

# WHY GREECE RESISTED THE AXIS

CHRYST LOUKAS

GREECE is a community of practically homogeneous population. Her people are held together by certain things common to them — namely nationality, language, religion, customs and institutions, memories and traditions, sentiments and sympathies, concern for the preservation of the family and love for liberty.

My purpose in this article is not to give a summary of Greece's history, or a *post obitum* encomium of her war with the Axis, but rather to present a sociological narrative of some of the outstanding causes that combined to bring about the resistance of her people against the Italian and German invaders. The interpretation will be more comprehensive if, before we go farther, we take into account and keep always in mind certain attitudes and interests common to these people in which the factors that gave rise to Greek resistance are contained; that is to say, if we reacquaint ourselves with some of the outstanding *mores* of the Greeks. Upon the degree of our understanding of the common and complex national and racial patterns of behavior of these people depends the ease or difficulty with which we shall be able to discover the hidden vaults of motive, in the innermost chambers of which the actual causes that spurred the Greeks to resistance are inclosed.

Every Greek, in a greater or less degree, is aware and is constantly reminded by priests, teachers, national leaders, and by politicians of the contributions which his ancestors made to civilization. He is cognizant of his cultural heritage, and proud of the scientific importance of his language. The Greeks consider their religion and their language as the two *palladia* of their national existence, and feel morally bound to preserve them at any sacrifice. The strongest passion of each Greek is a fervent self-sacrificing love of country or patriotism. The Greek imbibes love for liberty with "his mother's milk": this idea is nurtured through

best expressed in the following rhyme, which is a part of every school child's repertoire:

My country's liberty  
And Christ's holy faith  
I am fighting to gain,  
For without these twain  
Life is of no avail

It is not meant here to imply that every Greek is a profound student of his country's history, but rather that he has some knowledge, "charged with sentiment", of certain outstanding events which played an important rôle in the history of civilized mankind. The battles of Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis are an undying reminder of the heroism and military skill displayed by his forefathers. Often he does not know who contributed what in the fields of philosophy, drama, sculpture, architecture, poetry and history, but he never fails to recognize a Greek name when he hears it, and claims that name with pride as of one of his illustrious ancestors. He may have no thorough understanding of the workings of democracy, but he knows that democracy emerged in Greece, and never hesitates to boast about this fact when he is engaged in a political argument. Nor is he unaware that the inability of his ancestors to cooperate proved ruinous to the commonwealth of that day. He knows that this lack of unity brought about the subjugation of Greece by Rome, but the fact that Greece conquered Rome culturally is to him an ever flowing source of pride.

The Greek is devoted to his Orthodox Church. As far as he is concerned, his faith is the true one, as the term etymologically implies. He substantiates his argument by recalling that the New Testament was originally written in Greek. He is aware, and is constantly reminded, that the Church is the outstanding agency that has preserved the national solidarity of his people through the dark ages. He is fairly well acquainted with the rôle which the Greek Church Fathers have played in the political and ecclesiastical squabbles between the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire, and for this reason he places them on a pinnacle no lower than his classical ancestors. The legendary idea that at some time the Byzantine Empire will be re-established has never been entirely eradicated from his mind.

Perhaps in no other period in history did the Greeks suffer more than they did from the time of the fall of Constantinople



impatiently not only served to enhance their desire for freedom, but also helped them to realize more keenly the importance of unity which alone would restore their national independence.

The people of Greece have never forgotten the sacrifices which their ancestors endured during the War of Independence, nor are they unmindful that for six trying years Greece fought this war alone, and that every inch of their soil which they regained was purchased by their blood. The fortitude and heroism not only of the leaders of that war, but of every man, woman and child, has become a source of eternal gratitude and a symbol of liberty. Their unyielding determination stirred the hearts of liberal-minded people throughout the world to the point that the then governments of Great Britain, France and Russia came to their aid at the Battle of Navarino. The dramatic yet unselfish aid of Lord Byron, coupled with his death for the Greek cause, made him a "Greek" hero and an everlasting link of friendship between Great Britain and Hellas.

Thus far, samples of outstanding historical events from the Greek heritage have been presented because of the great importance the Greeks attach to them. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding as to why the Greeks resisted the Axis, we shall present a somewhat fuller picture of what has taken place within the life span of the present generation of Greeks, that is, from the time of the Balkan Wars to the present day.

