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DOOMED NEUTRALITY:
GREEK FOREIGN POLICY, 1936-1940

The Origins of Greek Neutrality, 1922 – 1936

After the *rapprochement* with Turkey in the wake of the Asia Minor Disaster, the two sources of anxiety in Greek foreign affairs during the interwar years were the revisionism of Bulgaria and the Italian design for a new Roman Empire in the Mediterranean. With the former raising territorial demands against Greece in her attempt to secure a warm-water port in the Aegean Sea, Greek-Bulgarian relations were plagued by what in 1936 Sydney Waterlow, the British ambassador in Athens, called ‘that Greek mistrust of Bulgaria which is a national obsession’.¹ To counter the threat, in February 1934 Greece joined Yugoslavia, Romania and Turkey in signing the Balkan *Entente* Pact, while after August 1936 the dictatorial regime of general Ioannis Metaxas heeded the urgent calls of the Greek Army General Staff for the modernisation of the Greek army’s equipment and the fortification of Eastern Macedonia to repel an anticipated Bulgarian invasion.²

The relationship between Greece and Italy, on the other hand, was complicated not only by the objectives of Italian foreign policy and the manner they were pursued, but also by the organic relationship between Fascism, Nazism and foreign affairs; a relationship in which

foreign policy was internal policy and *vice versa*; internal consolidation was a precondition of foreign conquest, and foreign conquest was the

1. Public Record Office (PRO, London, Kew Gardens), Foreign Office Files, FO 371, General Political Correspondence, FO 371/21147 R347: Waterlow to Eden, Annual Report for 1936, 1 January 1937.

2. General Archives of the State (hereafter GAK), Athens: Metaxas Papers. File 79: Observations and Proposals of the Inspector General of the Army Lt.-Gen. D. Katheriotis, 10 and 16 July 1935.



decisive prerequisite for a revolution at home that would sweep away inherited institutions and values [...] Only Mussolini and Hitler simultaneously sought to overthrow their societies and their neighbours.³

Although Benito Mussolini, who alone controlled the making of foreign policy in Fascist Italy, changed his mood frequently, he had a genuine foreign policy programme designed for Italy's expansion. The essence of that programme was the creation of vital space for Italy in the Balkans, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Externally that would confer upon Italy the status of a great power, while internally it would confer upon Mussolini the power and the prestige necessary to consolidate the Fascist regime and remake Italian society.⁴ In his relations with Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean countries, Mussolini's explicitly expansionist intent and bellicose rhetoric did little to remove tensions throughout the interwar period. It was hoped that such ambitions would be facilitated by the existence in the Balkans of Italy's weaker neighbours, whose internecine rivalries could be exploited by Rome to further the long-term goal. Accordingly, one of Mussolini's tactics was to encourage existing irredentist movements as yet another means of fostering tension in the region.⁵

The Greeks were the first to find themselves at the receiving end of Mussolini's earliest attempt to assert Italian rights in the Mediterranean. In August 1923 the Italian armed forces bombarded and then landed on the Greek island of Corfu in a bid to control the entrance to the Adriatic through the annexation of the island. In the following month, world pressure and the danger of British naval action forced the Italians to withdraw, as Mussolini realised that he could not defy states more powerful than Italy. This dictated a more cautious foreign policy for the following decade, but even so, it was indicative of the Fascist mood that its press hailed the attack on Corfu as the first step towards securing a place in the sun for Italy. More ominously, when

3. MacGregor Knox, 'Conquest. Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany'. *Journal of Modern History*, no. 56 (March 1984), p. 57.

4. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 286, 289-290.

5. D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 3-5, 19, 22; *idem*, *Mussolini* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), pp. 95, 154; A. De Grand, *Italian Fascism: Its Origins and Development*, 2nd edn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 94-96; MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 33-34.



the League of Nations expressed its outrage, Mussolini retorted that there far too many “semi-barbarian nations” in the League, claiming to have an equal voice in the international forum, and that they should be taught to keep their place and not meddle with their more civilised neighbours.⁶

Greek-Italian relations improved thereafter, especially when on 23 September 1928 the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos and Mussolini signed in Rome a bilateral treaty of friendship.⁷ Yet for Mussolini treaties were mere pieces of paper, occasionally useful as temporary expedients, but with no binding value if he felt that the circumstances had changed. In the same year the *Duce* signed a treaty of friendship with Ethiopia, whereas plans to impose an Italian protectorate on the country existed from as early as 1922-1923, and plans for a military invasion from 1925.⁸ Both treaties of 1928 with Ethiopia and Greece must be seen in the context of Mussolini’s foreign policy in the late 1920s and the limits imposed by Italy’s domestic conditions. The economy of the country was mainly agrarian and lacked raw materials and foreign exchange, while the Italian armed forces were considerably weaker than those of Britain and France.⁹ Whilst the Corfu incident of 1923 had demonstrated that he was not as yet ready to defy the world in any more than aggressive rhetoric, the onset of the economic crisis of 1929 necessitated substantial cuts in the military budget, which, in turn, necessitated a few more years of cautious international demeanour. Moreover, throughout the 1920s the international balance of power on the continent did not permit Italy either to act as the makeweight or to embark on forceful initiatives to upset the system. This was to change in 1932-1933, when the western European powers had been weakened by the Great Depression and Germany’s resurgence under Hitler enabled Mussolini to pursue expansionism actively.¹⁰

In the run-up to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, relations between

6. D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, 95; *idem*, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, pp. 5-6; E. Robertson, *Mussolini as Empire-BUILDER: Europe and Africa, 1932-36* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 17-18.

7. Text of the ‘Treaty of Friendship, Conciliation and Judicial Settlement between Greece and Italy’ in *The Greek White Book: Diplomatic Documents Relating to Italy’s Aggression Against Greece* (Athens: Greek Foreign Ministry, 1940), no. 1, pp. 21-22.

8. D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, pp. 97, 98, 154, 174.

9. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 8-15, 30-33.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 34; A. De Grand, *Italian Fascism*, pp. 78-91, 93-99.



Athens and Rome had suffered a setback which both sides were slow to forget. In August 1935 the League of Nations appointed a commission to investigate the Wal Wal incident of December 1934 on the border between Italian Somaliland and Ethiopia. Instead of the Romanian Foreign Minister Nicolas Titulescu, who was favoured by the Italians, the Greek liberal Foreign Minister Nikolaos Politis was appointed as the neutral head of the commission of investigation. The Politis Commission issued its verdict on 3 September 1935 in remarkably objective terms; Italy was not responsible for the Wal Wal incident, but, equally, no case of Ethiopian aggression could be proven. The Italians were not satisfied. Pompeo Aloisi, their representative in Geneva, interpreted the verdict as placing the blame squarely on Italy and complained that Politis “has betrayed us”.¹¹ The incident turned Politis into a marked man for the Italians, and their antipathy towards him was to resurface in the summer of 1936.

After October 1935 the Ethiopian crisis raised the prospect of closer Anglo-Greek co-operation. From the end of the First World War until the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947, Britain’s overall conception of her strategic relationship with Greece derived from the requirements of the ‘historic policy’ of protecting India and the Suez Canal. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Foreign Office maintained that ‘geographically the position of Greece was unique for our purpose: politically she was strong enough to save us expense in peace, and weak enough to be completely subservient in war’.¹² As if to confirm the British view, on 8 October 1935 the Greek Service Chiefs produced an alarming report on Greece’s strategic position in the Mediterranean in the event of an Anglo-Italian war. In such an eventuality, the first cause for alarm was what or who could prevent Bulgaria from realising her expansionist designs against Greece. The pessimistic conclusion of the Greek Service Chiefs was that

11. E. Robertson, *Mussolini as Empire-Builder*, pp. 107-109, 161-162, 171; S. Morewood, ‘Anglo-Italian Rivalry in the Mediterranean and Middle East, 1935-1940’, in R. Boyce and E. Robertson (eds.), *Paths to War: New Essays on the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 172.

12. *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939* (hereafter *DBFP*), (Series) I: (vol.) XII (London: HMSO, 1947), no. 488: Memorandum by Mr. Nicolson on Future Policy towards King Constantine, 20 December 1920.



the [Bulgarian] danger from the north is so serious, [and] the military weakness of Greece [is] so extensive, that it precludes any thought of Greece participating in the Anglo-Italian war if her north-eastern borders are not fully guaranteed. [...] Intervention in the Anglo-Italian clash is pregnant with serious dangers and catastrophic consequences [...].¹³

For the British, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia signalled the beginning of an effort to make arrangements with Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia for joint resistance to a would-be Italian attack - albeit without any substantial commitments or guarantees on Britain's part. On 23 December 1935 the British Foreign Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare instructed the ambassadors in Athens, Ankara and Belgrade to ask the governments of the three Balkan states whether Britain could count on the use of Greek, Turkish and Yugoslav harbours, docks and repair facilities, and on the co-operation of their armed forces in resisting an Italian attack. The three governments promptly assured Britain that they would fully co-operate.¹⁴ The British government was content with such general assurances and did not seek any special inter-service staff conversations or detailed arrangements with the defence services of those three countries.¹⁵

The British offer was not deemed sufficient. In a supplementary report on 20 January 1936, the Greek Service Chiefs reiterated that 'the capability of Greece is so limited that [...] she cannot face even Bulgaria alone'. Thus, before any decision for participation in an Anglo-Italian clash in the Mediterranean, Greece had to be supplied with war *materiel* and obtain full guarantees against the threat from Bulgaria as well as guarantees of her coastal defence by the British Fleet. In the longer-term, the Greek economy,

13. GAK: Metaxas Papers, File 81: Army, Navy and Airforce General Staffs, no. 3620, 8 October 1935: General Summary Review of the Strategic Situation of Greece in case of an Anglo-Italian War.

14. *DBFP*, II: XV (London: HMSO, 1952), no. 287: Sir S. Hoare to Sir S. Waterlow (Athens), 2 December 1935; *ibid.*, no. 298: Sir S. Hoare to R.H. Campbell (Belgrade) and Sir P. Loraine (Ankara), 3 December 1935; *ibid.*, nos. 309: Campbell (Belgrade) to Hoare, 5 December 1935; 319: Waterlow (Athens) to Hoare, 6 December 1935; *ibid.*, nos. 339, 340: Loraine (Ankara) to Eden, 9 December 1935, and no. 342: Waterlow (Athens) to Eden, 9 December 1935.

