

MUSSOLINI'S FIRST AGGRESSION: THE CORFU ULTIMATUM

General Enrico Tellini and his staff, members of an International Commission appointed by the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris to delimitate the Albanian-Greek frontier, were murdered by unknown assassins on August 27, 1923, on Greek territory near the Albanian frontier. Word of the murder first reached Mussolini via the secretary of the Italian Consulate at Janina, Andrea Liverani, whose telegram arrived in Rome at 6:15 on the evening of August 27.¹

Almost simultaneously another cable was dispatched by Captain de Limperany, secretary of the Commission of Delimitation to the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris, to inform them of the tragic news.²

The events that were now to move with such breath taking speed were to be centered in three cities, Rome, London and Paris. Throughout the first days the advantage of initiative was to be in the hands of Rome, while the latter two cities would be straddled with the unappetizing role of merely reacting to actions already instituted in Rome.

Mussolini's reaction upon the arrival of the tragic news from Janina was, according to an eye witness, the then chief of the Near Eastern Division of the Foreign Office, "immediately violent, intransigent".³

His cable in the early morning hours of August 28 to the Italian Minister in Athens, Giulio Cesare Montagna, is revealing. The Duce felt that "without diminishing seriously the responsibility that is incumbent upon Greece, immediate and exemplary punishment of the culprits is indis-

1. Liverani (Janina) to Mussolini, repeated to Athens, August 27, 1923. Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1955), Settima Serie, Vol. II (27 aprile 1923 - 22 febbraio 1924), p. 125. Hereafter cited as *DDI*.

2. Captain de Limperany (Janina) to the Conference of Ambassadors, August 27, 1923. Attached to file 768.7515/54, Record Group 59, National Archives of the United States, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as *N.A.*

3. Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi: 1922 - 1946* (Napoli: Scientifiche Italiane, 1950), p. 28. Guariglia's memoirs are an indispensable source for the innermost history of Italian foreign policy during the Fascist era.

pensable because of the deep horror which will be aroused in Italy and abroad," when the news was received that Italian officers part of an international commission in a peaceful mission entrusted to them by the Great Powers had been brutally murdered. Therefore, he instructed Montagna to make "the most energetic protests" to the Greek Government but at the same time making complete reservations for reparations that would be due to Italy and which it would claim after all the facts had been ascertained in detail. ⁴

Concurrently with this cable to Montagna another one was sent to the Italian Embassies in Paris and London stating "that which has happened notwithstanding lack of injury to other delegations represents an affront against the prestige of the Allied Powers." Mussolini therefore urgently requested that they inform the governments to which they were accredited about the horrible news. In closing he stressed that he relied on the solidarity of both England and France and that both Italian missions should convince their respective host nations to urgently instruct their representatives in Athens "to join with the forcefulness dictated by the gravity of the event" in the steps that would be undertaken by the Italian Legation. ⁵

Although Mussolini was undoubtedly excited there is nothing in the substance of the above telegrams that warrants criticism. The instructions issued to Montagna in Athens were of a type that would have been issued by any government in a similar situation. Nor was the cable to the Italian missions in Paris and London in any way out of the ordinary. On the contrary, the second cable was a request for Great Power solidarity regarding what the Duce considered to be an "affront against the prestige" of the Great Powers. The crucial question however was what steps Rome would instruct its legation in Athens to take. This was to be triggered by the reports of the Italian Minister from that same legation.

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If it is a cardinal principle of diplomatic practice that one should always be as objective as possible it should be noted that the Italian Minister in Athens had discarded that most important attribute.

Minister Montagna had first arrived in Athens in 1919. But during the period 1919 - 1923 he had also served as Italian delegate at the Lau-

4. Mussolini to Montagna (Athens), August 28, 1923. *DDI*, p. 127.

5. Mussolini to Della Torretta (London) and Vannutelli (Paris), August 28, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

sanne Conference, where the Allied powers and the Kemalists negotiated the peace treaty that brought peace to the Eastern Mediterranean and an end to Greek dreams of expansion into Asia Minor. At the latter conference his dislike of the Greek Revolutionary Government then in office which the powers did not recognize, was quite apparent.⁶ A proposal by the Italian chargé d'affaires at Athens, De Facendis, to take a new tack in Greece,⁷ involving a rapprochement Montagna declared useless. There was no value for Italy troubling herself with the "ill-humor of men who today govern Greece against the will of the country," he cabled Mussolini.⁸

In Athens Montagna's attitude toward the Greek Government was an open secret that did not go unobserved nor unreported by his diplomatic colleagues. As the American Minister Atherton cabled the Department of State on September 2, after the occupation of Corfu, "There is every probability of growing unconfirmed [reports or rumors?] that Italy's precipitant action had been based throughout on the reports of Montagna to his government colored by his personal antagonism toward present day Greece".⁹ A similar view was voiced by the British chargé d'affaires, Sir Charles Bentinck, who was inclined "to believe that extreme antagonism of Montagna toward present Greek authorities has led him to overstress his reports to Italian Government...[and] has advised London accordingly."¹⁰ Keeping all of the above in mind the contents of the cables that Montagna was now to send to Mussolini which were to affect his thoughts so deeply become explainable and make the reactions and the events that were to follow more understandable.¹¹

6. After the defeat of the Greek army in Anatolia in August - September 1922 a group of young army officers led by Colonels Plastiras and Gonatas overthrew the government. A Commission of Inquiry was appointed by the Revolutionary Committee to fix the blame for the Anatolian debacle. The arrest, trial, conviction and execution of three ex-Premiers, two ex-Ministers and the former Commander-in-chief caused a painful impression throughout Europe.

7. De Facendis (Athens) to Mussolini, repeated to Lausanne, June 28, 1923. *DDI*, p. 67. Montagna's opinion was asked for by the Secretary - General of the Foreign Office. Contarini to Montagna (Lausanne), June 30, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

8. Montagna (Ouchy) to Mussolini, July 2, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

9. Atherton (Athens) to the Department of State, Sept. 2, 1923. File 765. 68/21, Record Group 59, *N.A.*

10. Atherton (Athens) to the Department of State, Sept. 3, 1923. File 765. 68/22, Record Group 59, *Ibid.*

11. As early as September 1, after the Corfu occupation the attention of the Greek Foreign Office much to Montagna's embarrassment was drawn to the Greek press, which to his pique was inciting public opinion against him and accusing him

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Montagna's first cable reached Rome at 2 AM on August 28 a half hour after Mussolini's first cables had already been transmitted. Its relationship to the events that were to follow is witnessed by the fact that the Duce was to cite this very cable to the Italian Embassies in London and Paris when his demands to Greece were brought to their attention.¹²

as being primarily "responsible of the hostile attitude of Italy against Greece." (Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, Sept. 1, 1923. *DDI*, p. 151.) But then again Montagna's relationship with the Greek press left a great deal to be desired. As early as May during the Lausanne Conference he had protested to Eleutherios Venizelos, about the attacks of the Greek press directed against his "person for the action that I display [at] Lausanne as Italian delegate." Montagna feeling that they had been inspired by the Greek delegation. Venizelos deplored the attacks and gave assurances that he would contact Athens in order to have the attacks cease. (Montagna (Lausanne) to Mussolini, May 19, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 32.) In his dispatches Montagna made no attempt to disguise his feelings toward the Greek Government. It was a government he cabled Mussolini on September 3, whose "yoke [is] stained with the blood of their tyranny." (Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, Sept. 3, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 168.) On the other hand Montagna's "over-excited condition" did not go unnoticed by the Yugoslavian Minister who emphasized it to his American colleague on the same day that Montagna was filing the above cable to Rome. (Atherton (Athens) to the Department of State, Sept. 3, 1923. *loc. cit.*)

The mistrust of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs towards Montagna was to increase to such an extent during the crisis that rather than deal with him directly as when it wished to inform him that the Greek Fleet had been ordered to retire from the Athens area in order to avoid any possible conflict between Italian and Greek naval units, it had the news conveyed to him through the British and French chargé d'affaires—a procedure that Montagna declared to them he found "strange and incomprehensible" since the Greek Government could have contacted him by normal diplomatic means. He added if normal channels were not used he would consider that the news had never been delivered. Both chargé d'affaires agreed and after informing the Foreign Office, an official was appointed to communicate the news directly to Montagna. The whole episode was an attempt to "craftily establish intervention by third parties in our affairs" and by giving an "impression about relations with the Royal [Italian] Legation different from reality and of [attempting] to ignore the existence of the Royal [Italian] Representative," Montagna cabled Mussolini. (Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, Sept. 6, 1923. *DDI*, p. 191.)

