

**Holiday reflections on a critical battle for freedom sixty-five years ago**

**The Greeks and the Epic of 1940**

"The time has come for Greece to fight for her independence. Greeks, now we must prove ourselves worthy of our forefathers and the freedom they bestowed upon us. Greeks, now fight for your Fatherland, for your wives, for your children and the sacred traditions. Now, over all things, fight!"

**Ioannis Metaxas**

**Prime Minister of Greece – 1940**

“Until now, we knew that Greeks were fighting like heroes; from now on we shall say that the heroes fight like Greeks.”

**Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Britain - 1940.**

I had an interesting conversation during the Christmas break when an elderly friend of our family brought her husband to our house for the holiday meal. She had lived in Italy for a number of years and had been an opera singer. He was an Italian composer of classical music and quite talented in his field. After leaving

Italy

they had settled outside of NYC where he runs a music-composing studio. Over the course of the meal we were extremely interested to hear about his background and tales of his life growing up in

Italy

. I am a huge history buff, so I was riveted, as he told of his experience being a soldier in Mussolini's Fascist Italy during World War II. Hearing about the war from somebody who had been on the other side was intriguing. He hated everything about the Fascists and considered himself a pacifist, but unfortunately he was drafted from his hometown of

Milan

into the army. He had ended up as a soldier in the elite Italian 3rd "Julia" Alpine Division. It was this elite military unit, that became infamous as the symbol of the complete fiasco, that resulted from Mussolini's decision to invade

Greece

in 1940. Our guest was very reserved as he recounted the incredible events that had taken place sixty-five years ago but he became quite emotional when he expressed his admiration for the Greeks. His words really had an impact on me.

***"If the Greeks had not resisted and had given in to the Italians, then the chain of events that led to the ultimate downfall of the Axis powers would have been radically different".***

The Greco-Italian War had started when the Italian ambassador in Athens issued an ultimatum on October 28<sup>th</sup>,

1940

to the Greek Prime Minister, demanding

Greece

to allow

Italy

to occupy the country. There were many Italians – our dinner guest included - who were quite dismayed at Mussolini's hostile attitude towards

Greece

and rightly predicted that nothing good could come from Mussolini's desire to show off the Italian war machine to his ally Hitler. The Greeks had replied to the Italian ultimatum with a resounding NO (OXI in Greek) and October 28th is still celebrated every year in Greece as a national holiday commemorating the resistance of Greece to Axis aggression and the sacrifice

of the Greek nation for the allied cause. The Greeks have a saying - “when we are right we fight” – and fight they did.

Mussolini had been busy building up the Italian war machine and watching in envy as his ally Hitler conquered one country after another. He was fond of lecturing the Italian people about how he would restore Italy into a powerful new Roman Empire. The Italian armed forces had an overwhelming advantage in terms of modern weaponry and numbers of troops, but they drastically underestimated the fighting spirit of the Greek army. Besides the fact that the Greeks were fighting for their homeland they also harbored a deep animosity towards the Italians for their betrayal of the Greek cause during the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922 when the supposedly allied Italians secretly sold weaponry to the Turkish side and then cut a deal to support the Turks.

When the Italian army crossed into Greece, they expected an easy victory, but met an enemy who was preparing to deliver a response that would devastate the Italian battle plan. As the columns of Italian infantry and tanks advanced through the valleys into Greece, the Greek forces converging from all over northern Greece went into action. They came down from the surrounding mountains, where they had been monitoring the troop movements, and attacked from all sides, stopping the invasion dead in its tracks. In one of the most amazing episodes in military history, the Greek army trapped the Italian 3rd Alpine Division in the mountains and shocked the Italian high command, by annihilating the unit taking 5,000 prisoners. By the middle of November, the Greek army had gone on the offensive driving the Italian army back into Albania.

At the end of December in 1940, the victorious Greek army had not only repulsed the Italian invasion, but had gone on to push the Italian forces out of the southern one third of Albania completely. On December 28

th

, Mussolini had to acknowledge that his grandiose vision to show Hitler how Italy

could easily conquer

Greece

was a complete failure and he asked for German military assistance. Hitler who was furious that Mussolini had embarked on the invasion of

Greece

in the first place, now had to rescue the defeated Italians.