15. *DBFP*, II: XV, no. 422: Campbell (Belgrade) to Eden, 3 January 1936; *ibid.*, no. 441: Eden to Campbell, 9 January 1936; *ibid.*, no. 438: Eden to Loraine (Ankara), 8 January 1936; *ibid.*, nos. 444, 487: Eden to Waterlow (Athens), 10 and 29 January 1936.



and especially its industrial sector, would have to be strengthened in order to improve the country's military preparedness.¹⁶

This required a rapid change of thinking which the British were not ready to embark on as yet. The scars of the First World War and the disillusionment with the subsequent peace treaties turned most British people away from militarism, continental involvements and concerns for the balance of power system. In terms of actual strategic challenges to the British position around the world, the British government heeded the Chiefs of Staff who urged that since the British Fleet could not simultaneously fight against Italy in the Mediterranean and against Japan in the Far East, and since the latter was deemed the bigger of the two threats, the former had to be appeased. A more conciliatory British policy towards Italy meant that any British support to the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean would have to be minimal and couched in inoffensive terms.¹⁷

In the case of the Italian challenge after 1935, this explains why Britain followed a contradictory policy: it tried to neutralise the threat against the *status quo* in the Mediterranean whilst simultaneously trying not to provoke Mussolini and render him permanently hostile or force him into an alliance with Berlin. The difficulty of Greek foreign policy, on the other hand, lay in a different dilemma. If the fortification of Eastern Macedonia addressed the danger from Bulgaria, to counter the Italian threat Greece needed to modernise her armed forces. Yet in early 1935 her attempts to buy modern vessels and aircraft from Britain had been thwarted by her low creditworthiness, as well as by the prevailing belief in London that Greek rearmament would offend Mussolini and that the Greeks were exaggerating their fears of Italy.¹⁸

Assessments of the Italian threat against Greece came from several quarters and pointed otherwise. On 25 February 1936 the German press

16. GAK: Metaxas Papers, File 84: Army, Navy and Airforce General Staffs, no. 29231, 20 January 1936: Supplementary Report on the Strategic Situation of Greece in case of an Anglo-Italian War.

17. British Cabinet Papers, PRO. London: CAB 24/159: CP 26 (36), Memorandum by the Defence Committee, 21 November 1935; P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Fontana Press, 1989), pp. 385-392, 408-411.

18. FO 371/19513 contains documents from the Anglo-Greek negotiations of January 1935 for the ordering of warships and aircraft from Britain.



thing possible to rekindle them. On 4 April 1936 Nikolaos Politis, now the Greek ambassador in Paris, cabled Athens that the staff of the Italian Embassy in the German capital were openly boasting that

fascist Italy has not only won Ethiopia. With her perseverance and her power she has also prevailed over England and from now on the commencing battle with her will continue with a major hope of success, until Italy's final domination in the Mediterranean.²³

Yet this did not appear to worry the Greeks too much, though it ran counter to official Italian pronouncements. Nor did there seem to be any signs of Greek anxiety when in April 1936 the Greek Embassy in Rome transmitted to Athens a recent article by Virginio Gayda, editor of *Il Giornale d' Italia*, which aired more subtle threats. Italy, Gayda claimed, was

victorious in Africa despite the British prognostications and machinations. Unshakeable in Europe despite the threats and pressures from the greatest empire of the world. Determined on the one hand not to provoke any civilised country or to harm anybody's interests, but also to counter with arms the provocations and threats no matter where they come from[,] even from Great Britain. These are in the main the premises upon which the prestige of the State is founded.²⁴

Whereas the Greek Foreign Ministry remained unperturbed by the bellicosity of the Italian rhetoric, elsewhere in the Balkans perception were different. In Yugoslavia, also the target of Mussolini's designs and Greece's partner in the Balkan *Entente* Pact, the press voiced grave concerns over the implications of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia. This was

the first step towards the re-establishment of Rome's domination in the Mediterranean, Northern Africa and the Near East, as envisaged in the blueprint of fascist expansion. The annexation of Abyssinia is not enough for the ideal of the Roman Empire [...] The expansionist tendency of Italy will of necessity manifest itself in other directions, and will inevitably come to clash with Great Britain. For it is obvious that in the Mediterranean there is not enough room for the British lion and the she-wolf of Rome.

23. AGFM 1936: A/i (33): N. Politis (Paris) to K. Demertzis, 4 April 1936, no. 1211.

24. AGFM 1936: A/10/3 (30): Greek Embassy (Rome), Press Bulletins nos. 17 and 19, 21 and 28 April 1936.



Therefore the more perceptive Yugoslavs felt compelled to issue grave warnings about 'the danger of war, which would be the entirely natural consequence of the wild excitement of the victor of Africa', and plea that 'the Italian victory causes us only the feeling of lack of security'.²⁵

If these assessments could only cause long-term worries to perceptive minds, at the same time there were other, more mundane and perhaps equally alarming signs. In the period between November 1935 and November 1936 the Greek security services reported to the Foreign Ministry that the Italian navy was depth-measuring and photographing Greek ports in Crete, Poros and Pylos, perhaps as part of studying the possibilities of a landing on Greek shores.²⁶ Yet any protests against such activities would be incompatible with the determination of the Greek government to avoid doing anything that might incur Italy's displeasure. In May 1936, when the question of the sanctions against Italy re-emerged, the Greek prime minister Ioannis Metaxas cabled the Permanent Greek Representative at the League of Nations that the Greek government

studiously wishes to avoid creating the impression that Greece is embracing any initiative which might be interpreted as directed against Italy [... or] capable of irritating Italy.²⁷

The restrictions which the British policy of appeasement imposed on smaller states, and the extent to which this accounts for Greece's attitude towards Italy, transpired in mid-May 1936. Speaking at the House of Commons on 12 May, the conservative British prime minister Stanley Baldwin refused to take seriously Mussolini's statements that he had founded the Eastern Roman Empire, as 'made perhaps on a moment of enthusiasm'. Britain would therefore offer no guarantees to Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey.²⁸ Within days, however, Greece's acceptance of British complacency was shaken and fears about the *status quo* in the Mediterranean intensified. Rumours went about that Baldwin had stated that Britain

25. AGFM 1936: A/i (33): Greek Embassy (Belgrade) to Athens, 12 May 1936, no. 854.

26. AGFM 1936: A/10/3 (30): Department of State Defence to Foreign Ministry, 20 March 1936, no. 53/2, and 3 June 1936, no. 2824; *ibid.*, Messinia Gendarmerie Command to Sub-Ministry of Public Security, 16 November 1936, no. 15/6/1.

27. AGFM 1936: A/i (33): Metaxas to the Greek Representative (Geneva), 11 May 1936, no. 9007.

28. AGFM 1936: A/i (33): Greek Embassy (London) to Athens, 12 May 1936, no. 1288.



would abandon the Eastern Mediterranean and use the Cape of Good Hope to secure communications with India. Alarmed by these rumours, Politis had a conversation in Geneva with Anthony Eden. The British Foreign Secretary was 'categorical'. Not only Baldwin had not said that, but the British position remained focused on the preservation of the *status quo* and the balance of power in the Mediterranean. Politis then inquired whether this meant an Anglo-Italian understanding on the Balkans; Eden pleaded ignorance, which the Greek ambassador interpreted as a sign that Britain 'wishes to avoid the assumption of great responsibilities' in the region.²⁹

Politis was not convinced. On the following day he sent Metaxas a perceptive assessment of the Italian threat, arguing that Mussolini had

revealed his plans for further conquest, [and that] the dreams for the resurrection of the old Roman Empire have started to materialise. It is true that Mr. Mussolini stated that Italy from now on ranks herself amongst the contented Powers, but he added that if she wishes peace for herself and the others, she discards war as long as this is not imposed by "the pressing and unstoppable needs of life". And it is needless to say that since domestically [Italy] reserves for herself the exclusive judgement of these needs, she is objecting to the existence of an international law which is the same for all. Hence the well-grounded suspicion that the conquest of Ethiopia signifies not the end but the beginning of Italian expansion.³⁰

At the same time, to fascist audiences as well as in private, Mussolini was insisting on the inevitability of another war which would enable Italy to consolidate her domination of the Mediterranean and persuade Greece and Turkey to place themselves under his protection.³¹

By summer 1936 Italian duplicity and British appeasement had combined to present Greek diplomacy with an unenviable task. Greek attempts to befriend Italy continued apace but failed to convince. The most telling sign of the fears and constraints under which Greek diplomacy operated came on 26 June 1936. On that day the Permanent Deputy Foreign Minister N. Mavroudis cabled Metaxas from Montreux that the chairmanship of the General Assembly of the League of Nations might be offered to Politis.

29. AGFM 1936: A/i (33): N. Politis (Paris) to Metaxas, 15 May 1936, no. 1684.

30. AGFM 1936: A/i (33): N. Politis (Paris) to Metaxas, 16 May 1936, no. 1693.

31. D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 84-85.



Politis himself is hesitating to accept a proposal that might be made to him [,] for he fears that despite the objectivity during the fulfilment of his duties[,], he would not avoid been misunderstood by Italy which[,], due to erroneous information[,], regards him as systematically opposed to all her views.

Mavroudis concurred with Politis and sought Metaxas's view. The latter replied on the following day:

Although the election of Mr. Politis as Chairman of the General Assembly of the League of Nations would be a great honour to Greece, I think that he should not accept any proposal that might be made [to him and] which could create misunderstandings which we must at all costs avoid at the present critical moment.³²

Between British Appeasement and Italian Hostility, 1936-1939

Italian views of Greece appeared to take a turn to the better in the immediate wake of 4 August 1936. The Italian press unanimously agreed that the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas was established to save the country from communism, presented 'with a favourable spirit' the causes and aims of the new regime, and gave lengthy and favourable coverage to developments in Greece which would 'eliminate for good the danger of the establishment of communism in the Eastern Mediterranean.'³³ At first the advent of the dictatorship of 4 August generated in Rome an expectation that Metaxas's domestic policies could lead to a loosening of Greece's ties with Britain and France and to her alignment with the Fascist powers. This may well have been the reason why at first Mussolini wanted, however temporarily, to maintain good relations with Greece in the hope of undermining the Balkan *Entente* and loosening the ties between Greece and Britain. Yet in late 1936 the Italian ambassador in Athens reported to Rome that the dictatorship had inherited the foreign policy of the political parties it had abolished. This dashed Italy's early hopes that the domestic policies of the Metaxas regime

32. AGFM 1936: A/i: N. Mavroudis (Montreux) to Metaxas, 26 June 1936, no. 128; *ibid.*, Metaxas to Mavroudis, 27 June 1936, no. 12363.