His relationship with the government during this period were to deteriorate further and to such an extent that the Head of the Press Section of the Greek Foreign Office made it clear that the Greek Government "would be prepared to deal directly [in an] amicable arrangement of the conflict with the Italian Government at Rome debarring from the negotiations the Royal [Italian] Legation at Athens looked at presently under the circumstances as inimically inspired towards Greece." (Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, Sept. 6, 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 191 - 192.)

12. Mussolini to Della Torretta (London) and Vannutelli (Paris), August 29,

The cable was essentially a description of a visit by an official of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs who presented himself at the legation to inform them of the Tellini murder and "to express the grief of the Greek Government." Rather than seeing the official personally, which perhaps would have been in order Montagna delegated the task to a subordinate member of his staff. The official attempted "to minimize the gravity of the crime [by] insinuating that the murder has been committed near the frontier and perhaps by brigands"—a reasonable interpretation if one keeps in mind the history of the area during this period. Montagna, however, commenting, immediately felt this should "be excluded a priori because we are dealing with *well-known armed bands subsidized by the [Greek] Government.*" For an assertion so patently false¹³ one can devise no explanation except to credit it to Montagna's basic and initial antagonism to the Greek Government. However this assertion turned out to be of paramount importance for within the the coming hours, it was to greatly influence Mussolini's thoughts. Montagna continued by stating "This circumstance if confirmed would eliminate every doubt about the *political nature of the crime.*" This was a further point of importance which was to influence the Duce that warm August night. Continuing his comments Montagna felt that the crime should not go unpunished "even in consideration of moral responsibilities"—an observation that did not fail to register with the excited Mussolini. Lastly he emphasized that the rank of the deceased Tellini and the fact that he was president of an International Commission emanating from the Conference of Ambassadors "can only force our allies to behave [in a manner] dictated by the moral solidarity [which] is incumbent upon them,"¹⁴ a point Mussolini had already realized and was attempting to pursue.

Montagna's second telegram reached Rome an hour after his first or 3 AM on August 28. After quoting *in toto* a cable transmitted to the Royal Consulate at Janina requesting fuller details about the Tellini murder, Montagna drew Mussolini's attention to reports recently filed by General Tellini and in particular to "the paragraphs concerning the men-

1923. *DDI*, p. 136.

13. In all the literature about the crime of Kakavia as well as in all the investigations that followed the crime, Greek and non-Greek, no mention or even inference was made that the armed bands of the Epirus area were subsidized by the Greek Government.

14. Italics added. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 27, 1923. *DDI*, p. 126.

cing and arrogant behaviour of the Greek Delegate [Colonel Botzaris] now assuming a symptomatic character." His "first impression" Montagna continued "is that we are dealing with a crime [which] has a political basis, due in great part to the systematically hostile attitude to us of the Greek authorities and to the perfidious anti-Italian propaganda activity encouraged by the current Greek Government for internal politics especially in Epirus."¹⁵ Montagna made no attempt to enlarge upon this charge nor to substantiate it either by offering concrete evidence or by referring to prior dispatches filed to Rome covering these particular points, though, on July 19, the Italian chargé d'affaires had emphasized to Rome the hostility shown by certain Greek officials toward Italy.¹⁶ Not wishing to close without one parting shot Montagna could not help but note the incorrect manner in which the news reached the Royal Consulate at Janina "merely by the Commander of the local gendarmerie."¹⁷

With only these two cables as guides, aside from the original cable notifying him of Tellini's murder, Mussolini retired for the night. The dawn of a new day brought about a crystallization in Mussolini's thoughts. In a note written in his own hand Mussolini recorded his thoughts for posterity. First—a thought transposed from Montagna's cables, the "*crime [was] political, desired by armed bands in the pay of Greece.*" Points two and three of the note, emphasized the "sensitiveness" of the Tellini mission and the fact that the Greek Government was not diplomatically recognized. On the other hand, since this same government "does not give guarantees hence [it has] to give necessary reparations." His last point however was most crucial, "While waiting, the Italian Government shapes its request [that] it may have guarantees and reparations and as a mesure of retaliation *Italy occupies by force of arms the island of Corfu.*" A marginal annotation from another hand noted the above had been for the moment suspended by Mussolini.¹⁸

The Duce had now decided on his course of action: "he wanted the occupation of Corfu."¹⁹ All the diplomatic notes and hurried replies that followed were meaningless gestures and meant merely to impress or mesmerize the unknowing and the gullible with his feigned sincerity. Europe

15. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 27, 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 125 - 126.

16. De Facendis (Athens) to Mussolini, July 19, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

17. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 27, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

18. Italics added. Mussolini, morning of August 28, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

19. Guariglia, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

was seeing a new type of diplomacy which was to reach its zenith and most cynical form in the coming decade.

On this same day in the early afternoon Mussolini in a somewhat similar note as the one above, recorded six of the seven demands that would be cabled to Montagna within a matter of hours, for presentation to the Greek Government. The demands Mussolini desired were, an apology on the part of the highest Greek Military Authority; a funeral service in the Roman Catholic Church in Athens, attended by all the members of the government; a criminal investigation to be completed within five days from the arrival of the Italian Military Attaché, Colonel Ferdinando Perrone; capital punishment for all the culprits; an indemnity of 50 million Italian lira payable within five days, though in a moment of generosity Mussolini had written eight days which he then corrected to five. Lastly honor was to be shown to the Italian flag.²⁰

To set the stage for the events that were soon to follow, secret priority cables were sent to the prefects of Bari and Lecce ordering them to make the necessary preparations to stop all cable-telegraphic communications directed to Greece, unless instructed otherwise. But the Duce's confusion and unsureness of what his future actions would be, manifested themselves during these early hours in the composition of the cable. The request at first was to have been effective "from tomorrow at mid-day," (August 29). It was then to be effective as of mid-night the 28th and finally in a postscript in Mussolini's own hand it was to be delayed forty-eight hours or until August 30.²¹

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The events that now occurred between Mussolini and the career officials at the Palazzo Chigi illustrate the position to which professional diplomatists were relegated in their relationships vis-à-vis the political leadership during the inter-war years. It was a situation that was not peculiar to Italy but endemic throughout the chancelleries of western Europe, and was as true in democracies as in non-democracies.²²

The first weeks after his assumption of power in October 1922, the Duce had "brought little but uncertainty," to the professionals of the

20. Note by Mussolini, August 28, 1923. *DDI*, p. 128.

21. Mussolini to the Prefects De Vita (Bari) and D'Arienzo (Lecce), August 28, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

22. Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds.), *The Diplomats 1919-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), *passim*.

Palazzo Chigi, since Mussolini's statements prior to achieving power had suggested "that at the very least he would try to startle the diplomatic world with a series of melodramatic gestures."²³

But the Duce's inexperience in, and ignorance of foreign affairs required him — at least here in the very beginning — to depend upon the advice of the professional. In foreign affairs prior to Mussolini's arrival "the real minister," the man who "wielded the real power," was the Secretary-General, Salvatore Contarini,²⁴ described as "thinking two moves ahead of his diplomatic adversaries. Though his methods are often tortuous, he plays safe."²⁵ His power, methods and influence within the foreign office were such that they have been styled as "Contariniana."²⁶ But it was Contarini who restrained during this early period some of the more grandiose actions of the Duce and who convinced him that one of the traditional prerequisites for a successful Italian foreign policy was friendship with Great Britain.²⁷

The Italian career diplomats like Max Weber's ideal bureaucrat were 'apolitical'. But at the same time they recognized that the "internal solidarity" and the "unpredictability" of the Duce's government gave "them leverage for negotiation abroad," in order to realize Italian foreign policy aims.²⁸ Though they were always apprehensive of the Duce, they "felt sure that time and training, and advancement in manners under their supervision, would strip the words [of the Fascists] of all danger, leaving

23. H. Stuart Hughes, "The Early Diplomacy of Italian Fascism: 1922 - 1932," in Craig and Gilbert, *Ibid.*, p. 214.

24. G. A. Borgese, *The Goliath: The March of Italian Fascism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), p. 254.

