

Small States in World War II: The Greek Example ¹

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It is often said that the history of wars and other conflicts is written by the winning side. (This may not be always true, but it is certainly true of World War II.) What is almost never identified as a problem, however, is something else: that the history of wars is written from the perspective of the major powers participating in the conflict—the Great Powers, to use a somewhat antiquated term.

Small or, in any event, smaller states receive scant attention, either as mere pawns or, at most, as opportunities for action (or inaction) by the Great Powers. This is true of the historiography even when Great Power propaganda at the time had magnified the aggression and destruction befalling a small state. Remember, for example, the “rape” of Belgium in World War I.

Was the avoidance or, rather, the postponement of war in 1938 worth Czechoslovakia? Conversely, was Poland worth starting the war in 1939? Was the German attack on Norway provoked by British moves? This is the sort of question that is still being debated in the endless stream of studies that keep appearing on World War II. Normally, you have to be a Czech, a Pole, or a Norwegian to go beyond this level of abstraction and examine the concrete experience of the particular country—very often at the risk of forgetting or even ignoring the larger picture.

What appears even more parochial is that historians and informed citizens immersed in the wartime history of their own small country typically show no interest whatsoever in the comparable experiences of other small states, which they keep ignoring blissfully. The Greeks, for example, are prone to regard their own successful resistance against Italian aggression (to be celebrated on 28 October) as a unique case of David facing Goliath. They are totally unaware of the earlier case of David facing Goliath, which had moved and mobilized world public opinion a year previously. That was the so-called Winter War of 1939–40 between Finland and the Soviet Union—similar in many ways to the so-called Albanian War of 1940–41 between Greece and Italy.

¹ This was the Annual Constantine Karamanlis Lecture at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy on 22 October 2009.

The experience of small states in World War II is no mere academic question. Nor is it only a matter of fairness or “justice” in the study and the use of history. The traumatic memories of World War II have affected in the most concrete and lasting way the postwar politics and especially the foreign policy of practically every small state in Europe. Erstwhile neutral countries became and remain the staunchest pillars of NATO: Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium.

Of course, in Western Europe the linkage between current policy and the bitter lessons of the War may no longer be perceived. This is why there appears to be so much surprise and incomprehension among older NATO and EU member states over the long-delayed reactions on the part of smaller countries for which the War actually ended only with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Among them, Poland stands out, with its obsessive commemoration of the Katyn massacre after many years of repressed memory. Even in Finland wartime experiences can be evoked and celebrated freely at last, after several decades of debilitating “Finlandization” and concomitant self-censorship.

In other words, the experience of small states in World War II is not yet merely a matter of historical record. It may provide, nonetheless, useful historical material for the study of “small-state diplomacy,” in which there is a growing interest.

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What were the options for small states in Europe on the eve of the War? A few (like Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary) had reasons to jump on the Axis bandwagon. Otherwise, the most “natural” choice for a small state was neutrality. The other option was reliance on military alliances and on the guarantees offered by Great Powers. In the end, and in most cases, neither option provided effective protection against German aggression.

Neutrality was not only brutally violated by Germany on the flimsiest of pretexts. It had also induced previously a lack of military preparedness, which was perhaps most bitterly felt in the case of Norway. Only Swiss neutrality was backed by an elaborate military system of defense, which may have proved effective as a deterrent (in conjunction with other factors).

A far more bitter experience than the violation of neutrality by a notoriously unlawful regime was the brutal destruction of all the hopes and trust invested in alliances and Great Power guarantees. This was the experience first of the Czechs, sold out in 1938 despite their impressive military preparedness. Then of the Poles, fooled to the last by the outright lies of the French general staff promising that the French army would invade Germany two weeks after the start of the war.

In this context, special mention should be made of Belgium, which wavered between the two options of alliance or neutrality in the most disastrous manner. It abandoned its alliance with France and opted for neutrality in 1937 in the naïve hope that it would not become a battlefield again. In 1940, however, its neutrality affected adversely Allied military planning and thereby contributed considerably to the swift German victory.

When the day of reckoning eventually came, small states again had two options: either to submit without a fight or to go down fighting. In each specific case, the choice was dictated by the country's historical traditions and memories, geography, particular circumstances, but also by the mentality or sheer quality of its leadership.

I would like to argue that there was also an *existential* aspect involved: the sense that a historic nation would preserve its honor and self-esteem only if it went down fighting—rather than surrender. Listen to Winston Churchill speaking to the assembled members of his government on 28 May 1940: “If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground!”² French Colonel de Larminat, before joining the Free French of General de Gaulle, had been arrested on 28 June 1940 for declaring: “If we have to perish, we’ll perish on our feet!”³

In Greece, one month before the German attack, the conservative editor George A. Vlachos published a dramatic open letter to Hitler. Its ending referred to the land which “having once taught the entire world how to live, must now also teach it how to *die*.”⁴

One might even speak here of an existential *wager*: the belief that, in the long run, a nation had a better chance of eventual rebirth and survival if it went down fighting. This existential wager was made first by the Finns, then by the Poles, then by the Norwegians (or most of them), and eventually by the Greeks.

