

CONTRIBUTION OF GREECE TO THE VICTORY OF THE ALLIES DURING WW II

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The peninsula of Greece has, since antiquity, been a point of confrontation between East and West, as it constitutes an area of utmost strategic value, situated on the flanks of the main axis of operations in East-West direction and vice-versa. Whoever occupies Greece can effortlessly with his forces harass the flanks or even the rear of troops operating along the aforementioned axis, control the sea line of communication from Gibraltar to Suez, and block from the west the sea route from the Black Sea to Propontis (Marmara) Sea, the Hellespont (Straits), the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. The geo-strategic value of Greece has been dramatically enhanced during the XXth century, due to the rapid technological development of war equipment (as per the quote of sir Halford Mackinder on the «Heartland»).

During the 2nd World War, Italy launched the attack against Greece, without informing its ally, Germany. Berlin was enraged by the Italian action and considered it «totally incoherent» and mistimed, because it was initiated just before wintertime, a season unsuitable for mountain operations, as well as just before the elections in the (still neutral) USA, providing Roosevelt with even more convincing arguments for going to war. Moreover, it criticised the Italians refraining from any seaborne operation, a fact that facilitated the British in debarking on Crete and other islands, significant for their strategic importance; while they left them the margin to deploy in Thessalonica. To preclude such an eventuality, Berlin notified the Hellenic Government, a few days after the Italian invasion, that it would not consider the presence of small British air units as a “casus belli”, provided that they would not be allowed to use the airfields in northern Greece.

The threat from the Axis, however, came from the unexpectedly successful Hellenic counter-offensive in northern Epirus since 14 November 1940, just two days after the completion of the general mobilisation of Greece. On 22 November 1940, the Hellenic forces seized Coriza (Korçë), the first town lost by the Axis forces since the beginning of the war. Subsequently, on 13 December 1940, Hitler issued his Order Nr 20 for the operation “Marita”, in which he explained that «... given the menacing situation in Albania, it is of twofold importance to cancel the effort of the English to organise -under the screen of the Balkan front- an air base particularly dangerous for both the Italians and the oil wells in Romania. In this light:

- a) Within the next months forces should assemble in southern Romania that were gradually to be reinforced (and)
- b) as soon as the weather conditions permit -perhaps in March [...] they would be employed in order to occupy, through Bulgaria the northern coast of the Aegean Sea and, if necessary, all mainland Greece».

The seven month-long battle in 1940-41, against the Italians initially and the Germans afterwards, substantially contributed to the Victory of the Allies during the

2nd World War. During this battle, approximately 14,000 Greek soldiers were sacrificed, up to the final occupation of our country, against the loss of 28,000 soldiers of the opponent forces. It was the first allied victory and caused astonishment to the world, as it made friends and enemies recognise that «heroes fight like Greeks», as per the famous phrase credited to Winston Churchill. Until then, the Axis with its pioneer strategic planning and tactic employment of mechanised and airborne forces advanced all over continental Europe. In contrast, as noted by Peter Young, it took only 45 days for the occupation of France, despite the strong British military assistance, 18 for Belgium; 5 for the Netherlands; while Denmark had succumbed within 12 hours and Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Albania had either joined or surrendered without a fight to the Axis.

Nevertheless, the decision to fight against the expected invaders was a conscious and deliberate decision of the political leadership since September 1936; and was complemented by every possible preparation as regarded fortification works, defence armaments, morale enhancement, personnel training, mobilisation planning and wartime operations.

The most indicative characteristic of this preparation had been the immense construction and equipping works of 21 major permanent forts along the Hellenic-Bulgarian frontier, of a total length of approximately 500 kms, of paramount strategic and tactical efficiency, even against the German war machine, despite the fact that the entire line was intended for defence only against the Balkan opponent (Bulgaria). The total length of the underground galleries and shelters reaches 37 kms, which were excavated without the current digging machinery. They were completed within 3 years (1937-1940) and were to be known as the defensive «**Metaxas line**», being a major Greek achievement, the cost of which reached 1.5 billion Greek drachmas of that time, that is approximately 30 billion Euros. The project had been entirely planned by the Engineers of the Hellenic Army, with the tactical contribution of the Infantry and the Artillery. The contractors also did their duty, because, when the money of the Hellenic State dried up (1938-39), they agreed to work on credit – expecting to be paid off the following year!

