

The 1940 Epic

It is true that we, the Greeks, sense a particular feeling of emotion, whenever we recall in our memory the glorious events of 1940. Indeed, those great and enlightening events have sealed with indelible glory the historic evolution of the Hellenic Nation.

The Hellenic Nation is exceptionally proud for the great "NO", which the people as one person said to the enemy in the early morning hours of the historic day of the 28th of October 1940.

The League of Nations, to which all nations have entrusted their hopes for an enduring peace, had literally lost any substantial authority following the insularity-drawn withdrawal of the USA from the Organisation, followed by Italy in 1935, Germany in 1939, and for long suffered by the antagonism of the "peace loving" remaining Western Democracies, mainly the United Kingdom and France that failed to timely realise the potential of the war at hand.

It was the beginning of a campaign that most people tend to call as the "Epic", which covers one of the most glorious chapters of the age-long Hellenic history; evidencing two of the elements, which in general are considered as ingredients of true history: major events and an "aroma" of that time. The events themselves have already been recorded by historians and contemporary people interested in history can easily reach them and draw right conclusions; on the other hand, future historians can be also assisted in case they decide to reconstitute them, even after the passage of centuries. The "aroma", however, that the protagonists of history have felt, i.e. the Hellenic people who actually lived the events when they occurred, is swept by the winds of time, even for those who lived and survived them.

The Hellenic "Epic of 1940", considered as a unique incident in the world in terms of both moral and historical significance, has been followed by unhappy events: foreign occupation, resistance, executions, the December 1944 conflict, the first post-war years, the outburst of the nuclear era. These have thrown a shadow over the previous deeds, hid and hastily closed that chapter of history, even before people could understand its monumental significance; this chapter was only to be opened long after the liberation of the country from the oppressing German boot.

The generation of the 1940's has once more evidenced that the sacred passion for the freedom of the country is the ultimate duty for every Greek, as repeatedly done during the centuries-old existence of our nation. We shall not cease, either, to do the same thing for as long as we live in this beautiful country.

Since the first decades of the 20th century, hostile intentions of Italy against Greece had become more evident and any hypocritical effort to conceal them had failed. The culmination of this hypocrisy was the torpedoing of the Hellenic Fleet battleship "ELLI", anchoring off the island of Tinos on the 15th of August 1940, in violation of the "friendship pact" signed by both countries in September 1928. Mussolini had probably believed that arrogance could disarm dignity, hypocrisy could eliminate the passion for freedom, and military strength could impede the Greek Soldier from doing his duty and preserving the freedom of his country. He believed he could revive his dream to reconstitute the Roman Empire, or at least the Venetian naval power.

Greece, deeply affected by the impacts of the disaster in Asia Minor, had been making efforts since 1923 to absorb one and a half million refugees, reconstruct its economy and stabilise its political system.

Since April 1939, fascist Italy had been occupying Albania and in a series of evolving and deviating acts, diplomatic manoeuvres, turnabouts and self contradictions concealed its expansionist intentions against Greece. The occupation of Albania naturally created concerns to the two neighbouring countries, Greece and Yugoslavia, since certainly any threat to them would not come from Italy alone, but from the Axis as a whole, the establishment of which had already been declared by Mussolini himself in November 1936.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom had expressed by way of Prime Minister Chamberlain, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lord Halifax and the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, along with France, by way of Prime Minister Daladier, plenty of comforting assurances for the territorial integrity of Greece that would unfortunately prove to be purely academic. All these finally meant that Greece had to stand alone, and prepare to face any imminent conflict, to defend its independence.

The Hellenic General Staff had good reasons not to be inactive. Although cooperation was sought with the British and French General Staffs, this was reduced to purely intelligence gathering, without practical consequences, and Greece was finally left once more alone on its peninsular bastion to fight against despotism.

In August 1939, under the pretext of military manoeuvres, Italian forces assembled along the Hellenic-Albanian border line, and this brought much concern to the Hellenic General Staff, which was forced to recommend to the Hellenic Government to order mobilisation of the VIII and IX Divisions, as well as of the IV Brigade, deployed along the border line with Albania. The mobilisation order was signed in the night of the 23rd of August 1939. The day before the non-aggression German-Soviet Pact had been signed in Moscow, which meant that the Axis was allowed undistracted and undisturbed to act against the West and the South.

On the 29th of August 1939, the Italian Military Attaché requested the Chief of the Hellenic General Staff, Alexandros Papagos, to provide him with information on the assembly of Hellenic troops, whilst extending on behalf of Italy the assurances, previously given, on the inviolability of Hellenic territory.

