

Italy to Greece, 28-10-1940

In the autumn of 1939 Italy and Greece had still reconfirmed 'the friendship and collaboration which inspired the Pact of Friendship, Conciliation and Judicial Settlement signed at Rome on September 23, 1928'.¹ But relations between the two countries had been deteriorating almost directly since. In the first half of 1940, rumours of Greece attempting to sow unrest in Albania reverberated in Italian media. Editorials demanding the annexation of Greek territory were a regular feature. Numerous incidents troubled the waters further. In one incident an unidentified submarine sank a Greek mine vessel, and in another incident, Italian military aircraft raided two Greek destroyers performing ceremonial duties off the Greek island of Tenosby. In early October 1940, reports surfaced that Italy had deployed 130,000 troops close to the Greek border.² Annexing Greece was indeed part of the Italy's Leader Benito Mussolini plans. By mid October he had decided to launch an attack on Greece but not before first presenting it with an ultimatum.³ Mussolini notified the German government of his plans shortly before they were carried out.⁴ At 3 a.m. of the morning of 28 October, Italian Representative Grazzi presented the Greek Leader General Metaxas with an ultimatum in Athens. In the ultimatum, which carried a time limit of only 3 hours, the government of Italy charged the government of Greece with aiding Great Britain in the war effort by allowing it to freely navigate its waters and to use Greek islands for intelligence purposes. It also accused the government of committing acts of terrorism against the Albanian population and instigating unrest on the Albanian-Greek frontier. The ultimatum stated that the Italian government had therefore decided

to demand from the Hellenic Government, as a guarantee alike of the neutrality of Greece and the security of Italy, the right to occupy with Italy's armed forces, for the duration of the present conflict with Great Britain, a number of certain strategic points in Greek territory.⁵

The ultimatum, which was broadcast through the Italian radio later that day, continued:

The Italian Government demand that the Hellenic Government instantly issue the necessary orders to the military authorities, so that the occupation may be carried out peaceably. Should the Italian forces meet with resistance, the resistance will be crushed by force of arms, and in that case the Hellenic Government will bear the responsibility for whatever may ensue.⁶

The Italian representative delivering the ultimatum was not able to further specify which strategic points Italy intended to occupy. Regardless, the Greek leader general Metaxas famously responded 'Ochi', the Greek word indicating 'no'. Italy launched its attack thirty minutes prior to the expiration of the deadline from Albania. Metaxas immediately ordered the full mobilisation of the Greek armed forces and issued a call to arms to the Greek male population stating 'let the nation arise! Fight for your Fatherland, your wives, your children, and for our sacred traditions!'⁷ The government of Great

¹ M. B. and A. J. B., 'The Invasion of Greece', *Bulletin of International News* 17, no. 22 (2 November 1940): 1413.

² B. and B., 1413.

³ Santi Corvaja, *Hitler & Mussolini: The Secret Meetings* (Enigma Books, 2013), 137.

⁴ Corvaja, 140-41.

⁵ Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1939-1946: The Initial Triumph of the Axis*, 340. For an account of the entire episode see 336-341; 361-363; see also Keesing's, *Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 1940*, Vol. IV:4295. The content of the ultimatum was broadcast through the Italian radio later that day, see Bulletin of International News, 'Chronology', *Bulletin of International News* 17, no. 22 (2 November 1940): 1457-58.

⁶ 'Remember Greece, by Dilys Powell, 1941', Scribd, 1941, 46, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/32818528/Remember-Greece-by-Dilys-Powell-1941>.

⁷ Keesing's, *Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 1940*, Vol. IV:4295.

Britain promised (military) assistance to Greece.⁸ Bulgaria and Yugoslavia had already declared their neutrality and so did Turkey.⁹ Despite some initial Italian successes, the Greek armed forces managed to withstand the Italian attack due to poor weather conditions and inadequate military logistical preparations by Italy, and, eventually, after a number of serious military clashes, turn the tables on Italy by mid November.¹⁰ Italy was pushed back into Albania and failed to achieve any of its objectives. Only when Hitler came to Mussolini's side with military assistance five months later in the spring of 1941, did Italy finally manage to invade Greece. Fatality rates were 13,755 fatalities for Italy and 13,408 for Greece, in addition to tens of thousands of injured for both countries.¹¹

⁸ Keesing's, Vol. IV:4295. see also Martin van Creveld, 'Prelude to Disaster: The British Decision to Aid Greece, 1940-41', *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 3 (1 July 1974): 65-92.

⁹ B. and B., 'The Invasion of Greece', 1407.

¹⁰ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 148-50. See also Chapter 13 The Armed Forces and Preparedness for War in Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 169-89.

¹¹ Clodfelter, *Warfare And Armed Conflicts*, 803. Beevor, *The Second World War*, 150.