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UNWANTED ALLY: GREECE AND THE GREAT POWERS, 1939-1941

Greece's international position and national security, from the spring of 1939 when the Axis powers initiated a policy of outright conquest in Europe until the German invasion of the country two years later, have, until recently, been examined mainly from the point of view of contemporary official Greek policy, leading thus to the development of a semi - official Greek historiography[1]. Most of the governing assumptions and premises of this historiography grew out of both wartime rhetoric and the post - war requirements of Greek policy, to become in time axiomatic. Some of these assumptions and premises are: a) that Greece followed, before the Italian attack, a neutral policy towards the great European powers; b) that the Italian attack was unprovoked; c) that Anglo - Greek cooperation was subsequent — and consequent — to the Italian attack; d) that the Greek Government, although resolved to resist a German attack, did everything to avoid it, and e) that the German invasion was unprovoked and undertaken to rescue the defeated Italians in Albania. In this paper I propose to examine these assumptions in the light of evidence newly made available, and see particularly whether Greece followed a really neutral policy until the Italian attack, and whether the Greco - Italian war was, until Germany decided to intervene and extinguish the potentially dangerous conflict in the Balkans, more than a local war loosely connected with the strategical interests of Britain and Germany.

Greece's foreign relations before World War II were first put to the test in April 1939, on the occasion of the Italian occupation of Albania. During the April 1939 crisis, and at the express wish of the Btit-

1. The most representative studies are those hy General Alexandros Papagos, *O polemos tis Ellados, 1940-1941,* Athens 1945 (Engl. transl. *The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941,* Athens 1949); B. P. Papadakis, *Diplomatiki istoria tou ellinikou polemou, 1940-1945* (Diplomatic History of the Greek War, 1940-1945), Athens 1956; P. N. Pipinelis, *Istoria tis exoterikis politikis tis Ellados, 1923-1941* (History of Greek Foreign Policy, 1923-1941), Athens 1948; and Greek General Staff, *Aitia kai aphormai tou ellino-italikou polemou, 1940-1941* (Causes of the Greco-Italian War, 1940-1941), Athens 1959. The most notable revisionary studies have heen M. L. van Creveld's *Hitler's Strategy, 1940-1941: The Balkan Clue,* Cambridge 1973, and the author's *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941,* Oxford 1977.

ish Government, Greece received from Italy certain assurances which, however, made the Greeks uneasy, less the Italian assurances were extorted, and left them uncertain about British intentions. But the British were not prepared to give assurances to Greece, except in close consultation with the Italians in order not to offend the Italian Government; and when the Italian assurances had been secured, then Britain could safely do the same[2]. Before, however, these assurancess were made public — to satisfy also public opinion in Britain and the United States, which expected a resolute attitude from the British Government in the face of Axis aggression — it was necessary to satisfy British strategic considerations, and particularly that Britain should not undertake obligations, such as the defence of Greece's territorial integrity, which she could never meet[3]. When this was accepted by the British Government, the Greeks could be informed of the text of the guarantee the British proposed to make public, but, again, not before the Italians were informed of British intention to make a public statement assuring Greece[4].

The British «Guarantee» of Greece, therefore, which was declared by Chamberlan in the House of Commons on 13 April 1939, did not constitute a definitive commitment to go to war over Greece's territorial integrity, but only an undefined promise of support, in the event that Greece fell victim of aggression and chose to resist such aggression. For Britain, the public assurances to Greece — and to Romania — amounted to little more than a carefully measured gesture of support, meant to assure the prospective victim without, however, offending the potential aggressor. As far as Greece was concerned, the British gesture left much to be desired, for the Greek Government were seeking since the previous year an Aglo - Greek alliance to ward off a possible Italian attack and secure vital assistance from Britain. But the British

2. The main sources for the April 1939 crisis are *Diplomatika engrapha: I italiki epithesis enantion tis Ellados* (Diplomatic Papers: The Italian Attack on Greece), Athens 1940, Engl. edition, *The Greek White Book,* London 1942, Nos. 19, 25, 26, 27, 28; *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939,* 3rd Series, vol. V, Nos. 91, 101, 112, 136. 140, 145; John Metaxas, *To prosopiko tou imerologio* (His Personal Diary), vol. IV, edit. P. Vranas, Athens 1960, pp. 364 ff., and above all the British Foreign Office and Cahinet Papers at the Public Record Office, vols. F.O. 371/23780, F.O. 434/6, and Cab. 27/624.

3. Cab. 27/624, F.P. (36)41, 11 Apr. 1939.

4. F.O. 434/6, F.O. Tel. to Rome No. 192, 12 April 1939; D.B.F.P., 3rd Ser., vol. F, Nos. 140, 145; Metaxas, *op. cit.,* vol. IV, p. 368.

promise was accepted for what little it meant in terms of security, in the hope that it would eventually lead to the cherished goal, namely, a binding British commitment to defend Greece's territorial integrity[5].

