh occupation, participate in a massive Resistance Movement and enjoy the privilege of an extensive foreign intervention; a decade that concludes with a sharp and bitterly fought civil war. If the decade starting in 1940 has such an, unfortunately, impressive record to show the previous decade is no less important.

In 1940 Greece was no better prepared than any other country to enter the war inspite the facade of enforced political stability that every self respecting dictatorship strives to project to the outside world. The repercussions of her involvement in a series of wars culminating in the disastrous Greek-Turkish War in the early 1920s were still strongly felt on the eve of the Second World War. In October 1940 Greece was invaded and all uncertainties and tensions which gradually had built up during the previous decade were brought to an end. This paper aims to examine this year of reckoning for Greece seen in the wider Balkan context: the influences brought to bear upon the Metaxas regime and the policy it sought to implement under the constraints of its own inherent internal weakness.

The Balkans following the world economic crisis of 1929 and throughout the 1930 were largely left to their own devices by the USA, Britain and to a lesser degree France. Their attitude towards the Balkan countries recalls to memory the celebrated Chamberlain phrase about far-away countries and people of whom we know nothing. Turkey however was the exception that proved the rule.

The Nazi rise to power did indeed result in the formation of the Balkan Entente in 1934 at the instigation of France. It was a political alliance of Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Roumania to safeguard the status quo in the area. However the economy of the region as a whole and of each country individually was too dependent on foreign markets to strengthen the resolve of this alliance.

By the time the Balkan Entente was formed its members had already developed extensive economic relations with Germany. Due to the prevailing economic conditions in the peninsula and the lack of British and French interest for the area's products, the Balkan countries turned increasingly towards Germany. Thus they extended their economic dependence on this country with all attendant short-term advantages and long-term limitations. This dependence upon Germany entailed however a serious disadvantage in the political field ; it began to materialize at a time when the Balkan countries had just formed an alliance to oppose the territorial revisions Germany was so actively supporting ! This development did not augur well for the Balkan Entente which undermined by french inactivity in the area adopted an increasingly consiliatory attitude towards the Axis powers and Bulgaria, up to its dissolution.

This attitude however was in accordance with the appeasement policy so eagerly practiced during the best part of the 1930s in Europe and across the Atlantic.

Apart from pressing economic issues, the close ideological affinity between Nazi Germany and the regimes in power in all Balkan countries, certainly played a role in making these countries more amenable to German economic penetration.

In 1935 the pro-British King George II had been restored to the Greek throne, through proceedings that left much to be desired. A year later Greece was the last one to join the chorus of fascist dictatorships that had started to emerge in Europe as early as 1922. Aspiring to imitate the German model, the Metaxas regime put to practice all traditional authoritarian measures albeit without the same ruthless efficiency. It also employed the equally predictable trappings of fascist authority to catch the imagination of the Greeks, a people given to ridicule. The net result produced could be deemed ridiculous if it was not downright repressive.

The accumulating evidence on these negative aspects of the Metaxas regime made no lasting impression to the British government whose influence in Greek affairs was clearly visible during the second part of the decade.

London's main preoccupation was that the Greek government should continue to set store by the British connection and on this aspect Metaxas had no intention to disappoint them. Aware of the vulnerability of his own position and of his dependence upon the King's goodwill, Metaxas tried hard to shed his pro-German reputation lingering from the First World War. He realised that internal and external factors pointed towards close collaboration with Britain (2).

London however had little used for Greece itself up to the moment of the Italian attack in October 1940. This attitude was reinforced by the C.O.S. appreciation that the strategic value of Greece being negligible, it could be used only as an air and naval base against Italy, an eventuality Britain wished to avoid, given its lack of strength in the Mediterranean. Hence the Foreign Office's polite refusal to Metaxas repeated efforts to conclude an alliance with Britain, which the crafty dictator would undoubtedly also use to reinforce his own position (3). The fact that the Greek government was toeing the British line had as a result that all issues Greece was facing were examined from the British point of view and in spite of all efforts from Athens the decisions reached were responding primarily to British needs and priorities. Foreign policy was the most glaring example of this relation. In spite of what Metaxas may have thought the main factor in formulating British policy in the area was the attitude of Italy and Turkey. It is in this context that the Greek situation must be examined following the outbreak of war in September 1939. Early in 1940 the Foreign Office had finally decided to cast aside what misgivings it might have as well as ignore all warnings about the nature of the Metaxas regime. It was felt that Metaxas' overall attitude towards Britain was a sufficient guarantee that Greece would not hesitate to support British interests in case of a war in the Mediterranean (4). The British Minister in Athens refrained of course from informing the dictator accordingly and as a result Metaxas continued to be consumed by his never ending suspicions regarding the stability of his regime and of his own position.