25. Gunther (Rome) to the Department of State, October 15, 1923. File 765. 68/127, Record Group 59, N.A. For other laudatory descriptions of Contarini's ability see H. Stuart Hughes, "The Early Diplomacy of Italian Fascism: 1922 - 1932," in Craig and Gilbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 216 - 217. But Count Carlo Sforza, *Contemporary Italy*, trans. and ed. by Drake and Denise De Kay (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1944), p. 347, who had appointed Contarini felt he "had the soul of a rabbit under a proud Sicilian physiognomy. Contarini was of service only in arranging things rather poorly after they had begun to go awry." Sforza's comment is probably sour grapes, for whereas he left on Mussolini's assumption of power, Contarini remained and did not leave the Foreign Office until 1925 when he finally broke with Mussolini.

26. Guariglia, *op. cit.*, p. 12, 14.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 12 - 15, 24.

28. H. Stuart Hughes, "The Early Diplomacy of Italian Fascism: 1922 - 1932," in Craig and Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

just that zeal for aggressive rhetoric that may prove usable, from time to time, in that competition of nations."²⁹

The ends desired both by the career officials at the Palazzo Chigi and Mussolini were the same—"Italy great and respected, substantially enlarged in territory and influence."³⁰ But where they differed was in the methods and the means to be used. The professionals were more modest realizing the inadequacies of Italy's strength—both financial and military. They recognized the chimerical policy of believing that Austria, Hungary or Bulgaria could ever be reliable allies. Therefore in their dealings with Mussolini they continually impressed upon him the *sine qua non* of Italian foreign policy—friendship with Great Britain.³⁰

But it was this very policy that the Duce would challenge by his eruptive action at Corfu—an entanglement from which the professionals at Rome, London, Paris and Geneva would have to extricate him. Once his decision to occupy Corfu militarily had been taken, no one at the Palazzo Chigi "was given the means to canalize through normal measures the solution of the incident."³¹

Even more important was the fortuitous absence from Rome of Contarini who appears to have been on a holiday.³² The only person at the Palazzo Chigi competent enough to draw up the demands to Greece "was not consulted."³³ His reaction upon learning of the Corfu occupation was one of alarm and condemnation for the Duce's action. He immediately withdrew to his home at Anzio informing Rome that he could not participate "in such statesmanship." Asked to return to Rome, Contarini refused. Only later did he return to the Palazzo Chigi, when the situation between Italy and the Great Powers had become so strained that Mussolini turned to him for assistance. At this point Contarini agreed but on his own terms

29. Borgese, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

30. H. Stuart Hughes, "The Early Diplomacy of Italian Fascism: 1922 - 1932," in Craig and Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

31. Guariglia, *op. cit.*, p. 28; Legatus [pseudonym- Roberto Cantalupo?], *Vita Diplomatica di Salvatore Contarini* (Roma: Sestante, 1947), p. 91.

32. All sources agree that Contarini was absent during this period. Count Carlo Sforza, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1944* ([Roma]: Mandadori, 1946), p. 176, places him on the island of Ischia. Mino Caudana, *Il Figlio del Fabbro* (Roma: Centro Editoriale Nazionale, 1960), p. 289, states he was at Cortina d'Ampezzo.; Gunther (Rome) to the Department of State, October 15, 1923. *loc. cit.*; Borgese, *op. cit.*, p. 255; Legatus, *op. cit.*, p. 91, 92; *The Times* (London), Sept. 8, 1923, p. 8.

33. Count Carlo Sforza, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1944*, p. 176.

to which the Duce acquiesced.⁸⁴ Whether Mussolini's "impetuosity in the Greek affair would have been restrained and his energies directed into other safer channels of action,"⁸⁵ if Contarini had been present is open to question.

When Baron Romano Avezzana the Ambassador in Paris appeared at the Palazzo Chigi, after August 27 and before the Corfu occupation, he found the Foreign Office deserted of officials.⁸⁶ How important their absence was—as in the case of Contarini—in the light of the events that were to follow is speculative.

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Unaware of the diplomatic moves that were unfolding in Rome the professionals in Paris and London true to the instructions issued by Mussolini appeared at their respective foreign offices.

In London, the Italian Ambassador, Marchese Pietro Tomasi della Torretta, presented himself at Whitehall and informed the Under-Secretary of State, Sir William Tyrrell, of the "horrible massacre," to which Tyrrell "displayed anger." In the conversation that followed, Della Torretta requested "complete British solidarity" with the steps that the government at Rome would instruct its legation in Athens to take. Tyrrell informed him that, just prior to his arrival the British Embassy in Paris had informed the Foreign Office that the Italian chargé d'affaires had strongly pressed for a meeting of the Conference of Ambassadors in order to deal with an urgent event and to decide on an inquiry which would then be communicated to the Greek Government. Tyrrell had agreed and authorized the British representative to act accordingly. Therefore Tyrrell added, it would be unnecessary to telegraph to the British representative in Athens in the sense desired by the Italian Government. Admitting his ignorance of any events unfolding in Paris, Della Torretta emphasized to Tyrrell that Mussolini's instructions had been "imparted in a precise and explicit

34. *Legatus op. cit.*, pp. 92-93. On the other hand the declaration of the American Embassy that Contarini "was away during the whole of the Greco-Italian crisis," Gunther (Rome) to the Department of State, October 15, 1923, *loc. cit.*, and Count Carlo Sforza's *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1944*, p. 176, belief that Contarini did not wish to go to Rome, thinking that the Corfu debacle would cause the Duce's government to topple and that Contarini "did not realize that, with passive opposition, one can save one's own soul not Italy," are all incorrect as the above clearly shows. In the Italian diplomatic documents Contarini's name appears on September 7, 1923 though he may have arrived earlier to join his colleagues in the task of trying to solve the crisis.

35. Gunther (Rome) to the Department of State, October 15, 1923. *loc. cit.*

36. Count Carlo Sforza, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1944*, p. 177.

manner", which requested British solidarity for the action that the Italian Government would undertake in Athens. At Tyrrell's hesitation, Della Torretta added "that Italy alone was capable to obtain from Greece full satisfaction for the grave crime perpetrated against Italy and reparations for the injury caused to her prestige." However because of the international character of the Tellini Mission, Della Torretta added, his government believed that it could count on British solidarity in support of any actions that it took in Athens. On the other hand, this Italian action would be independent from whatever was agreed upon in Paris for which he had not the slightest information.

Della Torretta therefore was basing Italian actions and rights to reparations on the firm rule of international law traceable to the Vattel thesis that "whoever ill-treats a citizen indirectly injures the State."³⁷ At the same time however he wished to get British support because of the international character of the Tellini Mission, but support of what were to be essentially not 'international' but 'Italian demands,' though he was willing to admit that concurrent demands could be instituted by the Conference of Ambassadors, because of the international character of the Tellini Mission.

To Della Torretta's persuasive arguments Tyrrell succumbed and promised to dispatch the required instructions to Athens, but added they would be sent the next day [August 29] after receiving prior authorization from the Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, who was on the Continent. He felt sure that Curzon would approve the necessary instructions which were being sent to him as a mere formality.³⁸

The ambassador had therefore succeeded in implementing the instructions issued by the Duce, much to the glee of the latter who approved "fully the language used by Torretta to Tyrrell which corresponds exactly to the point of view of the Royal [Italian] Government."³⁹

But the successes in London were not to be repeated in Paris. Here the Italian chargé d'affaires, Count Luigi Rey Vannutelli, presented himself at the Quai d'Orsay, and in a conversation with Peretti de la Rocca, the

37. The quote continues, "The sovereign of the injured citizens must avenge the deed and, if possible, force the aggressor to give full satisfaction or punish him, since otherwise the citizen will not obtain the chief end of civil society which is protection." Emer De Vattel, *Le Droit des Gens ou Principes de la Loi Naturelle* (1758), livre II, section 71.

38. Della Torretta (London) to Mussolini, August 28, 1923. *DDI*, p. 129.

39. Mussolini to Vannutelli (Paris), August 30, 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 138 - 139.

director of political affairs, requested similar action—that the French Government adhere to the steps to be undertaken by the Italian Minister in Athens.

Peretti replied that France was ready to do so, “but not separately,” a major qualification. Any action of this type he felt had to be done in concert with the Conference of Ambassadors of which the Tellini Mission was a “dependent organ.”