33. AGFM 1936: A/10/3 (30): A. Dalietos (Rome) to Athens, 10 and 17 August 1936, nos. 1506 and 1554.



would propel Greece closer to Rome and forced the Italians to treat the Greek dictator with suspicion.³⁴

The more perceptive Greek diplomats were able to cut through the occasional Italian flattery. Positive comments were repeated to the Greek ambassador in Rome in October 1936 by the Italian foreign minister Count Galeazzo Ciano himself, the Deputy Foreign Minister Giuseppe Bastianini and the Director General of Political Affairs, ambassador Buti. All three said that Italy was watching with 'special interest and strong sympathy' the domestic efforts of Metaxas and wanted to create 'the closest possible bonds of friendship with Greece'. In trying to assess these proclamations of sympathy, the ambassador accepted that Italy had reasons to be sympathetic towards Metaxas's Greece because of ideological affiliation and Greece's strategic importance in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet he felt that there were legitimate doubts about the 'depth and stability' of these Italian protestations. Given that Rome made similar statements with regard to Yugoslavia and Turkey, these might only be an Italian ploy designed to avoid the creation of a British-led anti-Italian bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Mussolini's attitude towards Greece since he had come to power in 1922 had been marked by 'sudden changes, inconsistencies, and at times unjustified disfavour, which have generated among Greek public opinion a feeling of disappointment and suspicion towards the neighbouring Great Power'. The recommendation of the ambassador summed up the difficulties and dilemmas of Greek foreign policy. He urged Metaxas to accept the friendly Italian advances and make similar pledges of friendship towards Rome - but all in a measured manner; caution was necessitated both by the unpredictability and aggressive thrust of Italian foreign policy and by Greece's need to avoid loosening the ties with the Balkan *Entente* or 'the traditional and vitally important to us bonds with England.'³⁵

One week later the ambassador in Rome elaborated on the need to be cautious and disbelieving towards Italy.

34. J.W. Borejsza. 'Greece and the Balkan Policy of Fascist Italy, 1936-1940'. *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, vol. XIII, nos. 1-2 (1986), pp. 54-55; R.H. Rainero. 'To Praxikopima tou Metaxa ke i apichisi sti fasistiki Italia', in N. Svoronos and H. Fleischer (eds), *I Ellada 1936-1944: Diktatoria - Katochi - Antistasi* (Athens: Agrotiki Trapeza Ellados, 1989), pp. 34, 37, 38, 41-42, 45.

35. AGFM 1936: A/10/3 (30): P.A. Metaxas (Rome) to Metaxas, 6 October 1936, no. 1985.



Mr. Mussolini, who never concealed his contempt for pacifist ideology, who right from the start took to the military reorganisation of his country and to inspiring bellicose fury in the Italian people, and who thus managed to establish the Italian Empire of East Africa disregarding the reaction of Great Britain, which was no longer in a position to threaten him seriously precisely because of her neglect of her war preparations, was bound to continue or rather intensify even more his previous preparation and tactics now that the orgasm of war preparation has been generalised, that clouds are gathering on the European horizon, having to defend his newly-created Empire, he sees that the country which opposed most the success of the Italian plans intensified to the highest possible limit the speed and the extent of her armaments.

The ambassador ended on the alarming note that since Italian war preparations involved mostly the Navy and the Airforce 'mainly in the context of the Mediterranean', it seemed that Mussolini 'tried to warn Great Britain that he is not prepared to tolerate the imposition of English hegemony in the Mediterranean.'³⁶ As if to confirm the suspicions about the unpredictability and inconsistency of Mussolini's pronouncements, on 6 November 1936 the Greek Representative at the League of Nations informed Metaxas of the 'monstrous' statement made by the *Duce* in a recent speech at Geneva, that 'there is no "legal parity among states"', which was interpreted as 'the beginning of the domination of small States.'³⁷

By that time Metaxas had been sufficiently unnerved by the signs from Rome, though Mussolini's unpredictability occasionally blurred his grasp of the gravity of the threat. From 1936 to 1940 his genuine attempts to reach an understanding with Italy were dictated by the appeasement emanating from London, his belief that Mussolini's foreign policy could be affected by ideological sympathies, and the fear of entanglement in a war that might involve not only Italy but also Bulgaria. Yet even before imposing his dictatorship Metaxas had told the Greek War Council that Greek war preparations must aim at enabling the country to face Bulgaria on her own, "while in the event of a general conflict she must be in such a position as to

36. AGFM 1936: A/10/6 (26): P.A. Metaxas (Rome) to Athens, 13 October 1936, no. 1998.

37. AGFM 1936: A/10/2 (26): S. Polychroniadis (Geneva) to Metaxas, 6 November 1936, no. 1543.



be welcome into the grand coalitions”’. Then in October-November 1936 he told the Greek Naval Staff:

You will not communicate to anyone what I am going to tell you. I predict war between the English and the German bloc. A war much worse than the previous one. I shall do my best so that Greece does not get involved in this war, but unfortunately that will be impossible. And, I repeat once more, especially this must not get out of this room, it is needless on my part to tell you that our position in this conflict will be on the side of England.³⁸

Accordingly, the dictator directed much of his energy to the reorganisation and equipment of the Greek armed forces. In fact Metaxas had already started a rearmament programme in April 1936, when king George II had appointed him care-taker prime minister, but he greatly intensified it after August of that year.³⁹

There was a partial, temporary and misleading lull in Italian hostility towards Greece from the summer of 1936 to spring 1939, as at that time Mussolini was preoccupied with his Spanish campaign. Yet Galeazzo Ciano had hinted at the wider implications of Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War in October 1937, when he boasted that in Spain ‘we were fighting in defence of our civilisation and our Revolution’, while in February 1939 he elaborated that ‘on the Ebro, at Barcelona and at Malaga the foundations of the Roman Mediterranean Empire were laid.’⁴⁰ Thus even during Italy’s involvement in the Iberian Peninsula, the Duce and his foreign minister did not seize to cast a covetous eye on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. Indeed, the next step of Italian aggression had been in gestation at least since 1937, when, after a conversation with the Greek king, Ciano recorded in his diary:

In any case the line of advance drawn by destiny is Salonika for the Serbs, Tirana and Corfu for us. The Greeks know this and are frightened. [...] It

38. E.P. Kavvadias, *O Naftikos Polemos tou 1940 opos ton ezisa: Anamniseis 2 Martiou 1935-25 Martiou 1943* (Athens: Pyrsos, 1950), pp. 103-104.

39. I. Metaxas, *Logoi ke Skepseis 1936-1941*, vol. I (Athens: Govostis, 1969), pp. 35, 81, 113-114, 176, 184, 221, 232, 252, 257, 265, 323, 339-340 and *passim*.

40. *Ciano’s Diary 1937-1938* (London: Methuen, 1952), p. 26; *Ciano’s Diary 1939-1943* (London: Heinemann 1947), p. 33.



is, after all, an idea for the realisation of which I have for some time been working.⁴¹

The most perceptive analysis of Italy's Mediterranean policy reached Metaxas on 6 March 1937, when from Paris Nikolaos Politis warned of the dangers stemming from Mussolini's Mediterranean project:

What is excluded by cool logic, is at times imposed by a developing passion which may reach complete blindness. The boldest, the maddest, the most unrealistic plans, fomented in a period of excitement, also become [the] object of [a] psychosis capable of creating the illusion of the possible and the feasible. The obsession to dominate the Mediterranean may unfortunately lead the rulers of Italy to such an illusion.⁴²

Yet from the beginning of the year Metaxas was going through a phase of considerable faith in the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 2 January 1937, whereby the two countries expressed their desire to maintain peace in the Mediterranean, declared that their respective interests in the region were not incompatible, and also pledged to maintain Spain's territorial integrity.⁴³ On 18 June general Alexandros Papagos, Chief of the Greek Army General Staff, handed him a personal report in which, *inter alia*, he speculated about the possibility of an Italian attack on Greece. In the margin of that paragraph Metaxas noted: 'Reality: Of [the] two Powers[,] England - Italy[,] the first will not attack us - the second will be watched by the first [because of the] gentlemen's agreement.'⁴⁴

With the exception of the ambassadors in Paris and Rome, Greek diplomacy continued to show signs of confusion and contradictions in its perceptions of Italian policy and aims across the Mediterranean. This became particularly evident in Greek views on foreign involvement in the Spanish Civil War and its international implications for the whole of the region. On 26 November 1936 the Greek Chargé d' Affaires in Paris opined

41. *Ciano's Diary 1937-1938*, p. 27 (1 November 1937).

42. AGFM 1937: A/1 (8) 1937: N. Politis (Paris) to Metaxas, 6 March 1937, no. 870.

43. *DBFP*. II: 17. nos 376, 461, 530; AGFM 1937: A/8/4/13: P. Metaxas (Rome) to Athens, 9 January 1937, no. 61; AGFM 1937: A/36: H. Simopoulos (London) to Athens, 6 January 1937, Bulletin of Embassy Reports no. 190, p. 7.

44. GAK: Metaxas Papers, File 90: Papagos to Metaxas, Personal Report, no. 40075, 18 June 1937.



that the real interest of the Spanish conflict for Europe was to ascertain whether the Soviet Union would succeed in establishing a communist state in the Western Mediterranean or whether German and Italian policy would prevent an 'adventure jeopardising the civilisation of the West'.⁴⁵ In July of the following year A. Dalietos, the Chargé in Rome, sent Athens a report remarkable for its lack of understanding of Italy's Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean policy. He argued nothing less than that Italy was undoubtedly an element of stability with regard to the strong Slavic Bloc on Greece's northern borders, whereas Britain remained the only power capable of guaranteeing Greece's independence in the event of 'serious complications' arising from a would-be Anglo-Italian clash in the Mediterranean.⁴⁶

Politis in Paris remained the most astute, alert and perceptive Greek observer of European diplomatic developments. In intimating to Metaxas his worries about Italian objectives and policies in Spain, Politis argued that

reason does not rule policy and especially that of the fascist government [...] The situation in Spain, if it is not going to be useful to the fascist government as a pretext for a military adventure, it will be used, no doubt, to secure every kind of reward from the two western Powers.⁴⁷

In a similar vein, on 20 August 1938 the Greek ambassador in Rome warned that Fascism demanded an 'imperialist' foreign policy, hence Mussolini was constantly coming up with external enemies so that he could impose his programme.⁴⁸ Thus he admitted something that Greek diplomacy had, by and large, been unable to grasp – namely, the links between the internal needs of fascism and its overseas programme, which implied that there was very little that outsiders could do in order to mediate fascist aggression.

