



Old British Embassy (now demolished)

From the Diplomatic Pouch

Reports from British envoys on the Greek national character

By S. Victor Papacosma

“THE Greeks are a mercurial race, fickle in their affections, quick to wrath, slow to reason, hard bargainers, astute in business, prone to litigation, none too scrupulous in their use of facts as arguments or of arguments as facts, impatient of authority, nosing out a slight as a dog a bone, fond of subterfuge, self-sufficient in their own knowledge, and resentful of instruction.” Percy Lorraine, Britain’s minister to Athens in the late 1920s, drew this intricate profile, which is just one among many descriptions of Greek character appearing in British diplomatic dispatches.

If describing national character is generally a tricky business, then portraying Greeks is a particularly slippery affair. For decades Europeans observing Greece first-hand have reflected in print on this different, ‘unwestern’ land on the southeastern corner of their continent. The Byzantine Empire, Ottoman Turks and other foreign invaders had seemingly taken their toll, transforming Greek character in a number of ways from its idealized classical model, so familiar to the well-educated. Consequently, romanticized preconceptions conflicted with the starker realities of modern Greece. In turn, many Europeans viewed the Greeks with inadequate understanding of Greece’s more recent history and with the perception and bias of ‘western’ eyes.

Some of the most provocative statements on Greek national character are to be found in the unpublished archives of the British Foreign Office housed in London’s Public Record Office. Prior to World War II, British interest in Greek affairs tended to be greater than that of any

other European power, a concern going back to the 1821 Greek War of Independence. This interest in things Greek is mirrored in the lengthy, detailed communications sent from the British Legation in Athens to the Foreign Office.

In addition to being first-rate sources of information – a veritable treasure trove for scholars – these British dispatches also offer examples of excellent writing style. The elitist educational background, predominantly Oxbridge, of Britain’s diplomats shines through. Thus ministers in compiling longer reports would oft-times digress with *bons mots* and pertinent references to literary classics and distant historical events. The erudite turn of phrase pops up to rouse the reader’s attention. Critics might argue that the basic information could be packaged more economically and with less adornment, but this allowance for thoughtful reflection and verbal rambles generally contributed to analysis and effortless reading for the staff in London. It must be noted, however, that few eyes ever peruse these well-composed dispatches. Foreign Office personnel, after utilizing these classified materials, relegate them to archives, where they customarily sit at least thirty years (the law now) until permission can be granted for research scholars to examine them.

MY own preoccupation, as a historian, has been with the internal politics of Greece during the period between the two World Wars. These were difficult years. With the backing of victorious Entente powers, Greek troops landed in Turkey in May, 1919, but as the result

of a complex sequence of events, Mustafa Kemal’s nationalist forces defeated the Greeks by late summer 1922. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed the following July, provided for the mandatory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey; an estimated 1,300,000 Greek refugees abandoned their ancestral homes of centuries in Turkey for a demoralized, impoverished Greece. The controversial monarchy was abolished in 1924 and the fledgling Greek Republic survived erratically until 1935, experiencing four major military revolts, one dictatorship and generally tempestuous politics. Shortly after the monarchy’s restoration, General John Metaxas, with the approval of George II, established a tight-fisted dictatorship on August 4, 1936. In trying to report these complex developments, British diplomats occasionally referred, sometimes out of exasperation, to Greek character in order to explain conditions. Examples of such commentaries follow which, the reader will quickly note, are often couched in condescending tones – thereby providing insights into English character as well.

THE seemingly vexatious nature of the Greeks regularly challenged the analytical abilities of Britain’s diplomats. In 1921 Minister Lord Granville wrote, “Greek mentality is a very peculiar thing, and it is hardly possible for a foreigner to foresee what effect any particular action may have on public opinion.” Several months later a Legation staff member declared, “It is the unexpected that happens in Greece.” F. O. Lindley, Granville’s successor, remarked the following year, “It is never easy to judge the true feelings

of Greeks." In 1923 one dispatch by Charge d'Affaires C. A. Bentinck proclaimed, "The lack of logic in this country is to my mind extraordinary." Twelve years later in 1935 the Legation's E. A. Walker noted, "I fear that common sense is not a long suit with this nation." Expressing an inability to explain the tremendous support in the 1928 elections for Liberal party leader Eleftherios Venizelos, previously discredited and away from the political scene for several years, Douglas MacKillop volunteered, "One feels inclined to refer to the old saying that in Greece it is only the impossible that happens and only the provisional that endures." A member of the Foreign Office in London, responding to rumors of an important cabinet official's resignation in 1923, jotted on the dispatch's folder, "In Greece it is wise to believe nothing one hears and half of what one sees."