Vannutelli stressed that the atrocious nature of the crime “justified manifestations of immediate solidarity,” and that this was the firm desire of his government. But Peretti was not to be shaken. He drew Vannutelli’s attention to a number of precedents to the Tellini murder,—none as serious—in which “every initiative was deferred to the Conference of Ambassadors”.⁴⁰ With France involved in the Ruhr, and relations with England strained because of it, Peretti’s tack was therefore quite clear. He wished to nip in the bud any possible Balkan difficulties. His interpretation therefore “had the object of giving to the considered *démarches* an interallied character and thus avoid a direct conflict between Italy and Greece, which would be of heavy consequences.”⁴¹

Poincaré immediately had London agree to this interpretation.⁴² His next step was to have Italy agree. As a result of the above, Della Torretta’s success in London proved to be fleeting. The simultaneous receipt of Captain de Limperany’s cable officially informing the Conference of Ambassadors of the Tellini murder galvanized Poincaré in to action. He urgently convened the secretaries of the British, French, Italian and Japanese delegations.

A draft note was prepared for Poincaré in his capacity as President of the Conference of Ambassadors to direct to the French Minister in Athens, inviting him to make with his Italian and British colleagues a joint *démarche* to the Greek Government. The purpose of the *démarche* was:⁴³

to protest in the name of the Allied Powers represented on the Conference of Ambassadors, with all the vigour that the gravity of the circumstances permit, against the odious and unprece-

40. Vannutelli (Paris) to Mussolini, August 29, 1923. *Ibid.* p. 132.

41. Jules Laroche, *Au Quai d'Orsay avec Briand et Poincaré 1913-1926* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1957), p. 174. The above book by Peretti’s assistant in the political section of the Quai d’Orsay is indispensable to an understanding of the French position during the Corfu crisis.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Text. File 763. 72119/12020, Annex A, Record Group 59, N.A.

dented crime, victims of which [were] on Greek territory, several members of an Inter-Allied Commission invested by the Conference of Ambassadors with a mission of pacification.

Secondly the Greek Government was to be asked:

to proceed without delay in an inquiry with a view to establishing the responsibilities, and to make known to it that the Powers reserve to themselves to present eventually any demands for sanctions and for reparations that will appear necessary to them.

At the last moment the British chargé d'affaires, Sir Eric Phipps, demurred, feeling he could not adhere to the second "request for penalties and reparations without first consulting his Government." He promised however, a reply once he had secured instructions from London, which he felt would arrive the following day [August 29]. To the harassed Vannutelli, without instructions and faced by a rapidly changing situation, because of Poincaré's and Peretti's quick actions, there was no other choice but to turn to Rome for instructions as to the course of action he was to follow, especially to the projected draft note of protest by the Conference.⁴⁴

But his request for further instructions would bring no immediate response. Events unfolding between Rome and Athens would monopolize the Duce's time for the issuance of instructions of a far more pressing nature.

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In Athens, the day following the Tellini murder and at a time when Della Torretta was presenting himself at Whitehall, and Vannutelli at the Quai d'Orsay, Montagna, following the instructions issued to him by Mussolini, presented himself at the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On being received by Apostolos Alexandris, the Foreign Minister, he made it clear that his visit "should not be in any way interpreted nor represented as a sign of change in the relations between the two governments." But, warming to his task, he did not hesitate to inform Alexandris that the "gravity of the fact, which I was going to discuss with him did not make me hesitate to put momentarily aside questions of form even of political complexion."

After what Montagna modestly described as "a short and impressive synthesis" in which he "put in evidence the serious responsibilities of the Greek people and the Greek Government in the ghastly crime," he stated to Alexandris "in a harsh, red hot and indignant tone" Mussolini's

44. Vannutelli (Paris) to Mussolini, August 29, 1923, *DDI*, p. 133.

instructions. At this point Alexandris, who was disconcerted, attempted "to provoke discussion," but Montagna refused to yield to any discussion, "reporting to him sharply that we insist upon immediate exemplary punishment of the murderers," and that Italy reserved the right "to ask ample reparations after ascertaining the facts." Alexandris made no attempt to dispute Montagna's statement nor did he object to the demands, but merely "limited himself to reiterating the regret and condolence of the Greek Government," for the tragic events that had occurred. Continuing, Alexandris also stated the measures the government had taken in an attempt to capture the authors of the crime, which was strongly deplored and condemned by the Greeks.

Montagna, playing his role to the hilt, replied "coldly" that he would convey to his government, at Alexandris' own request the declaration made. The interview now over, Montagna could not help "noticing with a point of irony that it was necessary that I bring myself to him [Alexandris] in order to learn the grief of the Greek Government," Alexandris immediate retort was he had not come to see Montagna in fear of not being received by him.

A half-hour later the conversation was continued at the Italian Legation. Alexandris came to inform Montagna, that the Revolutionary Government had directed that higher police and judicial officials be sent to Janina "in order to direct and intensify the actions initiated for the arrest of the murderers." His added statement that the culprits would be immediately shot when captured caused Montagna to observe that there was need to control the judicial procedure and judgement so there would "be no doubts to the identity of the criminals," and thus "to avoid an easy and not unlikely substitution of innocents."

Missing no opportunity to make a point Montagna in closing the interview warned Alexandris against the "deplorable consequences of [any] hostile behaviour against us." This was especially true of the local press whose "perfidious and systematic anti-Italian propaganda," he considered it "good under the circumstances to contain and above all not to excite," especially by allowing it to issue "unfounded and tendentious news" particularly, Montagna added, if the Italian Legation "was not allowed to correct and refute," this news.⁴⁵

Montagna's preoccupation with the Greek press was again accentuated in a meeting that same afternoon with his American colleague who repor-

45. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 28, 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 129 - 130.

ted that the Italian Minister "took [a] very serious view of this matter [Tellini's murder] as he has frequently warned the Greek authorities of the danger [of] permitting anti-Italian propaganda."⁴⁶

Though the second interview with Alexandris had ended, Montagna's work for the day had just begun. To confirm the declarations made to Alexandris a *note verbale* was transmitted to the Greek Foreign Office on the following day. A copy of this was also sent to Mussolini.

The note, reiterating the declarations made by Montagna, quickly moved to a summation of his statements "on the basis of information received from authorized and competent sources," regarding the murder of the Italian delegation.

The murderers according to the note were "*une bande d'irréguliers grecs*," though no evidence was offered to substantiate this point. It went on to demand that those guilty of the crime be quickly arrested and subjected to immediate and exemplary punishment, care being made to protect the innocent, though the execution of the above would not in any way absolve "the extremely grave responsibility of Greece in respect of this crime, which was undoubtedly committed for political motives."

Continuing, the note observed the "spirit of good-will and justice," in which the Tellini Mission had done its work, which had won the admiration and sympathy of all people and officials that it had come into contact. However there was one exception to this general feeling the note remarked, — an obvious inference to the Greek Government — "and the evidence on this point is quite definite — this attitude of respectful approbation was always lacking and there alone open or ill-concealed manifestations of opposition and hostility, and even incitement to hatred were observed." The Italian Legation, however, did "not consider it necessary for the moment to insist on this point." The Greek Government it added could "not help being aware of the circumstances referred to."

In closing, the note energetically protested against the Tellini murder which was committed well within Greek territory "*et presque sous les yeux des autorités Helléniques*," and reserved all rights to reparations to which Italy was entitled because "of the grave responsibility of the Greek Government in this deplorable matter."⁴⁷

46. Atherton (Athens) to the Department of State, August 28, 1923. File 768. 7515/44, Record Group 59, N.A.

47. Text. Manley O. Hudson, "How the League of Nations Met the Corfu Crisis," *World Peace Foundation*, VI, No. 3 (1923), pp. 199 - 200. The French text in Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Greece), *Documents Diplomatiques. Différend*

What Montagna's note was stressing was not so much Greek territorial responsibility but Greek culpability, an unsubstantiated but a far more serious charge.⁴⁸

The Greek reply on August 30, transmitted after the arrival of the Italian demands, began by stating that the Greek Government, shared "entirely the sentiment of indignation expressed," in the Italian note on the Tellini murder. It went on to observe that once informed of the crime the Greek Government immediately took all measures possible to "facilitate the search and arrest of the culprits," whose guilt would be ascertained by an investigation already in operation.

