

REPORT on GREECE

ATHENS

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Editor of the NEWS CHRONICLE

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FOREWORD

This pamphlet comprises the text of three articles contributed to the *News Chronicle* on February 8, 9 and 12. They were written on return from a visit to Greece made in an effort to discover at first hand the facts behind a complex and hotly-debated situation.

I was in Greece from January 18 to February 1 inclusive. During part of my stay the T.U.C. delegation, headed by Sir Walter Citrine, was also there. In the course of my investigation I made as thorough an inquiry as time and prevailing circumstances would permit into most aspects of the problem. I talked at length with members of the Greek Government, many other prominent Greek politicians of all shades of opinion, British authorities military and diplomatic, common soldiers, prisoners from both sides, Greek civilians, and members and spokesmen of E.A.M. and K.K.E. The resulting Report attempts to set out the facts and background as I found them honestly and impartially, without consideration of parties or personalities.

The reprint has been made in response to requests and because the Greek problem is in my opinion, in spite of the agreement now reached, of continuing importance as it affects British foreign policy and the European situation in general.

G. B.

February 15, 1945.

I.

BESIDE the main road from Athens to Levadhia, as a point where a track bears off to a small village, lies a huddle of some forty to fifty graves, marked by wooden crosses and simple peasant tributes. I asked the British military authorities to be good enough to investigate the history of these graves. This is the report they gave me.

In the first days of January, 1944, Elas troops in the neighbourhood killed a German soldier. In revenge the Germans seized 50 male hostages from the village, and on the order of a Gestapo officer executed them by machine-gun fire on January 8.

It is the story of resistance and reprisal tragically familiar to every occupied country. And here is the comment of the distinguished British general who obtained the facts for me. "It may explain," he wrote, "why E.L.A.S. did so little against the Germans—and why they were so keen on hostages."

It may also help to explain the extreme difficulty of understanding the complex Greek problem from the distance and enforced ignorance of England. Nothing about the Greek situation is simple, as this British officer saw; and any attempt to explain it in pure black and pure white is bound to be one of those half-truths that are more misleading than a lie.

One of the things to strike one most obviously on arrival in Greece is the difference between British opinion on the spot and British opinion at home. In Athens their single concern is the situation as it confronts them from day to day. At home we have naturally been pre-occupied with the question why such a tragedy should have occurred. Hence, incidentally, the dismay of the British in Athens at the reactions of the man in the street in London.

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In order to appreciate the Greek situation fairly, the first essential is to separate the position as it is now from the history of events which led up to it: to separate cause from effect.

The British have an excellent case for their handling of the prevailing situation. Their case for their handling of the long series of events which brought it about is quite another matter.

Given the situation with which the British authorities and Greek Government found themselves confronted on December 3, they acted in the only possible way. Since the truce, they have used their influence on the side of moderation. What is more, it deserves to be recorded that the British Army, under General Scobie's command, has been performing a highly exacting task with imagination, discretion and brilliant efficiency.

It is not too much to say that the British Army was at this time virtually administering on its own account that part of Greece where the writ of the Plastiras Government runs. Besides being the only dependable trained military force—with the exception of the controversial Mountain Brigade—at the Government's disposal, it was unofficially fulfilling the role, in towns and villages, of ministries of transport, health, education, food and public security.

The British in Greece, both soldiers and diplomats, are very sure of their wicket and have been gratuitously strengthened in their confidence by the spectacular blunders of E.A.M.'s political leadership.

The shootings and the taking of hostages are now admitted by responsible E.A.M.-ites themselves, from Siantos downwards, to have been unpardonable. They explain them, but do not attempt to excuse them. These blunders have lost them an immeasurable amount of sympathy, both in the outside world and in Greece itself—how much they themselves have perhaps not yet fully appreciated.

The majority of British soldiers like and respect the Greeks, but detest E.L.A.S. The exhumed corpses, the ill-treatment of hostages and some prisoners, have soured their gall. There is no doubt about the reality of these corpses, nor about the means by which most of them met their death. Nor about the ill-treatment of hostages. But even these shocking events, and the horror they properly created, are not to be entirely dismissed in terms of the devil versus virtue.

In spite of his experiences more than one British soldier to whom I spoke had a word of understanding for E.L.A.S. An "M.P." on traffic control outside British H.Q. said in answer to my question: "They fought for what they believed in. For the working-class—that's me. If you ask me, if we hadn't been there, they would have won."