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² *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton 1940–45*, edited by Ben Pimlott (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 28n. This is a (probably later) “marginal insertion” by Dalton. The first version was less gory: “If at last the long story is to end, it were better it should end, not through surrender, but only when we are rolling senseless on the ground.”

³ Raoul Aglion, *Roosevelt and de Gaulle* (New York: Free Press, 1988), p. 5. It is quite remarkable that a French aristocratic officer like de Larminat would echo the famous statement by the Spanish communist Dolores Ibarruri, during the Spanish Civil War, that it is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.

⁴ *Kathimerini*, 8 March 1941.

Among small European states, Greece was the last to be attacked (together with Yugoslavia) and the very last to be occupied by the Axis powers. Since 1936, the country had been under the strictly personal dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas. Despite all the trappings and the theatrics in imitation of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, this was not a fascist regime, except, perhaps, in a prospective sense: the compulsory youth organization EON was supposed to become, eventually, the fascist party that the country lacked. Until then, there was no party, nor even a recognizable ruling elite. There was only Metaxas and a handful—literally a handful—of trusted cronies.

A brilliant military mind, it was he who had started preparing the country for war ever since he came to power. It was also he who chose (all by himself, without consulting anyone) to reject the perfunctory Italian ultimatum in the early hours of 28 October 1940. *Alors, c'est la guerre*, he told the hapless Italian ambassador. But the press and public opinion immediately opted for a single word: “No!” (*OXI*).

Ever since then, those politically opposed to Metaxas have sought to deny his freedom of choice and, thereby, deprive him of the glory for *OXI* and for the ensuing victory over the Italians. Purely hypothetical and completely undocumented, these arguments are not worth discussing at length here. Suffice it to note that the rejection of the Italian ultimatum was not a precipitate or sudden decision, as these arguments assume. This was one of the most considered and calculated decisions in Modern Greek history. Consequently, though the very opposite of a charismatic personality, Metaxas emerges as a great war leader, especially when compared to his contemporaries—in Greece or elsewhere in Europe.

Two days after the start of the war, on 30 October 1940, Metaxas addressed the assembled editors of Athenian newspapers, seeking to ensure their genuine support for the war effort. He explained that he had sought to preserve Greek neutrality and to keep the country out of the war. With this aim, he had secretly appealed to Berlin. He had been made to understand that Greece would be spared only if it accepted willingly its territorial “amputation” to the benefit of Bulgaria and Italy. Such a sellout inevitably would split the nation in a repetition of the National Schism during World War I—a repetition that he was intent on preventing. After the unprovoked Italian aggression, Greece’s natural ally was Britain, commanding the seas. The struggle would be long, and Greece might even be occupied (“enslaved”) provisionally. Nevertheless, he was confident that the “Anglo-Saxon world” would eventually prevail. At the end of the ordeal which was just beginning, Greece would find itself among the victors, augmented at least by the Dodecanese (then under Italian

rule).⁵ This set of predictions was to prove absolutely correct, down to the last detail. The Dodecanese was indeed the only territorial gain of Greece out of the War.

To the last, Metaxas wisely resisted the premature dispatch of token British forces, which would precipitate a German attack while being insufficient to repel it. He was proved right by what was to happen in April 1941, when the combined Greek and British military effort ended up merely aiming at the safe departure of the British forces. They were insufficient to repel the German offensive and, subsequently, to defend Crete. Had they remained in North Africa, however, they would have been quite sufficient to finish off the Italians there, long before Rommel could come to their rescue.

Unlike his great opponent Venizelos, Metaxas was eventually favored by the gods—to use a classic ancient formula. He died at the height of his glory, as a revered national leader, on 29 January 1941. His death caused unbelievable shock and grief among the Greeks, especially the frontline troops—unbelievable, that is, if we did not have a mass of evidence for it, both visual and textual. Everybody felt that this death was creating a void which was impossible to fill.

There is no way of knowing how Metaxas would have faced the coming German onslaught in April 1941. His timely death also spared him any discussion of his responsibility for what was to follow. It is here that it becomes most relevant to recall that Greece was the very last country to be occupied by the Axis. Several other smaller countries had been overrun and occupied more than a year earlier, providing a wealth of instructive precedents. In most cases, the head of state and the legitimate government had left the occupied country and were hosted by the British in London. From there, they were continuing the war with all the armed forces that had managed to escape (mostly naval) plus those being formed on the spot. In the occupied countries themselves, an extremely complex interaction was developing between the occupiers, their indigenous collaborators, the state bureaucracy (including the police), the resistance movement(s), and the representatives of the government-in-exile, which had typically been broadened to become a government of “national unity” including all or almost all political parties.