Continuing it added with a note of irony that it could undoubtedly count on the active collaboration of the Italian Legation "which would possess on this subject information from trustworthy sources as it made mention in its *note verbale*."

What had "especially attracted" the Greek Government it added was "the information, according to which the Italian Delegation, could have been attacked *par une bande d'irréguliers grecs*." Since the Greek Government lacked "similar information" it expressed its pleasure if the Italian Legation would give any details that it possessed on the subject which "would be of a nature to facilitate the work of the inquiry already begun." Similarly it also lacked any information which would substantiate the fact that the murder, which it was "eager to condemn in the most express manner has been committed '*sous les yeux des autorités Helléniques*'." This charge it denied. Pressing its point it concluded the note by appealing to the Italian Legation "to communicate to it immediately all details that will be at its disposition and which could facilitate the task of the Greek authorities".⁴⁹

* * *

On this day of August 28 the public announcement of the Tellini murder produced in Italy the "greatest indignation." The tone of the Ita-

Italo-Grec: Août - Septembre 1923 (Athènes: Macris, 1923), pp. 10 - 11, is somewhat incorrect. Hereafter cited as *DDDIG*.

48. Though thirty-eight years have passed since the Tellini murder the culpability theory is still expressed in pro-Fascist accounts. There is absolutely no evidence to warrant the statement by Luigi Villari, *Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini* (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1956), p. 21, that "there is every reason to believe that the outrage had been organized with at least the connivance of certain local Greek officials."

49. Text. *DDDIG*, p. 13.

lian press from the anti-Fascist *Corriere della Sera* to the Fascist mouth-piece *Il Popolo d'Italia* was the same.⁶⁰ On the following day reacting to the "disastrous influence" of the press the Italian crowds acted.⁶¹ In Trieste, Turin, Florence, Genoa and Bologna violent demonstrations occurred directed against Greek owned establishments and Greeks resident in Italy, while in Naples, and Catania, Greek Consulates were also attacked.⁶² The outbursts continued on the 30.

At Turin they took on an anti-French flavor with shouts of "*Abbasso la Francia*," and demonstrations before the French Chamber of Commerce and the French Consulate, much to the Duce's annoyance.⁶³

The demonstrations appear to have been spontaneous and there is no evidence to show complicity either by Mussolini or by members of his government.⁶⁴ They were outbursts that were probably due to the humiliation and frustration, real or imagined, that most Italians felt their national pride had suffered by Italy's failure to realize its post-war demands. But the Tellini murder had been the last straw. Hence the official communiqué after the occupation of Corfu which declared that "the Government was in entire unity with the feelings of the country," was on firm ground.⁶⁵

Protesting to the Italian Legation against the anti-Greek demonstrations and the actions of the Italian press, the Greek Government requested the legation to intercede with its government "with an eye to the adoption of proper measures to put an end to the regrettable incidents."⁶⁶

To Montagna this legitimate Greek note of protest only made a "pretense [of] profound impression produced on the Greek Government," by the anti-Greek demonstrations in Italy. His own recommendation to the Duce was to disregard it entirely.⁶⁷ Mussolini disagreed with him even though Corfu by this point had been occupied. He instructed Montagna to point out that proper measures had been taken to insure Greek safety and

50. Muriel Currey, *Italian Foreign Policy: 1918-1932* ([London]: Ivor Nicholson and Watson Ltd., 1932), p. 104.

51. Pierre Lasturel, *L'Affaire Gréco-Italienne de 1923* (Paris: L'Île de France, 1925), p. 60.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-62. In Rome however things were comparatively quiet. *The Times* (London), August 31, 1923, p. 8.

53. Mussolini to the Prefect Palmieri (Turin), Sept. 6, 1923. *DDI*, p. 162.

54. Lasturel, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

55. Quoted in Currey, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

56. Text. *DDIG*, p. 16.

57. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, Sept. 1, 1923. *DDI*, pp. 151-152.

requesting a cessation of the anti-Italian campaign of the Greek press.⁵⁸

The Greek Foreign Office noted the assurances of the Italian Government that "all necessary measures had been taken... with a view of preventing the renewal of the regrettable incidents," but stated it could not disregard the gravity of the acts which constituted "grave violations of treaties and international customs" and involved "unquestionably the responsibility of the Italian authorities" who could have forewarned Greek nationals and Consulates by greater vigilance. In closing, the Greeks could not help but observe that cessation of press attacks was a two way street.⁵⁹

Montagna's reaction to the Greek note as was to be expected, was negative. He cabled to Rome he considered the note as "inspired by the usual bad faith" and written "in a rather arrogant tone in contrast with the moderation and rigid correctness of our [own] communication."⁶⁰

* * *

As August 28 came to an end the tempo of exchanges between Rome and Athens quickened. With the coming of the new day Mussolini cabled to Montagna the amount of "reparations to be considered the minimum consistent with the grave offense of which Greece is rendered liable to Italy." The seven demands enumerated were essentially the same as those the Duce had already noted, though there was one addition and certain refinements. Montagna was instructed to request in writing for an apology in the fullest and most official manner to be presented to the Italian Government via the Italian Legation by the highest Greek military authority; a solemn funeral ceremony for the victims of the murder at the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Athens to be attended by all the members of the Government; honor to the Italian flag to be rendered on the very day of the funeral ceremony by units of the Greek fleet (excluding torpedo boats, which were to be anchored) to the Italian navy in Phalerum Bay outside of Athens; an investigation by the Greek authorities with the assistance of the Italian Military Attaché Colonel Perrone. The Greek Government was to be fully responsible for Perrone's safety and was to facilitate the task entrusted to him in every way. The investigation to be concluded within five days after receipt of the Italian demands. The fifth demand was

58. Mussolini to Montagna (Athens), Sept. 2, 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163. For the Italian note of Sept. 3, 1923 to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs see *DDDIG*, p. 23.

59. Text. *DDDIG*, pp. 35-36.

60. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, Sept. 8, 1923. *DDI*, p. 206.

capital punishment for the culprits, the sixth for an indemnity of 50 million Italian lira, while the seventh and last demand previously unrecorded was for military honors to be paid to the corpses on the occasion of their transferral to an Italian vessel at the Greek port of Preveza. The Duce's last request was that Montagna was to insist upon a Greek reply of full acceptance within twenty-four hours after receipt of the Italian demands by the Athens government.⁶¹ On the remote possibility that the Greek Government might accept the Italian demands arrangements were made to conduct Colonel Perrone from the port city of Patras to Preveza.⁶² Concurrently the Governor of Rhodes, in the Italian held Dodecanese was alerted that a naval division would leave "this very evening towards Leros, where it will await for further instructions."⁶³ At the same time, Mussolini, somewhat belatedly, informed King Victor Emanuel III, of the demands transmitted to Montagna at Athens for presentation to the Greek Government. The Duce added "in agreement with the Ministers of War and Marine, [I have] taken the disposition of a military character necessary in order to be in a position to cope with the unfolding of the events in a manner consonant with national dignity and prestige,"⁶⁴ actions which the King assented to.⁶⁵

While the demands were being received on the afternoon of August 29 at Athens, the Italian Embassies at London and Paris were also informed of the demands, with instructions that they be brought to the attention of the host government. The "reparations requested... represent, if immediately consented to, the minimum which public opinion of our country, profoundly offended and exasperated at the news of the savage massacre expects," cabled Mussolini.⁶⁶

By eight in the evening Montagna delivered to the Greek Foreign Minister, Apostolos Alexandris, the Italian demands in a *note verbale*.⁶⁷ Alexandris declared that he would immediately transmit it to his government. Montagna's only comment was that he expected a reply within twenty-four hours, that is by eight o'clock the following evening [August 30].

