

THE GREEK-ITALIAN CRISIS OF 1923 – THE TELINI/CORFU EPISODE

Your Eminence, General, Representatives of the local Authorities, active and retired members of the Armed Forces and Security Corps, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Albert Cohen Foundation for the honour of inviting me to speak at today's event on the Greek-Italian crisis of 1923 - The Tellini/Corfu episode. This particular event has been of great interest to me for a long time, as it was the subject of both my doctoral thesis and my first book.

As we all know, the territories of present-day Albania have been subject to numerous invasions from ancient times until today. During the 15th century, the Turks occupied the area, which became part of the Ottoman Empire along with the rest of the Balkan Peninsula. Most Muslim residents began to become ethnically conscious in the early 20th century. In fact, in 1847, these people, from 55 primarily Muslim villages, drew up a memorandum in which they petitioned King Otto of Greece for their unification with his country. Unfortunately, this was practically impossible to accomplish.

The Young Turks made significant concessions to the Albanians, the most important of which was the territorial clarification of the region during the summer of 1912. Since then, the area belonging to the vilayets (provinces) of Shkodër and Ioannina as well as large parts of the vilayets of Kosovo and Monastir were considered part of Albania. This decision dispelled any confusion, as extremist Albanians now had a specific geographical area to which they would adapt their plans for autonomy (the

boundaries of today's "Greater Albania"), while the Greeks realized that Albania included areas with a purely Greek population or with a clear majority of Greek inhabitants. A few months later, the First Balkan War broke out.

The Albanians were the only Balkans to side with the Sultan. They found themselves struggling, especially after the successive victories of the Christian forces. Therefore, a number of prominent Albanians rushed abroad in order to secure diplomatic support. They were encouraged mainly by Italian diplomacy and secondarily by Austrian diplomacy, and Ismail Kemal proclaimed Albania's independence in Vlorë on 28 November 1912. After a few weeks, Rome and Vienna signed an agreement in which they undertook to "establish" an independent Albania, in which they would maintain independent spheres of influence. In May 1913, this agreement was ratified by a treaty signed in Rome.

The battles, however, continued and the Greek Army, under the leadership of Constantine the Crown Prince, liberated Ioannina and northern Epirus, provoking the wrath of Rome. In the negotiations that took place in London, the Italians and Austrians managed to obtain the agreement of the other delegations for the establishment of an independent Albanian state. At the end of May 1913, the Treaty of London was concluded, which amongst other things, regulated the establishment of an international commission for the delimitation of the borders of the new state. The Greek government submitted a request for a referendum to clarify the opinion of the residents of the area but this was rejected. The aforementioned international commission worked amidst fierce confrontations between its members in the northern part of Albania until December 12, 1913. The committee's activities were not renewed under

this formation, as the following summer the First World War broke out and the issue of the borders of Albania was put on hold.

In May 1920, the American Senate voted unanimously to grant northern Epirus to Greece. Unfortunately, eleven days later, Athens and Tirana signed the Covenant of Capetice, the provisions of which provided that Korçë would come under the control of the Albanians. The latter promised once again to respect the rights of the North Epirus. As a result, the Greek Army would not march into the area, even though it had secured the permission of the French and Italians to do so.

In November 1921, an international committee headed by the Italian General Enrico Tellini was formed to determine the borders of Albania. The Italian delegates undertook the demarcation of the Greek-Albanian border, while the Anglo-French undertook the demarcation of the Albanian-Serbian border. Lieutenant Colonel Dimos Notis Bottsaris was appointed head of the Greek delegation. From the very beginning, the Italian General's attitude was favourable to the Albanians and provoked reactions.

On the morning of August 27, 1923, delegations set out from Ioannina to conduct an inspection in the disputed area. On that day, the first vehicle to leave was the Albanian vehicle, the second the Greek and the last the vehicle of the Italian delegates. The latter was also the fastest and soon reached the old Ford of the Greek delegation, which had been immobilized due to mechanical failure. The Greek driver refused the help offered by the Italians and repaired the damage himself in due course.

At a point 54 km from Ioannina, tree trunks were placed across the road after the Albanian delegates' vehicle had passed. The Italian driver braked in time and stopped the car, the passengers of which were now a

sitting target for the perpetrators. The latter had been lurking for a long time and had chosen the location carefully. As soon as the Italian Lancia stopped, its passengers received a barrage of gunfire. All but one of them succumbed to their injuries while inside or near the car. Although wounded, General Tellini was the only one who managed to get out of the vehicle and walk a few meters. The perpetrators, however, managed to reach him and executed him, thus administering the *coup de grace*, as they did for the other victims.

The announcement of the tragic news sent shock waves to Athens. The Greek government sent the best police officers to the area as soon as possible. The latter, even though they used every possible means, failed to present a legally solid and justified case concerning the name or even the nationality of the perpetrators.