In their eagerness to regain the recognition which they felt they rightfully deserved from the rest of the world, and in their desire to liberate the remainder of their compatriots from the Turkish yoke, they were seeking in and out of Greece for leaders who would champion their cause. In their search they cast their lot with Eleutherios Venizelos who, in 1909, had left the island of Crete, which at that time was not a part of the Greek Kingdom, and became active in Greek politics. Through his statesmanship and magnetic personality, Mr. Venizelos succeeded not only in uniting his compatriots but also in inducing the Great Powers to recognize some of the rights of Greece. Loved as he was for his success in his foreign policy and hated for his internal blunders, his friends and enemies are united in their esteem for the rôle which he had played in Greece's struggle in the early days of his political career. However, the achievement which outweighed all of his other accomplishments, as far as a large majority of his compatriots were concerned, was the

with the Royal Family he and the then Crown Prince Constantine fought triumphantly the Balkan Wars.

The realization of their aspiration for a Greater Greece was brought a step closer through the military excellence of the late King Constantine XII. His unprecedented successes in the battles against the Turks and Bulgarians was due mainly to his ability to gain the respect and confidence of his soldiers. He would not only eat, drink and dance with them, but would share their discomforts. Because of these and other enviable traits, he became the idol of his army and practically a saint to the people at home, many of whom named their new born children after him. Many believed, as the legend goes, "King Constantine lost the throne of Constantinople, and a Constantine will regain it",—that he was the legendary figure who would re-establish the Byzantine Empire. It was this reverential attitude of the Greeks toward him, rather than an anti-British feeling, that made them follow him in his policy of neutrality in the beginning of the World War of 1914, to assure him of his restoration after the war, and to vote overwhelmingly for his return in 1920.

One of King Constantine's advisers, who was playing a silent and yet important rôle in both the Balkan and the World War, was the late General John Metaxas. In the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, he was the sub-chief of staff, and in 1915 he was elevated to be chief of staff. "At the time of the allied attack upon the Dardanelles", says William Miller<sup>1</sup>, "the Greek government ordered him to draw up a plan for their capture, based upon excellent information, which the British were not in position to acquire for themselves. This plan was sent to the British military authorities who, with deplorable stupidity and tactlessness, which cost us dear, returned the envelope containing the plan unopened!" Metaxas was a recognized military genius, but was not lacking in statesmanship. However, his insistence on the merit system and his dislike for patronage have been a stumbling block which kept him from acquiring a large political following. He adopted, from the outset of his political career, the motto "The right man for the right job," a slogan which was not favored by the political bosses who recognized his sincerity and knew that they would receive no personal gains if they followed him.

Subsequent events that have taken place since the second abdication of King Constantine, such as the change of the



government from constitutional monarchy to a Republic, the various *coups d'état*, the attempt by opposition leaders to assassinate Venizelos, the military insurrection of March 5, 1935, of which Venizelos later became the leader, the return of George I, the failure of the two major parties to form a coalition government, forced the King to create an emergency Cabinet of which Metaxas was a member. The death of the Prime Minister of this Cabinet elevated Metaxas to that office. The inability of the two large parties to reach an agreement for the formation of a Cabinet caused the Chamber to give the new Prime Minister a vote of confidence and adjourn for five months.

As soon as the authority was granted to Metaxas, he began to execute many of the social reforms which Venizelos had initiated and was unable to finish. He put in operation unemployment insurance; he began the construction of highways in all parts of Greece, and established large numbers of agriculture and experimental stations in the various farming districts of the nation. Courses in forestry, horticulture and animal husbandry began to be added in all schools of secondary and higher education. New health and sanitation laws were established and enforced. The swampy areas were speedily drained and prepared for cultivation. The initiation of all these works served as an indication of his ability as a national administrator, and prevented popular resentment at his rise to dictatorial rank which was to follow later.