Europe on the 28th of October 1940

The intentions of the Axis were to be revealed three days later. On the 1st of September 1939, Germany launched a sudden attack against Poland. The Second World War had begun. The results, to some extent, justified Hitler's estimation on the apathy of the Allies, who were not ready to support Poland, believing that if it fell victim of the ferocious aggressive greed of the Axis, its appetite would be satisfied. Poland was occupied within twenty days and partitioned between Hitler and Stalin. Some of the Balkan States, fearing that they would find themselves in the path of the storm, either declared neutrality or gave signs of good behaviour; on the other hand, Greece realised that its dramatic isolation was ever increasing, and all that was left to it, was to carry the weight of its responsibility dictated by its traditions and history.

In the time period that followed, the two partners in the Axis intensified their efforts to mislead Greece. Italy continued its preparations for the violation of the Hellenic independence; however, the sudden commencement of the war by Hitler and his thunderous successes in the battlefields, made Italy lose its temper and decide an impressive operation at this stage, in order to obtain some benefits, as it sensed that the war might soon be over.

In the summer of 1940, further to its overwhelming numeric superiority over Greece, Italy also had:

- The possibility to seize the initiative to commence the operations, in other words, it had the advantage of surprise.
- A terrific air superiority, of seven times more, which in combination with the modern for that time aircraft, mainly manufactured at the factories of Fiat, meant that spare parts were in abundance.
- A great number of mobile armoured units.
- War supplies pre-positioned in Albania, largely exceeding the needs of the troops deployed there.
- A capability of unhindered transport of more troops through the Adriatic Sea.

Then Mussolini launched an effort to provoke Greece and, thus, find a pretext for war; it was a well-planned escalation, together with a series of provocative acts:

- Hellenic Fleet ships were bombed, including the destroyer "Hydra".
- The Hellenic air space was repeatedly violated.
- The Italian Press published with large headlines the news that: "Daut Hodxa, the great Albanian patriot, was murdered on the Hellenic-Albanian border by Hellenic agents". (Daut Hodxa was a well-known bandit, wanted for over twenty years; he was killed in a fight by two Albanians, who two months earlier had been arrested by Hellenic authorities).
- On the 14th of August, Gayda, a notorious journalist and spokesman for the Fascist Party, in one of his articles in the government-controlled Italian press, launched the signal for an: "All-out attack on Greece". - Italy had cast out the mask.
- This was followed on the next day, 15th of August 1940, by the perfidious sinking by torpedo of the battleship "ELLI", off the harbour of the island of Tinos.

This latest act of defiance and sacrilege symbolically inaugurated the aggression on Greece and gave an essence of holiness to the struggle of the Greeks that would follow.

Since the 22nd of October, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Rome, Count Ciano had started drafting the infamous ultimatum, which was to be handed to the Hellenic Government, allowing no margins for compromise, but only "either acceptance of an occupation or undergoing an invasion".

Hellenic Fleet battleship "Elli"

The Hellenic General Staff could not complement the defence preparation of the country, the way it would like to do it, mainly for two reasons:

- Any significant mobilisation would be considered by Mussolini as a provocation.
- Italy had the initiative to commence the operations, but it was not known when it would launch the attack; a mobilisation that was possibly to be prolonged, would downgrade the morale of the Hellenic troops and strain the economy of the country.

The Hellenic people could not have known at dawn of the 28th of October the events that took place at three o'clock of that morning, at the house of the Prime Minister, nor the decisions taken by the Cabinet; nevertheless when at six o'clock, the sirens woke up the city of Athens, the crowds took to the streets as if they were expecting this very moment to shout out the historic word "OCHI (NO)", with a thundering voice, expressing their unanimous choice that could not be different.

The first war report was broadcasted over the radio and published in extra newspaper editions, giving a tone of solid dignity about the whole event:

"The Italian military forces have been attacking, since 5.30 this morning, friendly screening troops at the Hellenic - Albanian borderline. Our forces defend our home land".

A feeling of euphoria spread over the sky of Attica, springing out of people, who felt that more than three thousand years of history were calling them by name to defend the homeland. The news ran from mouth to mouth: "War! The Italians are invading us". Feelings were developing: pride, honour, bravery, indignation, condemnation, not only from those who ran to join the Army, but also from the non-combatant population, who were to offer valuable services to the struggle.

In the morning of the 28th of October something really great developed in Greece, which if the arrogant Italian dictator could realise earlier, he would prefer to withdraw his forces from the Albanian territory and modify his operational plans in general.

No-one could predict the course that the confrontation would take, although the indications could logically persuade that, sooner or later, the aggressor would prevail.

