

RELECTIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OCTOBER 28, 1940  
S. Victor Papacosma  
Kent State University

I shall begin by reciting a short marching song of the Italian army that was popular in the early autumn of 1940:

*Andremo nell'Egeo  
Prenderemo pure il Pireo  
E-se tutto va bene—  
Prenderemo anche Atene!*

We'll go to the Aegean  
And then we'll take Piraeus  
And if all goes as it should  
We'll take Athens too!

This script and the projections of the Italians did not, however, unfold in the expected manner. The haughty, cocksure attitude of the Italians soon fell victim to the bravery of the Greek nation which heroically responded to the invasion by Italy on October 28, 1940. We are gathered here to commemorate this historic moment, one whose importance is not restricted just to the Greek world.

First, some quick historical background comments are in order. Greece had experienced difficult years following World War I and its defeat in Asia Minor. And as was the case throughout Eastern Europe, Greece too saw the crumbling of liberal parliamentary institutions by August 1936 and the establishment of a rightist dictatorship led by General Ioannis Metaxas, a figure characterized by seemingly incongruous qualities. Thus, shortly before the outbreak of war in September 1939, Sir Charles Michael Palairet, Britain's minister in Athens, described him in generally unflattering terms: "General Metaxas is far from being endowed with the physical qualities necessary for success as a dictator. His short, corpulent, ill-dressed figure could never evoke popular enthusiasm, and I can see no sign of any of the magnetic and dynamic qualities which secure for Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini the

passionate devotion of so many of their compatriots.” Even Metaxas wrote of himself in self-deprecating terms when he noted in his personal diary after attending a tea with Greek and British officials: “They don’t pay much attention to me. I don’t know English. And I’m short.” He did, however, rule over a stern police state that sent many Greeks to prison or into exile. His Fourth of August regime, as it was called, justified its harsh methods as necessary in the campaign to improve the Greek economy, create a disciplined Greek society, and strengthen Greece’s national security forces. Indeed, had not other events intervened, Metaxas’s place in history would not have been a gloried one. But unlike other East European dictators of the period, Metaxas did acquire lasting fame and widespread respect because he effectively oversaw preparations for a war that Greece sought to avoid and then fought with great glory.

Within existing capabilities, Metaxas initiated effective training and rearmament programs for the Greek armed forces in preparation for a future war. Defense outlays increased considerably to the extent that they comprised nearly one-third of total state expenditures in the 1936-1939 period. He oversaw the construction of an extensive line of fortifications designed to resist an attack from Bulgaria. As much as possible, Metaxas bolstered programs for increasing Greece’s self-sufficiency in vital areas of arms production. While advances were made in a number of areas, Greece still depended, as in the past, on purchases of British and French equipment (e.g., bombers, destroyers), but now Germany, with its increased presence in Greek economic affairs, became a main supplier. Related improvement in the training, efficiency, and morale of Greece’s armed forces also occurred during the dictatorship.

Before and during World War I Metaxas, for reasons not to be explored here, was identified with pro-German positions. Consequently, one would presume that, in conjunction with Greece’s economic dependency, his government’s foreign policy would have inclined toward Berlin. Such would not be the case for some quite pragmatic reasons. King George II had established rather solid pro-British credentials. Metaxas, on his part, was sensitive to the

reality that Britain and, to a lesser degree, France prevailed in the Mediterranean. It was this regional superiority that had led to the Entente's success in pressuring Greece to join the war against the Central Powers in 1917.

The most immediate threat to Greece from a great power came from Mussolini's Italy. Rome had been cultivating its relations with revisionist Bulgaria, Greece's longstanding nemesis, and Hungary and with extremist parties seeking the breakup of Yugoslavia, while simultaneously increasing its influence in Albania. Left on its own, Greece, sharing the insecurity of its Balkan Entente allies—Romania, Turkey, Yugoslavia—sought to avert conflict not through multilateral solidarity but with cautious diplomacy. Greece pursued a policy not to provoke Italy, a position that became more difficult after Italy's armed takeover of Albania in April 1939.