In the wake of the Munich Agreement of September 1938, in public Metaxas followed the diplomatic trend of the times in expressing his relief at the settlement, which he hailed as a deal for peace.⁴⁹ In private, however, he

45. AGFM 1936: A/i (7): N. Marketis (Paris) to Athens, 26 November 1936, no. 3853.

46. AGFM 1937: A/I (A/i) (3): A. Dalietos (Rome) to Athens, 13 and 20 July 1937, nos. 1953 and 2030.

47. AGFM 1937: A/I (33) File 3: N. Politis (Paris) to Metaxas, 23 October 1937, no. 3976.

48. AGFM 1938: A/10/4 (31) 1938: P.A. Metaxas (Rome) to Athens, 20 August 1938, no. 19514.

49. I. Metaxas. *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. I, pp. 418-419 (25 October 1938).



was fully aware of its implications and potential dangers for the future. His fears were disclosed in the most glaring manner by a major gesture he made within days after the Munich settlement. Between 3 and 16 October 1938 he repeatedly proposed to Sir Sydney Waterlow, the British ambassador in Athens, an alliance between Greece and Britain based on the assumption that, in the event of a European war, Greek ports and islands would be crucial for British operations. The British, however, ignored the proposal for fear of offending Italy and also because Metaxas's categorical assurances, that he would on no account side with Italy in case of a war, convinced London that it would get what it wanted from Greece without having to undertake a formal military commitment towards that country.⁵⁰ On 20 October Metaxas entered a note of relief in his diary: 'Negotiations with Waterlow. My proposals. I am convinced that they will not be accepted. But I am setting myself free.' Eighteen months later, when the British did seek friends in a Europe that was being swept aside by the German armed forces, the dictator was to recall that in October 1938 the British had wanted the Greeks to remain neutral, therefore now the Greeks 'must uphold the rules of neutrality.'⁵¹

On 30 November 1938 Mussolini delivered a secret speech before the Grand Council of Fascism, announcing that "Albania will become Italian" and that "many small nations [are] destined to be demolished".⁵² In the following days Ciano discussed with the Italian ambassador in Tirana the operation against Albania. His only reservation was that this might weaken Belgrade's friendship with Rome to the advantage of Berlin. To prevent this, Mussolini and Ciano were prepared 'to talk to [the Yugoslav Prime Minister M.] Stoyadinovich and study the question of compensation, possibly at the expense of Greece, i.e. Salonika'.⁵³ On 24 November, during a conversation with Bosko Cristich, the Yugoslav ambassador in Rome, Ciano discussed with him 'the question of Salonika' and 'encouraged him to make a move towards the Aegean, Yugoslavia's natural outlet to the sea, at the earliest opportunity.' Ciano's main aim was 'to facilitate our action in Albania,

50. J. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 89-92.

51. I. Metaxas, *Apomnimonevmata*, vol. IV (Athens: Govostis, 1960), pp. 311, 460 (20 October 1938 and 2 April 1940).

52. Cited in MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 38-39.

53. *Ciano's Diary 1937-1938*, pp. 201, 203 (1, 2 and 6 December 1938).



which is maturing according to plan'. Then he went on to discuss with Mussolini Italy's demands and next moves. Greece was not mentioned specifically, but the plan for Albania boded ill for Athens: Mussolini and Ciano wanted Albania's 'liquidation by agreement with Belgrade, eventually favouring Serbian settlement in Salonika'.⁵⁴

On 4 February 1939 Mussolini produced the most succinct and comprehensive statement on the remaking of the Mediterranean world as he had envisaged it since the mid-1920s. Italy, the Duce told the Grand Council of Fascism, was "'a prisoner of the Mediterranean'", for she "'does not have free connection with the oceans'". "'The task of Italian foreign policy'", therefore, was "'to first of all break the bars of the prison'" and "'march to the [Indian and Atlantic] ocean[s]'" against "'Anglo-French opposition'":

Greece, Turkey, Egypt have been ready to form a chain with Great Britain and to complete the politico-military encirclement of Italy. Greece, Turkey, Egypt must be considered virtual enemies of Italy and of its expansion.⁵⁵

When War Broke Out, April – September 1939

On 7 April 1939, only a few days after Generalissimo Francisco Franco had proclaimed the end of the Spanish Civil War, in which he had triumphed with Mussolini's assistance, Italy invaded Albania. On the same day the Italian Minister of Culture Dino Alfieri told Italian journalists that Italian foreign policy aimed at the resurrection of the Roman Empire, and that Albania was the bridgehead from which all subsequent activities would stem.⁵⁶ The laconic entry of the event in Metaxas's diary does not fail to capture his feelings and fears: 'Landing of the Italians in Albania. Deep anxiety. [...] I return to the Ministry. Chiefs of Staff. Measures of resistance against the Italians'.⁵⁷ When rumours emerged that Italy might occupy Corfu, Metaxas sought a swift indication of Britain's intentions in such an eventuality and told the British ambassador in Athens that 'he had made all

54. *Ciano's Diary 1937-1938*, pp. 176, 198 (11 October and 24 November 1938); *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, pp. 7-8 (8 January 1939).

55. Cited in MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, p. 40.

56. J.W. Borejsza, 'Greece and the Balkan Policy of Fascist Italy', p. 61.

57. I. Metaxas, *Apomnimevmata*, vol. IV, pp. 363, 364 (7 April 1939).



preparations to resist to the utmost and at the cost of all sacrifices'.⁵⁸ On 9 April 1939 the Italian Chargé in Athens handed the Greek government a personal message from Mussolini, pledging 'to respect in the most absolute manner [the] territorial and insular integrity of Greece'.⁵⁹

Four days later, on 13 April 1939, Britain and France offered Greece and Romania guarantees whereby they did not commit themselves to start a war to protect Greek and Romanian territorial integrity, but only undertook a moral obligation to assist the two countries in case of an attack by a third power.⁶⁰ Yet such diplomatic pleasantries and half-baked commitments did not allay the anxieties about long-term Italian objectives. On 12 April 1939 Lord Perth, the British ambassador in Rome, reported that *Il Giornale d'Italia* claimed that after the occupation of Albania Italy had no intention of threatening neighbouring countries, and then redressed the balance with a dire warning: 'only an attitude of opposition to this collaboration on the part of neighbouring States could alter her intention. Greece has no need therefore of compromising guarantees of distant countries.'⁶¹ On 13 April 1939 Waterlow cabled from Athens that the Greek government was indeed worried by the article in *Il Giornale d'Italia*, and especially by the contention that since Greece was not threatened by any of her neighbours, she had 'no need of compromising guarantees from distant countries', and that after the Italian communication about full respect of Greek territorial and insular integrity, "'Greece does not need a new insurance policy which would be worse than useless and only calculated to disturb an otherwise clear atmosphere'".⁶² As if Italian objections and threats were not enough, Germany also let it be known that any British guarantees to Greece and Romania 'would be disagreeable to [the] German government'.⁶³

58. *DBFP*, III: V (London: HMSO, 1952), no. 95: Halifax to Perth (Rome), 8 April 1939; *ibid.*, no. 97: Waterlow (Athens) to Halifax, 9 April 1939.

59. *Ibid.*, no. 101: Halifax to Perth (Rome), 9 April 1939; *ibid.*, no. 105: Halifax to Waterlow (Athens), 9 April 1939; *ibid.*, no. 110: Halifax to Perth (Rome), 9 April 1939; *ibid.*, nos. 114, 117-118: Waterlow (Athens) to Halifax, 10 April 1939.

60. *Ibid.*, no. 136: Halifax to Waterlow (Athens), 12 April 1939; *ibid.*, no. 140: Waterlow to Halifax, 12 April 1939; *ibid.*, no. 145: Halifax to Waterlow (Athens), 12 April 1939; *ibid.*, no. 212: Halifax to Waterlow (Athens), 18 April 1939; *HC Deb.*, 5th series, vol. 346, cols. 5-15, 13 April 1939; I. Metaxas, *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. II, p. 51.

61. *DBFP*, III: V, no. 141: Lord Perth (Rome) to Halifax, 12 April 1939.

62. *Ibid.*, no. 146: Waterlow (Athens) to Halifax, 13 April 1939.

63. *Ibid.*, no. 147: Waterlow (Athens) to Halifax, 13 April 1939.



Meanwhile Italian actions continued to cause alarm, despite Mussolini's pledges to respect Greek territorial integrity. On 22 and 28 April 1939 general Papagos informed Metaxas that until 14 April 1939 1,4 million reservists had been called up in the Italian army, while in Albania the *Duce* maintained 65,000-70,000 troops. Greek intelligence indicated that developments at both ends of Europe were ominous. At one end, the Axis would neutralise the Balkans with diplomatic and if need be military means, while at the other end France was concerned because Franco was fortifying Gibraltar and was sending reinforcements to Spanish Morocco.⁶⁴ Then, on 24 April 1939, Metaxas received a hand-written personal letter from Colonel Alexandros Asimakopoulos, the Greek Military Attaché in Rome, whom the dictator had instructed to report directly to him. Colonel Asimakopoulos warned Metaxas that

the European war seems inevitable. With the pursuit of the reconstitution of the Roman Empire and domination of the Mediterranean[,] the policy of Italy is extremely dangerous for Greece [,] especially after the occupation of Albania.

