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# Greek Diplomacy towards Fascist Italy, 1922-1940

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# Greek Diplomacy towards Fascist Italy, 1922-1940

Antonis Klapsis

## Introduction

Greek foreign policy during the Interwar period was heavily affected by the legacy of the Asia Minor Disaster. After the signing of the Peace Treaty of Lausanne (24 July 1923), Greece's strategic aims focused on safeguarding its national security and its territorial integrity. Thus Athens, with the exception of the period of the Pangalos dictatorship (June 1924 – August 1925), became an ardent supporter of the status quo. In this context, it was evident that in order to achieve its aims, Greece had to reach an understanding with its most important neighbor: Italy. The fact that that country was under the leadership of Benito Mussolini beginning in October 1922 meant that Greek-Italian relations were naturally affected by the diplomatic orientation of the Fascist regime.

This article seeks to explore Greek foreign policy towards Italy from the establishment of the Fascist regime to the outbreak of the Greek-Italian War in October 1940. Covering a time span of almost two decades, the article focuses on the most important incidents that shaped the way Athens viewed the evolution of Greek-Italian relations during this period. In this context, it is argued that after the mid-1920s Athens sought to establish cordial relations with Rome as a means of exiting its post-Lausanne diplomatic isolation and as a tool for counterbalancing pressures from other neighbors (or, in the *sui generis* case of the Pangalos dictatorship, to form an anti-Turkish alliance with Italy). However, this attitude gradually changed after the early-1930s, as Greece became more and more apprehensive of Italian revisionism and expansionism, which in the end led to the complete rupture of bilateral relations during the Second World War.

## A troubled relationship

For many years prior to 1922, relations between Greece and Italy had been far less than cordial, and there was more than one reason. Since 1912, Italy had occupied the Dodecanese islands in the southeast Aegean Sea. Up to that point, the islands had belonged to the declining Ottoman Empire, but they were inhabited by an almost entirely Greek population. The Greeks of the Dodecanese welcomed the Italian troops as liberators from Ottoman rule and hoped that the Italian occupation would be a step towards the unification of the islands with Greece. However, these hopes did not come to fruition, as Rome was not at all eager to hand the Dodecanese over to Athens. As a result, the Dodecaneseans, supported by Greek public opinion, were vehemently opposed to continued Italian ownership of the islands, even though Rome had promised immediately after the end of the First World War to cede them –with the possible exception of Rhodes– to Greece. In reality, however, this promise of the Italians, which was incorporated into both the Venizelos-Tittoni Agreement (29 July 1919) and the Greek-Italian Treaty of Sévres (10 August 1920), remained a dead letter.

Greek-Italian relations were also strained by Rome's firm and repeated objection to Athens' claim over Northern Epirus (i.e. the southern part of Albania bordering Greece), which was inhabited by a majority Greek population. Italy had been one of the most ardent supporters

of the creation of an independent Albanian state in the early 1910s, and Rome had been interested ever since then in safeguarding Albania's territorial integrity in order to eventually turn it into an Italian satellite. Italy's Albanian policy was dictated by obvious strategic interests: the smallest of the Balkan countries, Albania was situated at the head of the Adriatic Sea and controlled the eastern coast of the Strait of Otranto. If it remained within the Italian sphere of influence, it could be used as a foothold for Italian political penetration into the Balkans.

Similar strategic interests dictated the Italian reaction to Greek aspirations towards western Asia Minor immediately following the First World War. Italy vigorously opposed Greece's territorial claims, even though numerous Greeks lived there, since Rome was interested in occupying much of the same part of Asia Minor for itself. Moreover, Italy did not want to see a "Greater Greece" stretching across both sides of the Aegean Sea, as this would turn Greece into an important regional power closely associated with Great Britain, and thus a local competitor of Italy in the wider eastern Mediterranean basin. As a result, during the Greek-Turkish War (1919-1922) that followed the Greek capture of Smyrna and its surroundings, the Italians repeatedly undermined the military and diplomatic efforts of Greece's Anatolian venture – a posture that was naturally judged as hostile in the court of Greek public opinion. In fact, in March 1921, Italy was the first of the Western powers to reach an understanding with the Turkish government in Ankara, thus helping the nationalists led by Mustafa Kemal to defeat the Greek army a year and a half later.

The Greek defeat in Asia Minor took place in September 1922, just a few weeks before Benito Mussolini became prime minister (31 October 1922) and established his Fascist regime in Italy. Thus, the autumn of 1922 proved equally important for Greek and Italian foreign policy, although for entirely different reasons. For Greece, the violent uprooting of the ethnic-Greek populations of Asia Minor, Pontus and Eastern Thrace that followed the Asia Minor Disaster signaled the collapse of the "Great Idea", meaning that Athens would have to abandon its policy of irredentism. For Italy, the establishment of the Fascist regime ultimately strengthened Rome's imperialistic and expansionist designs, most importantly in the eastern Mediterranean.

As far as the Dodecanese question was concerned, it was immediately understood in Greece that Mussolini would follow a hard line. The new Italian government seemed unwilling to cede the islands to Greece, arguing that the disposition of the Dodecanese was only a part of the overall Near Eastern question<sup>1</sup>, which was to be discussed at the upcoming Lausanne Peace Conference. Given Greece's diplomatic isolation and its extremely weak bargaining position, the Italians easily managed to use the conference as an opportunity to secure official ownership of the Dodecanese. According to article 15 of the Lausanne Peace Treaty, Turkey formally renounced

<sup>1</sup> Ruggiero Moscati (ed.), *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, 1922-1935, Vol. I (Rome: La Libreria dello Stato, 1953), doc. No. 70.

all rights and title to the Dodecanese islands in favor of Italy on 24 July 1923. As was to be expected, the Italians' overall attitude during the Lausanne Peace Conference, and most importantly Rome's firm decision to retain the Dodecanese despite the will of the islands' Greek populace, only served to intensify the bitter resentment towards Italy within Greece.

Greek-Italian relations reached a critical point immediately following the signing of the Lausanne Peace Treaty as a result of the Corfu incident<sup>2</sup>. Following the 27 August 1923 murder on Greek soil of Italian General Enrico Tellini, president of the International Commission on the Delimitation of Greek-Albanian Borders, Italy delivered an ultimatum to the Greek government demanding compensation. After some of Rome's demands were rejected, Italian naval units bombarded Corfu on 31 August 1923, resulting in the death of numerous civilians. The ensuing occupation of the island, which lasted for nearly a month, created a huge wave of indignation throughout Greece, where the entire operation was seen as further proof of Italian aggression and antagonism towards Greece.

Evidently, after the events in Corfu, Greek-Italian relations were at their lowest-possible point. As the Rome correspondent of *The Times* put it, "in the east the keynote of Italian policy [was] hostility to Greece", which had begun with the Corfu incident<sup>3</sup>. The Greeks were obviously already afraid of Italy's imperialistic policy leanings, and the situation was further exacerbated by the propagandistic activities carried out by certain Italians in Greece. As a result, the Greek government was seriously perturbed by what was in the eyes of many "an evident intention on the part of Italy to make Greece, in all but name, an Italian province – and to make Corfu something more"<sup>4</sup>.