Said another, a young man from the Home Counties: "It's a genuine fight. They think they're right." Neither of these men had any personal evidence of atrocities, but both of them added that, unfortunately, E.L.A.S. "didn't fight fair."

Some of the disgust is doubtless explained by the British soldier's unfamiliarity with guerilla fighting. Trained to oppose troops well disciplined and equipped, he does not understand the tactics of "civilians"—as he calls soldiers without uniform.

Equally the E.L.A.S. forces, equipped for the most part only with small arms, considered the British unfair to use tanks and rocket-firing planes against a city packed with civilians, and plastered the walls of Athens with gory posters labelled "Scobie's Butchers."

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As for the maltreatment of hostages and prisoners, no man in his senses could condone it; but since it has been turned to such triumphant account in order to condemn all E.A.M. out of hand as "brigands," it must in fairness be stated that much of the hardship endured was unavoidable in the prevailing physical conditions.

I visited prisoners in the hands of the Greek Government and found, as I expected, conditions which could readily be turned to propagandist advantage by the other side.

In one police station prisoners were sleeping eleven in a small cell on a bare cement floor, with but one blanket or cloak apiece, supplied by relatives—and Athens in January is cold. These prisoners were at that time dependent for food on what they were brought by friends from outside or could afford to buy—a condition that was about to be remedied.

In a Government gaol, 320 odd prisoners awaiting trial lived 30-40 in large cells with stone floors, again with only such meagre covering as relatives could spare. Their food, according to the information given me by the prison governor, was 120 grammes of macaroni at 11 a.m., and 120 grammes of rice cooked in oil at 4 p.m., plus 330 grammes of bread a day (roughly 1 lb. 4 oz. per person altogether per day).

Many of the prisoners looked ill, and they crowded round me with vehement complaints that no charge had been brought against them and they did not know what they were "in" for.

When I was in Athens arrests were still taking place—on one day 150 were recorded; and the Minister for Home Affairs was forced to admit and condemn instances of ill-treatment by the police. In the atmosphere of fear and intense bitterness now prevailing, acts of violence on both sides are inevitable and wherever opportunity permits it is certain that private vengeance will be pursued.

But how came it that E.L.A.S. committed the crime and blunder of their atrocities? The explanation of E.L.A.S. spokesmen themselves is that some of these deeds were acts of personal vendetta and some were the result of indiscipline among the rank and file. But many of the shootings, they declare, were sentences of summary justice meted out by military courts in conditions of civil war. There were three categories under which persons might be condemned to death: collaboration, espionage, sniping.

As to the taking of hostages, the K.K.E. case, as stated to me, is this: K.K.E. took no hostages between the outbreak of the fighting and December 24. By that time the numbers of arrests on the Government side had reached such proportions—an average, it is alleged, of 1,000 in each police district—that thereafter they felt compelled to take hostages in an attempt to stop these measures.

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But it is necessary to penetrate into deeper psychological recesses in order to get to the roots of this problem. When M. Sofianopoulos referred at the peace conference to "mass

hysteria" he was touching the fringes of the truth. The general whose comment on the roadside graves I have quoted was reaching for the truth too.

Greeks expostulate that violence and cruelty are not normal characteristics of their race, and history bears them out, though they have brigandage in their tradition. The Greeks are naturally a kindly, gay, intelligent people.

Resistance movements everywhere attract the best elements in a nation and the worst, and Greece has been no exception. Some of the murders and cruelties are doubtless the work of men of criminal instinct who have taken advantage of a lawless situation. But that is not the whole story.

A woman who works for the Greek Red Cross recorded to me the following experience. She went in the course of her duties to the northern demarcation line to retrieve E.L.A.S. hostages, and there she met a young man of whom she held a high opinion, who used to drive one of her travelling soup kitchens.

She was surprised to find him wearing a uniform and a fine pair of high boots. "Where did you get those?" she asked. "From a policeman." "But how?" "I killed him, of course. We took off his clothes first, so as not to get them spoilt with blood." And in reply to her unspoken astonishment his only comment was, "Why not?"

Something has happened in Greece, something common in varying degree to every occupied country in Europe. The Nazis have taught the downtrodden peoples of Europe a terrible lesson. The outbreak of savagery in Greece—and the excesses have by no means all been confined to one side—is the pattern of Nazi technique absorbed by tortured minds and reproduced in circumstances of extreme tension.