At this point, it should be noted that the forts were to be manned with the totality of the Hellenic land campaign forces. Instead, the fortifications along the northern borderline were manned with completely insufficient forces, remnants of the Greek-Italian front. Nevertheless, with the exception of the two edges of the line of the forts, the Germans did not manage to cut through the fortified line from Beles Mountain to Nestos River. When, after the capitulation, Major General Schneider (head of the German committee responsible for studying the fortification works) inspected the line for a month, he wrote that these forts had achieved the maximum defence compared to any other similar fortification line in Europe. Moreover, he admired the great durability of the concrete of the works ...

As evidenced from official foreign historical archives, the defeat of Italy sealed the hesitance of the then leader of Spain, General Franco, and of Marshall Petain, chief of the extensive free metropolitan and colonial territories of France, **not** to give in to German pressure for military intervention in order to seize Gibraltar, northern Africa and the Middle East, to encircle the USSR from the East.

Germany, not forgetting the breach of the Macedonian front in 1918, occupied the Balkans in order to cover the eastern flank of its area of operations against the

USSR, according to Hitler's Order Nr 21, issued on 18 December 1940 on operation «Barbarossa». This time lapse, cost **him** a delay of 5 weeks, as he was forced to divert one third of his troops, combat aircraft and main battle tanks, assembled to this end. As an indicative example, here is an excerpt from the memoirs of the state photographer and cinema director of the Third Reich, Leni Riefenstahl, recording the following phrase of Hitler's: «Italy going to war proved a disaster for us. If the Italians had not attacked Greece and had not needed our help, the war would have taken a different turn. We would have been able to seize Leningrad and Moscow before being caught up by the Russian frost». This was the reason why Hitler had unsuccessfully tried repeatedly and methodically to tempt Greece to accept advantageous peace initiatives, intervening and proposing that the Greeks would be able to keep the territories liberated in northern Epirus.

In order to completely occupy Greece -already exhausted by the five-month strong resistance- the Germans needed two more months, despite the fact that they employed their top elite units: Hitler's notorious experienced personal Waffen SS guard, the «Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler», and the specialised «Gross Deutschland» task force, and the famous Paratrooper Divisions, who were decimated during the battle of Crete and were never used again, until the end of the war, for major operational ventures.

Here is a characteristic excerpt from the speech of the British parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of War Transport (including Shipping) Philip Noel Baker, on 28 October 1942, for the first anniversary of «OCHI» (the Greek «NO» to the Italians):

«Had Greece succumbed without a fight to the Axis attacks, no one would have had the right to blame it. I say this while we knew then and we know even better now, what it would have meant for us if Greece had surrendered without a fight. The Axis would then be able to develop lines of communication throughout Europe and its planes and submarines would then dominate across the Mediterranean from the Greek coasts. Our defence in Egypt would be much harder. Syria, Iraq and Cyprus would be taken over by the Axis and Turkey would also be engulfed. The oilfields of the Middle East would be at the disposal of the Axis. The rear door of Caucasus would be wide open and we would lose the entire Middle East and perhaps the war.

Thanks to the Greek defence we were given the time first to fend off and then crash the Italian army, which moved from Libya against Egypt, to clear up the Red Sea from enemy ships, to move the American aid to the Middle East and to overcome the hostile threat against it. The results of the Greek defence are even felt today in our struggles. If Stalingrad and the Caucasus stand up today to the German pressure, it is not unrelated to the Greek defence, by which we are benefiting even two entire years later. The world really has no right to forget the feats of the Greeks at this historic moment».