None of this seems to have concerned or interested Metaxas in the least. While proving himself a great war leader, he remained nonetheless at the same time a very small man: petty, egocentric, perennially insecure, distrustful, suspicious, and even paranoid.

⁵ For the full text see his published *Diary*, vol. 4, pp. 520-526.

Only in the armed forces did Metaxas allow the reinstatement of select Republican officers among those cashiered following their abortive coup in 1935. Although appearing petty and vindictive, he may have been quite correct in rejecting a wholesale reinstatement of such politicized officers, as the subsequent mutinies among the Greek armed forces in the Middle East were to show.

Otherwise, he never even contemplated the slightest broadening of his regime, which remained a strictly personal dictatorship as before. There was no deputy and no designated successor. There were no contingency plans of any kind, even though Metaxas had explicitly predicted that the country would find itself occupied (“enslaved”) temporarily. What was to happen then? On the part of the dictator and his government there is not the slightest indication of any preparation.

There may be two explanations, neither of which amounts to a justification. One might be the fear that, at a time of sweeping enthusiasm and martial delusions, any such planning would have been considered “defeatist” and would have sapped morale. Nevertheless, the standard practice of sealed envelopes containing contingency instructions should have been sufficient to alleviate such fears. The other explanation lies entirely in the psychopathology of Metaxas. Prone to depression and deep fatalism, he apparently sensed that his own end was approaching, and lamented that nothing would be left of his regime. Consequently, for him it was meaningless to prepare and/or designate a successor, or otherwise plan for the situation that would follow his death. A person who had always relished responsibility ended up subscribing in effect to the motto *Après moi, le déluge!*

Accordingly, upon the death of Metaxas, things began to unravel and eventually to fall apart. Totally unprepared, King George II was incapable even of finding a new prime minister, apart from two successive bankers (first Korizis, then Tsouderos)—a ludicrous choice in such an emergency. At one point, he was even forced to serve as prime minister himself!

The only contingency planning had been done by the Navy. Its ferocious chief of staff Admiral Alexander Sakellariou implemented it with an iron fist. Thanks essentially to him, most of the fighting ships managed to sail safely to Alexandria in Egypt.

In sharp contrast, the Army was essentially abandoned to its fate. As the Germans were approaching Athens, its chief of staff General Alexander Papagos decided that this was the right moment to resign his command and go home. Earlier, the generals at the front had disobeyed him and the king and had signed an armistice with the Germans, safeguarding both officers and enlisted men from the indignity and hardship of captivity as POWs. The same

group of generals subsequently agreed to form the first government under Axis occupation. Although freely used, the epithet “Quisling” is hardly appropriate in their case. These were, after all, the leaders of a victorious army that had defeated the Italians. They had the most honorable of intentions: to benefit primarily their ex-soldiers and to protect the territorial integrity of Greece even in defeat.

Metaxas had wanted to lead a united Greece into World War II, avoiding a repetition of the National Schism. His own heavy responsibility for that conflict burdened him in his very last days, as his diary entry for 5 January 1941 reveals. In the end, however, he failed dismally.

More than previous wars, World War II became a test not only of military resources, but also of the legitimacy and solidity of political regimes. This is because several small countries were under enemy occupation in their entirety for an extended period—something unprecedented in Europe at least since the Napoleonic era. In this respect, the War may also be regarded as a rich quasi-laboratory for the political scientist.

In a case such as Norway, for example, king and government-in-exile continued the war from London, keeping essentially intact their legitimacy in the occupied country, despite Quisling and his thugs. At the end of the war, it was enough for the king and government to return to Oslo for the restoration of the interrupted constitutional order to be complete.

In sharp contrast, Greece entered the War with a king who was unacceptable even to some royalists because of his responsibility for the dictatorship. Greece also entered the War with a regime that was not only illegitimate and authoritarian, but also so literally personal that it was bound to vanish after the death of the dictator. Metaxas had prepared the country militarily but not politically for what was to follow his *OXI*.

For other small European states, like the Netherlands for example, enemy occupation merely signified a power vacuum, in the sense that the legitimate government was prevented from exercising power in the country. In Greece, however, the Axis occupation reactivated and exacerbated a far more noxious generalized crisis of legitimacy which had been simmering since 1935.⁶ This opened the door to a protracted civil conflict which was very different from the one that Metaxas had imagined and had wished to avoid.

⁶ See my *Stillborn Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), esp. pp. 337-349.