A considerable step towards closer relations with Britain was taken in September 1939, following the outbreak of war in Europe and on the occasion of the soundings about the Greco - Italian Pact of Friendship of 1928, which was due to expire that month. Metaxa's initial willingness to renew the pact or negotiate a new one, but subject to British approval, limited drastically his own foreign policy and decided the future of Greco - Italian relations. The British reply to his enquiry left no room for doubt as to British requirements from Greece; the proposed Greco - Italian agreement had to be phrased in more general terms than the old pact and its provisions had to comply with the following desiderata: a) Greece should preserve full liberty of action in the event of war between Britain and Italy, and b) the country should similarly preserve full liberty of action in the event of war between the Balkan Entente and Italy[6]. The British provisions for a Greek-Italian agreement essentially ruled out a meaningful understanding between the two countries and prescribed the course of Greek policy. The Italians, although unaware of the precise British conditions conveyed to Metaxas, did assume as much and accepted the indefinite formula of agreement expressing the hope that the international situation would make it possible for the two governments in the near future to give their relationships a more «concrete form»[7]. The Greek Government has been criticized for evading a friendly gesture from Italy, which could in no way have compromised Greece's position. This evasion, it has been argued, was bound to make the Italians suspicious that the Greeks had already bound themselves to the British[8]. It is, however, questionable whether Metaxas was, by this time, in a position to pursue a policy that conflicted with British interests or wishes.

Around the same time and independently of the Greco - Italian soundings, the British approached the Greeks with a view to concluding a war trade agreement that would restrict Greek exports to Germa-

5. See Koliopoulos, *op. cit.*, pp. 87 ff.

6. F.O. 371/23780, F.O. Tel. to Athens No. 376, 18 Sept. 1939.

7. *Greek White Book,* No. 52; *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani,* 9th Series, vol. I, Nos. 456, 546, 648; Emanuele Grazzi, *Il principo della fine: L'impressa di Grecia,* Rome 1945, pp. 74-75, 79-80, 90-92.

8. Pipinelis, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

ny. Under a temporary agreement signed in October 1939, the Greek Government undertook to fix a maximum for the export, from Greece to Germany, of cereals, fruits, vegetables, olive oil, tobacco and particularly metals. The Greeks agreed to supply the British with statistics at monthly intervals of Greek exports of these commodities to all destinations in Europe. Pending an agreement fixing maxima, the Greek Government undertook not to permit the export, in any one calendar month, of these commodities in excess of one - twelfth of the average annual exports to Germany during the years 1934-1938. The British for their part undertook to put no obstacle in the way of importation into Greece of certain commodities for domestic consumption, and to facilitate the supply from their own or other resources of certain commodities also needed for domestic consumption[9]. Finally, in January 1940, Greece and Britain signed a definitive war trade agreement reiterating all the above, as well as a shipping agreement, which was concluded by the Greek shipowners and the British Government (after the necessary pressure on the shipowners from the Greek Government) and secured to Britain the lease of a sizable portion of the Greek merchant marine[10].

These agreements bound Greece to Britain's economic war effort against Germany, and marked the first stage of Greek departure from neutrality. The Greek Minister in Berlin did his best to explain Greece's difficult position with respect to British contraband control in the Mediterranean and Greek dependence on British coal and the income derived from shipping; but the Germans remained sceptical and made it plain that they considered Greece's attitude unsatisfactory[11]. A Greco-German trade agreement signed in September 1940 did not reverse the pattern, as rhe Greek Government applied the brake on exports to Germany and turned a deaf ear to German complaints and veiled threats[12].

9. F.O. 371/23765, where the relevant correspondence between the Foreign Office and the British Minister in Athens, as well as the October 1939 agreement.

10. F.O. 371/23765/23766/24904/24905, where the relevant correspondence. See also Simopoulos Papers (St. Antony's College, Oxford), where correspondence between Metaxas and Simopoulos, the Greek Minister in London, of the period October 1939 - January 1940, and Metaxas, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 410.

11. *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945,* Series D, vol. VIII, Nos. 375, 614.

12. F.O. 371/24914, Athens dispatches Nos. 239 and 457, 28 Sept. and 7 Oct. 1940 respectively.

In 1940 Greek foreign policy was circumscribed by an unmistakable leaning towards Britain and an ambignous neutrality, which were the result of the cumulative forces of the war and the willingness of the Greek Government to cooperate with rhe British. British attitude towards Greece, on the other hand, depended on such variables as German and Italian policy and plans and the attitude of Turkey. British intervention in the area to support Greece would depend on the benevolent neutrality of Italy and the active support of Turkey, both of which were very doubtful[13]. Britain's position on assistance to Greece depended on the following factors: British forces, if available, could not be sent to Greece, except in the case where Crete was not in Italian hands. Britain, however, could not provide adequate forces for defending the island itself, whose own defences were non - existent. Another governing factor was the relative security of British communications in the Aegean. Britain would be unable to secure these communications until the Italian threat in the Aegean was reduced by knocking out the Italian bases in the Dodecanese, but that would not be possible until Britain was able to reinforce her naval and air forces in the Mediterranean appreciably. In short, British assistance to Greece depended on denying Crete to Italy and neutralizing the Dodecanese; but neither of these requirements was likely to be fulfilled in view of Britain's inadequate forces and vulnerable position in the Mediterranean and the Middle East[14]. At the end of May and before Italy entered the war against France and Britain, British attitude to assisting Greece was the following: in the event of an Italian attack on Greece, action would be initially limited to a) the dispatch of troops to Crete to help the Greeks deny the island to the Italians, and b) operations to control communications in the Aegean. In any case, because of vital commitments elsewhere and Britain's limited resources, the British could not possibly take Greece under their protection[15].