One of the first things to be understood about Greece is that conditions throughout the country are quite abnormal, politically, socially, economically. For years there has been no ordered central government. For years the people have lived under the shadow of repression, lawlessness and violence; they have suffered successively under the Metaxist dictatorship, German occupation and civil war. For years they have been hungry, workless, compelled to live on their wits:

They have seen their villages burned, their comrades tortured and killed, and have learnt that one death may be requited by 50 riddled corpses. Thus they may even have blundered into reasoning that the taking of hostages might prove a safeguard for their own hunted skins.

They have been encompassed by hatred and fear—fear of hunger, fear of reprisals, above all, fear that the power which was within their grasp might be filched from them by men who would rather collaborate with the sworn enemies of the nation—and did so—than see power pass into the hands of the hated Left.

None of this excuses the violence, but it does help to explain it. And unless we attempt to understand what has been happening below the surface in Greece, instead of being content to ride away on an easy if short-lived triumph by condemning the obvious brutalities of a minority, we shall be laying in store for ourselves a day of grim disillusion.

This would be a calamity; for since what has happened has happened, there can be no early or easy departure of the British from Greece. We have both a moral obligation and a practical interest to see things through.

When things came to the final touch, the Communist element which controls E.A.M. tried to seize power by force. If the mistakes of the past on both sides are to be avoided in the future—and if real unity is somehow to be restored to this demoralised and fiercely divided people—what matters now is to comprehend *why* they did so, why things ever reached this extremity.

II.

There can be no doubt that last autumn the forces of the Left in Greece genuinely feared a *coup d'état* by the Right. At the very least they suspected an attempt to impose a Government having no popular support and with monarchist leanings, sustained by British rifles, as a means of keeping power out of the hands of a movement whose strength derived from a fight for freedom and hatred of dictatorship.

If a thing is sufficiently believed, its effect may be the same as if it were true. E.A.M. had many reasons for being obsessed with this belief, from an early date right down to the day the fighting started.

In the spring of 1944 the British virtually ceased supplying E.A.M. with arms but continued to support rival organisations. They consistently refused to acknowledge the strength of E.A.M.'s following inside Greece or the intensity with which the monarchy was detested.

The fact that King George had at one time received the secret support of both Mr. Churchill and President Roosevelt was widely known to the Left. E.A.M. had always been cold-shouldered by the émigré Governments, and even at the Lebanon Conference Papandreou had abused its delegates. The Greek general staff were well known to be strongly anti-E.A.M., preferring to hob-nob with the German controlled Security Battalions rather than have any contact with E.A.M.

At the moment of liberation, when the Government was returning to Greece, E.L.A.S. had agreed with the British to withdraw its forces from Athens. When, following this withdrawal, the monarchist Mountain Brigade arrived on the scene, E.L.A.S. suspected that they had been double-crossed. What is more, E.A.M. Ministers were informed by M. Papandreou on point-blank evidence that it was British insistence which prevented him from agreeing to disarm the Mountain Brigade.

In spite of the Government's undertaking to disarm and disband the notorious "X" organisation, this body for a considerable time continued to control and terrorise the Thession district of Athens. Government action against collaborators was taken most half-heartedly.

Only some 1,200 were arrested, and of these but half remained in custody. The remainder managed to filter out, some even finding their way into the National Guard and being subsequently identified. Lists of officers for the National Guard approved by the joint committee were faked—as a result of which exposure the Under-Secretary of War, M. Lambrianides, was forced to resign.

This, in brief, is the E.A.M. case—or some of it. This is the reason why E.A.M. refused a one-sided disarmament and was united in declining to disband its forces until it had secured what it considered adequate safeguards against a *coup* from the Right.

Insistence on the disarmament of E.L.A.S. seemed proof of the intention of the Right to deprive the Left of the power to oppose its will. As a K.K.E. representative put it to me: "Greeks had too often seen elections won by the man with the knife in his hand."

Given the atmosphere of fear and hatred then prevailing, it is a waste of time to argue about inconsistencies. One event after another—a further example was the determination to keep Papandreou in office even after the E.A.M. Ministers had resigned and Communists had agreed to serve under Sofoulis—confirmed the Left in their conviction that power was at all costs to be kept from their hands.

It may be equally true that the Right feared a *coup* from the Left. But there was at least this difference, that, whereas up to the time of the liberation the Right had little popular following and no cohesion, E.A.M. had a very large following throughout most parts of the country.