The Colonel believed that although an imminent surprise attack on Greece was unlikely, nevertheless the concentration of three Italian army corps in Albania boded ill for the future.⁶⁵

Both assessments seemed plausible. The Yugoslav Foreign Minister, who was scheduled to go to Venice soon, thought that Italy might propose to Yugoslavia to join the Axis or to form a pact with Albania, Hungary and Bulgaria.⁶⁶ Then on 1 May 1939 Andrew Ryan, the British Minister at Durazzo, reported that in view of the movement of Italian troops towards the Greek border, 'everything now points to [the] existence of [a] serious threat to Greece which may be followed by sudden attack.'⁶⁷ Worried by Italian troop concentrations on the Greek-Albanian border, on 6 May

64. AGFM 1939: A/7 (29) 1938-1939: Papagos's reports to Metaxas. nos. 67278 (22 April 1939), 67484 (28 April 1939), and 67157 (n.d.).

65. GAK: Metaxas Papers. File 31: Colonel A. Asimakopoulos (Rome) to Metaxas. 24 April 1939, hand-written personal letter.

66. *DBFP*, III: vol. V, no. 299: Halifax to Waterlow (Athens), 27 April 1939.

67. *Ibid.*, no. 325: A. Ryan (Durazzo) to Halifax, 1 May 1939.



Metaxas summoned the Italian ambassador and warned him that Greece would fight if her sovereign rights were infringed.⁶⁸

In May 1939 Italian military preparations in Albania were in tandem with Mussolini's mood, 'increasingly anti-Yugoslav, anti-Greek'.⁶⁹ That an attack on Greece or Yugoslavia was not launched at the time was due to Mussolini's assessment of the current prospects and the German view on the value of Greece. Mussolini and Ciano were busy building Albania into a springboard for the domination of the Balkans and the redrawing of the map of the Mediterranean. Mussolini ordered the construction of roads leading to Greece, which he would invade as part of his action in a general war in order to turn the Mediterranean into an Italian lake. Temporarily, however, the British guarantee of April 1939 had placed Greece beyond his reach, unless the Duce were prepared to join - or, indeed, to start - a general European war. At the time he was prepared to do neither. On 30 May 1939 he announced both his short-term desire to have no war for the next three years, as well as his much more bellicose intentions for the future. For Mussolini, for whom war against the "plutocratic nations" was inevitable, the objective at the outset of hostilities would be to seize territory in the Balkans as far as to the Danube, and, in particular, 'to put Greece, Rumania, and Turkey *hors de combat* as a penalty for their presumption in accepting guarantees from Great Britain. This would be done even if they proclaimed their neutrality, because the Balkans were part of Italy's living space and would be required for the provision of food and raw materials'.⁷⁰ The German view emerged in conversations between Ciano and Joachim Von Ribbentrop in Milan on 6-7 May 1939. The German Foreign Minister stated that the occupation of Albania had diminished the importance of Greece, where the Axis would have little difficulty in exercising its influence.⁷¹

On 8 June Mussolini told Ciano that the Anglo-French guarantees to Greece and Rumania were 'elements of that policy of encirclement which

68. *Ibid.*, no. 390: Waterlow (Athens) to Halifax, 6 May 1939; I. Metaxas, *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. II, p. 357; *idem*, *Apomnimonevmata*, vol. IV, pp. 371, 372 (1, 3 and 5 May 1939).

69. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, p. 92 (25 May 1939).

70. Cited in D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 165-166; see also MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 41, 52.

71. *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers* (London: Odhams, 1948), p. 285.



London is directing against us.’⁷² To counter this, Mussolini and Ciano resumed fanning the flames of traditional rivalries amongst the Balkan states and issuing thinly veiled threats. On 5 July 1939 the Greek ambassador in Rome, who paid a courtesy visit to Ciano, was ‘stunned’ by the Italian Foreign Minister’s reception and his reservations regarding Greece’s acceptance of the British guarantee, ‘whose effect is to place his country in the somewhat unenviable position of a semi-protectorate.’⁷³ By the end of the month Ciano tried to exploit the historic rivalries amongst Balkan states. He noted that Bulgaria had been alarmed by the Anglo-Turkish agreement and concurred with Sofia that

Ankara, with British help, again wants to try to play the game of supremacy in the Balkans. We must take advantage of this fact to put fear into the Greeks and Yugoslavs, both of whom still remember the stench of the Turks [...] I don’t expect too much, but it is always worth while trying to revive certain old hatreds which are not entirely dead.⁷⁴

With the outbreak of the war three weeks away, the Italian policy of threatening and intimidating the Balkans was agreeable to Germany. On 12 August 1939 at Berchtesgaden Hitler told Ciano that ‘Yugoslavia and Greece will be immobilised through fear of Italy’.⁷⁵ On 21 August 1939 Metaxas told the Italian ambassador in Athens that Italy ‘is treating us badly and this gives us the right to think that your disposition is not at all friendly’, and warned him that Greece would fight against any state that threatened her territorial integrity.⁷⁶ Metaxas’s anxiety increased on 23 August 1939, when the Greek Naval Staff submitted an assessment of Greece’s position and addressed the issue of the naval aid that the country would need in the initial phase of a war. According to the Greek Naval Staff, upon the outbreak of a European war ‘Italy (and possibly Bulgaria) will attack Greece wantonly’. Considering the strength of the Italian Navy, such a war would be ‘far more

72. *Ciano’s Diary 1939-1943*, p. 101 (8 June 1939).

73. *Ibid.*, p. 114 (5 July 1939).

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120 (28 July 1939).

75. *Ciano’s Diplomatic Papers*, p. 302.

76. I. Metaxas, *Apomnimonevmata*, vol. IV, pp. 386-389: Note of a Conversation, 21 August 1939; GAK: Metaxas Papers: File 37: Metaxas to king George II, 22-23 August 1939, no. 21054.



serious than all other wars which Greece has fought on the seas. It will be the first time during which we shall face a powerful adversary, well-organised and in such close proximity to us.' Accordingly, the Greek Naval Staff urged the Greek government to ask massive naval support from Britain and France.⁷⁷

An Attack Waiting to Happen, September 1939 – October 1940

Yet for the time being such fears did not materialise. On 22, 23 and 24 August 1939 Metaxas recorded in his diary his fear of imminent war and ordered partial mobilisation. In early September 1939 he could barely conceal his initial anxiety and subsequent relief over Italian inactivity. On 1, 4 and 15 September 1939 he noted: 'War! Italy Neutral! [...] Written assurances from Mussolini that he will not bother us.' Indeed, on 12 September 1939 Mussolini gave Emmanuelle Grazzi, the Italian ambassador in Athens, 'instructions for an understanding with Greece, a country too poor for us to covet.' Grazzi, who had just returned from Rome, gave Metaxas the text of written assurances signed by Mussolini himself that Italy would not undertake any military operations against Greece. On 28 October 1939 formal notes signed by Metaxas and Grazzi were exchanged, pledging the two countries to follow a policy of peace towards one another. Metaxas was overcome by a 'feeling of deep satisfaction'.⁷⁸

Thereafter Greek anxieties were once more temporarily lulled, and the Greek government reverted to its earlier efforts to avoid anything that might offend Italy. On 16 September 1939 the Greek newspaper of Buenos Ayres *Nea Ellas* published an article entitled 'Mussolini and the Balkans', in which it commented on the occasion of Mussolini's recent statement that he was placing the Balkans under his protection:

the Greek people have no worse enemy than fascist Italy [...] how can one imagine that the Balkan Peoples would be placed under the protection and guidance of their most implacable enemy, whom they are in a

77. GAK: Metaxas Papers, File 88: Greek Naval Staff, Study No. 45: Assessment of the Situation During the Initial Phase of War, 23 August 1939, no 3731.

78. I. Metaxas, *Apomnimonevmata*, vol. IV, pp. 389, 392, 394, 396, 397, 399-404 (22, 23, 24 August, 1, 4, 15, 20, 30 September 1939), and Metaxas to Rome, 17 September 1939; *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, pp. 151, 155 (12 and 19 September 1939).



position, with the assistance of their friends, to teach the appropriate lesson in due course.⁷⁹

The Greek Foreign Ministry instructed the Greek Embassy at Buenos Ayres to 'indicate urgently to the particular newspaper that it is absolutely necessary to stop its unwise journalism on these issues, which is capable of harming seriously the national interests of Greece'.⁸⁰

Yet the fact that nothing happened in the Balkans had less to do with Greece's good behaviour and more with Italian weaknesses and the absence at that time of any specific Axis plans for the region. Shortly before the outbreak of the war in September 1939, Mussolini had told Hitler that Italy could not participate unless Germany provided in advance massive quantities of supplies. Hitler was unable to deliver them and, as a face-saving formula designed to satisfy his pride, Mussolini declared Italy's non-belligerence, as opposed to the unmanly status of neutrality. Unhappy that he could not join the war immediately, and caught between his own ambition and the limits imposed by Italy's economic and military weakness, Mussolini nonetheless insisted that he would be ready for war in or shortly after the summer of 1940; then he would fight the British and the French for supremacy in the Mediterranean.⁸¹

In the meantime Germany endorsed Italy's dominant role in the Mediterranean and the Balkans. On 1 October 1939 in Berlin Hitler told Ciano that

he considers Italy to be the country which must become the absolute master of the Mediterranean with predominating interests in all those countries of the Balkan peninsula directly in contact with the Mediterranean and the Adriatic. Germany is not interested in these parts and is, on the contrary, ready to support any Italian initiative which aims at increasing our sway.⁸²

As Berlin was soon to explain, Germany had three reasons to keep the Balkans out of the war: to avoid the undue dispersal of the German armed

79. AGFM 1939: A'/Id: Foreign Ministry, Press Directorate to Political Division A', 10 November 1939, no. 45298.

80. AGFM 1939: A'/Id: Foreign Ministry to Greek Embassy (Buenos Ayres), 18 November 1939, no. 29279.

81. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 42-49, 67, 77, 85, 108-112.