The precarious neutrality Greece was professing to follow was accepted at the time at face value by the Axis powers because they had not decided as yet to show their hand, while the lack of the necessary forces precluded the Allies from taking the initiative in the Balkans in spite of the French plans to establish an allied bridgehead in Salonica. At the same time Britain was walking on a diplomatic tightrope trying to balance between Italian intentions and the concomitant Turkish anxiety regarding the East Mediterranean.

London was trying to avoid any action in the area that might offend Italian susceptibilities but had nevertheless concluded the Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty of Mutual Assistance of October 1939, a treaty primarily seen by Turkey as directed against Italian expansionist designs.

Greece caught in between these two conflicting policies and the most likely victim should the situation flared up, received scant attention in the relevant deliberations. On the surface however Greece felt reassured. Following the Italian landing in Albania in spring of 1939 Britain had declared that it would lend Greece and Roumania all the support in her power. France had made a similar declaration. Moreover the Greek government reasonably believed that the Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty of October 1939 afforded her additional protection. It was specifically stated in it that Turkey would lend all aid and assistance in her power to France and Britain if they were engaged in hostilities in virtue of either of the their guarantees to Greece and Roumania. Irrespective however of the impression they sought to convey to world public opinion, these two much trumpeted measures were not exactly up to the mark.

The British guarantee to Greece, vague on purpose as to the nature of the support it promised was in fact issued after close consultation and agreement with Italy 5As to Turkey's treaty obligation the Foreign Office had already understood what the world public opinion was soon to realise; that Ankara's procrastinations and admirably evasive tactics were only matched by its ability to extract considerable financial concessions from a treaty that the Foreign Office had from the start serious misgivings that it would ever be honoured (6) According to the available evidence Metaxas had no knowledge of these two flaws in Britain's diplomatic armour. It can only be surmised what his reaction would be. However following the Italian landing in Albania Metaxas had shown a commendable resolution. He had announced to the British Minister in Athens that he had decided to resist an Italian invasion of Greece to the very end (7). This declaration certainly sounded as an emotional outburst of an offended dictator by one of his own kind but seen in retrospect it does show that at the end Metaxas stood his ground.

The period leading to the Italian invasion of October 1940 was definitely the most demanding one for a regime that was singularly not qualified to meet this crisis. Early in that year Greece had signed a War Trade Agreement with Britain while a Shipping Agreement was also concluded in London. As a result-the volume of Greek-German trade was reduced considerably. This was bound not to be taken lightly by the Germans, who were in fact the most important factor in the Balkans, a fact that all concerned tended conveniently to overlook. Consequently Greece had to sign a Commercial Agreement with Germany. The Greek Government however managed to limit its application (8).

Greece a nominally neutral country was therefore actively participating in the economic warfare against Germany. This commitment to the Allied war effort acquired a new dimension following the rapid collapse of France and Italy's entry to the war. It was evident that as war progressed, Greece was gradually immersing in a serious predicament with no concrete promise for help from anywhere.

These new developments in the war brought to the fore the standard combination of factors bound to affect the Mediterranean and the Balkans The intentions of Italy and the attitude of Turkey. The Greek government was understandably worried as to the possible implications for Greece, so much so as the first signs in a long and escalating series of provocations had already appeared in the Italian press (9).

Italy's entry to the war was followed by assurances to Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey that Rome wanted peace in the Balkans ? (10) However no one could take those assurances at face value as it was amply illustrated by Turkey's quick reaction.

Turkey under pressure from Britain to reassert her adherence to the Anglo-French-Turkish Treaty undertook to spare her allies and neighbours the agony of guessing as to her attitude. At the end of June 1940 Turkey announced her non-belligerency. This development and the escalation of Italian provocations that led to the torpedoing of an aged destroyer resting on its moorings underlined the impasse Greece was facing. This impasse was much more serious if the internal situation of the country is taken under consideration.

Greek armed forces' need for material were enormous while all available resources had been spent on the Metaxas Line to fortify the Greek-Bulgarian frontier. It was in this area that the enemy attack was confidently expected by a Greek General Staff gripped by a Mazino Line mentality. Moreover it was a glaring lack of quality that characterized the Metaxas regime. In a report he sent in April 1940 the British Military Attache was describing the Government as the political sweeping of the country. He added that the Greek people regarded them as a set of crooks (12).

Metaxas himself was exasperated by the shortcoming of his colleagues. He confined nevertheless his misgivings to his personal diary.

The Metaxas regime had indeed enlisted the usual assortment of second rate individuals that any dictatorship is confidently expected to attract. It was not however their intellectual prowess and administrative skills that were basically in question at the time. What was mainly at issue was the inability of the regime to raise to the occasion as the situation demanded.

