

ANGLO-GREEK RELATIONS DURING
THE ABYSSINIAN CRISIS OF 1935-1936¹

Between 1923 and 1935, Anglo-Greek relations, which were amicable, were fostered by Anglo-Hellenic societies, the British schools in Greece, the Anglophile community in Athens, the «international» Greeks of London, memories of Anglo-Greek cooperation during the war, and by the Byronic tradition. Moreover, Britain had a special attraction. Britain was well-governed, content, rich; she had still a great empire, and her fleet ruled the waves, or at least appeared to do so. Nevertheless she gave the impression that she was unable to understand the new forces unleashed in the post-war era and that she had realized only too late the danger posed by the revisionist powers, especially Germany and Italy. Throughout the second half of the 'thirties, she was lured by the idea that these «hungry» states could be somehow appeased by economic and territorial concessions outside the British Empire and Western Europe or in some sandy stretch of Africa. In the new pattern of international relations Greece was caught up and in circumstances that were beyond her control. Her policy, or rather the lack of policy, was unrealistic and had far-reaching consequences in both its external and internal aspects.

The Greek Republic had been eroded by its opponents and supporters alike, and by 1935 Greece was in the midst of a grave political and constitutional crisis. The March rising of that year, which appeared to be yet another game of ins-and-outs, failed: the defeated rebels were barred from public life; the victors were increasingly unable to exercise effective control; and obscure and impatient forces in the Greek body politic worked for expedient solutions. The restoration of the monarchy was a foregone conclusion, and the subsequent dictatorship only a matter of time. As before, the regime was changed not so much because of the merits of the new one or the defects of the old, but rather because the new regime was an expedient solution of a political impasse.

The external affairs of Greece were in confusion. Venizelos' policy of bilateral agreements with Turkey, Yugoslavia and Italy was abandoned for a multilateral pact. The Greek Government, under the spell of Geneva, and lacking any real insight into developments in Europe and in the Mediterranean, agreed to participate in a Balkan pact, which at best promised a yearly gathering and

1. This article is based on my London University Ph.D. Thesis, *Britain and Greece, 1935-1941: Some Aspects of Anglo-Greek Relations*, September 1972.

speechmaking. This pact, from which Bulgaria was left out, only complicated instead of solving problems. It drove Bulgaria in a direction that was to be fatal to the Balkans; it alarmed Italy, but did not check her since the participants had no faith in it, each believing that Italy was a danger to her neighbours only.

London refrained from interfering with internal affairs in Greece. Towards the rising of March 1935, the Foreign Office maintained a cautious attitude. They ignored Sir Sydney Waterlow, the British Minister in Athens, who pressed for a show of sympathy for the new Greek Government on the grounds that it was the lawful government of a friendly state. As they explained to him, the British Government had no wish «to get into the position of having sympathized with or specially assisted the loser»¹.

British policy was based on *ad hoc* decisions, and not on theoretical principles. As long as the outcome of the rising was in doubt, they preferred to «sit on the fence». The British Government however could not possibly ignore the great influence which the name of Venizelos commanded in Britain, especially in Parliamentary circles. In a Memorandum of 5 March 1935, the Head of the Southern Department of the British Foreign Office stated:

The present Greek Government has proved itself not only inefficient and corrupt, but also decidedly inimical to British interests. From the standpoint of the latter, a Veniselist Government could scarcely be worse, and might be considerably better².

In spite of the insistent advice of Sir Sydney Waterlow³ and of Charalampos Simopoulos, the Greek Minister in London, that they should promote the restoration of the monarchy in Greece, the British Government remained cautious⁴.

They were unwilling to intervene in what was clearly an internal affair of Greece, at least as long as that country remained of relatively little, if any, value to British Imperial policy and strategy. They realised that British public opinion was unlikely to support British intervention in favour of a monarchical restoration in Greece, particularly as the conduct of the Greek royal dynasty during the war was not forgotten. The Foreign Office informed Simopoulos that the restoration was an issue for the Greeks to decide upon: if the King were brought back to Greece, this action «should be demonstrated to be the real wish of the great majority of the Greek people», not as the result of a rigged pleb-

1. This paper and the relative correspondence in the British State Papers, are in Public Record Office, London, Vol. F. O. 371/19505, R1552/34/19.

2. F. O. 371/19505, R1829/34/19.

3. Waterlow stated that Britain was generally expected to play her «proper part» in Greece. See F. O. 371/19505, R1715/34/19.

4. F. O. Minutes in F. O. 371/19505.

iscite¹. To Waterlow Sir John Simon, the British Foreign Minister, telegraphed on 30 May as follows:

After careful consideration... I have come to the conclusion that it would be impossible for His Majesty's Government to take any action or express any opinion in regard to the merits or otherwise of a restoration of the monarchy in Greece. This is not to say, however, that you are precluded from expressing a personal opinion on the importance, if the question of the regime is to be reopened, of its being settled in a way which would convince the world that the settlement was in accordance with the freely and fully expressed wishes of the Greek people as a whole².