"... ahead, Greece stood firm,

spreading darkness away!

Humanity has risen,

follow now ... ahead ..."

A. Sikelianos (poet)

On the day of the invasion, the first telegrams received were from King George VI of England: "Your cause is our cause"; from Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister: "Italy has found that its threats were useless against your calm courage"; from Mackenzie King, the Prime Minister of Canada: "The cradle of the noblest civilisation that mankind has known, the country to which we owe whatever is superior and beautiful in life, is being attacked; the place of all true men is by its side".

France, already silenced by the German occupation, broadcasted a message from a free radio station in Africa: "We exorcise the Greeks not to think that the French are indifferent about the fate of their glorious homeland".

Even Turkey, as expressed by most of its Press, was triumphant: "Long lives Greece". On the 29th of October, the newspaper "Ikdam" wrote: "We are proud to be linked in an alliance with such a Nation"; also "Vakit" referred to Greece as an "unforgettable example of bravery for the whole world".

Distant India echoed: "The future of the Balkans depends on the fate of Greece".

For the Hellenic communities abroad, the enthusiasm was exultant. In Constantinople (Istanbul), Cyprus and Egypt conscripts rushed to the Hellenic consular authorities and requested to be sent to Greece to fight.

"Pindos": a two-syllable Greek name containing the most beautiful meaning: the invincible faith to freedom.

(Report on the War and Sacrifices of Greece, 1940-41")

"Giuglia", an elite Italian Division, launched an assault against our country from the steep mountain peaks of Northern Pindos, in an effort to advance easily towards Ioannina, as the Italian General Staff considered, thus facilitating "the easy promenade" of the other Italian divisions to Athens. The surprise, though, of Mussolini's "brave" quickly turned into disappointment, when the entrenched Hellenic soldiers of the guard posts did not offer them the kind treatment that they wished, but heavy fires. What sort of reception did they expect anyway?

Only this word I shall tell,

I have no more:

get drunk with the immortal

wine of 1821.

(poet K. Palamas)

It is known that the Division of Epirus was responsible for the major part of the defence; it was the only national Army formation that had the privilege to defend the honour and the territorial integrity of the country; its main mission was to "cover central Greece, to the direction of Ioannina, Zigos Metsovou" and its secondary "to defend the national territory". This Division, executing the orders of its commander, Major General Charalampos Katsimitros, did not abandon the forward defence line and fought there, without ceding any national territory to the enemy.

In an excerpt of the General Order Nr 30904 of the VIII Division, dated the 30th of October 1940, Maj Gen C. Katsimitros wrote

"We fight against a cunning and coward enemy, who attacked us by surprise without a pretext in order to subjugate us.

We fight for our houses, our families and our freedom.

Officers and Soldiers, keep your positions firmly and decisively, be prepared to move forward, since in a short time we are going to counter-attack, in order to throw the enemy out of our national territory that he contaminated with his presence ...

The day has come that the treacherous and coward enemy will be thrown in the sea. Keep strongly your positions and this is going to take place soon. This Order is to be promulgated to all Officers and Soldiers serving under our command".

The willingly and voluntary participation of the non-combatant population of Pindos (old men, women, young girls and children) to the ultimate effort to re-supply the fighters, was one of the most beautiful expressions of the national sentiment during those dramatic days.

Th. Papakonstantinou

"The Battle of Greece"

An excerpt of the Order of the Day of the above Division, on the 18th of November 1940, reads:

"Soldiers, remember what you used to tell me during my inspections, concerning the time that you would attack and throw the enemy over.

The time has come! With the blessing of God, who protects our holy and just cause, do chase the enemy, the treacherous and coward enemy. You have already known him very well. He is bullying and cunning. Smash him with your cruel blows. The homeland proudly watches your holy fighting. Glory belongs to you!"

It would be an omission not to refer to the substantial assistance offered during the operations by the heroic detachment of Colonel Davakis, whose few poorly equipped soldiers vigorously defended their position, displaying exceptional self-sacrifice and courage, and repelled successive attacks of the enemy, thus offering valuable time to the Hellenic Army to re-assemble its forces and counter attack, pursuing the invaders beyond the Albanian borderline, inside the historic territory of Northern Epirus.

Those who acted badly,
are taken by the black cloud.

But the one who met
the road of heaven,
now climbs alone
and bright.

Poem by Odysseas Elytis, Nobel Prize

On the 1st of November during the counter attack launched by the heroic Pindos Detachment, the Line of "Gyftissa - Oxia" was recaptured and three Italian Officers and 222 soldiers were taken prisoners; 140 animals and a large quantity of supplies fell in the hands of the Hellenic troops; however, it was also there that the first Greek Officer, Lieutenant Alexandros Diakos, left his last breath.