Individualistic and irrepressible proclivities of the Greeks, as opposed to the unflappable stereotypes of Englishmen, found a place in some dispatches. Lord Granville referred to "the constitutional dislike of all restraint and discipline nourished by the present inhabitants of Greece..." He remarked in 1920, "The Greek is naturally averse to all discipline or restraint and all improved police regulations, even those, for example, for the prevention of cruelty to animals and regulation of street traffic,

were apt to be regarded as tyrannical measures." On another occasion, Granville observed, "The Greeks resemble the youth approaching manhood, who feels that he is capable of achieving everything and that he is his own master, and who is particularly sensitive to outside criticism or attempts to compel him to respect anybody's authority but his own." Sir Sydney Waterlow, Britain's minister from 1934 to 1939, uttered similar views about "the conviction, justifiably implanted in the mind of every Greek, that no Greek can be trusted to carry out any undertaking that he has been given, not even the most formal, if it should turn out inconvenient to him to do so."

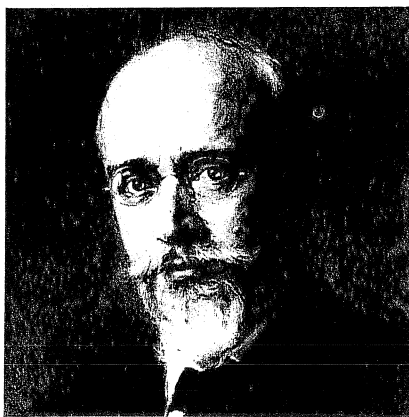
Candor and truthfulness, or their absence, on the Greek scene captured the attention of English diplomats. Referring to the brash accusations of King Constantine I's supporters against the deposed Venizelist Liberals, S. C. Atchley, the Legation's translator and second secretary, remarked in 1921, "The Greek people are being sedulously fed on falsehoods and forgeries in which diet the Censorship acts as Chief Cook. In Western Europe it would be taken for granted that these tactics must speedily fail — that the people cannot be fooled all the time — and doubtless the hour will come when the non-Venizelist Greeks will be disabused." Atchley continued by saying, "Here in the East, it should not

be forgotten, people show an extraordinary aptitude for assimilating a diet of lies and the truth is proportionately long in obtaining recognition." In London, Harold Nicolson, then a member of the F. O. staff, noted on the folder containing a dispatch from Lindley in early 1922: "It is impossible to deal with the Greeks if one proceeds from the assumption that they are all dishonest. The majority are doubtless self-seeking, disloyal and untruthful. But there does exist, chiefly, I admit, among the Venizelists a small leavening minority of more enlightened people." Lindley's profile of a newly-appointed foreign minister at the time of Greece's defeat in Asia Minor was especially damning: "He is considered particularly untruthful, even in a country in which the Einstein theory was applied in the sphere of veracity long before the learned German was ever heard of." Examples of such scornful statements on the character of prominent figures are few. Nevertheless, in June 1921 Atchley drafted a caustic "Memorandum on the Mentality and Character of King Constantine", criticizing this nemesis of British policy. Reacting to its contents, Harold Nicolson in London wrote, "King Constantine's main failing is not really his duplicity or his cowardice but his immense and unflinching stupidity."

In composing detailed dispatches



Sir Percy Loraine (left) on Eleftherios Venizelos (below): "Venizelos is essentially Greek, not a superman, but a super-Greek." To the right, Venizelos and Moustafa Kemal at a reception in Ankara, October 29, 1930.