Prisoners of a mentality emanating from the First World War cleavage that still dominated Greek political life the Metaxas regime viewed with awe the approaching confrontation (13). The ideological affinity to their political mentors and future aggressors combined with the dreadful possibility of having to face their military might produced feelings ranging from fear to downright defeatism. A defeatism that was to become increasingly evident as the Germans began to threaten intervention following the Greek successes in the Albanian front. This atmosphere of gloom permeating the Administration was however in sharp contrast with the enthusiastic determination that prevailed among the people when the Italian attack materialized.

It is exactly this dimension, the reaction of the people, that Metaxas did not take into consideration prior to the Italian attack. Instead his diary brims with references to his fascist youth organisation, the EON, units of which he visited almost daily, as if to seek refuge from a crisis that was beyond his comprehension. Facing the problem of the Italian attack Metaxas neglected the factor "Greek people". This factor alone, could not possibly offer the desirable solution, the final victory in the Greek -Italian war, although it came very near to accomplish it.

By showing his confidence to his people during the strenuous period up to the Italian attack Metaxas could justifiably claim that there was an additional element in the poor image Greece was projecting until then to the world opinion ; unity of purpose in the face of adversity.

Instead the inherent mistrust the Metaxas regime was showing to the Greek people reinforced by the rigidity of the ideological constructs it preached, increased its

detachment from the people it claimed to represent. This negative attitude of the Metaxas regime was only a part of a much wider contradiction that was evident in Greece at the time and was brought to the open by the Italian invasion. A profascist regime being attacked by a fascist dictatorship.

It was a contradiction that the energetic Censorship Department in Athens was at a loss how to handle it. Metaxas perhaps did not realise that by deciding to resist the Italian invasion he was in fact negating his own regime (14). He was actually expressing the feelings of the Greek people who muzzled by the regime until the morning of the Italian attack marched through Athens to the conscription centers. It was a spontaneous reaction that openly defied all orders that prohibited in the usual stern military manner all meetings and discussions on the situation as well as the possession of arms (15). These orders were issued in the interest of the war effort but they also revealed an anxiety as to the direction the people would funnel their enthusiasm.

Although the Italian attack on Greece created a new situation that could be strategically exploited the ability of the Greek people to resist was seriously questioned by all concerned. Metaxas himself noted in his Diary during the early days of the invasion that he was worried by the excessive optimism of the Greek public opinion (16).

The British Press while praising the Greek decision to resist hinted that this might not be possible due to the weakness of the Greek Armed Forces. Greece, it was added "should become a valuable field of operations for the Navy and Royal Air Force against the Italian invaders" (17). At the same time the strategic importance of Turkey was underlined, though on its determination to participate in the war there was guarded optimism at best (18). As you may have guessed the British Press was echoing the official views on this issue. The unexpected Greek resistance on the Albanian front notwithstanding, the British could afford only limited assistance to Greece, amounting initially to fifteen aircraft. Instead they decided to occupy Crete and use it as a naval and air base.

Turkey on the other hand was deemed to be more important than Greece for the long term British interests. This Turkish priority on British strategic planning held good when the Greek situation was soon reviewed and it was decided that Greece should receive assistance. In spite of the paucity of the British resources at the time the war material earmarked for Turkey was not touched. Consequently Greek needs would have to be accommodated from elsewhere.

Political considerations put forward by Churchill himself had been the decisive factor that led to the dispatch of military aid to Greece. In Greece however political considerations of a different nature began to preoccupy the Metaxas regime as the situation in the front was gradually becoming favourable for the Greek forces.

In mid-November 1940 a Greek counter-offensive was launched and the Italian army was soon retreating. This development brought to the fore the German attitude vis-a-vis the Greek successes. This factor already evident since the outbreak of war weighted increasingly on all discussions that followed between Greek and British officials.

Metaxas on his part was committed to continue the war against Italy with as much British help as he could get. He was anticipating a German attack but he was not keen at all to provoke it.

The British on the otherhand intendedto secure a firm foothole in Greece in order to intensify their offensive action against Italy and possibly against Romanian oilfields and communications with Germany. But they did not intend to commit land forces (19).

Seen from the Greek point of view such a deployment of forces would simply provoke a German attack without any chance to resist it successfully.

Metaxas was able to resist the increasing British pressure to accept this offer. However time was running out both for Metaxas and for Greece. He died at the end of January 1941. By that time the German intention to invade Greece was clearly anticipated. It was this intention that changed drastically the British policy in the Balkans and set in motion the ill fated attempt to form a Balkan front, comprised of Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey. In effect Britain decided to offer too little help too late to governments that were at leastreluctant to accept this offer and could not possibly appreciate that political considerations were mainly responsible for this decision.

Greece did accept the British offer and an expeditionary force was dispatched there amid serious misgivings by all concerned that it could effectively hold the line along the Greek army.