The present attempt to represent E.A.M. as at all times a small minority, which in any case did no fighting against the Germans, is altogether wide of the mark. There is plenty of British evidence to prove that E.L.A.S. did resist, though sometimes very disappointingly. Having praised them, suddenly to start deriding them merely drove them into opposition.

M. Papandreou's own estimate of the situation is worth noting: he cannot be considered over-partial to E.L.A.S. In his opinion E.L.A.S. did oppose the Germans, though not as wholeheartedly as they might have done. He believes their decision to appeal to force in December was a last-minute one. After Lebanon they sincerely intended to co-operate, but to keep their arms in case they should need them.

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As there has been no parliamentary government in Greece since 1936, the old political parties and leaders represent little more than a question mark. When liberation came, however, the parties of the Right found one unifying incentive—fear of the Left.

Under the occupation there had been a minority whose hatred of the Left had allowed them to collaborate with the Germans. When the Germans withdrew, political groups which ever since their foundation had been opposed to one another discovered in detestation of the Left for the first time a solidifying factor more compelling than the factors which divided them.

Even lifelong Republicans flirted with the idea of the monarchy in the hope of building "a rampart against Bolshevism." As the current saying in Athens goes, "the Communist Party is the King's Party." In fact, recent weeks of violence may temporarily strengthen the following of the King.

It is not difficult to imagine how powerful a factor in such a situation was the belief that Britain supported the monarchy and was ranged behind the forces of reaction. It was, of course, an idea entirely satisfying to the collaborators, for whom Bolshevism was a much more potent enemy than the Germans.

This belief has been responsible, and may yet be responsible, for an infinite amount of mischief. Because of it the Left has been provoked, and the Right has been buoyed up with expectation. What is most serious is the fact that *this belief still persists*.

If Britain is to succeed in helping to pacify and unify Greece, this idea must somehow be eradicated. It will not be easy. A very well known and experienced Greek politician with whom I talked—a former Prime Minister—could not be dissuaded from this conviction. He was firmly of the opinion that the British Government desires to see King George back on his throne and that British good will for Greece would be diminished if the plebiscite went against him.

“What is more,” he added, “so dependent are we on British support that, lifelong Republican that I am, if I thought Britain wanted the monarchy I should vote for the King—and many others in Greece would do the same.”

There is thus the danger that, even if the belief is completely mistaken, it may influence many votes. Yet it is certain that a return of the King would be but the uneasy prelude to a new and more bitter uprising.

There are those in Greece who have with difficulty been restrained from forcing the recent crisis to a war of extermination. They are sustained by powerful fantasies, of which the most potent and perilous of all is the belief, common to both the Left and the Right, that Britain and Russia are going to fight each other.

The agreement now brought about between the Plastiras Government and E.A.M. will have no more than paper roots unless a great many difficult things can be done to eradicate distrust, mollify hatreds, and rebuild the ruined economic and moral fabric of the Greek nation. But among the tasks to be performed, none is more urgent or essential than to present a categorical and authoritative picture of British policy; and, above all, to destroy the fatal illusion that the Powers will go to war over Greek politics.

III.

It is said that when the British force under General Scobie landed in Greece at the liberation, there were Greeks who believed he had come to establish a base for the forthcoming Anglo-Russian war.

Whether or not such a belief was ever actually held, it is symptomatic of a widespread Greek misconception, a misconception that has already been responsible for untold harm and is rich with peril for the future.

The Germans, of course, were assiduous in spreading the belief that Britain and Russia were bound to come to blows, and in Greece the soil was particularly ripe for such an

illusion to flourish in. There were elements on the Right who were only too ready to listen. The Communist Party, working underground during the Metaxist dictatorship, had been gaining steadily in influence and its progress was feared and resented. But there was another and unique circumstance: in Greece, by her geographical position, fear of Communism is identified with fear of Slav-ism.

In the belief of many Greeks the pan-Slav menace threatens to suffocate the independent life of their nation and to tear from it territories essential to its economy. With the immense growth of Russia's power and prestige in the past three years and the spread of her influence in the Balkans, this menace has appeared to become more actual and potent. They see their old enemy, Bulgaria—whom every Greek, with reason, detests—and a newly awakening Yugo-Slavia looming across their northern frontiers with a terrifying question-mark.