In May 1940 also the British Government considered the question on an alliance with Greece, as Metaxas returned to the subject from time to time. If Italy were to enter the war on the side of Germany,

13. F.O. 371/24887, Memo. by Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 28 Mar. 1940.

14. F.O. 371/24942, M.R. (40)63, «Military action open to the Allies in the event of war with Italy», 1 May 1940.

15. F.O. 371/24915, F.O. Tel. to Athens No. 244, 31 May 1940. The telegram was drafted by the Chiefs of Staff.

Greek intervention would divert Italian forces, and facilitate the dispatch of British forces to Crete and the use of Greek harbours and bases. Failing an alliance, Greece might be inclined to come to terms with Italy. But the alliance had many disadvantages for Britain, since it would constitute a «strategically undesirable» commitment. The Greeks would also be entitled to demand military and economic assistance, which Britain could not spare. Alliance with Greece would «expose» Britain's inability to provide adequate and direct support. Finally, Britain could reasonably expect Greece's friendly cooperation, in the event of war against Italy in the Mediterranean, even without an alliance. The issue was briefly discussed by the Cabinet on 23 May, only to be shelved indefinitely[16].

Greece's strategic value for Britain did not appreciably change even after Italy's entry into the war in June and the collapse of France. An effort might be made to induce Greece and Yugoslavia to intervene on the British side, as the British Chiefs of Staff recommended. But the Foreign Office was sceptical; while Italy kept her promise not to attack Greece and Yugoslavia, and as long as the tide did not turn in favour of Britain, it would be virtually impossible to induce the Balkan countries to intervene in the war. Moreover, if Germany was actively engaged in the Balkans, it was essential that both Turkey and the Soviet Union should not be estranged by Britain's intervention in the area, and that both powers should side with Britain. In the light of circumstances, however, both desiderata were problematic. Moreover, Germany could very well attack both Britain and the Balkans at the same time, and probably press on towards the Straits, while Britain could not aid Turkey effectively[17].

About this time, Italian designs against Greece were taking shape. In early July, Hitler assured Ciano that everything concerning the Mediterranean was a «purely Italian matter», in which Germany did not intend to interfere[18]. But in August and as a result of the Italian terrorist attacks against Greek ships in the Aegean, the Germans inter-

16. Cab. 80/11, C.O.S. (40)370, «The role of Greece in the event of war in the Mediterranean», 20 May 1940; F.O. 371/24924, W.P. (40)164, «The question of an alliance with Greece», 21 May 1940; and W.M. (40)135, 23 May 1940.

17. F.O. 371/24948, F.O. Minutes of June 1940; F.O. 371/24980, C.O.S. (40)525, «Balkan policy after the French collapse», 3 July 1940.

18. *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers,* edit. M. Muggeridge, London 1948, pp. 375-379; D.G.F.P., Ser. D, vol. X, No. 129.

vened and asked the Italians to restrain their actions against Greece for the time being; or that at least can be assumed from Ciano's instructions to the Military Governor of Albania to slow down the pace of Italian moves against Greece[19]. Germany wanted to leave the Balkans out of the war, as long as this important source of supplies for Germany provided theses supplies, and in order to avoid a clash of interests in the area between Italy and the Soviet Union. Moreover, if drawn into the war, the Balkans could become a British base for air strikes against the oilfields of Romania, or even a dangerous theatre of war. In September and October, however, and after the failure of Germany's invasion of England and Greece's failure to live up to the Greco - German trade agreement, Mussolini and Hitler began considering an attack on Greece as a British potential base[20]. Greece was «one of the main points of English maritime strategy in the Mediterranean», according to Mussolini, who had already decided to occupy Greece and informed Hitler on 19 October of his resolution to deal soon with the Greek problem. The attack materialized before Hitler had a chance to hold back Mussolini; or so he claimed later[21]. But it is rather doubtful whether Hitler would have been willing to hold back Mussolini[22], even if it had been possible at this late stage.

At this point it would be useful to examine Greek and British strategic considerations, particularly the former, before the Italian attack on Greece. The first soundings about the possibility of a common or parallel strategy in the event of war in the Mediterranean took place in early 1939, when Metaxas undertook to explain the essentials of Greek war planning to the British. According to Metaxas, Greek defence plans were based on a Mediterranean war in which Italy would be hostile and Greece on Britain's side. Hitherto, Greece had been preparing for a Balkan war, in which the predominant role would be played by the army; but attention had been turned lately to a Mediterranean war, in which the navy and the air force would play the principal part, in close cooperation with the British Mediterranean Fleet and Air Arm[23].