### Bridging the gap

Some signs of improvement in Greek-Italian relations became visible in April 1924, on the occasion of a ceremony that took place in Thessaloniki, in which the remains of Italian officers and men of the First World War Italian Expeditionary Force in Macedonia were removed to Italy. Speeches evincing cordiality, if not sincerity, were exchanged between the Greek authorities and the Italian representatives. Moreover, from the beginning of 1924 the Italian embassy in Athens made persistent efforts to bring about an understanding between the two governments<sup>5</sup>. In the autumn of that year, the Italian ambassador in Athens offered to supply the needs of the Greek navy through an Italian naval mission. This offer was rejected by the Greek government; however, not deterred by the rejection, the Italian ambassador approached the Greek foreign ministry some time later with an even bolder proposal: a trans-Mediterranean

compact between Italy, Greece and Spain, which, if put into effect, could control the entirety of that sea from east to west. This proposal was also turned down even more decisively by the Greek minister of foreign affairs, George Roussos, who refused to discuss it at all<sup>6</sup>.

The first attempts on the part of the Greeks to improve relations between Athens and Rome were made during the premiership of Andreas Michalakopoulos (October 1924 – June 1925). Michalakopoulos repeatedly referred to the necessity for a rapprochement between Greece and Italy, as a means of safeguarding their common interests<sup>7</sup>. Some progress was made – Greek-Italian relations improved somewhat, and initial conversations concerning the possibility of closer cooperation between Athens and Rome began in the spring of 1925<sup>8</sup>. Some Italian officials even hinted that a Greek-Italian alliance against Turkey would be beneficial for both parties. In the event of a successful war against Turkey, Italy would take part of Asia Minor and Greece could then secure Eastern Thrace and possibly even the Dodecanese<sup>9</sup>. However, despite these efforts, Greek-Italian relations remained overshadowed by bitter memories of the recent past. According to Michalakopoulos, in late 1924 and early 1925 Greek public opinion was not ready to accept the prospect of a Greek-Italian rapprochement, since the psychological wounds caused by the Italians' 1923 operation in Corfu had not yet been healed<sup>10</sup>. As the 1924 annual report of the British embassy in Athens pointed out:

*"Relations between Greece and Italy during 1924 were somewhat less strained than those which prevailed during the preceding year, but by no stretch of imagination could they be described as even friendly. The remembrance of the Corfu bombardment was too recent to allow the bitter feeling which that outrage provoked to subside to any extent. Not only so, but the consistent hostility of the Italian attitude towards the Greek point of view in almost every question affecting this country, and the hectoring behaviour of certain members of the Italian Legation tended to make Greek resentment yet more deep"*<sup>11</sup>.

Michalakopoulos' government was overthrown in June 1925 by General Theodoros Pangalos, who imposed his dictatorial regime on Greece. The Pangalos dictator-

2 For more details about the Corfu incident see James Barros, *The Corfu Incident of 1923. Mussolini and the League of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

3 *The Times*, 13 May 1924.

4 Foreign Office (Public Record Office) [hereafter: FO] 371/10771, Cheetham to Chamberlain, "Annual Report, 1924", Athens, 13 May 1925.

5 FO 371/11357, Cheetham to Chamberlain, "Annual Report, 1925", Athens, 6 May 1926.

6 FO 371/10771, Cheetham to Chamberlain, "Annual Report, 1924", Athens, 13 May 1925.

7 Andreas Michalakopoulos Archive (Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive) [hereafter: AMA], file 3.2, Michalakopoulos to Kyrou, Semmering, 14 August 1935.

8 Diplomatic and Historical Archive of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs [hereafter: DHAGMFA], 1925, A/5/III, 2, Karapanos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 847, Rome, 29 April 1925; DHAGMFA, 1925, A/5/III, 2, Michalakopoulos to Embassy to Rome, No. 5862, Athens, 2 May 1925; DHAGMFA, 1925, A/5/III, 2, Karapanos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 871, Rome, 5 May 1925; DHAGMFA, 1925, A/5/III, 2, Karapanos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 927, Rome, 13 May 1925.

9 DHAGMFA, 1925, A/5/III, 2, [illegible signature] to Michalakopoulos, No. E.1637/834, Athens, 15 May 1925.

10 Andreas Michalakopoulos, *Logoi*, Vol. II (Athens: 1964), p. 706.

11 FO 371/10771, Cheetham to Chamberlain, "Annual Report, 1924", Athens, 13 May 1925.

ship, which remained in power for 14 months, had a deep influence on Greek foreign policy, as it resulted in the revision of the fundamental guidelines that had been followed by all Greek governments after the Asia Minor Disaster and the signing of the Lausanne Peace Treaty. Pangalos was an advocate of Greek neo-irredentism and hoped to change the territorial settlement agreed at Lausanne in Greece's favor<sup>12</sup>. It was clear that if Pangalos' maximalist plans were to have any chance of success, they had to be in harmony with the interests of at least one of the Great Powers actively involved in the affairs of the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean. As a result, he understood almost immediately that before he could make any attempt to revise what he called the "unjust" territorial terms of the Peace Treaty of Lausanne he would first have to secure the support of Italy. As a matter of fact, according to the British ambassador in Athens at the time, Sir Milne Cheetham, the Italians were attempting to familiarize the Greeks with the notion of some adventure in Asia Minor<sup>13</sup>.

Being a dictator, Pangalos had fewer reasons than his predecessors to worry about the reaction of Greek public opinion against a policy that would lead to improved relations with Italy. Moreover, he was a fanatic admirer of Mussolini, whose example he aspired to mimic<sup>14</sup>. Given the ideological bond between Pangalos' authoritarian regime in Greece and Mussolini's Fascist regime in Italy, and the fact that both men detested democracy and had plans against the territorial integrity of Turkey, the Greek dictator's diplomatic turn to his Italian colleague seems to have been a natural development. Pangalos saw the strengthening of bilateral political ties with Italy as a means of securing the necessary diplomatic support to implement his anti-Turkish schemes.

The unofficial visit of the Italian undersecretary of foreign affairs, Dino Grandi, to Athens in early July of 1925 was the first sign of the new climate in Greek-Italian relations<sup>15</sup>. Grandi had personal contacts with Pangalos and with the Greek minister of foreign affairs, Konstantinos Rentis. Pangalos told Grandi that he was strongly in favor of Greek-Italian collaboration on issues of common interest<sup>16</sup>, a statement that could easily be interpreted as including the possibility of bilateral cooperation against Turkey. Indeed, the influential Greek newspaper *Eleftheron Vima* credited the talks which the Italian undersecretary of foreign affairs had in Athens as paving the way for a much closer rapprochement between Greece and Italy<sup>17</sup>.