82. *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, pp. 314, 315.



forces; to retain as neutral for as long as possible an important source of materials; and to prevent Italy from intervening in the Balkans, which, after the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 1939, would bring Mussolini in a collision course with the interests of the Soviet Union in the region.⁸³

In November 1939 the Greek Military Attaché in Rome reported to the Greek General Staff that the British and French diplomats were 'gravely suspicious of the position of Italy' and that their governments were 'doing everything in order not to offend' her. The Attaché himself believed that 'the fascist regime, despite the antipathy of the people towards the Germans, will be able, if it wishes, when it finds the appropriate moment, to bring out Italy on Germany's side.'⁸⁴

By late January 1940 the 'appropriate moment' had not presented itself. Mussolini, however, had grown impatient with Italy's abstention from the war and thus spent the next few months reaffirming to himself and to others his intention to do so soon. On 23 January, during a meeting of the Council of Ministers, the *Duce* bitterly attacked Britain and France, protesting that Italy could not remain neutral indefinitely and thus 'play second fiddle among the European Powers'. In February he announced that 'Italy is a prisoner in the Mediterranean and will be so until such time as it has free access to the oceans'. In March he reiterated his wish to enter the war at the right moment on Germany's side in order to break free from his Mediterranean gaol, and he went on to clarify Italy's course of action, which included an 'aero-naval offensive in the Mediterranean.' On 2 April 1940, at the Council of Ministers again, he elaborated that entry into the war would preserve Italy's prestige as a great power, which would be harmed if she stayed neutral, and he spoke 'of a Mediterranean empire and of access to the ocean.'⁸⁵

Meanwhile the plight of the Greek government continued. While the prospect of an Italian attack was drawing nearer, in March 1940 Metaxas imposed new taxes for Greece's fortifications and air and coastal defences,

83. *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945* (hereafter *DGFP*), (Series) D: (vol.) VIII (London: HMSO, 1955), no. 514: Memorandum of 6 January 1940.

84. AGFM 1939: A/I (1): Greek Military Attaché (Rome) to Greek General Staff, nos. 677 and 692, n.d. [November?] 1939.

85. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, pp. 201, 219-220, 225-226, 231 (23 January, 11 and 23 March, 2 April 1940); *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, p. 338.



and in June he introduced food rationing,⁸⁶ while diplomatically he continued his efforts to avoid anything that might offend Italy. On 20 April 1940 he informed the Greek Embassy in Paris that he wished to discourage the idea of a visit to Greece by Field Marshal Maxime Weygand, commander of the French armed forces in the Middle East, for

no matter how secret [his visit] may be, it will certainly become known and it will bedevil us both vis-à-vis the Italian Diplomacy, with regard to which even the English government advised us to avoid any provocation, and vis-à-vis our Balkan Allies, who view Field Marshal Weygand's moves with great distrust, so much so that such distrust could only cause harm to the military cohesion of the Balkans.⁸⁷

Yet despite the cautious stance of the Greek government, by late April 1940 Mussolini was rapidly running out of patience. Embarrassed by the lack of any military success comparable to Germany's, and apprehensive lest Hitler got all the European war booty to himself, the *Duce* revived the idea of attacking Greece and Yugoslavia. First he spoke of destroying the latter, but when the Germans suggested that it might be better to leave Yugoslavia and her raw materials intact, he reverted to the idea of attacking Greece. In May 1940 the Italian General Staff was ordered to prepare a military plan for the invasion of Greece within a few days, while Ciano momentarily toyed with the idea 'of finding an Albanian "to eliminate" the King [of Greece]'.⁸⁸ Again Hitler, who at that time preferred to keep the Balkans neutral, dissuaded Mussolini from any action in the peninsula. Mussolini went along, convinced that an Italian invasion of the Balkans would be a waste of time and resources, because Italy would be offered the peninsula as a free gift at the postwar peace settlement.⁸⁹

By early summer 1940 the German victories in western Europe had eliminated the objections of the Italian king and military and had changed the popular mood into one of fear lest Italy entered the war too late and

86. I. Metaxas, *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. II, pp. 277-280, 315-316.

87. GAK: Metaxas Papers. File 43: Metaxas to Greek Embassy (Paris), 20 April 1940.

88. E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous: I Epicheirisi kata tis Ellados* (Athens: Estia, 1980), p. 117.

89. DGFP, D: IX (London: HMSO, 1956), nos 92, 138, 323, 328, 341, 356, 357, 360, 371, 371; *ibid.*, D: X (London: HMSO, 1957), no. 388; D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, p. 211; *idem*, *Mussolini*, pp. 250, 257.



obtained little or no booty. This enabled Mussolini to declare war on 10 June 1940, thereby launching officially his bid to realise his Mediterranean and Middle Eastern ambitions.⁹⁰ In the following month he decided once again to concentrate on an invasion of Yugoslavia, only to be reminded by Hitler yet again that the Axis did not have to fight for the Balkans since it would get the entire peninsula for free after the war; instead, Hitler urged him to concentrate the Italian military effort on North Africa and the Suez Canal.⁹¹ However, the external and domestic successes which he scored in the first three months of his participation in the war were crucial in sustaining his appetite for Greece. By August 1940 Mussolini had conquered the British Somaliland, had prevailed upon the Italian military and had prevented the king from interfering with the conduct of the war.⁹² With his confidence increased, on 12 August 1940 he set down 'the political and military lines for action against Greece'.⁹³ Once more, German pressure forced Ciano to declare that Italy would not act against Yugoslavia and Greece without prior consultations with Berlin.⁹⁴

Italy's entry into the war on 10 June 1940 had exacerbated Greek fears and had compelled the Greek government to acquiesce to even more blatant Italian provocations. Already in early May 1940 Alexandros Rizos-Rangavis, the Greek ambassador in Berlin, had protested to the German government that Germany and Italy were behaving as if they wanted to draw Greece into the war. The German Foreign Ministry did nothing to allay the Greek anxieties, 'but threw the blame entirely on England and France'. Towards the end of the same month, and despite Italian assurances, the ambassador's fears were so intensified that he suggested to Metaxas that Greece 'seek Germany's protection in order to avoid Italian occupation'.⁹⁵ Metaxas accepted the suggestion. On 1 June he told the British and Italian ambassadors in Athens that Greece would maintain strict neutrality and would allow neither power to violate it; Metaxas was so determined that he even foresaw a bizarre situation 'in which Greece would have to defend

90. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 122-125, 133.

91. D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p. 254.

92. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 187-188.

93. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, p. 283 (12 August 1940).

94. *DGFP*, D: X, nos. 343, 353.

95. *DGFP*, D: IX, nos. 210, 318.



herself by force of arms simultaneously against two parties at war with each other'. On the morrow of Italy's entry into the war, he repeated his decision to Grazzi.⁹⁶

Even more important was Metaxas's decision in early June 1940 to bypass the German Embassy in Athens and approach the German government through a certain Mr. Deter, managing director of *Rheinmetall-Borsig S.A.*, the Athens-based subsidiary of the German industry. According to a memorandum of the German Foreign Ministry dated 4 June 1940, Metaxas asked Deter to fly to Berlin 'at once' in order to convey to the German government the following request:

Germany to consider most carefully whether she could not in the interest of the common German-Italian policy persuade Italy to keep away from the Balkans and especially not to violate Greek territory. M. Metaxas believes that the German Government realises what the Greek Government has so far achieved politically and he is, therefore, counting on Germany's understanding. [...] [Metaxas] was most keen that Germany announce *without delay* her protection of Greece's territory [*Bestandes*] and frontiers in this the eleventh hour for Greece [...] M. Metaxas now requests the German Government to take this form of private communication as an occasion for declaring the protection of Greece (through official channels).⁹⁷

The Germans were infuriated when Metaxas confirmed that he was seeking guarantees and protection from them only against Italy, and not against Britain as well. Moreover, they considered that in bypassing the official channel of the German Embassy in Athens, Metaxas himself offered proof that he 'is hardly anticipating a positive reply'. At any rate, Berlin had no intention of offering a substantive reply to his request. One reason was that the German government did not anticipate an Italian attack on Greece and regarded sufficient Rome's assurances to that effect. Primarily, however, in invoking the political achievements of his regime and appealing to German ideological sympathy, Metaxas himself undermined his own effort to solicit German mediation. Understandably, the German position

96. *DGFP*, D: IX, no. 384; E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, p. 125.

97. *DGFP*, D: IX, no. 384.



was that 'the Greek Government would surely fare best if it would openly declare itself on the side of the Axis Powers'.⁹⁸

At that time Italian provocations against Greece increased both in terms of quality and quantity. On 12 and 31 July and 2 August 1940 the Italian airforce bombarded Greek warships, and this despite the fact that, precisely in order to avoid such incidents, the Greek Naval Staff had notified the Italian authorities of the movements of the Greek Royal Navy. In the second week of August, following a fresh outburst of anti-Greek statements in the Italian Press, Metaxas complained to Grazzi that, despite assurances about her friendly intentions, Italy was threatening Greece.⁹⁹ On 12 August the dictator told Prince Erbach, the German ambassador in Athens, that the attacks against Greece in the Italian press suggested that a military attack was 'imminent'. Although he expressed the hope that Germany would continue to exercise 'a moderating influence' on its Axis partner, Prince Erbach urged upon him 'a complete reorientation of Greek foreign policy'. Metaxas replied that he could not do so 'because in Greek experience England was today still in a dominant position in the Eastern Mediterranean'.¹⁰⁰ According to Grazzi, Metaxas's views on who ruled the Eastern Mediterranean became immediately known to Mussolini and Ciano, who, in 'a most violent explosion of anger', probably decided 'to prove at once to Metaxas who actually dominated the Eastern Mediterranean'.¹⁰¹

On 15 August 1940 an Italian submarine attacked and sunk the Greek destroyer *Elli* in the Greek island of Tinos, while a Greek passenger ship was attacked by Italian airplanes. The Greek government discovered from the very beginning the nationality of the submarine which had sunk *Elli*, but went out of its way to keep it secret. Yet, despite his public reticence, on the following day Metaxas announced to the Greek Cabinet that, in case of war, "we are on the side of England, 100%, without reservations and without bargaining".¹⁰²

98. *DGFP*, D: IX, no. 384. See also *ibid.*, nos 395, 403.

99. E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, pp. 126, 130-131, 141, 147, 153-155, 163, 167, 170, 173, 181-187, 193, 198.

100. *DGFP*, D: X, no. 333.

101. E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, pp. 201, 203.

102. Extract from the unpublished memoirs of A. Tzifos, cited in I. Metaxas, *Apomnimonevmata*, vol. IV, p. 742 (Cabinet Meeting of 16 August 1940); *DGFP*, D: X, no. 363; E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, pp. 203-207.