19. Franz Halder, *Diaries,* Washington D.C. 1950, vol. IV, pp. 166, 170; *Ciano's Dipl. Papers,* p. 385.

20. D.G.F.P., Ser. D, vol. XI, No. 135.

21. *Ibid.,* Nos. 194, 199, 209; *Les lettres secrètes échangées par Hitler et Mussolini,* Paris 1946, pp. 81 ff.; Ernst Weizsäcker, *Memoirs,* London 1951, p. 244.

22. Creveld, *op. cit.,* p. 39ff.

23. F.O. 371/23760, Reports of the British Sesvice Attachés, Jan. 1939.

These explanations came two months after a proposal from Metaxas for an Anglo - Greek alliance. The first approaches for placing Anglo - Greek relations on an alliance basis had been made by the Greek Government in May 1938, in the light of Britain's decision to facilitate Bulgaria's rearmament. A month later Metaxas himself proposed to the British Minister that Britain should undertake to guarantee Greece's frontiers, or sign an alliance with her; and King George implored the British to do «something» for Greece, in the face of Bulgaria's rearmament[24]. On this occasion the Foreign Office found the Greek approaches besides the point. The British Chiefs of Staff had already considered the subject in March of the same year and decided that an alliance with Greece or other Balkan states would constitute an «embarrassing commitment»[25]. In October, finally, Metaxas proposed to the British Government an Anglo - Greek alliance to facilitate Greek war preparations and Anglo - Greek cooperation in the event of war in the Mediterranean. But the British were not prepared to consider such an alliance, mainly because they did not want on the one hand to undertake to defend Greek territorial integrity and on the other to run the danger of estranging Italy[26]. It is worth noting in this context that Metaxas considered that control of the Greek peninsula and islands would be a «vital strategical necessity» to Britain's position in the Eastern Mediterranean[27]; an appreciation, of course, that was outdated and based on World War I strategical desiderata.

To return now to Metaxa's confidential explanations of early 1939 to the British, it seems that the view that Greece had of late been preparing for a «Mediterranean» war was not in accord with the views of the Greek General Staff; for, at least until the April 1939 crisis, war planning and preparations covered almost exclusively the Bulgarian threat, as the elaborate and costly fortifications on the border with Bulgaria clearly showed. General Papagos, Chief of the General Staff, admitted later that the Government had made it clear that the aim of Greek rearmament was to deal with Bulgaria in the event of a Greco - Bulgarian war, in which Bulgaria would have the initiative. This aim was also in accordance with Greece's obligations arising

24. F.O. 371/22362, F.O. correspondence and minutes, May - June 1938.

25. F.O. 371/22362, F.O. minutes of June 1938, and Cab. 27/627, C.O.S. 698, 21 Mar. 1938.

26. Koliopoulos, *op. cit.*, pp. 89 ff.

27. F.O. 371/22363, Athens Tel. No. 200, 16 Oct. 1938.

from the Balkan Pact. And he adds: «The Government had never considered the possibility of a war against Italy to be the purpose of our military preparations». Greece according to Papagos, did not even possess a plan covering the Italian danger[28].

The April 1939 crisis sounded the alarm, and the Greek General Staff then produced the first plan covering both Italy and Bulgaria. The new plan (Plan IB) took into consideration the help Greece might expect from her Balkan partners, in the event of Bulgaria attacking alone; it presupposed British naval superiosity in the Mediterranean, and counted on some British and French assistance; and divided Greek land forces between two lines of defence, the frontiers with Albania and Bulgaria, allocating the forces in a way that clearly favoured the Bulgarian sector. This allocation, according to Papagos, was made necessary by the need to hold Bulgaria at all costs until Turkish help arrived. But this hardly constitutes by itself a convincing explanation of the attitude of the General Staff. It is worth stressing in this context that expenditure on the line of fortifications facing Bulgaria was not reduced after the Italian occupation of Albania, as one might have expected. On the contrary, the Bulgarian sector received between April 1939 and October 1940 the lion's share of funds spent on fortifications, approximately, 90.4 per cent against 9.6 per cent; indeed, more than half of total expenditure on defence works in the years 1936-1940 was spent in the post - April 1939 period[29].

Clearly, the Greek General Staff prepared for a «Balkan» not a «Mediterranean» war, notwithstanding Metaxas's assurances to the contrary. There are even some indications that the Greek Government—not only the General Staff — were seriously preoccupied with the Bulgarian danger well after the April 1939 crisis, as late as August 1939[30]. As might be expected, the British Government disapproved of the em-

28. Alexandros Papagos, *O ellinikos stratos kai i pros polemon proparaskevi tou, 1923-1940* (The Greek Army and Its War Preparedness, 1923-1940), Athens 1945, pp. 325-6.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 220, 327-8; Athanasios Korozis, *Oi polemoi tou 1940-1941: Epitychiai kai efthinai* (The Wars of 1940-1941: Successes and Responsibilities), Athens 1958, vol. I, pp. 154-5, 613, 638 ff.