Quite soon, the talks between Greek and Italian officials were followed by more practical initiatives that further underlined the improvement in relations between Athens and Rome. In August 1925 Greece signed an

agreement with Italy concerning the purchase of Italian military equipment for the Greek armed forces<sup>18</sup>. More importantly, in September of 1925 Rentis informed the British embassy in Athens that during a meeting he had with Grandi in Geneva, the Italian undersecretary expressed his government's desire for a closer agreement with Greece, with a view towards eventual collaboration in Asia Minor. In view of Grandi's statements to Rentis, the timing for the implementation of Pangalos' plans for a close Greek-Italian collaboration that would enable the creation of a common front against Turkey seemed to be ideal. In November of 1925, during a dinner given by the Italian Embassy in Athens, Pangalos gave a speech in which he alluded to the strengthening of the ties between Greece and Italy and referred to the "two strong men" at the head of the Greek and Italian governments. The Greek government was also careful to avoid any points of friction with Italy. In an expression of his pro-Italian feelings and on the demand of the Italian Legation in Athens, in October 1925 Pangalos ordered the suspension of certain Greek newspapers that were strongly protesting Rome's policy toward the Dodecanese, while the publication of other articles of similar nature was prohibited<sup>19</sup>.

In this context, the official visit paid to Rome in early March 1926 by the Greek minister of foreign affairs, Loukas Kanakaris-Roufos, and the minister of communications, Anastassios Tavoularis, provided an opportunity for the immediate implementation of the Greek initiatives and the clarification of Italian intentions. However, the talks Roufos had with Mussolini unveiled Italy's unwillingness to undertake certain commitments to Greece. During these talks, there was actually no direct reference made to the possible formation of the common Greek-Italian front against Turkey for which Pangalos had hoped<sup>20</sup>. A few days after Roufos' departure, the secretary general of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Salvatore Contarini, who was actually responsible for Italy's eastern policy<sup>21</sup> and was known to favor Italian designs in Asia Minor<sup>22</sup>, confided to the Greek ambassador in Rome, Nikolaos Mavroudis, that the talks between Roufos and Mussolini had referred only in general terms to issues of common interest between the two countries. Contarini added that the Italian government was satisfied by the visit of the Greek ministers and underlined that it was an important step towards the consolidation of friendly relations between Athens and Rome. However, he admitted that the discussions had been vague<sup>23</sup>, hinting that they had not

12 For a general overview of Pangalos' foreign policy see Harry Psomiades, "The Diplomacy of Theodoros Pangalos, 1925-1926", *Balkan Studies*, 13 (1972), pp. 3-26.

13 FO 371/10765, Cheetham to Chamberlain, No. 217, Athens, 8 July 1925.

14 FO 371/10768, Cheetham to Chamberlain, No. 225, Athens, 17 July 1925.

15 FO 371/10765, Cheetham to Chamberlain, No. 217, Athens, 8 July 1925.

16 *Eleftheron Vima*, 4 July 1925.

17 *Eleftheron Vima*, 25 July 1925.

18 FO 371/10766, Keeling to Chamberlain, No. 257, Athens, 14 August 1925. See also *Eleftheron Vima*, 6 and 13 August 1925.

19 FO 371/11357, Cheetham to Chamberlain, "Annual Report, 1925", Athens, 6 May 1926.

20 DHAGMFA, 1926, 8.1, Mavroudis to Pangalos, No. 503, Rome, 7 March 1926; DHAGMFA, 1926, 8.1, Mavroudis to Michalakopoulos, No. 2496, Rome, 22 December 1926.

21 DHAGMFA, 1925, A/5/III,2, Karapanos to Rentis, unnumbered, Rome, 30 July 1925.

22 Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 307.

23 DHAGMFA, 1926, 8.1, Mavroudis to Michalakopoulos, No. 2496, Rome, 22 December 1926.

achieved any of the tangible result that Pangalos had desired.

The allusion was more than clear: Italy was not willing to reach an understanding with Greece concerning a possible common action against Turkey. Given that Mussolini avoided offering any commitments, Pangalos' plans for the formation of an anti-Turkish alliance between Greece and Italy were impossible to be implemented and his dreams for the revision of the territorial status quo imposed between Greece and Turkey by the Peace Treaty of Lausanne would remain unfulfilled. In this context, the official expression of satisfaction on the part of Athens about the results of the Greek-Italian discussions held in Rome<sup>24</sup> was not enough to make up for the failure of Pangalos' diplomatic initiatives.

### The era of the Greek-Italian friendship

Pangalos' attempt to establish some form of alliance with Italy in order to create a common front against Turkey failed. Nevertheless, his efforts towards this end had a positive impact on Greek-Italian relations. For the first time in many years relations improved, and Pangalos' policy of rapprochement bore the fruit of closer contact between the two governments. While Greek-Italian discussions had been of a more or less general character, they succeeded in laying the foundation for the negotiation of a closer understanding<sup>25</sup>. Thus, even if it was not Pangalos' main aim, his policy paved the way for the gradual improvement of relations between Athens and Rome, which continued after his downfall in August 1926. In October 1926, the Italian government proposed a Greek-Italian arbitration treaty along lines similar to those of the Italo-Romanian Treaty signed on 16 September 1926<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, on 24 November 1926 Greece and Italy signed a commercial convention which not only seemed to mark the beginning of an era of even closer cooperation between the two countries, but which also gave Mussolini occasion to refer to the need for an immediate political undertaking between Athens and Rome<sup>27</sup>. According to the Greek ambassador to Rome, his Italian counterpart in Athens was given instructions by Mussolini to prepare the diplomatic ground for the signing of a Greek-Italian Friendship Pact<sup>28</sup>.

Michalakopoulos, who in early December of 1926 assumed the portfolio of minister of foreign affairs in the newly formed coalition government of Alexandros Zaimis, viewed the improvement of Greek-Italian relations favorably<sup>29</sup>. However, he was hesitant in regard to the immediate signing of a Greek-Italian pact, as he was

concerned that such a move might cause negative reactions in France, Yugoslavia and Turkey<sup>30</sup>. Those fears were gradually allayed, and by July of 1927 Michalakopoulos and the minister of finance, George Kafantaris, paid an official visit to Rome, where they had long talks with Italian officials. In December of 1927, Michalakopoulos again visited Rome and met with Mussolini, giving rise to speculation about a political pact between Greece and Italy<sup>31</sup>.

A pact with Athens would have been most beneficial for Rome as part of a larger, tripartite agreement between Italy, Greece and Turkey<sup>32</sup>, and indeed Mussolini wished to see such an agreement take shape, as it would represent a major success in his Mediterranean policy. For Greece's part, Italy's interest in a tripartite agreement was welcomed as a means of exerting pressure on Turkey to accept a compromise in regard to the abeyances resulting from the implementation of the Lausanne Convention for the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations<sup>33</sup>. Michalakopoulos had a new meeting with Mussolini in Rome on 4 April 1928, during which the prospect of an agreement between Italy, Greece and Turkey was thoroughly discussed<sup>34</sup>. The Italian dictator promised to mediate between Athens and Ankara, but the results of this mediation were rather disappointing. Greece and Turkey failed to reach a mutually accepted compromise on the outstanding bilateral issues.