Still, this did not deter the Greeks from continuing to seek German mediation. On 27 August 1940 Joachim von Ribbentrop told the Greek ambassador in Berlin that the German government 'considered Greece as a country which had gone over to England'. When Rizos-Rangavis once more appealed for German mediation between Greece and Italy, the German Foreign Minister 'declined, pointing to the direct route and stressing that an agreement was not at all impossible if Greece took the proper attitude'. What that might be, transpired from von Ribbentrop's advice to the Greeks 'to remedy the Italian grievances as quickly as possible and accommodate any wishes the Italians might have'.¹⁰³

Subsequently, during a brief to the proprietors and editors of the Athens newspapers at the Army Headquarters on 30 October 1940, Metaxas confidentially disclosed that after the sinking of *Elli* by the Italians, he had put out feelers on Berlin to inquire about Mussolini's ultimate intentions. The German counsel was to avoid anything that Italy might consider a 'provocation'. Metaxas claimed that he had grasped immediately the meaning of the 'entirely vague' recommendation of Berlin and lamented the 'endless Italian provocations [...] and the christian patience which we demonstrated pretending that we do not understand them'. He had been anxious to keep Greece out of the war, but his soundings with the Germans and the Italians were depressing: this could have only been achieved by Greece's alignment with the Axis, the cession of western parts of Greece as far as Preveza to Italy, and possibly the cession of eastern parts, as far as Dedeagats (Alexandroupolis) to Bulgaria:

In other words, in order to avoid the war, we should volunteer ourselves for slavery and pay this price...! by extending the right arm of Greece to be amputated by Italy, and the left [arm] by Bulgaria.

On the basis of information he had received from Egypt, Metaxas claimed that in such an eventuality

the English, too, would amputate Greece's legs [by] occupying Crete and at least the rest of our islands.¹⁰⁴

103. *DGFP*, D: X, no. 394; see also *ibid.*, nos 334, 372, 377.

104. I. Metaxas, *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. II, pp. 357-362.



Thus Metaxas stood by his choice to fight alongside the British, recognising British sea power and having confidence in Britain's ultimate victory.

Once again German mediation seemed to halt the unfolding of Mussolini's Balkan adventure. On 17 August 1940 Ribbentrop spoke to Dino Alfieri in terms of a 'complete order to halt all along the line', including the abandonment of plans to attack Yugoslavia, while 'an eventual action against Greece is not at all welcome in Berlin.' On 22 August 1940 Mussolini told Ciano that the military plans against Yugoslavia and Greece were 'indefinitely postponed', which Ciano attributed to renewed German pressure on the *Duce*. Accordingly, on 22 August 1940 Ciano instructed Francesco Jacomoni, Lieutenant-General in Albania, 'to slow down the pace of our moves against Greece and Yugoslavia'. Yet what seemed to undermine the German mediation was Berlin's reiteration that Greece and Yugoslavia were Italy's to play with. On 19 September, in a conversation with Mussolini and Ciano in Rome, Ribbentrop confirmed that those two countries were 'a question of exclusively Italian interests for which it is up to Italy to find the solution'. The attack had only been postponed temporarily.¹⁰⁵

The Greeks' worst fears since the end of the First World War seemed to come close to realisation on 27 September 1940. On that day Periklis I. Argyropoulos, the Greek ambassador in Madrid, reported that the staff of the Bulgarian Embassy there had let it be known that Italy was exerting pressure on Bulgaria to undertake military action against Greece.¹⁰⁶ On 18 October 1940 Mussolini sent a letter to King Boris of Bulgaria, informing him of the decision to attack Greece and effectively inviting him to give a hand by marching to the shores of the Aegean Sea. For her part, Bulgaria had since June 1940 told Berlin of its demands for an exit to the Aegean and an exchange of populations with Greece.¹⁰⁷

The motives for the decision by Mussolini and Ciano to attack Greece

105. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, pp. 284-285 (17 and 22 August 1940); *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, pp. 385, 391; *DGFP*, D: X, no. 387; E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, pp. 239, 211.

106. GAK: Metaxas Papers, File 41: P.I. Argyropoulos (Madrid) to Metaxas, 27 September 1940, no. 8/M/40.

107. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, p. 299 (19 October 1940); *DGFP*, D: IX, nos. 198, 478; MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, p. 218.



stemmed from their desire to incorporate the country into their Mediterranean empire and add her to Fascism's war booty, the desire to deal a severe blow on British naval supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the need to demonstrate Italy's independent status within the Axis. The final impetus for the decision came on 12 October, when the German army marched into Bucharest. Mussolini was furious with Hitler's occupation of Romania, which he interpreted as an attempt to reach the Mediterranean and encroach on Italy's exclusive Balkan sphere of interests.¹⁰⁸ On the same day that the Germans marched into Bucharest, Mussolini told Ciano that 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.

The Duce was irrevocably determined to proceed with a quick and unilateral war against Greece and had already worked out his reply to any objections from his generals:

I shall send in my resignation as an Italian if anyone objects to our fighting the Greeks.

Ciano concurred and thought that the attack on Greece would be 'useful and easy'.¹⁰⁹

On 14 October Mussolini fixed the day for the attack for 26 October. On the following day he discussed the military plan with Ciano and a group of generals at the Palazzo Venezia. On 17 October, while the *Duce* was away, Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio told Ciano that the Italian General Staff was against the operation in Greece; the number of troops assigned to the attack were insufficient, the shallow waters of the Greek port of Preveza made impossible a landing as had been planned, and the war would thus be a protracted one and would waste Italy's 'already meagre resources'. Ciano passed no comment on the military side of the argument but stressed that 'from a political point of view the moment is good'; the Greeks were isolated because the Turks and the Yugoslavs would not move, whereas the Bulgarians, if they moved, they would be on Italy's side. When, on the following day, Badoglio repeated his objections to Mussolini and threatened

108. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 197-198, 204, 208-209, 288.

109. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, p. 297 (12 October 1940).



to resign if the attack on Greece went ahead, the *Duce* had ‘a violent outburst of rage’, lashing out that he would ‘go personally to Greece “to witness the incredible shame of Italians who are afraid of Greeks”’. Ciano understood that Mussolini was ‘planning to move at any cost’.¹¹⁰

On 22 October Ciano began to draw up the ultimatum which Grazzi would hand to Metaxas at 02:00 a.m. on the morning of 28 October 1940. ‘Naturally it is a document that allows no way out for Greece. Either she accepts occupation or she will be attacked.’ Ciano thought that the military plan was so competent that it could bring about Greece’s ‘complete collapse within a few hours’.¹¹¹ Hitler found out a week in advance that an Italian attack on Greece was imminent, and although Ciano and Mussolini denied it, he hurried himself to Italy to meet the *Duce*. When he arrived in Florence and met him on the morning of 28 October 1940, it was too late. As he had long ago decided to do, Metaxas had flatly rejected the Italian ultimatum and the war had already begun.¹¹²

That the Italian military prowess had been overestimated whereas that of the Greeks had been underestimated, became clear very soon. Twenty-four hours after the invasion Ciano noted that ‘diplomatic reactions in the Balkans are quite limited for the time being. No one makes a move to defend the Greeks.’¹¹³ They needed no such move. The invasion turned sour for Mussolini as the outnumbered Greek army halted the Italian advance and launched a successful counter-attack deep into Albanian territory.

Epilogue

In late December 1940-early January 1941, while the Italian army was facing the prospect of a humiliating defeat by the Greeks in Albania, Argyropoulos, the Greek ambassador in Madrid, found himself at the receiving end of a German offer for a mediated peace between Greece and Italy. The German offer envisaged the holding by the Greeks of all the

110. *Ibid.*, pp. 297-299 (14, 15, 17 and 18 October 1940); E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, pp. 239-251.

111. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, pp. 300-301 (22 and 24 October 1940).

112. I. Metaxas, *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. II, pp. 355-356; *DGFP*, D: XI (London: HMSO, 1961), nos. 194, 225, 246, 252; E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, pp. 355-356.

113. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943*, p. 301 (29 October 1940).



territory which their army had occupied, with the exception of a neutral zone between the Greek and Italian troops; this would be occupied by Germans in order to prevent breaches of the truce by either side. Argyropoulos immediately notified Metaxas, recommending acceptance of the German offer.¹¹⁴ At the same time, in late December 1940, the same offer was made to the Greek General Staff by major Clem von Hohenberg, the German Military Attaché in Athens. Metaxas's immediate reply was negative, even if that meant a German attack on Greece. On the one hand, the dictator felt that the German offer was only intended to improve the military fortunes of the Italians; on the other, he still seemed to entertain hopes that the German Army, "so decked with laurels", would not attack a small country like Greece, which could not put up any major resistance. Were that to happen, the Greeks "will not hesitate to do our duty". The reply of the German Military Attaché – that Germany, too, would do "[her] own duty" – left no margin for misunderstandings about Germany's ultimate intentions.¹¹⁵ A dying man at the time - he died on 29 January 1941 - Metaxas opted to fight on despite his knowledge Greece could in no way resist a German offensive.

Primarily in order to protect his right flank during the planned onslaught against the Soviet Union, on 6 April 1941 the Twelfth Army under Marshal Wilhelm von List launched the invasion of Greece. Before the end of April the German troops had occupied Athens. This was a sad, undeserving but inevitable postscript to the Greek victory over the Italians, which dealt the greatest blow to the prestige of Fascist Italy since the defeat of the Italian 'volunteers' at Guadalajara in March 1937 at the hands of Spanish Republican troops and a battalion of Italian anti-fascist members of the International Brigades.¹¹⁶

The Greek victory over the Italians and the overwhelming German response cannot obscure the fact that when it came to Italian foreign policy,

114. Military History Directorate/Greek Army General Staff (hereafter DIS/GES), Athens, File 612/2/1: P.I. Argyropoulos interview with brigadier E. Mansolas, 9 May 1955; P.I. Argyropoulos, *Ai Axioseis tis Ellados: Esoterikai kai Exoterikai Katefthynseis* (Athens: Sideris, 1945), p. 331; J. Hondros, *Occupation and Resistance: The Greek Agony, 1941-44* (New York: Pella, 1983), pp. 43-46.