Alexandros Diakos

From the very first days of the war, lack of supplies was evident, especially in the Air Force. The British support was in general insufficient. British Forces were more interested for the defence of Crete, where Infantry forces and air-defence equipment were sent from the Middle East, during the first days of the war.

On the 14th of November, the Hellenic counter-offensive was launched along the front, and Hellenic forces advanced into Albania. The successive capture of towns and villages of Northern Epirus was reported in the first pages of the free press, in Great Britain, the United States of America and other countries; at that time Central Europe was under the foot on the German Army that had already captured Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Netherlands, Belgium and almost half of France.

The unexpected Hellenic successes had serious impact on the policy of the United Kingdom, forcing it by mid-November to decide to strengthen the front. The British Ambassador in Athens was of the opinion that the Hellenic front, as it shaped following the heroic successes of the Hellenic Army, offered an exceptional chance for the United Kingdom to move the theatre of operations against Italy there.

Front page of the newspaper "ASYRMATOS" on 22 Nov 1940, reading "The Hellenic flag hoisted over Korytsa (Korce) - Our forces entered the city"

Front pages of 1940 newspapers, featuring the capture of Premete, Agioi Saranta (Sarande) and Argyrokastron (Gjirokaster).

Suddenly, Greece was found at the epicentre of interest of the public opinion worldwide. It became the breakwater against the horror and the general belief of the European peoples that the victory of the iron-clad Nazi and fascist armies was certain and that the isolated Great Britain would not be able to stop the terrific German military machine.

It's now the sky that spreads sapphires and topazes.

The eye laughs, as silvers brighten on the breasts.

And Korytsa, the Greek, all together is dressed in blue.

Poet St. Sperantzas

The successful outcome of this daring decision and the long-sustained psychic power of Greece contributed to refuting the legend about "the invincibility of the Axis", while at the same time assessments changed in regard to the evolution of the war, positively affecting the diplomatic field. Countries, thought as ready to participate in the war on the side of the Axis, showed signs of reluctance about their participation or even denied it. In the edition of the 28th of November, the "Times" wrote: "Greek victories had a tremendous impact at the Near East ... Concerns about an Italian invasion against Egypt were dissolved and Mussolini, until then conceived by popular imagination as something important, changed into a comic figure".

From now on, we shall not say that the Greeks fought like heroes, but that heroes fought like Greeks.

Newspaper "Manchester Guardian", 19-4-1941

It would be improper to forget the participation of the Hellenic Navy in the struggle, in spite of the great difference of potential, compared to the Italian Navy, in terms of numbers, armour, speed, fire power and effective range for the submarines. Notwithstanding the above disadvantages, the Hellenic ships carried out their difficult tasks without suffering serious casualties. They sunk enemy transport ships of several tens of thousands of tons, and successfully escorted military convoys to the front. On Christmas Day of 1940, the submarine "Papanikolis", commanded by Lieutenant Commander Iatrides, attacked an Italian convoy off the port of Avlon (Valona); two transport ships of between 15.000 and 20.000 tons were hit and sunk. The submarine managed to escape, despite the relentless pursuit by Italian destroyers. A few days later, the submarine "Proteus", commanded by Lieutenant Chatzikonstantis, sank an Italian transport ship that carried military forces to Albania, but afterwards it was rammed by an Italian destroyer and was lost with crew and cargo. On New Year-Day, the submarine "Lampros Katsonis", commanded by Lieutenant Commander Spanides, set an Italian tanker ablaze, while "Papanikolis" sunk an Italian transport ship off the coast of Brindisi. Similar successes were achieved by the submarine "Nireus", the torpedo boat "Sfendoni", the destroyer "Psara" and the submarine "Triton".

The Hellenic Air Force, as mentioned earlier, had mostly old or obsolete aircraft, airports were not enough and unsuitable for use most of the times, and air-defence was at an elementary level; however, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Hellenic Air Force operated and accomplished significant achievements, thanks to the bravery of the Airmen. The flights of the Greek pilots at low altitudes in mountain gorges and along "the paths of the skies", and their achievements, remain famous; this was the case of Air Force Lieutenant Mikralexis, who having exhausted all ammunition deliberately blocked the tail controls of an Italian bomber using the propeller of his aircraft, shot it down, landed next to the Italian Airmen that had used their parachutes, captured and took them as prisoners of war to the Military Command of Thessalonica.