Of course, the results of the German campaign in the Balkans would have been different, if the Yugoslavs had fought and did not collapse in 2-3 days and if the Hellenic forces were equipped with Armour ...

Even after the occupation of Crete, the Hellenic Army did not surrender. All the combat able ships of the Fleet sailed with almost 3,000 volunteers to Alexandria in Egypt, where, along with the men of the Hellenic Army and Air Force escaping occupied Greece, the Hellenic Government in Cairo and King George II continued the war against the Axis, even in its birthplaces (in Italy) and up to the final victory of

1945. Greece had been the only country that, despite its occupation, made organised land, sea and air forces available to the Allies.

However, the Hellenic Government, after arriving, faced a very difficult situation. The Axis forces, after the attack launched in spring 1941, had swiftly regained the lost terrain and threatened even the territory of Egypt. The Allies did not have sufficient forces for effective resistance; additionally, the situation in the areas of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran, even in Turkey, which kept an evasive stance and sui-generis neutrality, seemed complicated. Under such conditions, the Hellenic Government had also to come to terms with the negative or even pro-Italian stance of the Egyptian Government. Due to this situation, King George and the exiled Government were forced on 27 June 1941, one month after their initial installation to leave the country for South Africa, where they stayed for approximately one and a half months, and for London, where they installed themselves along with other allied governments that had found refuge there. Only the Ministers of the three war ministries Army, Navy and Air Force remained in Cairo.

The Hellenic Government had found in Cairo those first elements that would subsequently constitute the base for the development of the Hellenic Army in the Middle East, the Army of the enslaved winners. These elements were, mainly, the «**Phalanx of the Greeks of Egypt**» (ΦΕΑ) and one Infantry Battalion in Alexandria, manned by enlisted and volunteer Greeks from Egypt and the Italian-occupied Dodecanese, named the «**Dodecanese Battalion**». A very important reinforcement was also to be troops of the Hellenic Evros River Brigade that, after the German invasion, found refuge in the territory of Turkey, as foreseen by the respective staff plans. The Turks disarmed the brigade, as soon as it crossed the borderline; and the commander, Major General Ioannis Zissis preferred to commit suicide instead of surrendering his pistol. After many setbacks and pretexts, the Turkish authorities allowed the transfer in June 1941 of approximately 1650 men of this brigade to Egypt.

Equipping the men of the Hellenic Army in the Middle East by the British was very difficult, due to the lack of armaments. In parallel to the enlistment of the aforementioned classes of Greeks of Egypt, volunteers both officers and soldiers continued flowing in, as they escaped from occupied Greece using all the available means, along with expatriate Greeks from various parts of the world (in total, almost 9,000 enlisted volunteers) and Cypriots, who fought with the British forces. Thus, the strength of the re-organised Hellenic Army in the Middle East, at the end of May 1942, reached approximately 12,000 men.

Veteran retired Lieutenant General Ioannis Korkas later stressed that: «The Greek spirit has absolutely influenced and decisively reacted on the main instigator, planner, organiser and architect of the allied operations, General Montgomery, who, arriving on 12 August 1942 to assume the command of the 8th Army, was astonished by the prevailing defeatism and the orders of retreat to and withdrawal from Egypt. He then wrote in his book: «I remembered the inscription, which I saw in Thermopylae in 1933: «Ω! ξείν ἀγγέλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις – Oh! Stranger, go tell the Lacedaemonians» and I said that we would do the same». The decision «victory or death» proved important for the historical outcome at the position of El Alamein, where the Hellenic I Brigade made a great contribution.

Summing up only the most important participation of the units of the Hellenic Army in the Middle East in the allied operations inside Greece, one may refer to the

battles of El Alamein; the operations in northern Africa and for the recuperation of the Dodecanese by the Sacred Company, and the occupation of Italy, where the Hellenic III Mountain Brigade excelled during the battle of Rimini; for this reason, it was re-named as «Rimini Brigade». The participation of the Hellenic Fleet was also significant with the main mission to escort and protect allied merchant ship convoys in the Mediterranean against enemy attacks. It also participated in the great and successful allied landing in Sicily, on 10 July 1943, which eventually led to the capitulation of Italy on 8 September 1943 and the respective landing at Anzio on 22 January 1944.