30. During the negotiations of August 1939 about buying aircraft from Britain, Metaxas informed Simopoulos thas Greece needed the aircrafs to cover Bulgaria, as well as Italy. But Simopoulos was directed that, in his talks with the British, he «should not mention Bulgaria». Simopoulos Papers, letter from Metaxas to, Simopoulos, 26 August 1939.

phasis and general line of Greek strategy and war preparations: in the first place, the British believed that Bulgaria on her own would not attack Greece in the event of a general war; in the second place, they considered that the major danger to Greece was from Italy, and from Britain's point of view this was most certainly the case[31]. Indeed, to meet this danger, the British Chiefs of Staff recommended that the Greeks concentrate on aircraft, anti - aircraft guns, coastal defence guns and anti - submarine vessels; that is to say, armaments meant to protect Greek harbours and supplement British strategic requirements in the Mediterranean[32].

But the Italian occupation of Albania and the resulting threat to Greece's security from that direction changed the strategic realities in the area at a stroke. As already seen, the British Chiefs of Staff were now faced with a situation for which they had no answer. Strange though it may sound, the Italian military presence in the Balkans shifted the emphasis in such a way as to put Greece outside Britain's main strategic concerns and interests; because the more Italian power in the area increased, to the detriment of British power and Greek security, the more the British considered Greece a vulnerable and unattractive base of operations. Greece's strategic value to Britain depended on Britain's ability to dispatch to Greece forces and keep them with relative safety and control communications in the Aegean.

British strategy in relation to Greece came under consideration in early September, when the Chiefs of Staff concluded that, with the attitude of Italy in the balance, Britain's interests would be best served by maintaining the neutrality of Gteece[33]. The same conclusion was arrived at later in the month, on the occasion of the Italian proposals to the Greek Government regarding the Greco - Italian Pact. With the exception of a situation in which Bulgaria and Turkey were both belligerent and on Britain's side, it would be to Britain's advantage for Greece to remain neutral as long as possible, even if Italy declared war against Britain. As a belligerent, Greece was expected to prove a liability and absorb valuable British resources, which could be better used in more vital theatres of the war. In any event, Britain could not provide any land or air forces to assist Greece unless the neutrality

31. F.O. 371/23760, report by the Military Attaché in Athens, 7 March 1939, and F.O. letter to the War Office, 17 March 1939.

32. F.O. 371/23760, report by the Chiefs of Staff, 31 March 1939.

33. Cab. 79/1, C.O.S. (39)6, 7 Sept. 1939.

of Italy was assured beyond any doubt. All that was expected of Greece, in all circumstances, was to deny the use of her harbours to Britain's enemies, with the least possible support from Britain[34].

The Italian attack on Greece in October 1940 made Greece a belligerent, but only against Italy. To the extent that the Italian attack was considered a pre-emptive strike against a potential British base — which was certainly the case — the Greco-Italian war was part of the European war, but only indirectly so. Greece was not at war with Germany; nor was she officially an ally of Britain. Greece was allied to Britain only as long as she fought against Italy. Indeed, as far as Britain was concerned, the attack on Greece created an inconvenient commitment. Britain had given Greece a solemn assurance that she would come to her assistance if she became the victim of aggression and chose to oppose the aggressor, but was not bound by an alliance. Churchill could promise to Metaxas, in a message on the day of the attack, that Brittain would give Greece all the help in her power, since the two countries fought a «common foe»[35]; but help was more easily promised than given. When pressed by the British Minister in Athens two days later to urgently send assistance to Greece, Chrchill replied that no explicit pledges of support had been made, except that Britain would do her best; and that, in any case, the British Guarantee had been given in conjunction with France[36].

Interestingly enough — but not surprisingly — a similar position with respect to Anglo-Greek relations was also taken by the Greek Government. When invited by the British Government in early November to participate in a meeting of allied governments, which would be held in London as a show of solidarity among the allies fighting the Axis, Metaxas replied that Greece's position differed from that of states like Poland, Tzechoslavakia, Norway and the Netherlands, and therefore Greek participation was not «appropriate». To British pressure to reconsider his position on the meating of allied governments in London, Metaxas felt obliged to draw the attention of the British to the possible consequences of Greece's participation, namely, an attack from Ger-

34. Cab. 80/3, C.O.S. (39)45, 22 Sept. 1939.

35. F.O. 371/24919, F.O. Tel. to Athens, 28 Oct. 1940; Metaxas, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 526; *Ellinika diplomatika engrapha, 1940-1941* (Greek Diplomatic Documents, 1940-1941), Athens 1980, No. 6.

36. F.O. 371/24919, Athens Tel. No. 1019 and 1023, 30 and 31 Oct. 1940, and F.O. reply Tel. No. 806, 31 Oct. 1940.

many. If the British Government considered that the Greeks should not refrain from inviting such attack, Metaxas expected the British to state that «categorically» and be fully aware of the consequences and the responsibillity they were undertaking in common with the Greeks[37]. Metaxas's explanations to the British defined Greece's position *vis-à-vis* the belligerent European powers and the character of the Greco-Italian war in the context of the general war.