1940-41 Aircraft

Following the inglorious termination of the Italian operations at the Albanian front, a series of important events took place in Yugoslavia, somehow agreeable for Greece and the Allies. On the 27th of March, liberal forces revolted, overthrew the Regency and the government of Cverkovic, who had ranged on the side the Axis, and the young King Peter II was raised to the throne. Two days later, general mobilisation was proclaimed. All these events signified that Yugoslavia could fight against the imminent German invasion or at least that it would remain neutral. Eventually, decision was made to conduct a joint Hellenic-Yugoslavian operation against the Italians, who in a state of embarrassment tried to keep Northern Albania, and put an end to this open wound. This joint Hellenic-Yugoslavian plan, however, was not implemented, since Germany put into effect operation "Marita", of course not to save its Italian allies from final humiliation, but to preclude any undesirable reaction of the Soviets, as it always suspected.

Indeed at 5.15 on Sunday the 6th of April 1941, a German attack was launched against Greece, at the same time that an ultimatum was being delivered, emphasising that the purpose of the German action was to expel the British out of Greece.

Faith in the righteousness and the just of the Hellenic cause multiplied again the morale of the nation and gave to our country the ability to stand again against Hitler's Army; however, it was not humanly possible to resist for long against the German supremacy and Greece succumbed

"The Germans speak with astonishment about the Hellenic defence, and characterise it as glorious. Before visiting the fortresses, they thought that they were even superior to those of the French Maginot line. But, when they come close to them, they stood in embarrassment. The personnel that served them were few! Canons and ammunitions were few, but gave the impression of strong firepower and abundance of means! The actual shortage of weapons in the hands of the Greeks made the enemy realise the significance of bravery during the war. General Bämme, who conducted the battle of the front in person, could not believe his own eyes when he saw the garrison of Perithori fort with only 120 soldiers, having captured 300 German prisoners".

Excerpt of the book "Rupel" by Chr. Zalokostas

In the morning of the 27th of April, the first German troops entered Athens, heading towards the Acropolis to fly the "Swastika". That very moment, the Athens State Radio Station broadcasted the last free message to the Hellenic people: "Greeks, in a few minutes this radio station will not be Greek any more ... Brothers, keep your hearts high ..."

A new circle of martyrdom had begun for the capital and the country, in general.

It was the last confrontation in the European Continent with dissymmetrical forces, means, and weapons. Goliath stood on one side, with state-of-the-art heavy weaponry; David stood on the other with obsolete means, fighting for his existence and his rights. Greece gave once more its individual style to this struggle, making it similar to that of 1821. The fight of 1940-41 was a struggle between modesty and pomposity, love for the country and imperialism, and the passion for liberty and the obscure objectives.

The breeze from the mountains around the temple may eternally gather the endless parade of all the heroes, British, Americans, Polish, Russians, free French, Dutchmen, Belgians, Norwegians, having a Greek warrior at the head of the parade, the truest son of freedom, whose shout "Aera (Attack)" will always echo over seas and mountains.

Compton Mackenzie: "The Wind of Freedom"

Technology, thanks to its iron bulk, may have forced the fighting soul to kneel, but this situation will soon be reversed. The Hellenic front collapsed in April 1941, but during the years of the occupation (1941-44), the Hellenic Nation continued fighting against the Axis in every possible way, in occupied Greece, in Northern Africa, in Italy and in the Aegean Sea Islands.

Thus is how this Epic was written in the first place, a glory and pride for the Hellenic Nation, that was no miracle at all, as many used to believe. It has been the result of a scrupulous, careful and methodical military preparedness, of a moral training and a national orientation of the Hellenic people, and their result was the high morale of the Hellenic Nation and Armed Forces for a dynamic and victorious defence.

It is true that the League of Nations had not managed to impede the catastrophic World War II, but it led the way to the United Nations Organisation, with a more performing legal and executive power, an international presence, and the ambition, among other things, to "ensure world peace and security". If this Organisation, the most comprehensive ever made available to the international community, is to survive, maintain its authority and be able to carry out its mission, all its members should support it and comply with the Security Council's Resolutions. Members, who do not wish to comply, should be aware of the heavy penalties that they are to face, not for the purpose of restoring their transgressions, but as deterrence against any future action.

Contemporary Greece faces open threats from a neighbouring country, whose leadership, through constant, clandestine, methodical and opportunist efforts tries to intervene, whenever is the case, ignoring all international reactions and resolutions. Chauvinistic and expansionist attempts against Greece cannot be faced, if Greece remains unjustifiably calm, suffers from internal instability, follows ungrounded orientations and our Armed Forces are weakened. We wish that there will be no need for another Epic that would have to be added to the Hellenic history.