At that time, as the reader may recall, international relations had definitely become worse, and few were the people who were not apprehensive of a new world conflict. To the King and his emergency Cabinet, the menace of war was a matter of grievous concern, for they knew that, in the event of hostilities, Greece would be caught, torn by factionalism and completely unprepared. In addition, they had accurately perceived the increasing disposition in circles other than political to approve the subordination of party politics to national interest; and, spurred to action by the mounting discontent among industrial and agrarian groups, they finally concluded that the salvation of Greece might momentarily require the assumption of complete control by Premier Metaxas.

Thus, before the time expired which was allotted to the Premier by the Chamber to rule Greece unhindered, the King and his emergency Cabinet appointed Metaxas dictator of Greece.

On the assumption of his dictatorship, Metaxas

Our Motherland has suffered enough hardships from our continuous factionalism and individual strife. Such vicious practices are out of date. They are popular only among primitive people. The time has come for us to unite our efforts for our common good. Let us throw a veil over the past, and put our shoulders together so as to make ourselves happier, stronger people, who may walk with a more determined spirit and gait. Let us remain true to the principle of peace, and maintain friendly relations with all nations. To this cause each of us must dedicate himself unflinchingly.

Metaxas's assumption of dictatorial powers was, to be sure, displeasing to many, but gratifying to not a few. Neither group, however, doubted his ability, sincerity and genuine patriotism.

With foreign powers great or small, Greece's relationship continued to be amicable. Not unlike that of the Secretary of State of the United States, Metaxas's intention from the outset was to maintain friendly relations with democratic and all other forms of governments of the world. The avoidance of "entangling alliances" which might prove ruinous to its people was the major tenet of the Government's foreign policy. Sober-minded individuals can readily comprehend the wisdom of such a course. Had the Government adopted a different policy, what would have hindered her ambitious and powerful neighbor, Italy, from destroying Greece either by air or by sea?

The reader is aware that past relations between Greece and Italy had never been reliable, and that since 1912 they had become increasingly strained. Italy's refusal to return the Dodecanese to Greece, which she had repeatedly promised to do through various treaties since 1912, caused many Greeks to consider her as a neighbor with imperialistic designs. This suspicion was strengthened by the well-known Corfu incident of 1923, through which the Greek Government was held responsible for the death of an Italian delegate, General Tellini, without justification, and was faced with the dilemma of meeting many humiliating demands as well as the paying of a large indemnity. The latter requirement the Greeks agreed to, but they refused some provisions of the former requests; in retaliation Italy bombed the unfortified Island of Corfu, and had it not been for the intervention of the League of Nations, Italy would have seized the island. The hatred of the Greeks for Italy's methods was stretched almost to the breaking point on the eve of the festival of the Virgin Mary, in the Island of Tinos on August 14, 1940, when an Italian submarine torpedoed and sunk the Greek cruiser *Helle*



served to make many opponents of the Metaxas régime realize the General's wisdom in using a mild form of regimentation. His military successes against the Italians proved to the world that he was engaged in preparing his compatriots psychologically not to believe the Nazi contention that the Axis forces are invincible.

In the foregoing pages I have tried to bring to the foreground that part of the social heritage of Greece which constitutes an unbroken chain between the Greeks of the past and the Greeks of to-day. The purpose, so to speak, has been to comprehend Greece through a time span: to view her as she actually is, a becoming, not a being; process, not a product; a moving equilibrium, not a constant. We have done so in order to facilitate our understanding of how the social heritage of the Greeks determines to a degree their present actions. Every Greek has a definite attitude toward this common heritage, and a common interest for its perpetuation. Whenever their heritage is threatened, both attitude and interest increase in intensity. They become more keenly concerned about its future, so to speak, and willing to die for its preservation if need be.

The factors which influenced the Greeks to resist the Axis are many and variously inter-related. They are environmental, cultural, social, economic, etc., each of which contributed its share in the making of that decision; the exact measure of the contribution of each cannot, of course, be mathematically determined. These factors fall into two closely bound categories, into what Professor R. M. MacIver terms<sup>2</sup> "inner" and "outer" aspects of the total environment which constitutes the life-long experience of every Greek. These two orders, though separate in thought, in actuality are but two aspects of the same thing. They are the creative experience of every Greek individually and collectively. Each of these aspects is a counterpart of the other. The inner is a complex of desires, motives and attitudes; it is the subjective aspect of the experience-context of each Greek. The outer is a complex of specific means, specific opportunities, specific stimulations, and specific hindrances; it is the objective aspect of the experience-context of each Greek. The reality of the concept will be better apprehended if we consider objectively the reasons why the Greeks resisted the Axis.