The Italian government did not even wait for the conclusion of the Greek investigators and, holding Greece responsible for the crime, sent an ultimatum to the internationally isolated (after the Execution of the Six) revolutionary government of Athens. Benito Mussolini demanded that Athens undertake a series of actions to restore Italy's damaged prestige. The Greek government had to respond within 24 hours, without specifying in the ultimatum what would happen otherwise. The terms of the Italian communication were excessively harsh, especially since Greek culpability had not been proven in any way.

Nevertheless, the Greek government accepted some of these, requested the modification of some others, and rejected three conditions which, according to the Greek government, violated the honour and sovereignty of the Greek state. Finally, Athens stated that if the Italian government considered the proposed remedies insufficient, then Greece

would appeal to the League of Nations, committing itself to accept in advance any decisions of the international organization. Mussolini did not even expect to receive the Greek reply, which was considered to be ex-post rejection in its entirety. The order for the departure of the Italian fleet was given several hours before Mussolini received the Greek government's verbal warning, while the plans for the capture of Corfu had been drawn up much earlier, as I found out personally, while studying the Italian archives.

Early on the afternoon of 31 August 1923, an Italian ship sailed into the port of Corfu, the “Countess” of the Ionian Sea, and anchored in front of the Old Fortress, without saluting the Greek flag according to the rules. The rest of the fleet followed, consisting of seventeen ships, accompanied by a submarine and four seaplanes. Shortly, all the Italian ships were deployed in battle order between the island of Vidos and the Corfiot coast.

At 15:00 pm, Captain Antonio Foschini and his aide-de-camp Lieutenant Tsordini visited the prefect Petros Evripaios, who welcomed them in French. Foschini rudely interrupted him and handed him a document written in Italian. Evripaios, although fluent in Italian, pretended ignorance of the language and, realizing the criticality of the circumstances, asked Foschini in French to summon the Italian consul stationed on the island. During the few minutes while they were waiting, Evripaios managed to alert some of the island’s important actors to come as soon as possible to the building of the prefecture. After a few minutes, the consul arrived and undertook the translation of the Italian document. According to this, the Greek prefect had to surrender Corfu to the Italians, without putting up the slightest resistance, as it would be violently overpowered.

The occupation of the island would begin in 30 minutes. This deadline was given in order to give third country nationals time to assemble at the consulates of their countries or at least to be able to leave the military buildings. Evripaios, having overcome the initial shock, replied calmly that he lacked instructions from his government and therefore asked the Italian officer to give him the required time to come into telegraphic communication with Athens.

Foschini angrily replied that he was neither giving him a deadline nor allowing him to have any kind of communication with the Greek government! Then Evripaios answered him proudly: "Under these circumstances, I am unable to hand over the island to you." Meanwhile, the representatives of the city authorities had begun to arrive at the building and the Italian officials were becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, Foschini consented to the granting of a few minutes' time only for Evripaios to confer with the other officials. The prefect immediately tried in vain to contact Athens in order to obtain instructions from the government as to how to proceed.

This was followed by an intense dialogue between Evripaios and Foschini. The Greek public official launched into a harsh "accusation" with respect to the violation of Corfu's long-established neutrality. The Italian officer interrupted him and asked his country's consul to inform the Greek prefect that he had no intention of talking to him. All he expected from the latter was a "Yes" or a "No".

Evripaios replied that the Italian commander of the naval squadron, Admiral Emilio Solari, was a regular visitor to Corfu and was aware of the fact that both Venetian fortresses on the island were not only lacking weapons for defence but were also overcrowded with refugees from Asia

Minor. Then, the Italian official, understanding Evripaios' delaying tactics, gave him a note with the terms of surrender for the island and prepared to depart. Shortly before leaving, he told the Greek prefect that unless he raised the white flag on the mast of the Old Fortress, three blank cannon shots would be fired and the Italian troops would begin to land. It is of immense importance that Foschini made no reference to any shelling of the city!

At 17:00 p.m., the three blank cannon shots were fired and shortly afterwards the Italian ships began to fire at the Old and New Fortresses. It is noteworthy that, according to all indications, the Italian artillerymen were aiming at the ramparts of the Old Fortress, on which women and children were in motion. The distance between the ships and the coast was not more than three hundred metres and it would have been impossible for any Italian not to see the women and children. However, even in the event that for 90 minutes all the Italians on board failed to distinguish them, it is practically impossible that they did not notice the approximately two hundred children swimming under the Old Fortress in imminent danger of injury. At the same time, the light cruiser "Premuda" fired at the New Fortress from a distance of about five hundred metres. In this location were the students of the Gendarmerie School, their British instructors, a few soldiers of the island's garrison and hundreds of refugees.

It is difficult to describe the unspeakable panic that was caused in the city of Corfu. People ran to hide in the underground tunnels of the fortresses, in the houses and in the churches, while others jumped into the sea. The horror was caused by the sight of the first dead and wounded, the screams of their relatives, the women's terrified voices and the sight of some Italian planes flying at a very low altitude over the city.