The Greek counter-attack, which was launched in mid-November and met with unexpected success, allowed Metaxas to press the British for assistance with more conviction than hitherto. Greek successes in the field presented the British with an opportunity to transfer their main war efford against Italy from North Affrica in the Balkans. For better or worse, explained King George to the King of Britain, the British had a «Balkan front»; and he was at a loss to account for their reluctance to press home the advantage this front gave them, before the Germans had time to retrieve the difficult position in which Italy had placed the Axis[38]. But there is little doubt that what the Greek Government wanted the British military presence in Greece for was to knock Italy out of Albania; and what they essentially meant by a Balkan front was a deterrent to Germany, not so much a theatre of offensive operations — for which the British, anyway, lacked the necessary forces. The invitation to the British to send forces to mainland Greece, it is worth noting, was followed, after one day, by Metaxas's revealing reservations about Greek participation in the proposed meeting of allied governments.

It was Germany then, more than Italy and Britain, that defined Greece's international position and the character of the Greco-Italian war; more presicely, it was Germany's attitude towards Greece, more than Greece's war against Italy and cooperation with Britain, that determined the character of Greek belligerency. It is interesting to note that, just as the British were beginning, towarbs the end of November to consider the Albanian front useful, because it pinned down considerable Italian forces and drained valuable supplies[39], the Germans turned their attention to Greece and the war she waged against Italy.

37. *Greek Dipl. Documents,* Nos. 19, 20, 38.

38. F.O. 371/24921, Athens Tel. No. 1133, 14 Nov. 1940, and letter from King George to the King of Britain, 10 Nov. 1940. See also *Greek Dipl. Documents,* No. 30, and Metaxas, *op. cit.,* vol. IV, p. 534.

39. F.O. 371/24892, F.O. Memo., 28 Nov. 1940.

German policy with respect to Greece is now fairly easy to trace. When plans for the invasion of Britain were finally shelved, Hitler began considering a «peripheral strategy», essentially a series of strikes against Britain in the Mediterranean. In the light of this strategy, Greece became an important objective, or rather a springboard from which attacks could be launched against Britain's position in the Mediterranean. Thus, initial German strategic considerations on Greece had a distinctly offensive character. After the Russo-German talks of November, however, and the realization on the part of the Germans of the differences that separated them from the Russians with respect to the Balkans, besides other parts of the world, Hitler set his mind on a war against the Soviet Union. In the light of the new priorities, therefore, the «peripheral strategy» against Britain was dropped as hurriedly as it was devised, and Greece was to be considered from now on mainly in relation to German plans and preparations for an invasion of Russia. Of course, Hitler would have been happy to deal with Russia and Britain at the same time, but this was not feasible for lack of the necessary forces and resources. The German General Staff and Hitler, therefore, had to settle for a limited undertaking in order to secure the right flank of German forces directed against Russia, that is a pre-emptive strike against Greece as a potential British base[40].

In the light of these German plans, the Italian action against Greece, which from the start had been unwelcome to the German General Staff[41], now became an extremely annoying and inconvenient factor, in the shape of serious Italian revenses, which offered Britain the opportunity to establish herself in Greece and threaten the planned invasion of Russia. A British foothold in the Balkans could have endangered Germany's venture in the East in more than one ways. Besides the real and immediate danger to the Romanian oilfields, to which the Germans had always been alive, Britain's military presence on mainland Greece was a potertial threat to the right flank of the German forces, if this presence was to develop into something similar to the Allied Salonika front of Worlf War I[42]. Therefore, it can now be reasonably maintained that Germany's planned action against Greece was not so much in support of Italy's deteriorating position in Albania

40. Creveld, *op. cit.*, pp. 55 ff., 81 ff.

41. Halder, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 4; *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, 1940-1941*, London 1947, pp. 112 ff.

42. Creveld, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

as a pre-emptive move against Britain's position in Greece; in other words, Operation «Marita», the German code word for military action against Greece[43], had very little to do with Italy and very much to do with Britain.

In the meantime, the Germans made an effort to mediate in the potentially dangerous Greco-Italian conflict. If the war between Greece and Italy could be brought to an end, the British would probably be compelled to withdraw from Greek territory, since the presence of their forces in Greece could be associated solely with the Italian threat to that country. There is no question that Germany would have been delighted to see an end to this rather irrelevant war in the Balkans[44]; and it is logical to argue that the reason for the rejection by Metaxas of the German offer for mediation must be sought in Britain's obvious interest in preventing such a development[45]. The British Government, despite Metaxas's assurances that he would never agree to «any attempt to drive a wedge between Britain and Greece» and that, after knocking out Italy, the two allies must turn their attention to Germany[46], considered that the position of Greece, in the event of Italy's defeat and elimination from the war, would be «anomalous». The same would also be true if Greece concluded a separate peace with Italy. Greece had not declared war on Germany and, once the Greco-Italian war was over, she was likely to revent once more to neutrality. In that case, Britain would have to evacuate Crete and abandom the naval and air bases on the southern Greek mainland This would be both a short-term loss for the navy and the air force and a long-term loss in case Britain were to embark on a Balkan campaign in the spring[47]. To ensure that Greece would not conclude a separate peace with Italy the British were even considering the possibility of making the Germans commit an act of aggression against Greece; or persuading the Greek

43. *Hitler's War Directives, 1939-1945,* ed. H. R. Trevol-Roper, London 1965, pp. 46 ff.