We have noted from the foregoing account how significant a rôle the past Greeks play in the life and actions of the modern. While the Greek is aware of the value of his heritage, he is not

unmindful of the esteem in which the outside civilized world holds this heritage. Nor is he ignorant that the democratic-minded people expect him, to a large degree, to be the guardian and propagator of the ideas of his ancestors. His love for liberty is so strong that he is ever ready to die for it. The fact that his ancestors have always defeated their foes in battle, not by numerical strength but by outwitting them in military tactics, spurs him to defy any enemy irrespective of the consequences. The knowledge that the Greek War of Independence was practically won without any outside aid taught the Greek to rely first and always on his own resources. Whenever Greece was at war, the officers and soldiers as well as the folks at home knew far in advance why the war was undertaken, believed in it and fought it as one man. This singleness of thought and action was well illustrated in the Balkan Wars, when the late King Constantine fought side by side with his men and shared their hardships. This singleness of purpose was translated, through the efforts of Venizelos, into the international realm, and made the Greeks aware of their relationship and the inter-dependence of nations with democratic principles.

The political leanings of the average Greek have always been democratic, and in time of crisis invariably he casts his lot with the democracies. That this is so, is perceived in his preference for British friendship. Byron was unmistakably, to a large degree, responsible for the beginnings of this pro-British attitude. The Greek partiality for British was strongly shown when in 1862, after the deposition of King Otho I, the nation held a plebiscite for a new King and gave 230,000 votes to a British Prince as against 2,000 for the Russian Duke. Although the English Prince was unable to accept because of the Protocol of 1830, the British Government promised to find a ruler for Greece. With the selection of the Danish Prince, as the new Greek King, George I, the British ceded the Ionian Islands to Greece as a coronation gift. King George I did a great deal to foster intimate relations between Greece and the British Empire. The perpetuation of Anglo-philism is unmistakably reflected in the present King George II, grandson of George I. It should not be assumed that there were no misunderstandings between Greece and the British Empire, but these differences became insignificant when the mutual interests of the two countries were at stake. And it was this realization that caused Metaxas to forgive whatever



his time and energy to prepare his country to meet the crisis which he foresaw.

Reducing the foregoing discussion into terms of social causation, we discern that the various causes that combined to spur the Greeks to resist the Rome-Berlin Axis are contained in their attitude towards their heritage and their interest in preserving it. We can conclude, then, that the motive which caused the Greeks to resist the Axis can be ascertained from an analysis of the combined "value total"<sup>3</sup> which the Greeks place on their cultural heritage, the bravery shown by their ancestors in the various wars of their nation, their well-known love for home and country, and their unyielding determination to defend their liberty at all costs. To this "value total" of theirs, we must add an "appreciation sum" which is the result of their knowledge of the esteem in which the world held their heritage, and a "measure of feeling of moral obligation" to Great Britain and the democracies for their obvious pro-Greek attitude. The "total" of these "sums" we will have to contrast with the "total" of the "sums" of their apprehension of the Italian aspirations and their dislike for the ruthless and oppressive Nazi policy of conquest.

Obviously, then, the combination of these and other factors forced the Greeks to think with which camp they had best cast their lot in order that they might enjoy those things which they prized most. The Nazi disregard for treaties, and the atrocities which they were inflicting upon the conquered people on the one hand, and Mussolini's midnight ultimatum on the other, hastened the Greek decision to fight the Axis—come what might! In a word, the Greeks realized that fighting with the democracies meant early or late the enjoyment, in a fuller measure, of all the things which they and their ancestors have always valued more than life itself. Yielding to the Nazi and Fascist demands meant the everlasting subjugation of their political, economic, cultural and religious liberties.

Seeing the Greek decision from this point of view, we can easily understand the motive that caused the Greeks to resist and defeat an army superior to theirs in numbers and equipment—it is enfolded in their attitude toward their heritage, in their *mores* and in their devotion to freedom. For the preservation of these, they are always ready to sacrifice their life. To them the motto "Liberty or Death" is not an idle phrase.