Many of the shells landed in the Jewish cemetery, while others fell even in the garden of the former summer royal palace, located several kilometres outside the city! The shelling lasted for about 25 minutes and resulted in the death of 15 people and the injury of at least 35. Evripaios realized that he would not receive orders from the surprised government of Athens. He issued a series of orders in cooperation with the other authorities of the island, and drafted an official protest to the Italian Admiral Solari. He then decided to bear the burden of a momentous decision. He therefore ordered the semaphore of the Old Fortress to raise a white flag. Because there was no white flag in the fortress and time was passing, Evripaios' children took a huge white sheet onto the balcony of the prefecture building, as his daughter and my aunt told me many years ago.

Immediately after this, the Italian soldiers began to land in the harbour. As soon as the scouts announced that there was not a single Greek soldier in the fortresses, the trumpets gave the order to attack. Immediately, the Italian soldiers lost all military discipline and began to run, competing with each other and literally stepping over corpses. Their fury burst out in the building of the VII Recruitment Office, the door of which was riddled with bullets. They then completely destroyed it, breaking the furniture, tearing up the records, burning the registers and stealing various boxes and a military stove! The same inappropriate behaviour was displayed at the Guardhouse, while at the Military Hospital they ordered the removal of all patients without exception and arrested the staff.

Extensive damage was also caused to the New Fortress. There, the Italian soldiers broke down the door of the church, looted the clothing stores of the Police School and raided the residence of the Director of the School, from where they removed all the furniture! The worst of all, however, took place in the Old Fortress. There, a company of Italian

soldiers found a Greek flag, hung it like a rag on a bayonet and carried it mockingly around the city. This sad procession ended up on the Italian flagship, where the Italians cheered for their country and its... glorious army.

After the completion of the military occupation, the Italians posted on all public buildings freshly painted inscriptions in Italian, ignoring the fact that only a few Corfiots were proficient in this language. A few days later, the Italian Deputy Minister of Merchant Shipping and an inspector general of the administration arrived on the island from Rome. The purpose of their arrival in Corfu was to organize the local services according to the Italian system. There were other indications of their intentions for the long-term settlement on the island, such as the commencement of extensive earthworks for the construction of an airfield in the vicinity of the town, the attempt to establish a seaplane reception station at Gouvia, and the continuous shipment of vast quantities of military supplies capable of equipping a large number of men. Finally, the circulation of a postage stamp with the inscription 'Corfu - Italian Occupation' from the very first days of the occupation of the island was particularly notable.

The aforementioned actions increased the suspicion of the Corfiots as to the true intentions of the Italians and contributed to the preservation of the bad climate between the two ethnicities. The Italian administration attempted to take advantage of the strong religious sentiment of the Corfiots and to approach Metropolitan Athenagoras, who was later to become the Ecumenical Patriarch. Soon, the Italian consul conveyed the invitation of the new commander of the island, Vice Admiral Belleni, to Athenagoras, who was then transferred to the prefecture. There, Belleni greeted him with an unusual courtesy. Athenagoras, however, was not fooled. He returned the greeting with icy coldness and then immediately

gripped his interlocutor, complaining about the bombing. A heated dialogue ensued between the two men and Athenagoras departed.

The Corfiots closed their shops after the bombing and only by force were they “convinced” to reopen them. Even then, however, they refused to interact with the Italians. No one approached them and they all manifested their disgust at the conquerors. Then, the Italians thought to take advantage of the Corfiots' love of music, which is still known today, by sending their military band every afternoon to play music on the platform of the Upper Square (Spianada). Immediately, the place was vacated by the Corfiots and only the Italians remained. On September 10, some indignant Greeks stormed the stage and destroyed the lighting, forcing the band to leave in a hurry. Also, the Italians had to face constant acts of sabotage during the evening hours (e.g. cutting telephone wires, tearing up announcements, etc.).

The island had been declared to be in a state of mourning since the day of the occupation, with not a single marriage taking place. The last, and perhaps the most characteristic example of the actual feelings of the Corfiots towards the Italian conquerors, was the attitude of sexually “liberal” women. They systematically refused to accept as clients Italian officers and soldiers, even when some of them offered them twice the usual remuneration.

At the same time, a tough diplomatic battle was taking place. In this, the Norwegian representative to the League of Nations, Dr Fridtjof Nansen, came to the aid of the Greek effort, as you may also find in my book. Eventually, however, the serious errors of the Greek side and the warm support of the French for the Italians obliged Athens to pay compensation to Rome and to organise a humiliating apology ceremony at

the Zappeion, during which the Greek flag was lowered in front of these states of the Agreement. In fact, Greece took out a loan to pay compensation, without receiving a penny for the multiple victims of the Italian bombing of Corfu. Eventually, the martyred island was liberated on September 27, 1923. The incident, however, remained deeply engraved in the memory of the Corfiots, who were to experience again the "blessings" of the Latin civilization 18 years later.

Thank you for your kind attention.