Four months later conditions had changed. Early in October 1935 the Abyssinian crisis began. On the tenth of that month General Kondylis made his long-expected coup d'état and declared the end of the Republic in Greece. The coup presented the British Government with a delicate issue at a most difficult time. Waterlow's view was that, if King George were restored, he would rest on bayonets, that he should be persuaded not to return to Greece, and that the Foreign Office should withhold recognition of the new regime³. Simopoulos, however, assured the Foreign Office that the change of regime in Greece would not affect the country's foreign policy⁴, and Demetrios Maximos, the chief delegate of Greece to the League of Nations, assured Eden on 8 October that Greece, despite economic and political repercussions, would be prepared to play her part in any economic sanctions agreed upon by the members of the League⁵. The British Government faced a serious dilemma: they wished to avoid intervention in the internal affairs of Greece; but as they needed the cooperation of the Greek Government it was essential to recognise immediately the new regime. This the British Foreign Office favoured, for, should a sudden emergency arise in the Mediterranean, the friendly cooperation of the Greek Government—whether *de facto* or *de jure*, revolutionary or constitutional—was of vital importance. They instructed the British Minister in Athens as follows:

We think that the present political situation, in which we might at any time require the goodwill and friendly cooperation of the Greek Government, renders it desirable that you should enter into personal relations with General Kondylis and other Ministers, whether there be official recognition of the new regime or not. As for official recognition, the sooner it can be safely affected the better from the point of view of British interests. Delay merely on technical grounds is, in view of the international situation, to be deprecated⁶.

1. F. O. Minutes, 13 May 1935, F. O. 371/19507, R/3432/34/19.

2. F.O. Confid. Desp., 30 May 1935, F.O. 371/19507, R/3203/34/19.

3. Athens Tel., 11 Oct. 1935, F.O. 371/19508, R/6108/34/19.

4. Letter of Simopoulos to Sir Samuel Hoare, 12 Oct. 1935, F.O. 371/19509, R/6265/34/19.

5. Geneva Tel., 8 Oct. 1935, F.O. 371/19508, R/6051/34/19.

6. F.O. Tel., 15 Oct. 1935, F.O. 371/19508, R/6123/34/19.

On 16 October Sir Samuel Hoare, who had become Foreign Secretary, approached King George¹. To the King's inquiry of the British attitude to his restoration, Sir Samuel Hoare replied that in the face of so many disquieting features in Greece, the British Government could neither encourage nor discourage the restoration: assuming, however, that the monarchy was re-established, the British Government would make no difficulties or delay recognition of it, and would wish to see it established firmly. Summing up the interview, the Foreign Minister noted:

I gave him (the King) neither encouragement nor discouragement. I take, however, the view that as the restoration is now inevitable, we had much better do everything that we legitimately can to help to make the Monarchy as secure as possible. This should be our line both in London and in Athens².

On 11 November 1935, Sir Robert Vansittart the Permanent Under-Secretary, instructed Waterlow to show himself as cordial and sympathetic to King George as possible. As he explained:

There are so many subjects, ranging from sanctions to Anglo-Greek commercial relations, on which we may hope to profit by the King's goodwill, that we must leave no stone unturned to secure and keep it³.

The Abyssinian crisis had revealed to the British Government the glaring deficiencies of British power. Greece might be useful as a friend, and all the more so if she were dependable. In an emergency in the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece was ideally situated for launching naval and air strikes against Italy. Nevertheless, although the British Government backed the League of Nations in its quarrel with Italy over Abyssinia, they were a party to the Hoare-Laval pact, which aimed at appeasing Italy. Faced by Germany and Japan, which both grew increasingly hostile, they could hardly adopt a policy hostile to Italy⁴.

Greece faced a somewhat similar dilemma: she wished to cooperate with Britain against Italian designs in the Eastern Mediterranean but desired to avoid a provocation to Italy. The sanctions policy of Greece however had already estranged Italy to some extent, and British assurances given to Greece

1. Note by Sir Robert Vansittart, 14 Oct. 1935, F.O. 371/19508, R/6609/34/19, which provided a brief for this interview.

2. Memorandum by Sir Samuel Hoare, 16 Oct. 1935, F.O. 371/19508, R/6249/34/19.

3. Letter of Sir Robert Vansittart to Sir Sydney Waterlow, 11 Nov. 1935, F.O. 371/19509, R/6609/34/19.

4. The deficiencies of British power and arguments for reconciliation with Italy are set out in a report by the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee, 21 Nov. 1935, Cab 24/259, C.P. 26 (36).