Negotiations towards a tripartite agreement were also impeded by the fact that the member states of the Little Entente were inclined to see them as an attempt on the part of Italy to draw Greece into its orbit, and to establish a bloc which could be directed against the Little Entente, and more particularly against Yugoslavia. However, the Greek government had no intention of being drawn into such a combination. As the Greek ambassador in London, Dimitrios Kaklamanos, pointed out, "*any result ... from these negotiations would certainly not be used by Greece as a means of bringing pressure to bear on the Yugoslav Government*"<sup>35</sup>.

The idea of a tripartite agreement between Italy, Greece and Turkey was eventually abandoned for the time being, and on 30 May 1928 Rome and Ankara signed a bilateral pact of friendship. Even after the signing of the Italo-Turkish pact, Rome continued to make proposals to Greece for the conclusion of a similar Greek-Italian pact<sup>36</sup>. Thus, when in the summer of 1928

24 *Embros*, 7 March 1926.

25 FO 371/11337, Graham to Chamberlain, No. 224, Rome, 12 March 1926.

26 FO 371/12178, Loraine to Chamberlain, "Annual Report, 1926", Athens, 14 April 1927.

27 Konstantinos D. Svolopoulos, *I Elliniki Exoteriki Politiki meta ti Synthiki tis Lozannis. I Krisimos Kampi, Ioulios-Dekemvrios 1928* (Thessaloniki: Institutou Diethnous Dimosiou Dikaiou kai Diethnon Sheseon Thessalonikis, 1977), p. 33.

28 DHAGMFA, 1926-1927, 35.1, Mavroudis to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 2538, Rome, 29 December 1926.

29 DHAGMFA, 1926-1927, 35.1, [Michalakopoulos], "Simeiomata epi tis apo 8is Dekemvriou protis synantiseos mou meta tou Presveftou tis Italias".

30 Eleftherios Venizelos Archive (Benaki Museum) [hereafter: EVA], 173/file 328, Michalakopoulos to Venizelos, Athens, 5 January 1927.

31 Antonis Klapsis, *O Andreas Michalakopoulos kai i Elliniki Exoteriki Politiki, 1926-1928* (Athens: I. Sideris, 2009), pp. 147-151.

32 DHAGMFA, 1928, 48.1, Mavroudis to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 440, Rome, 23 March 1928.

33 DHAGMFA, 1928, 48.1, Michalakopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 884, Geneva, 27 March 1928.

34 DHAGMFA, 1928, 48.1, Michalakopoulos, "Simeiomata tis synomilias mou meta k. Mussolini, 4 Apr. 1928".

35 FO 371/14391, Balfour, "Memorandum. Tripartite Agreement between Italy, Greece and Turkey", [London], 18 November 1930.

36 DHAGMFA, 1928, 48.1, [Michalakopoulos], "Synomilia meta tou Italou Presveos tis 28 Maiou"; Mavroudis to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 842, Rome, 6 June 1928.

Eleftherios Venizelos became prime minister, the diplomatic ground was well prepared for a general Greek-Italian accord. In early July, during their first meeting, Venizelos told the Italian ambassador to Athens, Mario Arlotta, that he was genuinely interested in promoting cordial relations between Athens and Rome and that for this reason he wished to visit Rome as soon as possible<sup>37</sup>. Mussolini expressed his satisfaction in regard to Venizelos' intentions<sup>38</sup>, and the latter replied that he was determined to sign the desired Greek-Italian pact<sup>39</sup> during his planned visit to Rome, on condition that it would not be directed against any third power<sup>40</sup>.

The text of the Greek-Italian Pact of Friendship, Conciliation and Judicial Settlement was finally signed by Venizelos and Mussolini in Rome on 23 September 1928<sup>41</sup>. According to its first article, the two contracting parties agreed to lend each other mutual support and to cooperate cordially for the purpose of maintaining the order established by the peace treaties to which they were both signatories, and of ensuring that the obligations stipulated by these treaties were respected and fulfilled. Moreover, according to the second article, if a power or powers made an unprovoked attack on either of the contracting parties, the other party undertook to observe neutrality throughout the conflict. According to the third article, if the security and interests of either contracting party were threatened by external invasions, the other party undertook to lend its political and diplomatic support with a view towards removing the cause of these threats. Similarly, article four provided that in the event of international complications the two parties would, if they agreed that their joint interests were or might be threatened, confer with each other as to the measures to be adopted in order to safeguard these interests. Finally, the remaining articles laid out the details of the procedures of arbitration and judicial settlement between Greece and Italy.

The pact, which was considered a decisive step for Greece in exiting its post-1922 diplomatic isolation, established the foundation for a Greek-Italian rapprochement. In this context, Venizelos avoided raising the Dodecanese question, stating to Mussolini that this was an internal Italian issue<sup>42</sup>. At the same time, in a careful attempt to maintain a balance between the other Great European Powers – specifically, Great Britain and France – Venizelos did not accept Mussolini's proposal of a formal Greek-Italian alliance<sup>43</sup>. Even so, the signing of

the Greek-Italian Pact of Friendship was very important for Greece, as Italian friendship could immediately be used as a means of counterbalancing pressures from Yugoslavia. Indeed, after the signing of two intermediate agreements, on 27 March 1929 Greece and Yugoslavia concluded a Treaty of Friendship, thus putting an end to a long period of strained relations<sup>44</sup>.

The Greek-Italian rapprochement also proved very important in regard to the settlement of outstanding issues between Greece and Turkey. For a year and a half, Rome played a very active role as mediator in the prolonged negotiations between Athens and Ankara concerning the Greek-Turkish abeyances resulting from the implementation of the Lausanne Convention for the Exchange of Populations. Mussolini was personally interested in the fruitful outcome of these negotiations<sup>45</sup>, since he still hoped to fulfill his old dream of creating a bloc between Rome, Athens and Ankara. The Italian mediation thus facilitated the signing of the Greek-Turkish Convention of Ankara (10 June 1930), which solved all of the pending issues once and for all<sup>46</sup>. Acknowledging the importance of the Italian mediation, the ambassadors of Greece and Turkey to Rome expressed their respective governments' gratefulness to Mussolini for his efforts to reconcile them. Moreover, in the last days of October 1930, Venizelos paid an official visit to Turkey, during which a Greek-Turkish Pact of Friendship was signed in Ankara (30 October 1930)<sup>47</sup>.

The Greek-Turkish rapprochement would seem to have paved the way for the implementation of Rome's plan for a tripartite agreement between Italy, Greece and Turkey, since Mussolini was still in favor of such an agreement<sup>48</sup>. However, at that point, Athens was not willing to follow this line. On the contrary, Venizelos was concerned mainly with keeping an equal distance towards all the Great Powers, including Italy. In this regard, he did not wish the Greek-Turkish rapprochement to be perceived as an Italian diplomatic aide, and he managed to convince the Turkish leaders to follow the same route<sup>49</sup>. When he visited Rome again in January 1931, Venizelos made his policy perfectly clear to the Italians: "*Friendship, therefore, with all countries with-*

37 Giampiero Carocci (ed.), *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, 1922-1935, Vol. VI (Rome: La Libreria dello Stato, 1953) [hereafter: *DDI*, Vol. VI], doc. No. 467.