As an indicative example, it should be noted that, in **1943**, out of the **41** warships conducting escort missions, 27 were British, **11 Hellenic** and only 3 French. Moreover, Hellenic Fleet units participated in the great allied landing in Normandy on 6 June 1944, the greatest combined allied operation of all times. Hellenic ships operated in the Atlantic from England to Cape Town and from Gibraltar to the Azores. The total distance covered by the Hellenic Fleet during those war operations was approximately 2 million nautical miles within about 185,000 navigable hours. This means that each ship covered an average of 20,000 nautical miles, which is 80% of the perimeter of the Earth, under war conditions. The Hellenic Merchant Marine provided many ships for those death convoys and proved a valuable caterer for the Allies, while during the Italian invasion against Greece, its ship, protected by the Hellenic Navy, **safely** transported almost **80%** of the war materials and the troops to ports of destinations near the front.

Meanwhile in occupied Greece, from the very first moment, National Resistance against the occupation forces was organised, with the overwhelming participation of the Greek people. Men, women and children volunteered with self-sacrifice to the cause of freedom. Gradually, starting from sabotage and intelligence teams mainly in Athens, the Resistance developed from 1942 on to an armed struggle, with respective guerrilla forces, first principally in the countryside, and later (1943-44) in residential areas.

It took different forms of struggle: sabotage by students, civil servants and workers to occupation forces infrastructure works, in particular bridges; noisy demonstrations; celebrations of national days; collection and transmission of crucial information and transfer of volunteers to the Middle East; and of course, guerrilla warfare in conjunction with major allied military deception operations, since 1943; etc.

The most important resistance organisations were:

1. ΕΔΕΣ (National Republican Greek League) and EAM (National Liberation Front) with their armed branches EOEA (National Groups of Greek Guerrillas) and ΕΛΑΣ (Greek Peoples' Liberation Army) respectively
2. ΕΚΚΑ (National and Social Liberation Army) which reorganised the 5/42 Regiment
3. ΕΣΕΑ (Greek National Liberation Army) and
4. ΠΑΟ (Greek Liberation Organisation)

Other sabotage and intelligence organisations were active, such as «Μπουμπουλίνα», «Όμηρος», «Ζευς», «Κόδρος», «Τρίαινα», «ΠΑΝ», «ΠΑΙΑΝ» and many other. Apart from the Greek ones, allied organisations were activated in Greece, namely «Force 133» and «Midas». From 1942, a «British Military Mission» deployed, which in 1943 was renamed to «Allied Military Mission», whose influence during the initial stages was determining. At this point, the participation of Greek expatriates from the USA should be recorded in 1943, as well as the operations of the C Com-

pany of the 2671 Special Reconnaissance Battalion which operated in Greece from 23 April to 20 November 1944.

Given that the terrain configuration in Greece favours guerrilla warfare, National Resistance was catalytic for the allied planning; eventually it pinned down 300,000 Axis troops, keeping them away from the north Africa front and later from Sicily, in a period crucial for the operations there. Indeed, the German Staff was so much deceived by the activities of Greek partisans that it considered our country as the primary objective of the allied landing.

It should be noted, at this point, that tactical troops of that time were inexperienced in countering guerrilla warfare. Most anti-insurgency techniques and tactics were developed later in Malaysia, Algeria, Vietnam and other areas. Partisans of the 2nd World War brought great embarrassment and despair to the Germans, who had to constantly experiment solutions. Arresting civilian hostages, conducting retaliation and the collective responsibility doctrine did not bring tangible results; on the contrary, in the end they turned against the occupation forces, as they led more and more people to the resistance.