That Metaxas gave priority to Greece's links with Britain became evident early. The British minister told the Foreign Office in December 1936 that the Greek dictator "went out of his way" to assure him that Greece was "irrevocably and unreservedly devoted to the British connection." Subsequently, at various junctures (e.g., after the Munich crisis) both King George and Metaxas separately expressed the wish to formalize ties more precisely, but London chose not to commit itself. Historian John Koliopoulos contends that "the British underestimated the real as well as the potential value of Greece, while the Greeks overestimated Britain's ability and willingness to come to their assistance . . ." The Anglo-French unilateral guarantee of 13 April 1939 to Greece and to Romania in the aftermath of Mussolini's absorption of Albania offered a vague promise of support should the two states fall victim to aggression and resist. Britain was still not ready to take a firmer stand that would offend Italy during a period of mounting tension with Germany.

When Germany launched World War II with its attack on Poland in September 1939, Greece assumed a neutral policy. The main theater of military action was still quite distant. It

was Mussolini's Italy, which had invaded and annexed neighboring Albania in April 1939 and loomed as the major threat for Greece, which tried not to respond to Italian provocations. Conditions in southeastern Europe shifted markedly after Germany's 1940 springtime offensive and conquests in Western Europe that left Britain alone to confront Germany and its allies. Italy exploited the situation to enter the war formally and ignominiously by moving into southern France on June 10. On that occasion, Mussolini announced: "I declare categorically that Italy has not the slightest desire to draw into the conflict any other nation . . . .Let Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey and Egypt mark my words."

Such, as we well know, would not be the case. Italy systematically increased its provocative actions against Greek interests, to include the torpedoing on August 15 of the Greek cruiser, *Helle*, deployed for the religious ceremonies of the Panaghia on the island of Tinos. Despite the relative certainty that an Italian submarine committed this deed, Metaxas refused to respond to this and other provocations. Mussolini, attempting to build up a case to justify an attack on the Greeks, mistakenly believed that Greece would quickly fall to Italy's superior forces, thereby bolstering the stature of Fascist Italy, which had been overshadowed by the conquests of his stronger ally, Hitler's Germany. Count Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, later quoted Mussolini as saying: "Hitler always faces me with a *fait accompli*. This time I am going to pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the papers that I have occupied Greece. In this way the equilibrium will be re-established."

On the evening of October 27, 1940, Metaxas attended a reception at the Italian Legation in Athens. A few hours later, at 3:00 a.m., the Italian minister and host of that reception, Emanuele Grazzi, arrived at Metaxas's home in suburban Kifissia. Greeting his unexpected early morning visitor in his nightshirt and robe, Metaxas quickly fell into a serious discussion. Grazzi was delivering an ultimatum, expiring at 6:00 a.m., demanding the right of Italy to occupy strategic points in northwestern Greece because of Greece's alleged unneutral

attitude in favoring Great Britain and fomenting troubles in Albania. Unless Greece yielded, the Italian troops were under orders to advance at 6:00 a.m. According to an accounting of the meeting by Metaxas's wife, Lela: "Their conversation began calmly but soon I heard an animated exchange, and an angry tone in my husband's voice followed by a loud bang of the palm of his hand on top of the desk. This was the exact moment of the *ochi* which was followed by Grazzi's departure." It is this *ochi/no* that captured the fiery spirit of the Greek nation at this critical moment in its and the world's history and inspired resistance to the Italian invasion that began at 5:30 a.m.