38 *DDI*, Vol. VI, doc. No. 513.

39 *DDI*, Vol. VI, doc. No. 524.

40 *DDI*, Vol. VI, doc. No. 542.

41 For the full text in English see Royal Ministry for Foreign Affairs, *Italy's Aggression against Greece. Diplomatic Documents* (Athens: 1940) [hereafter: *Italy's Aggression*], doc. No. 1.

42 EVA, 173/file 51, Venizelos, "Synomilia meta tou k. Mussolini tis 24is Septemvriou 1928".

43 Konstantinos D. Svolopoulos, *To Valkanikon Symfonon kai i Elliniki Exoteriki Politiki, 1928-1934* (Athens: Hestia, 1974), pp. 38-40. See also EVA, 173/file 51, Venizelos, "Synomiliai meta k. Mussolini tis 23 Septemvriou 1928", and *DDI*, Vol. VI, doc. No. 679.

44 Svolopoulos, *I Elliniki Exoteriki Politiki meta ti Synthiki tis Lozannis*, pp. 119-140.

45 DHAGMFA, 1929, A/3/γ, Papas, "Geniki Ekthesis Presveias Agyras", No. 32, Ankara, 4 January 1929.

46 Antonis Klapsis, *To Ellino-Tourkiko Oikonomiko Symfono tis 10is Iouniou 1930: O Eleftherios Venizelos kai i Diefthetisi ton Ekkremotiton tis Symvasis tis Lozannis gia tin Antallagi ton Plithismou* (Athens: I. Sideris, 2010); Antonis Klapsis, "Cutting the Gordian Knot: The Implementation of the Lausanne Convention for the Exchange of Greek-Turkish Populations and the Ankara Convention of 10 June 1930", *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, 26/27 (2010/2011), pp. 83-101.

47 DHAGMFA, 1930, B/68/I, Mavroudis to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 1004, Rome, 19 June 1930.

48 DHAGMFA, 1931, B/2/I, Polychroniadis to [Michalakopoulos (?)], No. 1834, Ankara, 25 October 1930; DHAGMFA, 1931, B/69, Michalakopoulos to all Embassies and the General Consulate in Istanbul, No. 15853, Athens, 1 December 1931; FO 371/14391, Balfour, "Memorandum. Tripartite Agreement between Italy, Greece and Turkey", [London], 18 November 1930.

49 AMA, file 1.1, Michalakopoulos to Politis, Athens, 5 January 1931.

out being bound to any particular 'bloc' directed against third parties. This is the foreign policy of Greece"<sup>50</sup>.

### Status quo vs. Revisionism

Venizelos was hesitant to embrace close ties with Rome in the form of a tripartite Italo-Greek-Turkish agreement as he preferred bilateral agreements to multilateral instead. He believed that by signing a multilateral agreement, Greece would not be in a position to protect itself through diplomacy alone and in the unfortunate case of an emerging new war in Europe it could not avoid but be part of it. In other words, had Athens been associated with a Great Power, its decision to remain neutral would be rather oblique. In that respect, Venizelos was determined to keep Greece out of the immediate influence of Italy so to avoid similar consequences<sup>51</sup>. Therefore, Greece had used the Italian mediation as a channel of rapprochement with Turkey and when the rapprochement materialized Athens had no intention to accept the proposed tripartite agreement<sup>52</sup>.

Additionally, Venizelos' reserve also reflected his wariness to hold back any reactions coming from France and Yugoslavia. The Greek prime minister knew that Paris and Belgrade did not like the option of such an agreement between Rome, Athens and Ankara<sup>53</sup> and the idea of Italy's strengthening position over the Balkans and in Europe in general, would make them nervous.<sup>54</sup> The French and the Yugoslavs were obviously concerned about Italy's revisionist policy and were strongly opposed to any sort of action had Rome found help to implement its revisionist aspirations. An example for these fears, was that of French ambassador in Athens, Frédéric Clément-Simon, who – according to his British colleague in the Greek capital, Sir Patrick Ramsay – seemed to be “too ready to believe any rumour of Italian designs in the Balkans” and was obsessed with the fear that Greece was being drawn “into the group of Powers maneuvering for the revision of peace treaties”<sup>55</sup>. It was exactly for this reason that Venizelos had been repeatedly struggling for, to reassure both Paris and Belgrade of Athens' reluctance to join any alliance against them, ensuring Greece's support for safety and stability in the region; in the end he succeeded.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in order to avoid any misunderstandings, the Greek prime minister refused the suggestion made by the Turkish government immediately after the signing of the Greek-Turkish Pact

of Friendship to send a joint Greek-Turkish telegram to Mussolini, in which they would express their gratitude for his mediation<sup>57</sup>.

Most importantly, Venizelos' hesitation reflected upon the separate ways on how Athens viewed the future of the Balkans and of Europe as a whole, comparing to that of Rome. Greece was an ardent supporter of the political and territorial status quo that was implemented at the end of the First World War. As a result, Greece recognized agreements with other countries as an approach to safeguard peace and security. On the contrary, Italy, being haunted by the dreadful “mutilated victory” during the First World War<sup>58</sup>, now under the leadership of Mussolini was a revisionist power that wished to change the regional balance in Europe. As a matter of fact, Rome was seeking for allies that could build up its revisionist orientations and disdain countries like Greece whose policy was to support the peace treaties. From this viewpoint, a closer Greek-Italian connection especially in the form of a tripartite agreement with Turkey, as proposed by Mussolini, was impossible to be achieved since Athens' and Rome's objectives simply did not match.

By the early 1930s, Italy had established close ties with other revisionist countries in Europe, such as Hungary and Bulgaria. The cordial Italo-Bulgarian relations were further extended due to the marriage of Bulgarian King Boris III to Princess Giovanna, daughter of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy. Obviously, Athens viewed this bond very suspiciously, given that Bulgaria never came into terms with its defeats both during the Second Balkan War and the First World War and it was still claiming Greek territories as its way out to the Aegean Sea through the province of Western Thrace. Obviously, amiable relations between two revisionist countries threatened both Greece's national integrity and also the peace and stability of the Balkan in general. The rise in power of Adolf Hitler in Germany in January 1933 made things even worse, as it provided a new boost in support of revisionism all over Europe.

Despite the fact that Greek-Italian relations remained normal, Fascist Italy was by far “the great power mostly disliked and feared by Greece”<sup>59</sup>. Italian propaganda activities at Patras organized by the Italian consul there<sup>60</sup>, along with frictions between the Italian colony and the Greek authorities at Corfu<sup>61</sup> (a place of bitter memories) added new obstacles to the Greek-Italian relations. Additional agitation took place in the spring of 1933, when an alleged statement that appeared in the French press and was reproduced by a Greek newspaper stated that Mussolini “only sought an Italian port in Thessaloniki”. At once, the Greek government took precautions to calm down the Greek public opinion by publishing an official statement in which the Italian ambassador

50 FO 371/15231, Graham to Henderson, No. 16, Rome, 9 January 1931.

51 Svolopoulos, *To Valkanikon Symfonon*, p. 37; FO 371/15231, Graham to Henderson, No. 16, Rome, 9 January 1931; FO 371/15240, Ramsay to Henderson, No. 325, Athens, 2 July 1931.