The first «clouds» of civil war appeared, as the reinforcement-consolidation of the resistance organisation brought to surface ΕΛΑΣ claims for more power after the liberation.

However, there was a plethora of positive reports by the Allies for the actions of the aforementioned organisations, as the one of the Chief of the Allied Military Mission in occupied Greece, Eddy Myers, as well as of his successor, Chris Woodhouse. The latter, in a speech in Greece on 31 October 1984 on the role of National Resistance, praised its contribution to three major operations planned by the Allies: the blowing up of the railway bridge of Gorgopotamos in November 1942, under the code name «Operation Hurling», the successive operations in summer 1943, under the code name «Animals», aiming at deceiving the Germans as to the exact location of the allied landing in Italy, and the one for the harassment of the German disengagement from Greece in September 1944, under the code name «Noah's Ark» or simply «Ark». Furthermore, the German historian Heinz Richter has mentioned that: «The Hellenic Army has shown to the world, in times when all believed that the dictators were invincible, that the resistance from a tiny country could be successful. The national resistance against the occupants that ensued proved once more how strong the will of the Greeks for freedom was».

This un-enlaved spirit of the Greek people came at a heavy price. The «ceremonial» devastating destruction of the village of Kandanos in Crete on 3 June 1941 was a war crime and signalled the beginning of a series of arbitrary and bloody tactics of German retaliations all over occupied Greece. During the triple occupation (Italian with the assistance of Albanian Muslims in Epirus, German and Bulgarian) almost 500,000 innocent civilian were either massacred or died of starvation and hardship, due to war operations and air bombardments. To these losses should be added the hostages taken to Germany, Italy and Bulgaria who never returned. This loss of population of Greece is considered among the highest in Europe, in comparison to those of other occupied countries, as it reached 7% of its total population.

The country, at the end of the war operations, was in essence destroyed. Burnt buildings of all types are estimated at 155,000; there were 1,700 totally burnt Greek villages; while families, victims of fire, reach 111,000. The reduction of the ag-

ricultural production reached at 80% and of the livestock capital dropped by 50%. The destruction of mineral mining installations, of the Corinth Canal and of transport and commercial infrastructure has been estimated at almost 18 billion USD. This amount also includes the sustainment of the occupation troops borne by the Greek people. Giga-inflation based the national currency and caused a financial catastrophe. The national income from about 63 trillion consolidated Drachmas in 1939, collapsed to 46 in 1941 and to 21 trillion in 1942.

Tremendous also were the damages for the Merchant marine, as almost 75% of the commercial and passenger shipping of the country was lost. During the 2nd World War, from the total **500** ocean-going freight steamers of the Greek fleet, approximately **211** sank due to war operations. Furthermore, **107** Greek ships were lost due to other causes. Out of the **55** passenger ships, **52** sank. In addition, out of the **700** caiques, almost **500** were lost. These Greek losses should be compared to the total losses of allied commercial ships during the 2nd World War. According to British statistics, published after the war, the Allies lost in total **2,600** of these ships, 95% of which in the Atlantic. Therefore, **the losses of the Greek Merchant marine represent 14% of the total number of allied commercial and passenger ships sunk.**

The years of the occupation were a living hell for the Greek people that, however, never lost its morale and kept on fighting. For Greece, the return from the war to peace entailed satisfying the national claims, such as the incorporation of northern Epirus, Cyprus and the Dodecanese. The international environment, since the country stood at the side of the winners, seemed favourable. But, behind the festive and consensual atmosphere of the first days, lurked those problems and confrontations that would lead to the civil war tragedy. Out of the Hellenic claims, only the one concerning the Dodecanese was satisfied.

The winners imposed on defeated Germany and Japan a ban on military armaments and movements. One can wonder whether this measure decisively helped the realisation of the German and Japanese «economic miracle». In contrast, Greece torn apart by the war and the ensuing civil one, was forced to bear enormous military expenses in the context of NATO, during the Cold War ...