Meanwhile, during the occupation, the development of E.A.M. within Greece brought the bourgeoisie's dread of Communism closer. Small wonder, perhaps, if there were Greeks who could be induced to believe that even to collaborate with Germany was the lesser of two evils. Anything must be patriotic which kept the Bolsheviks at bay—and sooner or later the British and Americans would come along and deal with Russia!

On the Left, of course, the poison could not be injected so simply. But if the Left could be persuaded to believe that an Anglo-Russian clash was inevitable—why then, in an ideological war, it would be forced to incline towards Russia.

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So the two elements in Greek politics took position, and the stage began to be set for civil war. Of course this is not the whole story, but it is an essential part of it. Both

sides were fortified by the impression—for which British policy towards Greece, and elsewhere, must largely be held responsible—that Britain in world affairs is identified with the old and the reactionary.

Too many Greeks erroneously believe that their country's future is secure because Britain is bound by strategic interest to back her *in any circumstances*. Thus the bankrupt Right is encouraged to gamble on another innings, and the suspicious Left to look hopefully to Russia.

It is not difficult to see the extreme danger of this illusion. How is it to be dispelled? In order to dispel it we must first of all make sure that it isn't true.

Much ignorance about Britain can be removed by a sound information service—especially this notion that we and Russia are going to fight. Greeks must understand that Britain and Russia are pledged to co-operate in the post-war world, and that the problem of the Balkans, of which Greece is a part, must be solved by Anglo-Russian agreement, not rivalry.

But the full misconception springs from something deeper-seated, and something for which Britain herself is to blame. If we are to help Greece back to strength and unity, if we are to assist the Greek people in seeing their problem aright, we must begin by seeing it aright ourselves. Hitherto we have not done so.

The problem of Greece is the problem of Europe. It cannot properly be treated apart from the general European problem. What has been happening in Greece is the same thing as has been happening all over occupied Europe: only the degree and emphasis vary from country to country.

There is in process within that small and ancient land a struggle between the Old and the New which is basic to current European history. To ignore it, or misinterpret its significance, will be to pursue a policy which in the long run will lose us our leadership and endanger our future in Europe and the world.

On a short and narrow view, helped by the follies of E.L.A.S. our policy in Greece may seem to have been justified by events'

On an historical view, any settlement of the Greek affair that fails to give due hope and confidence to the Left is certain to be proved a disastrous failure. No agreement will be worth the paper it is written on if the Left is subsequently driven into sullen and desperate opposition.

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Unhappily it is not only in Greece that the notion persists that Britain backs the powers of reaction instead of giving support to the new, dynamic forces that have been fermenting within a suffering and disillusioned Europe. In North Africa, in Italy, in Belgium, in Poland, in Yugo-Slavia the same crucial question has been raised and has received a disquieting and contradictory answer.

For too many years, both before the war and during it, Britain has suffered from the decisive disability of having no positive foreign policy. Yet by its past tradition, and even more by its present effort and sacrifice, our country has incurred both an obligation and a unique opportunity of leadership.

In the crisis of civilisation which confronts the twentieth century, Britain's authority and experience must be exerted to equate the ideological rivalries that otherwise threaten to engulf and disintegrate our world. To forgo this duty, relying on hand-to-mouth support of this or that ancient and discredited regime through senile fear of the new and unknown, will be to sell our heritage and challenge ignominy and disaster. There will be no vacuums in Europe after the war: wherever we abdicate, others will assume the lead.

Ever since Hitler came to power, the one completely consistent item of his propaganda has been the "Bolshevik Bogey"—and it has also been his one outstanding success. Within an ace it won him the hegemony of Europe without his having to fire a shot. Throughout the war it has gone on working successfully, even among the nations who number Russia as an ally. To our shame, it has to be said that it can still be found at work in Britain.

The huge danger overhanging the world is that when Hitler has gone his predestined way, and, with unparalleled human suffering, freedom and peace have been reclaimed, his Bolshevik Bogey may still be found, grinning in triumph amid the ruins.

In Greece, as in the world, it is the task of British policy to make this tragedy impossible. But it will not be made impossible there or anywhere else by supporting reaction or pretending that strong popular feeling is due to the machinations of a small extremist clique. In any case, Communism as a force in Europe has come to stay. Whatever Russian policy may be, if the Communists in each successive country are to be manoeuvred into isolation, so far from avoiding trouble, we shall be making the next war certain.