61. Mussolini to Montagna (Athens), August 29, 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 133 - 134.

62. Mussolini to Montagna (Athens), August 29, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

63. Mussolini to Lago (Rhodes), August 29, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

64. Mussolini to Victor Emanuele III (Racconigi), August 29, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

65. Victor Emanuele III (Racconigi) to Mussolini, August 29, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

66. Mussolini to Della Torretta (London) and Vannutelli (Paris), August 29, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

67. Text. Manley O. Hudson, "The Corfu Crisis," *loc. cit.*, pp. 201 - 202; *DDDIG*, pp. 11 - 12.

When presenting the Italian note, Montagna cabled, Alexandris “feigned indifference,” and then added significantly that neither the British nor the French chargé d’affaires had received any instructions to join his actions.⁶⁸

Upon receipt of the Italian demands the Foreign Minister, immediately convened the cabinet.⁶⁹ In a statement to the press the Prime Minister, Colonel Stylianos Gonatas explained that the demands did not have “the character of an ultimatum;” and that the note delivered by the Italian Minister contained various demands, some of which were acceptable, others had to be modified, while still others were completely unacceptable. However since the Tellini outrage had been committed in Greek territory the government was willing to give to the Italian Government full satisfaction to its *amour propre*, as much as this was compatible with Greek dignity. Furthermore the Greek Government was “willing to award to the family of the victims... a reasonable indemnity.”⁷⁰ As to the departure of the Italian Military Attaché for Janina, Gonatas declared that Colonel Perrone could not assist in the investigation “as such participation would mean intervention in internal affairs.”⁷¹

The observations of both the foreign and Greek press were somewhat

68. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 29, 1923. *DDI*, p. 137.

69. Ἀπόστολος Ἀλεξανδρής, *Πολιτικαὶ Ἀναμνήσεις* (Πάτραι, 1947), p. 106.

70. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 30, 1923. *DDI*, pp. 139 - 140. Why the Prime Minister, Colonel Gonatas, did not consider the Italian note an ultimatum remains something of a mystery. According to Sir Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (2d. ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 242, an ultimatum does not necessarily mean war. “It is often merely “the last word” before negotiation is broken off. It generally takes the form of a written intimation that unless a satisfactory reply is received by a certain hour on a certain date certain consequences will follow.” Sir Ernest M. Satow, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, ed. Neville Bland (4th ed.; London: Longman, Green and Co., 1957), p. 105, states that an ultimatum “ordinarily but not always implies a threat to use force, if the demand is not complied with.” However a more detailed examination is to be found in L. Oppenheim, *International Law*, II, ed. H. Lauterpacht (7th ed.; Longman and Green and Co., 1952), p. 295, who divides ultimatums into *simple* or *qualified*. The *simple* ultimatum does not include any indications of the measures envisaged by the Power transmitting it. On the other hand a *qualified* ultimatum indicates measures envisaged, whether reprisals, occupations, war etc. The Italian note therefore appears to fall under the category of *simple* ultimatum. But it should have been obvious to the Greek authorities that any note containing a series of demands, with a twenty-four hour time limit, sent by one of the Great Powers to a smaller power has implied sanctions attached and was therefore an ultimatum.

71. *The Times* (London), August 31, 1923, p. 8. Colonel Perrone was subsequently recalled. *The Times* (London), Sept. 3, 1923, p. 10.

more incisive than Colonel Gonatas'. The analogy between the Austrian demands to Serbia in 1914 and the Italian demands to Greece were too strong not to be brought up. The Italian "demands"... the London *Times* wrote, "do not appear to be inspired wholly by a desire for justice." "Some of them" it continued, "are expressly designed to inflict the bitterest humiliation upon Greece and others—among them the amount of money indemnity—seem to be altogether excessive." Continuing, it observed that "There is not evidence even that the criminals were Greek at all."⁷² The tone of the Greek press was the same. The demands from Rome were not a request for satisfaction of wounded dignity, wrote the *Eleftheron Vima*, but simply an attempt "to humiliate Greece and its national prestige and to violate its sovereignty."⁷³

Montagna's own impressions from Athens, were that the Greek Government was trying to obtain support from Paris and London "for the purpose of containing or minimizing our action." The hope of a collective action with other powers, he cabled the Duce, was virtually a dead letter since the British chargé d'affaires had received instructions to limit himself only to supporting a note of protest by the Conference of Ambassadors to the Greek Government.⁷⁴

Similar instructions had also been transmitted by Whitehall to Paris where the British chargé d'affaires, Sir Eric Phipps, was ordered to accept in full the projected text of the Conference's note of protest to the Greek Government, with Vannutelli as before imploring Mussolini, as to whether or not he should adhere.⁷⁵

The British and the French therefore appeared to be acting in unison after Poincaré's initial appeal to London to collectivize Great Power action vis-à-vis Greece over the Tellini murder, had been delayed due to Phipps' hesitation about accepting the projected draft note until he had received clearance from Whitehall.

But before the arrival of either of these two cables of what appeared to be a developing British and French *modus vivendi*, Mussolini had also decided to adhere to the projected Ambassadorial draft note of protest. By this concession Mussolini was admitting that the Tellini murder also affected the Conference of Ambassadors, that the dispute also had an

72. *The Times* (London), August 31, 1923, p. 9.

73. *Eleftheron Vima*, August 31, 1923. As quoted in Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (France), *Bulletin Périodique de la Presse Grecque*, No. 79, p. 3.

74. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 30, 1923. *DDI*, pp. 137-138.

75. Vannutelli (Paris) to Mussolini; August 30, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

inter-allied character. Unknowingly he was also establishing the channel through which the dispute would be solved, so as to save the Duce's face. But this decision however was due less to Mussolini's diplomatic acumen than to the accidental presence of a diplomatic professional, the vacationing Italian ambassador from Paris, Baron Romano Avezana, who "persuaded him to concede" to the Ambassadorial Conference.⁷⁶

Therefore Mussolini's instructions to the impatient Vannutelli in the early morning hours of August 30 were to accept the projected draft note of protest "even if it does not contain mention [of] reparations and sanctions." With his mind already made up and his plans already in operation what the Conference was going to request from Greece was immaterial to him. Though Italy would participate within the Conference of Ambassadors, in the deliberations that would inevitably follow since the Tellini mission was a dependent of the Conference, the Duce continued, the government of Rome was doing it "in consideration precisely [because] of the inter-allied function which in subordinate line covers the victims." But at the same time it was to be understood that by doing so it was neither renouncing the fundamental rights that belonged to it nor was it trying to evade "the duty of acting directly in order to exact reparations owed it by the most grave injury caused to the entire Italian nation in the person of officials and soldiers who before every other quality had that of Italian citizens." All of the above Vannutelli was to bring to the attention of the Quai d'Orsay, because from it flowed Italy's "request of reparations and sanctions presented by Montagna to the government at Athens," of which Vannutelli had already been informed.⁷⁷

Though Mussolini admitted the right of the Ambassadorial Conference to intervene since Tellini and his staff had acted as their agents, at the same time he maintained the Vattel thesis, which Della Torretta at London had expressed to Sir William Tyrrell, that the wrong committed to Tellini was a wrong committed to the Italian nation. In that respect the Duce's argument was founded on firm legal principles.

Vannutelli's dual assignment because of the instructions issued to him was not only to bring to the attention of the Quai d'Orsay Italy's adherence, with all its qualifications, to the projected note of protest by the Conference of Ambassadors, but also the Italian demands to Greece.

Officially informed of the Italian demands to Greece by Vannutelli,

76. Count Carlo Sforza, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1944*, p. 177.

77. Mussolini to Vannutelli (Paris), August 30, 1923. *DDI*, pp. 138 - 139.

Peretti de la Rocca, the director of political affairs at the Quai d'Orsay merely noted them and stated he would immediately transmit them to Poincaré. But it appeared, Vannutelli cabled, that within the British Embassy at Paris, the reaction of the chargé d'affaires, Sir Eric Phipps, was one of great surprise "to the grave initiative taken by Italy without previous concert with Allied Powers".⁷⁸

But Vannutelli's unnamed informant was quite correct. On certification of the news, Phipps immediately telephoned Jules Laroche at the Quai d'Orsay and informed him that after the Italian demands which he described as this "*coup de la grosse Bertha italienne*," it seemed useless to collectivize the dispute in the Conference of Ambassadors by "*tirer le petit fusil de la Conference*."⁷⁹ What Poincaré had hoped to prevent by collective action of the Great Powers and by so doing avoid possible complications between Italy and Greece in the Balkans, at a time when France's attentions were focused on the Ruhr, appeared to be slipping through his fingers.