115. DIS/GES, File 612/2/2: Memorandum by Lt.-Colonel A. Skylitsis, 10 May 1955.

116. E. Grazzi, *I Archi tou Telous*, pp. 7-8, 300-302; MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, p. 288; S. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-45* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 385.



complacency, gullibility and anti-communism prevented most Greek diplomats from appreciating that the Italian aggression, whether in the Western or the Eastern Mediterranean, stemmed from the consistency and tenacity of its agent and the links between foreign policy and the ideology of Fascism. Shortly before his death, Metaxas admitted to himself the folly of believing that ideological affinity with Italy could spare Greece from Mussolini's desire to build an empire:

Since the 4th August 1936 Greece became an anti-communist state, an anti-parliamentary state, a totalitarian state, a state based on peasants and workers and therefore antiplutocratic. [...] Hence Italy, which recognised the affinity of the Greek regime to her own, should be most friendly towards Greece, sincerely and faithfully most friendly. And yet she was hostile. Hostile from the outset. [...] Therefore the anti-communism [of the Germans and the Italians] is spurious, the totalitarianism of their state is spurious, their anti-parliamentarianism is spurious, and their anti-plutocracy is spurious, and all else is spurious. What is genuine is a thirsty imperialism. The one of which they accuse the English.¹¹⁷

The gullibility and complacency of most Greek diplomats was summed up by one of their colleagues and, twenty-three years later, Nobel Laureate for Literature. On 14 June 1940, four days after Italy's entry into the Second World War, Giorgos Seferis recorded in his diary:

those who are in the swing of things are content that the *Duce*, in declaring war, said that he would not harm us if we do not give him an excuse. For that night, and who knows for how many more weeks, these words are their gospel and their talisman. Not that they do not have the intelligence to understand how hollow these promises are, but you think that they have (they do have it) the feeling - a kind of superstition - that salvation depends on the faith that they appear to give to them. One feels this once one wants to discuss a bit more seriously with them. Thus, Papadakis was trying to dispel my reservations arguing that once the war is over, even with an Axis victory, Greece will again be able to play her game in the new balance of European powers which will be created. Just like a Yugoslav politician in Belgrade [,] who was telling me that Italy needs the

117. I. Metaxas, *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. II, pp. 443-445 (2 January 1941).



friendship of his homeland, because after the war she [Yugoslavia] will be necessary to her in order to assist her to resist Germany. Ruses which have a vogue until the blade reaches the nape.¹¹⁸

The critique was apposite. The *Duce* and his son-in-law had been working towards Corfu for themselves and Thessaloniki for the Serbs since November 1937. Again, it was in November 1937 that the *Duce* had told Ciano - “When Spain is finished, I will think of something else. The character of the Italian people must be moulded by fighting”.¹¹⁹ And, after all, for the Italians the shortest road to Greece was through Albania. But as Metaxas once again admitted to himself, some four weeks before his death,

Only the danger, the great, deep, terrible, opens the eyes widely to the truth.¹²⁰

118. G. Seferis, *Politiko Imerologio*, vol. I: 1935-1944 (Athens: Ikaros, 1979), p. 17 (14 June 1940).

119. *Ciano's Diary 1937-1938*, pp. 27, 32 (1 and 13 November 1937).

120. I. Metaxas, *Logoi kai Skepseis*, vol. II, p. 443 (2 January 1941).



ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

ΚΑΤΑΔΙΚΑΣΜΕΝΗ ΟΥΔΕΤΕΡΟΤΗΤΑ: Η ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗ, 1936-1940

υπό
Αθανασίου Δ. Σφήκα

Από τον Σεπτέμβριο του 1939, όταν εξερράγη ο Β΄ Παγκόσμιος Πόλεμος, ως τον Οκτώβριο του 1940 μεσολάβησαν δεκατέσσερις μήνες ελληνικής ουδετερότητας. Η πολιτική αυτή απέτυχε και η χώρα δεν απέφυγε την εμπλοκή στον πόλεμο, παρά την επιθυμία του Ιωάννη Μεταξά, καθώς η ελληνική εξωτερική πολιτική της περιόδου 1936-1940 ασφυκτιούσε μεταξύ της ιταλικής επεκτατικότητας και του βρετανικού ενδοτισμού έναντι της Ιταλίας και της Γερμανίας.

Μετά την πτώση της Οθωμανικής Αυτοκρατορίας, η αντίληψη της Βρετανίας για τη στρατηγική αξία της Ελλάδας απέρρευε από την ανάγκη προστασίας της Διώρυγας του Σουέζ. Για την Ελλάδα, οι δύο εστίες κινδύνου στον Μεσοπόλεμο ήταν η φιλοδοξία της Βουλγαρίας για διέξοδο στο Αιγαίο και τα ιταλικά σχέδια για μια νέα ρωμαϊκή αυτοκρατορία στη Μεσόγειο. Έναντι της Βουλγαρίας, το 1934 η Ελλάδα υπέγραψε με τη Γιουγκοσλαβία, τη Ρουμανία και την Τουρκία το Σύμφωνο της Βαλκανικής Συνεννόησης, ενώ μετά τον Αύγουστο του 1936 ο Μεταξάς αποδέχθηκε τις εισηγήσεις του ελληνικού Γενικού Επιτελείου Στρατού για τον εξοπλισμό του ελληνικού στρατού και την οχύρωση της ανατολικής Μακεδονίας.

Οι σχέσεις της Ελλάδας με την Ιταλία περιπλέκονταν όχι μόνον εξαιτίας των ιταλικών επιδιώξεων αλλά και λόγω της αιτιώδους σχέσης μεταξύ Φασιστικής ιδεολογίας και εξωτερικής πολιτικής, με αποτέλεσμα οι επεκτατικές προθέσεις και η πολεμοχαρής ρητορική του Μτούσε να υποθάψουν την ένταση στα Βαλκάνια καθόλη τη διάρκεια του Μεσοπολέμου.

Η Αιθιοπική κρίση του 1935-1936 και το ενδεχόμενο αγγλο-ιταλικής σύρραξης στη Μεσόγειο προέβαλλαν την πιθανότητα συνεργασίας μεταξύ της Ελλάδας και της Βρετανίας. Η ελληνική κυβέρνηση γνωστοποίησε θα παρέμενε ουδέτερη, αλλά αν αυτό αποδεικνυόταν αδύνατο, θα έσπευδε να στρατευθεί στο πλευρό της Βρετανίας. Παράλληλα, αντιμετώπιζο-



ντας το ενδεχόμενο ταυτόχρονης εμπλοκής με τη Βουλγαρία και την Ιταλία, η ελληνική στρατιωτική ηγεσία ζήτησε βρετανικές εγγυήσεις. Τούτο, όμως, ήταν αδύνατο σε μια περίοδο που η Βρετανική Αυτοκρατορία αντιμετώπιζε όχι μόνον την ιταλική απειλή στη Μεσόγειο, αλλά και αυτή της Ιαπωνίας στην Άπω Ανατολή. Εκτιμώντας ότι ο στόλος τους αδυνατούσε να πολεμήσει ταυτόχρονα εναντίον και των δύο, και θεωρώντας την Ιαπωνία ως μεγαλύτερη απειλή, οι Βρετανοί αποφάσισαν τον κατευνασμό της Ιταλίας. Μια διαλλακτική πολιτική έναντι της Ιταλίας σήμαινε ότι η τυχόν υποστήριξη προς την Ελλάδα δεν θα έπρεπε να προκαλεί τον Μουσολίνι.

Η στάση της Ιταλίας έναντι της Ελλάδας φάνηκε να βελτιώνεται μετά την επιβολή της 4ης Αυγούστου. Στη Ρώμη δημιουργήθηκε η εντύπωση ότι η εσωτερική πολιτική του Μεταξά θα χαλάρωνε τους δεσμούς με τη Βρετανία και τη Γαλλία και θα έφερνε την Ελλάδα στο πλευρό των Φασιστικών δυνάμεων. Από τα τέλη του 1936, όμως, όταν οι ελπίδες αυτές διαψεύστηκαν, οι Ιταλοί άρχισαν να περιβάλλουν τον Μεταξά με καχυποψία.

Από τον Ιούλιο του 1936 ως τον Μάρτιο του 1939 η προσοχή της ευρωπαϊκής διπλωματίας ήταν στραμμένη κυρίως στην επέμβαση της Ιταλίας και της Γερμανίας στον Ισπανικό Εμφύλιο Πόλεμο. Μετά την ολοκληρωτική επικράτηση του Φρανθίσκο Φράνκο, ο Άξονας δεν είχε καμία διάθεση αυτοσυγκράτησης. Στις 15 Μαρτίου 1939 ο γερμανικός στρατός κατέλαβε την Πράγα, και στις 7 Απριλίου η Ιταλία εισέβαλλε στην Αλβανία, την οποία η Ρώμη θεωρούσε ως εφιαλτήριο για τις επόμενες ενέργειές της.

Έναντι του ενδεχόμενου ιταλικής επίθεσης, στις 13 Απριλίου 1939 η Βρετανία και η Γαλλία ανακοίνωσαν ότι αναλάμβαναν ηθική υποχρέωση να συνδράμουν την Ελλάδα σε περίπτωση επίθεσης από τρίτη δύναμη. Ο Μεταξάς ικανοποιήθηκε, αλλά παράλληλα αγωνιούσε για την αντίδραση της Ιταλίας, η οποία προειδοποίησε ότι η Ελλάδα «δεν έχει ανάγκη επικίνδυνων εγγυήσεων από μακρινές χώρες», «ούτε χρειάζεται μια νέα πολιτική εξασφάλιση, η οποία θα ήταν χειρότερη από άχρηστη».

Με ελάχιστες εξαιρέσεις, η ελληνική διπλωματία απέτυχε να συνειδητοποιήσει ότι η ιταλική επεκτατικότητα απέρρεε από τη συνέπεια και την επιμονή των αρχιτεκτόνων της και από την οργανική σχέση μεταξύ εξωτερικής πολιτικής και Φασιστικής ιδεολογίας. Η ευελιξία του Μουσολίνι στις τακτικές επιλογές του ουδόλως επισκίαζε την επιμονή με την οποία επεδίωξε την αναδιάταξη του Μεσογειακού κόσμου. Στην πορεία αυτή του ιταλού δικτάτορα, η Αιθιοπία, η Ισπανία, η Αλβανία και η Ελλάδα αποτέλεσαν ενδιάμεσους σταθμούς.