52 DHAGMFA, 1931, A/3/IV, Michalakopoulos to all Embassies, No. 15183, Athens, 8 December 1930.

53 FO 371/14391, Balfour, “Memorandum. Tripartite Agreement between Italy, Greece and Turkey”, [London], 18 November 1930.

54 FO 371/14381, Ramsay to Sargent, unnumbered, Athens, 9 November 1930.

55 FO 371/15232, Ramsay to Henderson, No. 2, Athens, 2 January 1931.

56 *I Kathimerini*, 8 November 1930; DHAGMFA, 1931, B/69, Mavroudis, “Geniki Ekthesis. Pros Apasas tas Presveias”, No. 5106, Athens, 31 January 1931.

57 Svolopoulos, *To Valkanikon Symfonon*, p. 37.

58 James H. Burgwyn, *The Legend of the Mutilated Victory: Italy, the Great War and the Paris Peace Conference, 1915-1919* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993).

59 FO 371/18399, Waterlow to Simon, “Annual Report, 1933”, Athens, 9 March 1934.

60 FO 371/16775, Vaughan-Russell to Ramsay, No. 5, Patras, 7 February 1933.

61 FO 371/18399, Waterlow to Simon, “Annual Report, 1933”, Athens, 9 March 1934.

in Athens assured the newly elect prime minister of Greece, Panagis Tsaldaris, that there was no truth to be found in such statement<sup>62</sup>. However, the negative impressions caused by this incident had such an overall impact among both countries that in August of the same year things turned out for the worse when a dispute broke over a territorial ownership of several small islands among the Cyclades and the Dodecanese<sup>63</sup>.

In September 1933 Greece and Turkey signed a pact in which they jointly professed and guaranteed their common borders. It should be noted, that the Greek government made it clear that the guarantee referred only to and was valid for its borders in Thrace, while sea borders were excluded from the pact's conditions.<sup>64</sup> Greece insisted on the exclusion of sea borders so as to ensure Mussolini that the Greek-Turkish pact did not intend to lift the dominance of the Italian influence both in the Dodecanese and the eastern Mediterranean. The pact was obviously aiming to restrain Bulgarian irredentism. The same applied for the Balkan Pact which was signed in February 1934 between Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Romania.

By signing the Balkan Pact Greece ended Venizelos' policy against multilateral agreements. This action created a wave of fury to Rome which saw the Balkan Pact as a threat to Italian foreign policy. Through the Balkan Pact, Greece once again reaffirmed its intention to safeguard the status quo in the Balkans. Italy on the other hand, proved its revisionist aspiration by opposing to it. From this point of view, the Balkan Pact was a turning point in Greek-Italian relations as it was, more or less, a signal of Greece's alignment with countries that were seen as enemies by Italy (especially Yugoslavia). In a personal letter addressed to the US president, Franklin Roosevelt, the American ambassador in Athens, Lincoln MacVeagh, referred accurately to the broader feature of the Balkan Pact and especially to its significance on Greek-Italian relations:

*"Briefly, it represents a consecration in this part of the world of France's policy of non-revisionism, and a virtual extension and reinforcement of the Little Entente. It draws an iron ring around Germany's old ally, Bulgaria. It ties Greece and Turkey into the Central and Western European tangle, and ... removes Greece from her natural Mediterranean grouping with Italy, if indeed it does not actually commit Greece to fight Italy should the latter move against Yugoslavia through Albania"*<sup>65</sup>.

It was evident that Greece and Italy were following two completely different routes as far as their foreign policy was concerned. Greece's commitment to the status quo

was simply incompatible to Italy's open revisionism. Greek public opinion was always "very alive to any manifestations of Italian expansionist policy"<sup>66</sup>. Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in October of 1935 would once again put the Greek-Italian relations to the test. As a supporter of the League of Nations' collective security system, Greece chose to align with the powers (especially with Great Britain) which enforced the League's decision to apply sanctions against Italy because of the latter's invasion of Abyssinia. In early September 1935, Greece assured to assist Great Britain in the event of a complete Anglo-Italian split, expressing openly its interests and priorities. On the other hand, Britain reassured the Greek government that it could count on British support in case Greece was attacked by Italy. Athens' alignment with London on the sanctions against Rome meant that Greece was little by little falling into the British sphere of influence at a time when the rest of Europe was gradually pulled into the abyss of the Second World War<sup>67</sup>.

### The road to the Greek-Italian War

In October 1935, monarchy was restored in Greece and less than a year later the dictatorship government of Ioannis Metaxas came into power. Metaxas continued the same pro-British foreign policy, much to London's initial reluctance. For his part, Metaxas made systematic efforts to improve Anglo-Greek relations for he believed that due to Greece's geographic position, it ought to have established friendly relations with the dominant naval great power of the eastern Mediterranean, both in times of peace and war<sup>68</sup>. His policy was not received well by Mussolini whose imperialistic dreams for the creation of a "new Roman Empire" were largely based on Italy's domination upon the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. Therefore, despite Metaxas' efforts, Greek-Italian relations that had been disturbed during the Italo-Abyssinian War of 1935-1936 did not improve.

Greek-Italian relations were also harmed, firstly, because of the repressive measures taken by the Italian authorities against the Greek population of the Dodecanese, and secondly due to the aggressive editorials of the Italian press<sup>69</sup>. In this context, the Greeks feared for the Italian cruelty which had been demonstrated in Corfu in 1923, and were aware of the particular Italian belief that viewed small Mediterranean nations like Greece, as having no right to exist<sup>70</sup>. The growing pressure in

66 MacVeagh, p. 49.

67 For Greek foreign policy during the Italo-Abyssinian War of 1935-1936, with emphasis on the policy of sanctions and Anglo-Greek relations, see James Barros, *Britain, Greece and the Politics of Sanctions: Ethiopia, 1935-1936* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1982); John Koliopoulos, "Anglo-Greek Relations during the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935-1936", *Balkan Studies*, 15 (1974), pp. 99-106; Manolis Koumas, *I Elliniki Exoteriki Politiki kai to Zitima tis Asfaleias sti Notioanatoliki Evropi, 1933-1936* (Athens: I. Sideris, 2010), pp. 377-454.

68 For more details on the subject see John S. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

69 Thanos Veremis – Yiannis Koliopoulos, *Ellas. I Syghroni Syneheia. Apo to 1821 mehri Simera* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2006), p. 383.

70 MacVeagh, p. 90.

62 FO 371/16775, Ramsay to Simon, No. 149, Athens, 24 April 1933; FO 371/16775, Ramsay to Simon, No. 158, Athens, 29 April 1933.