Poincaré desperately wishing to save a deteriorating situation acted with vigor and dispatch. He got in touch with the Foreign Office and as a result the latter, again consented to collective action through the Conference of Ambassadors "declaring that in this case it denied to Mussolini the right of acting separately."⁸⁰

This British withdrawal and subsequent readherence "only after insistence of the maintenance of the principle of inter-allied intervention," was brought to the Duce's attention by the ever watchful Vannutelli.⁸¹

As to Italian adherence to the projected note of protest by the Conference of Ambassadors, Peretti, after consultation with Poincaré, informed Vannutelli that France considered that the government at Rome was "free to take separately those measures that it believes vis-à-vis Greece." But he also insisted on the thesis assumed from his first conversation with Vannutelli several days before that France in analogous cases would have followed the procedure of giving exclusive jurisdiction to the Conference of Ambassadors, as it had done in previous instances.

Vannutelli's retort was that recourse to the Ambassadorial Conference was a prerogative belonging to the individual state "while direct care [of the] citizens life... in every circumstances is the duty of each

78. Vannutelli (Paris) to Mussolini, August 31, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

79. Laroche, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

80. *Ibid.*

81. Vannutelli (Paris) to Mussolini, August 31, 1923. *DDI*, p. 142.

government." Vannutelli's concluding observation in his cable to Mussolini was that this Italian view was finally beginning to seep through to the French press "in spite of the Minister of Foreign Affairs [Poincaré] who endeavors to reverse it preferring inter-allied authority [of the] Conference of Ambassadors to the direct and individual Italian national action."⁸²

In fulfillment of this desire to collectivize the action of the Great Powers, and pressured by Great Britain, Poincaré acted once again. While the Ambassadorial note of protest was on its way to the French Embassy in Athens for presentation to the Greek Government, Poincaré was demanding from Rome the withdrawal of the Italian demands submitted on August 29. But Poincaré's *démarche* would prove to be a hopeless gesture for it was already too late and his note's transmission to Rome would cross with the news that the Italian fleet had already bombarded and occupied the island of Corfu.⁸³

* * *

In Athens at 8 o'clock on the evening of August 30, within the time limit set by the Italian note of the previous day an official of the Greek Foreign Ministry appeared at the Italian Legation and submitted a *note verbale* embodying the Greek reply to the Italian demands.⁸⁴

The Greeks in their reply "protested against the allegation" that Greece was "guilty of an offense against Italy" or that it could "in fact be seriously alleged that such an offense could have been committed by the Hellenic Government, either intentionally or through negligence," keeping in mind that it had no animosity toward the Italian Mission which was merely doing its duty. Nor could the government "be accused of negligence in connection with the safety of the Mission," as it had placed special troops at the Mission's disposal and the local authorities had organized patrols because of the presence of Albanian brigands. Furthermore no doubts had ever been expressed to the Greek Government as to the personal safety of either General Tellini or any other member of his staff.

Because of the above, the Greek Government took exception to the tenor of the Italian note "that the Hellenic Government is guilty of a serious offense against Italy," and regarded this charge as unfounded. Therefore it was impossible to accept points 4, 5 and 6 of the Italian note which demanded that an enquiry be instituted within five days after receipt

82. Vannutelli (Paris) to Mussolini, August 31, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

83. Laroche, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

84. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 30, 1923. *DDI*, p. 141.

of the note, with the assistance of the Italian Military Attaché; death sentence to those found guilty; and payment as penalty of an indemnity of 50 million Italian lira; all these points, the Greek Government felt, would "outrage the honor and violate the sovereignty of the State."

However since the "abominable crime was committed on Greek territory against subjects of a friendly State" the government expressed its willingness to accept that its regrets be expressed to the Italian Government "in the most complete and official form" by the general officer commanding at Athens to the Italian Minister; funeral services to be held at the Roman Catholic Church in Athens attended by all members of the government; honors to the Italian flag would be paid by a detachment of the Athens garrison which would come to the Italian Legation and salute the flag, "paying all customary honors;" lastly solemn military honors would be paid to the murdered victims at the Greek port of Preveza upon their transferral to an Italian vessel.

Continuing the Greek note furthermore declared the governments "willingness to grant, as a measure of justice, an equitable indemnity to the families of the victims," and in addition added that Colonel Perrone, the Italian Military Attaché would be welcomed to assist the enquiry by providing any information that would facilitate in discovering the murderers.

In closing the note expressed the hope that the government at Rome would "recognize the justice" of the Greek view "as well as its desire to give satisfaction to the Italian Government in the most equitable way possible." However if this did not prove true and the Italian Government was "unwilling to recognize the satisfaction given as adequate," the Greek Government would "in accordance with the provisions of the Covenant of the League of Nations..., appeal to the League and undertake to accept its decisions."⁸⁵

In brief, the Greek Government therefore rejected outright three of the original seven demands, accepted two and modified two others. Montagna's observations were that the ruling circles appeared to be exhibiting a "marked indifference" which made one "think that they will not yield notwithstanding my perfectly clear warning of the gravity of the situation" or they were relying upon "the support of others."⁸⁶ At the same time he had reason to believe that the Yugoslav Minister was inciting

85. Text. Manley O. Hudson, "The Corfu Crisis," *loc. cit.*, pp. 202 - 204; *DDDIG*, pp. 14 - 15.

86. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 31, 1923. *DDI*, p. 146.

the Greek Government in its present course of action, since he had expressed to Montagna, that Italy by some of its demands was offending Greek sovereignty and by doing so would galvanize world opinion against her. Furthermore the Yugoslav Minister could not help but compare the Italian demands to the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia in 1914 which had provoked the World War, an idea that had also appeared in the Greek press. These assertions Montagna had energetically denied.⁸⁷

A few minutes after midnight on August 30, within an hour after the arrival of the news from Athens that the demands had been rejected orders were issued from Rome to Vice-Admiral Emilio Solari, Commander of the Italian Navy, "to proceed at once to the occupation of Corfu."⁸⁸

Orders that the Minister of Marine, Thaon di Revel, later voiced grave misgivings about since any Greek or especially British naval reaction would have isolated the Corfu task force from the Italian mainland. The possibilities of aid to the latter being practically nil since an Aegean task force under the command of Rear-Admiral Angelo Frank was far eastwards in the Dodecanese.⁸⁹ But prior Italian planning and the measures to deal with the new and unexpected situation had merged.

* * *

Almost a month before, on July 24, on the day the Lausanne Treaty with Turkey was signed, the Italian fleet had been recalled to Taranto and Vice-Admiral Solari, had been instructed to report to Rome by the Minister of Marine, Grand Admiral Paolo Thaon di Revel. In a conversation which

87. Montagna (Athens) to Mussolini, August 31, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

88. Antonio Foschini, *La Verità sulle Cononate di Corfù* (Roma: Giacomaniello, 1955), p. 37. The Italian Navy had already been moved into position to strike at Corfu some hours earlier. At 4:35 PM on August 30, orders were issued to Admiral Solari, to proceed to the Italian port of Gallipoli on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Taranto. At 10:35 PM Montagna's cable was received in Rome of the rejection of the Italian demands by the Greek Government. Fifty minutes later at 11:25 PM orders were issued to Admiral Solari to proceed with the occupation of Corfu. Minister of Marine, Thaon di Revel to Admiral Solari, Sept. 30, 1923. *DDI*, p. 270.

89. Guariglia, *op. cit.*, p. 28. Guariglia feels that the ministers remarks were well taken and demonstrated the basic weakness in Italian possession of the Dodecanese. They were useful only in so far as Italy was able to construct a naval force powerful enough to operate solely in the Eastern Mediterranean, without any danger to the defenses of the mainland or Africa. Without this naval force, the islands were a military liability, especially if Italy's meager naval forces had to cover both the mainland and the islands. Mussolini thought that British friendship could still be preserved in spite of the Corfu occupation. The point he missed was that Italian strength in the Mediterranean "had remained more or less the same" when he took upon himself this venture which could have created war with England. *Ibid.*, pp. 28 - 29.

ensued on July 29, between Thaon di Revel, Admiral Solari and Naval Captain Antonio Foschini, the minister indicated "with a sense of bitterness" the necessity of raising Italy's prestige which had fallen so low. Dalmatia had been deserted, Albania evacuated, "After Jugoslavia and Albania, it appears the moment for Greece may have perhaps arrived," he observed to Solari and Foschini.⁹⁰

But di Revel's desire to resurrect Italy's fortunes, to achieve world wide status, attain prestige, by some sort of symbolic act had already attracted Mussolini's attention. At approximately the same time the Duce had proposed to send a naval squadron to take solemn possession of the Dodecanese. He was dissuaded from doing so only with reluctance and ill-humor by the professionals at the Palazzo Chigi. The gesture, they argued, would be both provocative and ridiculous, since Italy had been in occupation of the islands for more than a decade.⁹¹ What connection there was—if any—between Mussolini's ill fated proposal and the comments that Thaon di Revel was now to make to Admiral Solari and Captain Foschini is difficult to say.