44. Ehrengard Schramm von Thadden, *Griechenland und die Grossmächte im Zweiten Weltkrieg,* Wiesbaden 1955, pp. 150, 217-8; M. L. van Creveld, «Prelude to Disaster: The British Decision to Aid Greece, 1940-1941», *Journal of Contemporary History,* vol. IX (1974), for the most recent and complete account of the affair.

45. Creveld, «British Decision», pp. 71 ff.

46. F.O. 371/24920, Athens Tel. No. 1289, 7 Dec. 1940.

47. F.O. 371/24921, F.O. Memo., «Possibility of Greece making a separate peace», 14 Dec. 1940.

Government to delcare war on Germany, if Italy was knocked out of the war[48].

Metaxas proved more accommodating than the British expected, without even demanding — as they feared he would —, in return for not concluding a separate peace with Italy, specific undertakings on assistance to Greece, or territorial acquisitions the British Government might find impposible to agree to[49]. All the same, Metaxas was very reluctant to provoke Germany, before the war against Italy was brought to a successful end; an attitude that reflected the ambiguous position of Greece *vis-à-vis* the belligerent powers and the self-defeating effort of the Greek Government to preserve that position, in the vain hope that the war against Italy in Albania could be brought to a successful conclusion. In rejecting, in late December 1940, a British proposal for the establishment of air forces at Salonika, Metaxas assured the British Government that, after defeating the Italians, the Greeks would help the British against the Germans as well[50].

Greek preoccupation with the prosecution of the war against Italy was more than understandable: Greece was fighting for her very existence as an independent state, and that only with little British support. But refusal to consider masures for meeting what appeared, by the end of 1940 and the beginnig of 1941, to be a certain German invasion of the Balkans in the spring, before successfully terminating the war against Italy, amounted to a pretext for doing nothing at all. This refusal reflected the progressive disintegration of Greek policy under pressure form the Commander-in-Chief and the commanders on the Albanian front, which had acquired by now its own momentum and requirements. The attempt, at this crucial juncture, to set apart the Greek war effort against Italy in Albania from the general war and its requirements contributed on the one hand to the serious divergence of pursuits and aims between Greece and Britain and on the other to the equally serious and more dangerous divergence of views between the government and the military leadership of Greece a few monts later.

The Albanian front and its needs were set apart from the fortunes of the general war by Metaxas in early January, when he asked the

48. F.O. 371/24922, F.O. minutes, Dec. 1940.

49. *Greek Dipl. Documents,* No. 61, and Metaxas, *op. cit.,* vol. IV, pp. 545-546.

50. F.O. 371/29818, Athens Tel. No. 1456, 31 Dec. 1940, and F.O. 371/29825, Athens, Tel. No. 1457, 31 Dec. 1940. See also Metaxas, *op. cit.,* vol. IV, p. 550.

British to supply Greece with aircraft and transport vehicles for exclusive use on the Albanian front, after a meeting with Papagos and in view of the expected German advance in the Balkans[51]. Even more explicit and determined was Metaxas's effort to safeguard the autonomy of the Greek war in his meeting with the British Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, in mid-January, when the British proposed again to anticipate the German advance by sending forces to Salonica, reversing thus all previous strategical considerations and plans[52], and Metaxas tried to secure a British commitment to support Greece solely on the Albanian front[53]. Once the Albanian situation was cleared up, he stated to the British, large Greek forces would be available for the Salonika front and Greece would then welcome British forces for a front against Germany[54]; anyway, the British offer of forces fell short of Greek General Staff estimates and plans concerning the German threat and ways to meet it[55].

The Greek General Staff put before the government two important conditions concerning Anglo - Greek coopetarion against Germany: a) that the Albanian front should not be stripped of any forces, and b) that the line of defence against the Germans should be along the Eastern Macedonian fortifications[56]. These conditions of the Greek military essentially meant that the bulk of the Greek army would remain in Albania facing the Italians, irrespective of developments to the east of the Albanian front, and that the fortified line would be manned and defended against the expected German advance mainly by the British. For the British Metaxas reserved the following position: Greece, although determined to resist a German attack, would in no case provoke this attack, unless Britain was in a position to make the necessary forces available in Macedonia[57].

Greece, in other words, was determined not to submit to Germany without a fight. But the battle had to be fought on the fortified line and with nominal Greek forces, because the bulk of the army (some

51. Papadakis, *op. cit.,* pp. 132-3; Metaxas, *op. cit.,* vol. IV, pp. 555-6; F.O. 371/29818, Athens Tel. No. 26, 5 Jan. 1941.

52. W. S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance,* Boston 1950, p. 16.

53. Koliopoulos, *op. cit.,* pp. 207 ff.

54. F.O. 371/29813, Tel. from Wavell to the Chief of Imperial General Staff, No. P. 26 cipher 15/1, 15 Jan. 1941.

55. Papagos, *Battle of Greece,* pp. 257-9.

56. *Ibid.,* pp. 327-9.