**This amazing Greek victory over the Italians became known as The Epic of 1940 to the Greeks and to the rest of the world as the first defeat of the Axis powers that gave them reason to hope that the aggression could be halted.**

The Germans were unable to render assistance to their Italian allies until winter was over and then they launched their "Balkan Blitzkrieg" against Yugoslavia and Greece on April 6th, 1941.

As with the fight against the Italians – the Greeks fought ferociously and with British assistance succeeded in holding out until the end of May 1941. The final battle of the German invasion of Greece

was the airborne assault on the

island

of

Crete

. The Greek and British forces repelled two out of the three airports assaults, but the Germans poured men and material into the one airport that they had captured and finally turned the tide in their favor. Greek peasants hunted down and killed the elite paratroopers wherever they could find them. The German paratroopers suffered about 50% casualties (with almost 4,000 dead) out of 14,000 troops used in this final battle. So heavy were the losses that Hitler decided never to launch an airborne invasion again. General Kurt Student would later say, "Crete

was the grave of the German parachutists".

At the end of the war, the German officers on trial at Nuremberg had commented that if the invasion of Russia taken place on schedule early in the spring of 1941, instead of at the end of June, they would have succeeded in conquering the Soviet Union before the winter of 1941, which proved to be the only thing capable of stopping the German advance. Field Marshall Keitel, who was Chief of Staff of the German Army, was very bitter when he said that "The unbelievable strong resistance of the Greeks delayed by two or more vital months the German attack against Russia; if we did not have this long delay, the outcome of the war would have been different in the eastern front and in the war in general, and others would have been accused and would be occupying this seat as defendants today".

At the end of the war there were 10% fewer Greeks alive than when the war started and the overall devastation of the country took years to recover from, but this small country showed the world at a time when it mattered the most that freedom is worth fighting for. The sacrifices made by the Greek nation ultimately changed the course of history and contributed in preventing the evils of Fascism and Nazism from dominating the world.

The following poem was written in 1941 as a tribute to the heroism of the Greek nation after their defeat by the Germans.

### THE GREEK

Il Duce with his mighty legions

Knocked at Greece's ancient gate

He had forty million people

And the Greeks had only eight

With his Fascist banners gleaming

From the high Albanian Peak,

"I am coming," cried Il Duce.

"Come ahead" replied the Greek.

"Forward!" shouted the commanders

With a good old Roman curse;

And the legions started rolling,

Rolling swiftly – in reverse,

And throughout the startled nation

The news began to leak

That the Duce had been walloped

By the sturdy little Greek.

Then that poor, moth-eaten Caesar,

What a different song he sang!

“This great big bully licked me!

Hey Adolph, get your gang!”

“You’re a dumkopf,” cried the Fuehrer,

As he pulled his trusty gun;

“You don’t know how to murder kids;

“I’ll show you how it’s done.”

And then the tanks began to roll

With clank and roar and groan:

The great planes blacked the sky and filled

The air with ceaseless drone,

In endless ranks with flame and bomb

And gray guns long and sleek;

The mighty German war machine

Moved down upon the Greek.

And still that fellow wouldn't run –

He didn't quite know how.

“We've got some help,” he said, “and that

just makes it even now.”

“ Bring on your millions, Adolph dear,

We're neither scared nor meek.

The British, sixty thousand strong,

Are standing with the Greek!”

They fought a fight like Homer's song

They died, as brave men must

Their ranks, "neath dark odds,

Were beaten to the dust.

And then heroic chivalry

Attained its highest peak

As the victors clasped their bloody hands

Above the fallen Greek.

Someday, beyond this veil of tears,

We'll all stand on the spot

To tell the Judge of all the world

Just who we were – and what.

I wouldn't be a Fascist then,

Or Nazi grim and bleak;

But I'd be proud to tell my God

That once I was a Greek!

**By John Dennis Mahoney**

[http://www.capecodtoday.com/blogs/index.php/Constantine/2005/12/28/the\\_greeks\\_and\\_the\\_epic\\_of\\_1940](http://www.capecodtoday.com/blogs/index.php/Constantine/2005/12/28/the_greeks_and_the_epic_of_1940)