in December 1935 had contributed to that estrangement¹. These assurances the Greek Naval Staff considered «insufficient» and «vague». Greece could not depend for her safety on Britain's promise to come to her assistance. What was vital for Greece was not belated assistance following an Italian attack, but the prevention of such an attack: but as long as British naval and air forces could not be stationed in appropriate positions in Greece, the prevention of an Italian attack was impossible². On this vital point, however, the Greek Government were never able to convince the British Government. Britain wanted a friendly, not an allied Greece; an alliance would create a commitment which the British Chiefs of Staff would be unwilling and unable to meet and was bound to offend Italian susceptibilities. Nevertheless the restoration of a friendly monarch to the Greek throne secured to some extent the association desired by the British Government, that is to say co-operation short of an alliance. Internal political developments in Greece since the abortive rising of March 1935 had worked for the restoration of King George; and international developments during the autumn of that same year contributed to the association of Britain with Greece. Both the British and the Greek Governments considered the Greek King useful for the pursuit of their immediate and long-term interests: the British Government saw in the person of King George a dependable friend, while the Greek Government saw in him a powerful patron. King George thus became the key figure in Anglo-Greek relations, and was to remain so as long as the situation in the Mediterranean and in Greece was uncertain.

When in the spring of 1936 the conquest of Abyssinia became imminent, the British Government considered possible steps that would reassure the East Mediterranean countries. If sanctions were to be removed in June 1936 as expected, these countries would be deprived of the assurances which they enjoyed under Article 16 of the League Charter. Turkey and Greece in particular were afraid lest they should be left to face Italy alone. Some feared that Greece, being vulnerable to Italian military power, might turn to Italy. This possibility, however, the British Foreign Office discounted: they believed that Greece was too deeply committed to Britain to change her course³. The simplest way of reassuring Greece and Turkey would be a public declaration, both at Geneva and in Parliament, to the effect that if, during the crisis, those Mediterranean states which collaborated in the application of sanctions were attacked by

1. The Greek Prime Minister to Simopoulos, 9 Dec. 1935, Tel. No. 88038, Simopoulos Papers, in the possession of Prof. John Simopoulos, Oxford.

2. Memo. by Greek Naval Staff, 26 June 1936, No. 18, Metaxas Papers, General State Papers, Academy of Athens.

3. F.O. Minutes, April 1936, F.O. 371/20381, R/2403/193/67.

Italy they would be assisted by Britain in the same manner as had been contemplated during the sanctions period. In return for this protection Britain might be able to obtain from Greece and Turkey valuable concessions regarding the use of their territorial waters and harbours. Such concessions would greatly restore British prestige. In any event, the commitment to assist those two powers was one which British interests would necessitate¹. These assurances were best given unilaterally, and not take the form of a pact, which might offend Italy².

On 18 June 1936 in the House of Commons and again at Geneva on 1 July, Anthony Eden stated that the assurances given to the Mediterranean states in December 1935 would hold good after the lifting of sanctions during the period of uncertainty following the termination of action by the League. He added that the British Government regarded any eventuality covered by those assurances «hypothetical» and «improbable»³. These assurances, however, failed to satisfy the British Chiefs of Staff who maintained that, though Britain wanted a friendly Greece and Turkey, it was most desirable that no offence should be given to Italy, and that no new commitments should be assumed. In face of this service opposition the British Government decided to withdraw the assurances as soon as possible⁴. On 27 July 1936, after consultations with the Italian Government⁵, Eden stated in the Commons that, since Italy had recently given assurances to Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia of her «peaceful» intentions and had made it clear that she was not contemplating aggressive action in retaliation for their sanctions policy, the period of «uncertainty» was at an end and that there was no necessity for the continuation of the British assurances⁶.

In much the same way the tentative Foreign Office plan for an Anglo-Greco-Turkish understanding was dropped. In a Memorandum of 29 July 1936, drafted at the request of the Cabinet, the Chiefs of Staff argued that the «primary consideration» for a secure Mediterranean was the restoration of Britain's friendly relations with Italy, and that no step should be taken which was likely to prejudice this consideration. Although it was important to retain Greek and Turkish friendship, circumstances were not favourable to the acceptance of fresh military commitments, much less when such commitments were bound

1. F.O. Memo., 22 May 1936, F.O. 371/20382, R/4002/294/67.

2. F.O. Memo., 4 June 1936, F.O. 371/20382, R/4005/294/67.

3. Eden's statements in F.O. 371/20381, R/3565/294/67, and F.O. 371/20382, R/4135/294/67.

4. Extracts from Cabinet Conclusions, 23 June 1936, in F.O. 371/20381, R/3810/294/67.

5. Rome Tel., 13 July 1936, F.O. 371/20382, R/4163/294/67.

6. Eden's statement in F.O. 371/20383, R/4513/294/67.

to alienate Italy¹. These conclusions the Service Chiefs had based on a paper drawn up by the Joint Planning Sub-Committee—a paper which influenced Anglo-Greek relations, not only in 1936, but also until and during the early stages of the war of 1939-45. This report stated that Britain might gain from an understanding with Greece the use of Greek harbours and aerodromes whose geographical position would simplify the problem of controlling the Central Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea and facilitate air attacks on Italy. There were, however, certain problems:

