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GREECE: Land of Invasion

(See Cover) Since World War II began 14 months ago the Balkan Peninsula has run a temperature. Periodic scares have sent it to fever pitch, then dropped it as, one way or another, neighboring powers got their way without bloodshed. Rumania is partitioned and overrun by the German Army. Bulgaria takes orders from the Axis. Even Yugoslavia, which has a relatively large, well-trained Army, has taken the path of appeasement. This week war came at last to the Balkans, to the weakest country, but to the one country determined enough to stand up to Axis threats — to Greece.

Hellas has always been invaded. Since the barbarians carried the centre of power from southern to northern Europe she has been a pawn in all great struggles for power. Salonika is a back door to Central Europe, a jumping-off place to the Dardanelles and the Black Sea. Rocky Greek islands straggle across the Aegean to the shores of Turkey. The Peloponnesian Peninsula lies close to Italy; Crete, halfway to Africa. In this war Greece's fate was settled at Brennero on Oct. 4, when Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini planned their drive to the east. For Greece is the key to control of two of the three routes to the east : by land and sea through Turkey, by sea via the Mediterranean. Even the third route is controlled in part by Greece : the capture of Crete would help to safe guard Italy's Libyan route into Egypt.

Only strategic reasons could justify wasting military effort, however small, on Greece. The country is rocky, arid, grows little food. Greece's occasional prosperity has been based on maritime trade, and with the bulk of Greek shipping chartered to Britain, Italy will not get that.

As he defiantly rejected Italy's three-hour ultimatum, Premier "Little John" Metaxas addressed himself to the Greek people in words reminiscent of the days of Byron (see p. 22)

As Greece's poorly equipped, indifferently trained Army fought 200,000 Italian regulars in the mountains of Epirus and Macedonia Little John, who had once been thought an Axis stooge, called for aid from Britain and Turkey. Turkey's President Ismet Inönü had one ear cocked toward the Kremlin, and since his other ear is stone deaf, he did not immediately hear the call. Britain, expecting an attack on Gibraltar any day, sent her Mediterranean Fleet steaming toward the danger area. If Britain lost in the Eastern Mediterranean, and lost Gibraltar too, her goose was much closer to being cooked.

The Mind of Metaxas. Little John Metaxas, who was pro-German in World War I, changed from a waverer to a stiff-backed defier of the Axis after several months of intrigue in that most intriguing country, Greece. Six months ago he was thought ready to sell out to Mussolini. Then Britain, having relearned a lesson in Norway and Belgium that she knew well in World War I, began to put pressure on Little John through the man everybody considers his puppet —Greece's King George II. Britain made it clear that unless Greece agreed to secret staff talks and precise plans for military cooperation, Britain would seize whatever bases she needed. Metaxas agreed, and the Axis turned its attention to another choice for Puppet of Greece: King George's ten-inch-taller brother, Prince Paul, who is married to a German princess. So Greece's George II had his throne at stake when he exhorted his people this week:

"At this great moment I feel sure that every Greek man and woman will do his duty to the end and show himself worthy of our glorious history."

George's father lost his throne in the last war because he was thought to be pro-German. So was George. But George got on his throne in 1935 only because he was Britain's man, so he would have been less than grateful if he had failed to pay his debt. This week's events had a strangely familiar look to the Greek people. In the last war the roles of the great powers were reversed, but the Greeks and their rulers were on the same, receiving end of the trouble.

Kings and Strong Men. Almost from the day World War I began Greece was a centre of intrigue. King Constantine, his eldest son George and his Chief of Staff John Metaxas were accused by the Allies of being pro-German. In point of fact, the King at least was scrupulously neutral. In 1915 the Allies landed troops at Salonika in an ill-starred attempt to save Serbia; in 1916 they shelled Athens to make the Greeks give up their arms; in 1917 they almost starved Greece to force her into the war. Against this pressure and against the quisling tactics of Eleutherios Venizelos (whom the King had deposed as Premier for conniving with the Allies in the Salonika adventure) Constantine could not hold out. In June 1917 he fled the country with his Queen and Crown Prince George. Venizelos returned from exile and declared Greece in the war.

The Allies set up Constantine's second son, Alexander, as a puppet King, with Venizelos as the country's strong man. This arrangement worked well until Alexander happened to be bitten on the ankle by a monkey, ending his career in October 1920, just 20 years ago last week. The next month Greeks went to the polls, expressed three years of resentment against Venizelos by overthrowing the Government. In a plebiscite on Constantine's return, huge and genial "Tino" got 150% of the eligible votes. He returned to Athens at the end of 1920, inheriting a war against the Turks.

He stayed less than two years. France and Great Britain refused to recognize him, he was blamed for the debacle at Smyrna, and after a demonstration led by Colonel Nicholas Plastiras he abdicated again. He was succeeded by Son George, who lasted just 15 months. Venizelos, recalled to salvage at Lausanne what he could from the Turkish imbroglio, could not get along with him; the country soon split into two camps, Venizelists (i.e., republicans) and Monarchists. In December 1923, after a Venizelist victory at the polls, George and his Queen, Elizabeth of Rumania, were asked to leave the country while Parliament decided

on the future form of government. On March 25, 1924, 103rd anniversary of the Greek declaration of independence, Parliament proclaimed a republic.