The Greek attitude however was best expressed by the Greek Commander-in-Chief during the discussions on the common front to be held. He said that "it was a question of honour for the Greeks; he would rather be stabbed in the back by Germans than pushed in front by Italians" (20). The Greek High Command preferred a quick defeat if defeat had to be on the hands of the Germans in the Macedonian front while holding the Italians at bay in Albania.

This seemingly romantic solution was quite unacceptable to the British. For the Greek Government the German invasion meant inevitably defeat and occupation with all dire consequences, whereas the British viewed it as just another engagement to be fought in adversity. And this is exactly how it was fought.

NOTES

(1) On the Greek attempts regarding the question of Balkan Union in the 1930s see P. Papastratis "From the "Great Idea" to Balkan Union" in M. Sarafis and M. Eve (eds.) Background to Contemporary Greece. (Merlin Press, London 1990).

(2) On the relations between Greece and Britain in the second part of the 1930s and the beginning of the Second World War see J.S.Koliopoulos, Greece and the British Connection 1935 - 1941 (Oxford University Press 1977).

(3) There are numerous documents on the Question of an Alliance with Greece. The issue was re-examined on the eve of the Italian entry to the war. R6139, May 20 1940, C.O.S Committee. W.P. (40) 164 May 21, 1940 Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. W.M. 135 (40)7 Cab 65/7 May 23, 1940.

(4) R2575 F.O.371/24909 Foreign Office Minutes. The Assistant Under-Secretary of State Sir O. Sargent expressed the Foreign Office view quite accurately when he noted "I am therefore in favour of not interfering more than is absolutely necessary".

(5) J. S. Koliopoulos pp.111 - 113.

(6) Selim Deringil Turkish Foreign Policy during the Second World War : an "active" neutrality. (Cambridge University Press, 1989) pp. 83 - 84 Deringil ignores the German connection in Turkish Foreign policy at the time. This question however has been underlined in Frank G. Eber, The Evasive Neutral : Germany, Britain and the Quest for a Turkish Alliance in the Second World War (University of Missouri Press, 1979).

(7) I. Metaxas His Personal Diary 1933 - 1941 (Athens, Ikaros 1960) (in Greek) p. 364.

(8) J. S. Koliopoulos pp. 125 and 130 - 2. D.G.F.P. Series D, Vol. X, Document Nos 375 and 374.

(9) The Greek Government trying to elicit London's intentions enquired in the middle of May 1940 whether the British guarantee to Greece would hold good if Italy attacked Yugoslavia and Greece helped the latter. The Foreign Office believed that the British decision not to declare immediately war on Italy if she attacked Yugoslavia would be most discouraging to the Greeks. As a result the British Minister in Athens Sir M. Palaret was instructed not to inform Metaxas on this issue should he pressed for details, Palaret should return an evasive reply to the effect that the question would be considered in the light of general war situation.

It must be noted that the British decision regarding Yugoslavia once accepted by the French would be communicated to the Turkish Government. It appears that such a decision could not but reinforce Turkey's resolution to stay out of the war .- R6139 F.O. 371/24924.

(10) I. Metaxas Diary p. 476.

(11) The Turkish attitude in view of the Italo-Greek crisis was extensively examined at the Foreign Office in late August and early September 1940. The Foreign Office clearly annoyed by the evasive Turkish policy up to that time, believed that a joint Anglo-Turkish declaration was indeed needed if Italy attacked Greece. The British Ambassador

in Ankara was instructed to make clear to the Turks that their agreement to this was considered the "acid test of their sincerity". See R7274, R7314, R7396, R7464, R7601.

(12) J. S. Koliopoulos P. 161.

(13) G. Seferis, Nobel Prize for Poetry 1963, a career diplomat and a keen observer of the political situation was able in the course of his duties to observe at close quarters these developments. In his writings he delivers a scathing attack on these shortcomings of the regime. G. Seferis, Manuscript Sep.41 (Athens, Ikaros 1972) and Political Diary A'1935-1944 (Athens, Ikaros 1979) (both in Greek).

(14) G. Seferis Manuscript Sep. '41, p. 45

(15) Orders issued by the Military Commandant of Athens on the morning of the Italian invasion; published in the newspaper "Ethnos" ("Nation") on October 28, 1940.

(16) I. Metaxas, p.520

(17) The Manchester Guardian October 29, 1940.

(18) The Manchester Guardian, The Times, News Chronicle, Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph and the New York Times, October 29 and 30, 1940.

(19). R 8143, C.O.S. (40) 942 November 15, 1940.
J.S. Koliopoulos P. 183.

(20). R3870 "Report on the Mission of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to the Eastern Mediterranean, February-April 1941", p.60.