63 FO 371/18399, Waterlow to Simon, "Annual Report, 1933", Athens, 9 March 1934.

64 DHAGMFA, 1933, A.A.K. 15, "Proti Synedriasis 12 Septemvriou 1933".

65 John O. Iatrides (ed.), *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports: Greece, 1933-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) [hereafter: *MacVeagh*], p. 28.

Europe due to the revisionist policy of Nazi Germany and its close connection to Rome added more anxiety to the Greek side as far as the Italian intentions were concerned. When Italy withdrew from the League of Nations in December 1937 anxiety magnified. Hence, Athens accepted with relief the Anglo-Italian accord that aimed in reducing tension between London and Rome, particularly in the Mediterranean and the Near East while preserving the status quo, signed on 16 April 1938<sup>71</sup>. Metaxas seized the opportunity to send a telegram to Mussolini to express his congratulations for the conclusion of the Anglo-Italian accord. The Italian dictator, however, in an obvious attempt to humiliate the Greek government, refrained from writing a personal response to his Greek colleague: instead he simply charged his minister for foreign affairs, Count Ciano, through the Italian ambassador in Athens to a verbal response.<sup>72</sup> As a result, Greece had all the reason to remain particularly susceptible as far as the purity of Italian intentions was concerned.

Metaxas was now certain that Greece would sooner or later become the victim of Italian aggression. The British promise for assistance to Greece in the likely case of an Italian assault which was given during the Abyssinian crisis, was officially withdrawn in July 1937. For this reason, he tried to find new guarantees for the sovereignty and national integrity of Greece. In September 1938, during the Sudeten Crisis, Metaxas was informed that in the event of a war break out in Europe, Mussolini intended to hand over an ultimatum to the Greek government, demanding its docile submission to Italy within two hours<sup>73</sup>. Thus, in October 1938, just a few weeks after the infamous Munich Agreement, Metaxas turned once again to Great Britain proposing the conclusion of an Anglo-Greek alliance. His proposals, however, were rejected by London<sup>74</sup>. It was obvious that at this point the British were not willing to offer Greece evident assurance against the Italian threat. At the same time, Athens was becoming increasingly worried over the possibility that Mussolini might offer support to Bulgarian intents on parts of Northern Greece, for example Western Thrace and Eastern Macedonia. At the end of November 1938, MacVeagh declared: "*To the Greeks revisionism is naturally a disease, and they dread to its proving contagious*"<sup>75</sup>.

Metaxas' fears about Italy's true intentions were soon to be proved right. Despite the official Italian assurances that Italy had no intention of intruding in Albania<sup>76</sup>, on 7

April 1939 Italian forces invaded and occupied Albania and turned it into an Italian protectorate. Albania's King Zog fled to close by Greece and his crown was given to King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy. The Greek government was very concerned especially about widespread rumors that had Italy invade and occupy Corfu as well<sup>77</sup>. In an attempt to keep things balanced and prevent the extra tension between Greece and Italy, Athens assured Rome that the Greek government would undertake all necessary precautions to prevent any political activity on the part of King Zog that might form an abuse of hospitality extended to political exiles<sup>78</sup>. In reply to this Greek gesture of goodwill, Mussolini ordered the Italian chargé d'affaires in Athens to see Metaxas in person and express his absolute satisfaction for the Greek attitude towards King Zog. He also thanked Metaxas for the precautionary measures taken to prevent political activities on the part of Zog that could jeopardize "the cordial relations between Italy and Greece", the preservation of which Mussolini promised to form the basis of his future policy<sup>79</sup>. Likewise, Mussolini reassured the British government that Italy had no hostile intentions against Greece<sup>80</sup> and that it would respect Greece's sovereignty<sup>81</sup>. At the same time, Rome informed Athens that Italy intended to utterly respect the sovereignty of both Greece's mainland and islands<sup>82</sup>.

Mussolini's assurances did not appease Metaxas though he did formally express his satisfaction to Mussolini<sup>83</sup>. Conversely, Mussolini's assurances did not convince Great Britain either about the sincerity of his intentions. As a result, on 13 April 1939 the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, publicly announced his government's intention to offer "all the support in their power" to Greece in case the latter's sovereignty was threatened<sup>84</sup>. Later that same day, a similar statement was made by the French prime minister, Édouard Daladier<sup>85</sup>. Italy was not explicitly mentioned in either the British or the French declaration, but it was clear that the common Anglo-French guarantees given to Greece were primarily aiming to prevent Italian aggression against Greece.

Metaxas well understood that the Italian occupation of Albania was just the in-between step for an attack

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*the British Ambassador the formal assurance that Italy has not the slightest intention of intervening in Albania. She desires to keep out of any fresh complications"; see Italy's Aggression, doc. No. 10. On 6 April 1939, the Greek ambassador in London informed the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "The Foreign Office informed me today that the Italian Government have given the formal assurance that they are not considering any coup de main in Albania"; see Italy's Aggression, doc. No. 13.*

71 MacVeagh, p. 133.

72 Phaedon Vranas (ed.), *Ioannis Metaxas. To Prosopiko tou Imerologio*, vol. IV (Athens: Govostis, n.d.) [hereafter: *Metaxas*], p. 301.

73 FO 371/23779, Loraine to Halifax, unnumbered, [Athens], 19 March 1939.

74 *Metaxas*, pp. 311, 460.

75 MacVeagh, p. 138.

76 On 18 March 1939, the Greek ambassador in Belgrade informed the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "*The Italian Minister, in the course of his visit to the Yugoslav Prime Minister yesterday, gave him the assurances that Yugoslavia need [to] feel no anxiety whatsoever as far as Albania is concerned*"; see *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 4. On 4 April 1939, the Greek chargé d'affaires in Rome informed the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "*Count Ciano has given*

77 FO 371/23779, Waterlow to Foreign Office, Nos. 115 and 116, Athens, 9 April 1939; *Metaxas*, pp. 363-364; *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 25.

78 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 19.

79 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 21.

80 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 21.

81 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 26.

82 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 27.

83 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 28.

84 *Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons Official Report*, Vol. 346, No. 82, Thursday, 13 April 1939. See also *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 31.

85 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 33.

against Greece and he was determined to resist by all means and at all costs<sup>86</sup>. However, he was extremely vigilant of the alarming situation and was careful not to allow the Italians to use the slightest excuse to attack Greece. MacVeagh's dispatch to the State Department on 15 May 1939 is revealing:

*"In view of the threatening concentration of Italian forces in Albania ... Greece appears to be taking measures to put her standing army in a position to defend her frontiers to the utmost, enlarging her cadres, and perfecting her machinery for mobilization, but is doing all this with the greatest secrecy and caution, in order to avoid, in the words of Mr. Metaxas ... any 'gesture which would be interpreted as a mark of hostility' by those of whom she stands in dread"*<sup>87</sup>.