...internal economic conditions and lack of internal communications in Greece would make the maintenance of our air forces in the country difficult. Moreover, the Greeks are poor fighters and the military problem of protecting their country against Italy in time of war would be a very difficult one. Greece lies so close to Italian aerodromes that a heavy scale of air attack could be directed by Italy against any military bases established in that country. We should also be committed to the maintenance of Greek sea communications, which would be a commitment, in some respects, greater than maintaining our own, as for us there are routes alternative to the Mediterranean.

An understanding with Greece also entailed the danger that Britain might become involved in hostilities connected with inter-Balkan quarrels. The general conclusion was that Britain might lose more than she could expect to gain from an understanding with Greece².

By 1936 Greece had ceased to count even as a pawn, and her Government although professing a sort of neutrality that convinced neither Italy nor Germany continued to follow ceaselessly Britain's lead. They clung to the illusion that they might be able to buy British support and to achieve political association with Britain. Having a somewhat out-dated appreciation of Mediterranean realities based on World War I conditions and on the long tradition of Anglo-Greek co-operation and friendship, they took British support for granted and followed, despite repeated warnings of the Greek General Staff, a policy dependent on Britain.

At the beginning of the Abyssinian crisis the Greek General Staff had presented to their Government a gloomy picture of the Greek armed forces³. The Army had insufficient supplies of war material for full mobilization. The Navy had but few serviceable destroyers and submarines, and there were no coastal defences. The Air Force lacked both modern machines and trained personnel. The Service Chiefs feared that Bulgaria might attack while Greece was preoccupied in the south against Italy. As they warned their Government:

1. C.O.S. 506, Secret, «Eastern Mediterranean: Understanding with Greece and Turkey», 29 July 1936, in F.O. 371/20383, R/4650/294/67.

2. J.P. 164, 21 July 1936, in F.O. 371/20383, R/4650/294/67.

3. Memo. by the Greek General Staff, No. 3620, Secret, 8 Oct. 1935, Metaxas Papers.

The danger from the North is so serious, and the military weakness of Greece so great, that any thought about Greece's participation in an Anglo-Italian war must be ruled out, if the north-eastern borders of the country are not absolutely guaranteed. This danger cannot be compensated by any exchange that might be offered.

In January 1936, in the face of a possible Anglo-Italian war, the Greek General Staff had been even more precise in warning the Government. The participation of Greece in such a war required (a) the supply by Britain of war material, such as ammunition, aircraft, and anti-aircraft and coastal guns, (b) the guarantee of the country's northern borders, (c) the prompt and effective covering of the country by the British Fleet, and (d) the protection of the population from air attacks. Any commitment on the part of Greece to assist Britain which ignored these requirements constituted a «crime» against the country¹.

In the light of this appreciation of Greece's strategic position, the attitude of the Greek Government was at best a dangerous gamble. The Greek Foreign Minister had assured Sir Sydney Waterlow on 17 October 1935 that in the event of war Greece would be placed on the side of Britain². In June 1936 the Government of Metaxas had accepted British assurances with «lively satisfaction», and had assured the British Government that Greece was determined to follow Britain's lead in Mediterranean affairs³. On 6 August 1936, Metaxas had confided to Waterlow that he was satisfied with the state of Anglo-Greek relations and was «grateful» for Britain's attitude towards Greece⁴. In 1938 and again in 1940 Metaxas proposed to the British Government an Anglo-Greek alliance only to see his proposals turned down. Greece had chosen to side with Britain, and hoped, even when there was little ground for hope, to secure prompt and adequate support against Italy. This hope derived from her expectation to be rewarded for her good conduct towards Britain, from an overestimate of her strategical value to Britain in time of war, and from a failure to appreciate Mediterranean realities and developments.

1. Memo. by the Greek General Staff, No. 29231, Secret, 20 Jan. 1936, Metaxas Papers.

2. Athens Tel., 17 Oct. 1935, and Foreign Office Minutes in F.O. 371/19514, R/6251/173/19.

3. Athens Tel., 25 June 1936, F.O. 371/20381, R/3800/294/19, and Athens Tel., 16 July 1936, F.O. 371/20382, R/4280/294/67.

4. Athens Tel., 6 Aug. 1936, F.O. 371/20383, R/4814/294/67.