57. Metaxas, *op. cit.,* vol. IV, pp. 560-1; *Greek Dipl. Documents,* No. 82.

14 divisions) was held down on the Albanian frond. The forces required to check the German advance had to be put forward mainly by the British. All these, in view of the limited forces the British were in a position to send to mainland Greece and Greek refusal to accept these forces and organize a line of defence before the Germans could move south in the spring, essentially meant that the Greek Government and General Staff were looking forward to a quick and honourable fall under the expected German onslaught. It was the position one could expect from a small country faced with the might of a great power. But in the case of Greece that position was subject to a number of factors, such as the country's special relationship with Britain, the form and structure of the ruling regime, the state of the army, the organization of the defences and, above all, the war effort against Italy, which favoured unrealistic and illusory demands and expectations, and undermined the pursuit of a coherent and sound policy.

The negative effect of all these factors became apparent under Metaxas's successors, who wavered dangerously under pressure from various quarters and conflicting interests and in the face of the imminent danger emanating from Germany. The occasion for the appearance of these features was the Anglo-Greek talks of February - March 1941, which marked the beginning of the last and most crucial phase of the Greek war. The talks of February, held to decide in common on how to face the expected German advance in the Balkans, revealed a serious divergence of views and interests, which everyone concerned tried to minimize for the sake of uninterrupted Anglo-Greek cooperation. The British decision to send troops to Greece, at the earliest possible moment, satisfied the need to make a brave gesture of support to a country publicly guaranteed by Britain, a country moreover resolved to resist the Germans even alone if necessary, and at the same time made it more likely that Yugoslavia and Turkey would finally decide to join in a common effort against Germany. In other words, the dispatch of Britich forces to Greece satisfied both political and military considerations[58].

Greece, on the other hand, was willing to accept British troops for the organization of a common line of defence against a German advance, but wished to avoid provoking a German attack and was re-

58. F.O. 371/29813, F.O. minutes, 10 Feb. 1941; Cab. 65/17, W. M. (41)15, 10 Feb. 1941; Premier 3/209, Chiefs of Staff Tel. of 11 Feb. 1941 to the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East.

solved a) to prosecute the war in Albania unhindered by other campaigns, and b) not to abandon the fortified line in Eastern Macedonia without a fight[59]. In view of the inadequate forces the British were prepared to make available and the extremely cautious and unresponsive attitude of Yugoslavia and Turkey, to reach agreement for military cooperation required a great capacity for self-deception. The Anglo-Greek agreement of 22nd February, which glossed over the diverging views and aims of the two countries and rested on such variables as the attitude of Yugoslavia, the availability of British shipping, the pace of work for the improvement of roads in Greece and the fortunes of the war in Albania, was bound to run into serious trouble. The agreement, however, represented the form and extent of military cooperation the special Anglo-Greek relationship allowed under the circumstances; and the disagreement over the timing of withdrawal of the Greek forces from Eastern Macedonia on the common line of defence in Central Macedonia was, essentially, no more than a permissible difference of interpretation of the agreement, although the British side could present their case more convincingly than the Greek[60].

A second agreement, negotiated on 4th March, following the entry of German military units in Bulgaria and after considerable pressure was applied on Papagos through King George, made it almost certain that the Greeks and the British would be soundly and quickly beaten by the invading Germans. Greek priorities and British expediences were satisfied, but not sound strategy. The Greek Government and General Staff invited disaster, particularly on the Albanian front, where the German danger had a nefative effect on morale. What officers and soldiers feared most and were eager to avoid at all costs was humiliating surrender to the Italians, whom they had defeated and held in contempt. By the time of the German attack, it was commonly felt that to continue the war against the new and more formidable aggressor was futile. Battle - weary and demoralized, but determined all the same to avoid surrender to a defeated enemy, the Greek army in Albania saw capitulation to the Germans as the only honourable solution[61]. Strong

59. Koliopoulos, *op. cit.*, pp. 231 ff.

60. *Ibid.*, Ch. VIII, for a detailed account and analysis of the Anglo-Greek talks and the consequent agreement and disagreement, based on the unpublished British record of the meetings.

61. Greek General Staff Archives, F623/A/407, F627, F628, F634. See also Greek General Staff, *To telos mias epopoitas, Aprilios 1941* (The End of an Epic,

pressure from the field commanders to permit capitulation and equally strong pressure from the British to continue fighting led to the disintegration of the army and the capitulation of its leadership to the Germans and the Italians. The Greek Government, headed by the King, abandoned the country amidst chaos and defeat to continue the struggle against the Axis from abroad on the side of Britain, at last, unqualified ally of fully belligerent but enemy occupied Greece.

April 1941), Athens 1959, pp. 98-9, 122-3, 138-9, 289; Georgios Tsolakoglou, *Apomnimonevmata* (Memoirs), Athens 1959, pp. 70-2; Papagos, *Battle of Greece,* pp. 301-2.