In the months that followed, Greek fears about a possible Italian invasion through Albania grew bigger each day. In August 1939 the Greek government was disturbed to hear that more than half of Italy's occupying forces in Albania were gathered right across the neighboring Greek-Albanian border. Right away, Greece reinforced its borders with troops and artillery. In order to avoid misunderstandings, Metaxas chose to inform Rome about Greece's reinforcement of troops at its borders and also implied about the Italian forces that were gathered right across the borderline. In a firm and determined manner he clarified Greece's readiness to defend its national integrity<sup>88</sup>.

Tensions were somehow relaxed after the outbreak of the Second World War, as initially the Italians decided not to take part in it. In mid-September 1939 Rome informed Athens that even in the event of Italy's entry to the war, the Italian government would not take the initiative to use military aggression against Greece. At the same time, Mussolini, in order to appear more convincing to his "friendly feelings towards Greece", ordered the withdrawal of the Italian troops from the Greek-Albanian border 20 kilometers behind the line. This gesture of goodwill was attached by a proposal for the renewal of the 1928 Greek-Italian Pact of Friendship which was about to expire on 1 October 1939<sup>89</sup>. However, following consultations with the British<sup>90</sup>, Metaxas chose not to accept Rome's proposal for the renewal of

the Greek-Italian Pact of Friendship<sup>91</sup>. His decision was obviously based on his pro-British policy and his desire not to see Greece bound with a pact of Friendship with Italy in the event that the latter was at war with Great Britain but not with Greece.

In fact, by dismissing the renewal of the Greek-Italian Pact of Friendship it meant that Greece had chosen to align with the Western Powers. "We are with the Western Powers because it is to our own interest", Metaxas had announced to MacVeagh just a few weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War<sup>92</sup>. Also, the non-renewal of the Greek-Italian pact clearly meant that Greece was more exposed to Italian aggression<sup>93</sup>. In the months that followed, Rome's pressure against Greece would become stronger and stronger and would climax immediately after Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940. The Italian government accused Athens, among others, of "insincere neutrality" on the grounds that the Greek government was allegedly permitting British war ships to use Greek harbors, and of oppressing the Albanian Chams living in Greece<sup>94</sup>. The Greek government decided not to reply to the Italian provocations even when an Italian submarine went to extremes by torpedoing the Greek cruiser Elli on 15 August 1940. Had he was given the chance, Metaxas would have chosen neutrality for Greece. Regrettably, Mussolini had already decided to attack Greece. In the first hours of 28 October 1940, Metaxas firmly rejected the Italian ultimatum to surrender Greece and thus the road of Greek-Italian armed confrontation, which had been paved for some time, was followed<sup>95</sup>.

### Conclusion

Relations with Italy were an extremely important part of Greek foreign policy throughout the whole Interwar period. In the autumn of 1922 both countries entered a radical new era in their modern history: Greece, as a result of the Asia Minor Disaster and Italy as a result of the establishment of Mussolini's Fascist regime. Due to these extremely important events, Greek-Italian relations were shaped by the results that came forth and influenced both countries. For Athens, 1922 was a turning point in its foreign policy as after its defeat in the Greek-Turkish War and the violent uprooting of the Greek populations of Asia Minor, Pontus and Eastern Thrace that followed, its irredentism policy was abandoned and Greece became a status quo country. Similarly, 1922 was a turning point for Italian foreign policy for the exact opposite reason though, as Mussolini gradually turned Italy into a revisionist country.

Regardless of Italy's diplomatic orientation, Greece was interested in finding a sort of understanding with its biggest Mediterranean neighbor. In the early 1920s, Greek-Italian relations were shadowed by bitter memo-

86 FO 371/23779, Waterlow to Foreign Office, No. 73, Athens, 20 March 1939; FO 371/23779, Waterlow to Foreign Office, Nos. 115 and 116, Athens, 9 April 1939; *Metaxas*, p. 364.

87 *MacVeagh*, p. 159.

88 FO 371/23780, Palairot to Foreign Office, No. 340, Athens, 14 August 1939; FO 371/23780, Palairot to Foreign Office, No. 359, Athens, 25 August 1939; FO 371/23780, Palairot to Foreign Office, No. 83, Athens, 26 August 1939; *Italy's Aggression*, docs. Nos. 45 and 46.

89 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 49.

90 FO 371/23780, Palairot to Foreign Office, No. 399, Athens, 15 September 1939; FO 371/23780, Maclean, [untitled note], 16 September 1939; FO 371/23780, Palairot to Foreign Office, No. 407, Athens, 16 September 1939; FO 371/23780, [illegible signature], [untitled note], 17 September 1939; FO 371/23780, [illegible signature] to Palairot, No. 574, [London], 18 September 1939; FO 371/23780, Foreign Office to Palairot, No. 576, London, 18 September 1939.

91 *Italy's Aggression*, doc. No. 52.

92 *MacVeagh*, p. 161.

93 Konstantinos Svolopoulos, *I Elliniki Exoteriki Politiki, 1900-1945*, Vol. I (Athens: Hestia, 2002), p. 267.

94 *Metaxas*, pp. 476-491.

95 For a general overview of the Axis attack against Greece in 1940-1941 see Heinz A. Richter, *I Italo-Germaniki Epithesi enantion tis Ellados* (Athens: Govostis, 1998).

ries of the recent past, as Italian foreign policy systematically opposed to most of the Greek territorial demands in the Balkans and the Near East. The situation was further worsened almost immediately after the establishment of the Fascist regime that resulted to the Corfu incident of 1923. However, despite the additional disappointment, ever since the mid-1920s Athens had attempted on many occasions to stabilize relations with Rome and in one case, during the Pangalos dictatorship, Greece even explored the possibility to create a Greek-Italian alliance with an anti-Turkish direction. Thus, in 1928 Greece and Italy signed a bilateral Pact of Friendship which set the basis for a general Greek-Italian rapprochement, which Athens effectively used in order to terminate its post-1922 diplomatic isolation.

The Greek-Italian Pact of Friendship was the apogee of the bilateral rapprochement. Nevertheless, it soon became evident that it also marked the limits of cooperation between Athens and Rome. Ever since the early 1930s and especially after Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Italian revisionism was boosted and gradually became uncontainable. As a result, Greek support for the political and territorial status quo imposed in Europe by

the peace treaties that marked the end of the First World War was simply incompatible to Mussolini's firm decision to overturn it and to create a "new Roman Empire" in the Mediterranean Sea. Athens obviously felt closer to the powers defending stability (such as Great Britain), whereas Rome was searching for allies in its revisionist aspirations (such as the old Greek enemy, Bulgaria).

In the late 1930s, when Europe was little by little drawn into the abyss of the Second World War, grouping with Italy and the Axis Powers was not an option for Greece. For Athens, falling into the Italian sphere of influence would actually mean to completely surrender to Rome's interests. In this case, the result would most probably be Greece's territorial dismemberment: Italy would take most (if not all) of the Ionian islands, Albania (an Italian protectorate) would be given a part of Epirus and Bulgaria would seize the opportunity to annex Western Thrace and a large part of Greek Macedonia. To put it simply, Greece would have to pay itself the price of its surrender. As a consequence, Greece chose to defend itself with all the means available against Italian aggression when the latter stroke with a military invasion in late October 1940.