Minister di Revel explained to both naval officers that the real motive for the concentration of naval units at Taranto was the deteriorating relations with Greece. By article 15 of the Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey had renounced in favor of Italy the Dodecanese islands acquired by Italy during the Italo-Turkish war of 1911. Greece however claimed the same islands. Greek-Italian relationships were further strained by the work of General Tellini. These two controversies, fanned by the Greek press, Thaon di Revel observed "had already provoked public manifestation against Italy," which the government in Athens did nothing to either prevent or to restrain.⁹²

In this "so red-hot" atmosphere di Revel, concluded, any Italian proclamation of sovereignty over the Dodecanese contemplated for late August, after the ratification of the Lausanne Treaty was sure to produce in Greece "uproars and disorders with provocative character," Italy however "was not disposed to tolerate damages hurtful to national dignity," and had decided to react "immediately and vigorously in an exemplary manner, in order to obtain the proper reparations." To establish "the modality of the military operations to accomplish the object," a meeting was to be held with other military officials but directed by the officials of the Palazzo Chigi. The talks that followed were under the direction of Mario Arlotta,

90. Foschini, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

91. Guariglia, *op. cit.*, pp. 25 - 28; Luigi Salvatorelli and Giovanni Mira, *Storia del Fascismo* (Roma: Novissima, 1952), p. 202.

92. Foschini, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

formerly stationed in Athens as naval attaché and the then Director-General of Political Affairs. The "coercive measures" to be applied to Greece "in order to obtain reparations" in case of any "offense" was decided upon only after long discussion. Simultaneous actions were to take place in two quarters, the Aegean and Ionian Seas. In the latter Corfu was to be occupied "in order to hold it as a pledge" until Italian demands were satisfied. To the east in the Aegean, naval units operating from the island of Leros, which was suited for the task because of its central location and natural harbor facilities, would threaten Athens.⁹³

Because the major share of the work fell on the naval establishment Thaon di Revel stipulated that all naval preparations were to be finished by August and that secrecy was to be maintained. Arrangements were therefore pushed forward not only within the navy but also with other interested government departments.

Spies were sent to Corfu to gather information. Their reports clearly showed that it was poorly garrisoned, lacking naval support and hence virtually defenseless. With the Turkish ratification of the Lausanne Treaty on August 20, the Minister of Marine, di Revel, informed Vice-Admiral Solari, that on August 30, immediately after the Greek ratification, Italy would proclaim its full sovereignty over the Dodecanese and thus ordered all units to be in full readiness.⁹⁴

On the evening of August 29 instructions from Revel to Solari, ordered the departure of the Aegean task force under the command of Rear-Admiral Angelo Frank, which left Taranto by midnight. Passing out to sea so as to avoid detection from the Greek coast, the task force steamed at full speed eastwards towards Leros where it arrived on August 31. Admiral Solari's force followed Frank's within twenty-four hours, its destination the island of Corfu.⁹⁵

* * *

As the last scene in this tragic drama was being played out a personal

93. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 28. It appears that as early as August 13, 1923, a report by Naval Lieutenant Loranzo Daretti, clearly showed that the island was poorly defended. This was collaborated by a report from the military attaché at Athens. Whether Lt. Daretti was one of the spies sent to Corfu is unclear. Minister of Marine, Thaon di Revel to Admiral Solari, Sept. 30, 1923. *DDI*, p. 271. The events described above therefore answer the question as to how the Italian fleet was able to mobilize so rapidly in late August of 1923. A question which has generally been tied to the thesis that Mussolini had a hand in the Tellini murder. Count Carlo Sforza, *Contemporary Italy*, p. 349; Count Carlo Sforza, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1944*, p. 117.

95. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

and somewhat pathetic telegram was being sent from the Foreign Minister, Alexandris to the Duce, assuring him that the murderers were not Greeks, that the government was willing to pay an indemnity to the victims family since the crime had been committed in Greek territory, and asking him to desist on the payment of money as a penalty since it offended Greek "national pride" fell on deaf ears as was to be expected.⁹⁶

Several hours after the transmission of the orders to Admiral Solari to proceed to Corfu, the king was informed by Mussolini that the Greek reply corresponded "in essence to the rejection of the Italian request" and therefore he had arranged "for the departure of adequate naval forces and for the occupation of a pacific and temporary character the island of Corfu." To the king, the Duce now quoted the message that at 6:30 that same morning would be flashed to all Italian missions abroad.⁹⁷

To the just demands formulated by Italy following the barbarous massacre of the Italian Military Mission committed in Greek territory, the Hellenic Government has replied in terms that correspond in essence to the complete rejection of the same.

Such an unjustified attitude places upon Italy the necessity of recalling the Hellenic Government to a sense of its responsibility. I have therefore communicated the order for the landing on the island of Corfu of a contingent of Italian troops.

With this measure of a temporary character Italy does not intend an act of war but only to defend its own prestige and to manifest its inflexible will to obtain the reparations due in conformity with custom and international law.

The Italian Government hopes that Greece does not commit any act that may modify the pacific nature of the measures. The above does not exclude the sanctions that the Conference of Ambassadors will be taking [in view] of the fact that the assassinated Italian Delegation formed part of the mission for the delimitation of the Albanian frontiers that, presided over by the lamented General Tellini, was an agent of the same Conference.

While all this was occurring another city which up to this point had remained silent now entered the picture. On the afternoon of August 30 before the rejection of the Italian demands became known, the Italian diplomat, Bernardo Attolico, serving as Assistant Secretary-General of the League, sent confidentially via the Italian Consul at Geneva a request as to "what disposition it would be expedient to adopt" in the case Greece or some other state addressed itself to the League by invoking either article 15 or 11 of the Covenant.⁹⁸

96. Text. 'Αλεξάνδρου, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

97. Mussolini to Victor Emanuele III (Racconigi), August 31, 1923. *DDI*, p. 143.

98. Eles (Geneva) to Mussolini, August 30, 1923. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

The Duce now faced with action on another front and one that throughout the last few days had not even entered into his thoughts queried Attolico whether the above official communiqué could be considered as a submission to the League.⁹⁹ Not wishing to surrender his legal prerogatives to the Conference of Ambassadors, it was even more unlikely that the Duce would give in to the League of Nations.

In London in the early afternoon of August 31, the American chargé d'affaires, Wheeler, was reporting that the Foreign Office regarded the Tellini murder "with considerable anxiety" owing to an unconfirmed report that Rome had presented to Greece a five hour ultimatum for full acceptance of the Italian demands, with the threat to occupy Corfu. "In view of the potential naval importance of this island, a serious situation would result from such a step," Wheeler warned Washington.¹⁰⁰

Later that same afternoon Della Torretta informed the Foreign Office "that orders have been given for the occupation of Corfu"¹⁰¹. Mussolini's first act of aggression had been consummated. At a time when the collective note of protest by the Conference of Ambassadors was speeding towards Athens and Poincaré's *démarche* for the withdrawal of Italy's demands was being transmitted to Rome, the Duce had already made his move.

Europe was being subjected to a new type of diplomacy, of cynical negotiation begun in bad faith. It was also receiving its first glimpse of what Ortega y Gasset would later describe as "a type of man who does not want to give reasons or to be right, but simply shows himself resolved to impose his opinions. This is the new thing: the right not to be reasonable, the 'reason of unreason'." To Gasset, man in the second decade of the twentieth century was seeing a new phenomenon the use of "direct action." Whereas before the use of force had always been the *ultima ratio* in defense of what the individual thought were his rights—an inversion of the order had occurred and the proclamation of violence as the *prima ratio* or more strictly *unica ratio* was the order of the day.¹⁰²

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99. Mussolini to Attolico (Geneva), August 30, 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 141 - 142.

100. Wheeler (London) to the Department of State, August 31, 1923. File 768. 7515/48, Record Group 59, N.A.

101. Wheeler (London) to the Department of State, August 31, 1923. File 765. 68/11 or 768. 7515/50, Record Group 59, N.A.

102. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1932), pp. 80 - 82.