Basic to Mussolini's decision to attack was his false assumption that the Greeks were ill-prepared. But a secretive and partial mobilization had been taking place for several months in anticipation of such a challenge to Greece's national sovereignty, and on October 28 the Greek people unified and embarked enthusiastically on general mobilization, putting aside their political divisions and opposition to dictatorship. As the three-pronged Italian attack advanced into Greek territory, the Greek forces avoided frontal assaults and used the narrow mountain passes and jagged uplands to their advantage. The Italian advance bogged down. Greek units, supplied by local peasants and equipped with light guns, would descend on the Italian forces in coordinated assaults, taking detachments by surprise and forcing them to surrender. By November 13, 1940 the Greek forces had regained all the territory they had initially yielded to the Italians and on the 14<sup>th</sup> the Greek army went on the offensive and invaded Albania all along the northwestern front. The Italians fell back and within a short time they were retreating so rapidly that cargo planes, sent in to supply them, fell into Greek hands. On November 22 the Greek army captured Korytsa, an Italian base 20 miles inside Albania, and by the end of the year Greek forces had occupied more than one-quarter of Albania.

For several months in the face of overwhelming odds sixteen Greek divisions cornered twenty-seven Italian divisions in Albania. The Greeks were experiencing, to borrow on Winston

Churchill's phrase, their "finest hour." Lincoln MacVeigh, America's minister to Greece, eloquently and insightfully summed up the situation in a Christmas day letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and I believe it appropriate to quote him at length. He wrote:

Of course I have been as much surprised as anyone by the Greek successes.

Explaining miracles is perhaps a thankless business, but it is human to try one's hand at it. . . .Something has released an energy in these people of which none of us had any suspicion. Patriotism may be part of this something, as well as hatred of the Italians, and resentment over their insults and threats. But more important than these, I believe, has been the consciousness of unity which the nation suddenly achieved in the dark dawn of October 28<sup>th</sup>. The history of ancient Greece is at least 50 percent discord, and there was plenty of it in the Greek Revolution, while the whole life of the Modern Greek State has been factious almost beyond belief. But from the moment Mr. Metaxas rejected the Italian ultimatum, there has been only one party, one class, one purpose in the whole of the small land. Such unity is in itself a force, but the realization of it by a people which had never known anything like it has created a kind of national intoxication to which the traversing if not the removal of mountains is a thing to be taken in one's stride.

It is also worth noting here a little known fact to which the Greek government was long overdue in bringing attention. In October 2003 Kostas Stephanopoulos, president of the Hellenic Republic, unveiled a new memorial at the Jewish cemetery of Thessaloniki honoring the many Greek Jews that fell during the World War II battles of 1940-41. According to Defense Ministry records, 12,898 Greek Jews—of which 343 served in the officer corps—were called for active duty and fought during the war. 513 died on the battlefields of northern Greece and 5,743 were wounded. In fact, Mordechai Frezis, a Jew from Chalkis, was one of the first Greek officers to die in battle.

These Greek victories registered some hope and provided one of the rare bright moments during this otherwise bleak period for the forces then fighting the German-dominated Axis powers. The euphoric conditions could not last, however. Metaxas died on January 29, 1941. And Hitler, seeking to consolidate his southern flank prior to his planned invasion of the Soviet Union, invaded Greece on April 6. Greece would succumb to overwhelming force, but in the process, especially with the Battle for Crete, delayed the scheduled attack on the Soviet Union, which, it has been argued, stalled the advances of the Axis invaders when the Soviet winter struck them---a fateful development for the course of the war.

The remarkable story of Greece at the time of the Italian invasion is that, despite the crushing victories of the Axis juggernaut in Western Europe, it stood its ground with no prospect of victory in the longer run. The Greeks reacted thus because they believed, unlike the response of many other Europeans during the spring of 1940, that a short-run success had much to offer them and those fighting the sinister forces of Axis aggression. Metaxas summed up beautifully such sentiments when he stated:

Greece is not fighting for victory. She is fighting for glory, and for honor. She has a debt for herself to remain worthy of her history . . . There are times in which a nation, if it wishes to remain great, gains by being able to fight, even if it has no hopes of victory. It is out of respect and admiration for Greece's glory and honor that we are here today.