Altogether, between 1923 and 1935, there were 25 Greek administrations plus two dictatorships (one for 14 months under General Pangalos, the other for 14 hours under General Plastiras). In October 1935 an Army coup established General George (The Thunderbolt) Kondylis as Premier and Regent; the republican Constitution was abolished and monarchy restored. After much international political finagling Georgios II was invited to replace his British bowler with the diadem of his forefathers.

Gorgeous Georgios. This twice-enthroned son of a twice-abdicated father had been bored by his twelve years of exile. In London, where he lived most of the time, he liked nothing so much as strolling along through the streets at night —and once he had the distinction of being the first King known to have been solicited by a prostitute. George's preference was for noble ladies, a preference which had caused him to be divorced by his Queen just before his return from exile.

He had been accustomed to the privileged but democratic life of small-time royalty. The Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg family, which ascended the Greek throne in 1863, had the easygoing habits of all Danes. George grew up at Tatoï Castle, 15 miles from Athens, whence came the family eggs-&-butter; at Mon Repos on the island of Corfu, where his grandfather always spent the month of April because Kaiser Wilhelm II used to go there in April and Georgios I said: "If I don't, he'll think he's King of Greece"; and in the Athens Royal Palace, a gaunt structure of stuccoed white marble. George II's Uncle Christopher had a sense of humor, wrote of the Palace:

"It was hideous—like a huge cardboard box. . . . There was only one bathroom in the whole place and no one had ever been known to take a bath in it. ... The taps would scarcely ever run and emitted a thin trickle of water in which the corpses of defunct roaches and other strange animals floated dismally. . . . The Palace in itself would have been a joy to any child. The long, dim galleries and unused rooms made endless appeal to the imagination. The vast entrance hall and the grand staircase were ideal for hide-&-seek. Then the delight of bicycling on wet afternoons through the enormous ballrooms. . . ." Georgios I used to lead the bicycle procession, his children and grandchildren following in order of age. Uncle Christopher, Constantine's younger brother, was only two years older than Grandson Georgios and was his playmate. When they were 21 and 19 they paid a giddy three-weeks visit to Buckingham Palace and were trotted around by Uncle Edward of Saxe Coburg-Gotha.

George served in Uncle William Hohenzollern's Prussian Guards for a time, fought in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. In 1913 Grandfather Georgios was assassinated and Father Constantine became King. By 1917 George was a Major of infantry and Commander in the Greek Navy, but his father's abdication kept him from doing anything in the last war. George drove off in one of the fleeing cars, lying on the floor with his legs waving out of the open door. For the next 18 years (except for his brief puppet reign in 1922-23) he was out of a job. He once described himself as "one of the unemployed who hopes to get his job back."

But in 1935 George suddenly found himself internationally important. Italy's man in Greece was the old Thunderer, George Kondylis, who was serving as War Minister. George became Britain's man. Premier at that time was Panagiotis Tsaldaris. George's family gave a banquet at Bled, Yugoslavia, for Premier Tsaldaris, who went into dinner a republican, came out a royalist. That put the squeeze on Kondylis, who helped to rig the plebiscite that recalled George by a 98% vote. The Royal Family and Michael Arlen saw him off from London. He set foot on Greek soil on Nov. 25, 1935. Athens was decorated with arches on which republican youths spattered ink. Royalist youths chipped in to buy the King a Royal Bed.

Rise of Little John. When the shouting was over Greece was in just as bad a political mess as ever. Kondylis wanted to be a Duce; George wanted to be a real King. He dismissed Kondylis (who shortly died), called for free elections. The elections only made things worse. Venizelists and anti-Venizelists were almost evenly divided and the balance of power in the new Parliament was held by 15 Communists. Venizelos and Tsaldaris, who might have helped the King to maintain constitutional government, died. Thereupon George called on War Minister John Metaxas (whose party held seven seats) to form a Government. Metaxas did. To avoid a test vote he persuaded the King to dissolve Parliament. Next day Metaxas reorganized his Cabinet, abolished political parties, imposed a ferocious censorship. In 1938 he made himself Premier for life.

Little John has not been popular in Greece. His Government is neither a constitutional monarchy nor a corporative State, but it has those fascist elements of regimentation, government by decree, secret police and a youth movement. There are no civil liberties, but cigarets are cheap and every man can afford a string of beads to twiddle in his idle fingers. Metaxas is Premier, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Cults and National Education, Minister of War, Minister of Marine, Air Minister. His chief hold on the King is a little secret between them: the King, who is always hard up, signed a decree paying himself his salary for the years of his exile, and the King knows that if Little John gets mad he will spill the story to the country.

Bone and Gristle. Fifty-year-old George is childless, disinclined to marry again. Once he was reported engaged to the Countess of Craven. The Countess' mother denied the rumor, but added: "I may state, however, that my daughter and the King of Greece have been close friends for about 15 years." A year before that, while Edward VIII was cruising in the Adriatic, King George invited him to dine with him—"alone." Cousin Edward arrived with Mrs. Simpson. A few days later Edward invited Cousin George to dine with him alone. George arrived with his friend.

Neither family life nor intellectual pursuits interest the King of Greece. He loves circuses, once rode in one as a boy. He likes to drive a car fast, to shoot big game, to dance, go to first nights, wear snappy clothes—stripes and braided uniforms.

This week modern Greece had, for better or worse, stepped out of her comic-opera role. Greece was full in the path of huge events. In a debate at the Oxford Union during his exile George once said: "Instinctively I distrust the professor and the pedant. Give me a burly man of bone and gristle." This week the men of bone were on the way.

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