on political developments, Legation personnel in Athens and the F. O. staff would also interject general commentary on the shifting sands of Greek politics. Following the abortive March 1935 military revolt of republican officers, Waterlow observed, "Greek politics are half feudalism, half democratic veneer; the individual voter supports his party leader, not because he believes in the principles (if any) for which the party stands, but because his vote is the price he pays for the leader's personal protection; the relationship is much like that of a liege to his lord, and no other kind of relationship is congenial or even intelligible." Several weeks later, responding to Waterlow's remarks about prospects for the monarchy's restoration, a member of the F. O. staff wrote, "The Greeks are ungovernable under any form of constitution, or are, at any rate, not governable under the same constitution for any prolonged period of time." The F. O.'s J. D. Greenway, in compiling a lengthy "Memorandum on Greek Politics between 1915 and 1925," expressed similar sentiments: "The Greek people have always combined a wild devotion to politics with an unparalleled ignorance of first principles. Like the crowd in *Julius Caesar*, they will change their views with lightning rapidity, and will cheer for whichever demagogue has for the moment the loudest lungs and the most brazen assurances." A 1930 dispatch by Minister Patrick Ramsay generalized, "It is perhaps . . . well to bear in mind that elections in this country sometimes produce surprises owing to the changeable character of the people and to the irregularities of their conduct."

Viewing the blustery political arena from another angle, British diplomats referred on occasion to the Greek lack of regard for class distinctions. Waterlow in 1935 emphasized, "Except in the form of snobbishness, the Greeks are no respecters of persons; indeed, they are less so than any people I have ever known, except perhaps our American cousins; every Greek considers himself to be as good as, or better than, every other Greek, and in the mass they are entirely devoid of that quality which has been called 'le mysticisme du chef.'" Earlier, in 1929, Oliver Harvey expressed similar opinions: "There can be few countries



Harold Nicolson (right) on King Constantine I (above): "King Constantine's main failing is not really his duplicity or his cowardice but his immense and unflinching stupidity."



where people are so democratically-minded as Greece or where there is less reverence or respect for important persons."

Percy Loraine, several months before Harvey's observations, evaluated the democratic and intractable inclinations of the Greeks in more tolerant tones. Referring to the sensitive issue of republic versus monarchy, Loraine related that a "Frenchman prefers a republic to a republican government but cannot disavow his King. The Greek, perhaps, is capable of disavowing either but his conscience would be easier if it were merely the republic. This characteristic may be moral or immoral, I do not pretend to judge, but it is essentially democratic and, as the Greeks of former days invented the word democracy, their modern descendants are undoubtedly entitled to their conception of the phenomenon . . . One of the most salient features of 20th-century Greece is the naturalness and genuineness of the democratic spirit of the inhabitants." To clarify further these intriguing people, Loraine added that with all their faults or virtues, "there must be some starker fibre in the Greek stock, which is the cement in its remarkable racial and social cohesion, the impulse which drives its traders and its merchant seamen to the remotest corners of the earth, the instinct which somehow pulls the body of the race through every suffering and catastrophe. I am sensible of this extra quality, though I cannot define it, but I believe it to be rooted in the race's faith in its own destinies, and belief in its distinctiveness

as the heir of ancient Greece. In a different way, and for different reasons, the Greeks, like Jews, feel themselves to be a chosen race." Then, focusing on Venizelos, Loraine concluded, "In my opinion, it is quite erroneous to suppose Venizelos is a great man thrown up accidentally and casually from the Greek stock. Venizelos is essentially Greek, not a superman, but a super-Greek, for he has the Greek qualities in crescendo and the Greek faults in diminuendo. But whereas Venizelos is a great man, the Greek race is not a great race, and the explanation of this resides, I believe, in the fact that the capacity for objectivity has been granted to Venizelos and, as yet, denied to the race."

Waterlow six years later would reflect on negative dimensions of Greek character, too, remarking, "There is truth in M. Clemenceau's saying that Greek history has always been nine-tenths spoken and only one-tenth lived. On the other hand, there is in the nature of the Greeks a fundamental strain of such tough vitality as to justify the belief that they will muddle through somehow." Winston Churchill in *Closing the Ring* would later express similar notions on the ability of Greeks and Jews to endure tribulation: "Both have shown a capacity for survival, in spite of unending perils and sufferings from external oppression, matched only by their own ceaseless feuds, quarrels, and convulsions."

Although some critics might contest the validity of many of these characterizations, such opinions no doubt influenced the thinking of British policy makers. Was such a



U.S. ambassador Lincoln MacVeagh (above) on Sir Sydney Waterlow (below): "Sir Sydney is a large, pink-cheeked, walrus-mustachioed, bureaucratic martinet, whose aspect recalls the Major General of the Pirates of Penzance."

sneering sense of superiority warranted? One may respond with another question: Could it have been otherwise? The British, then rulers of a vast empire, tried to understand and, at times, to manipulate the inscrutable Greeks, inhabitants of one of Europe's most strategically-located and poorest regions. (With their own special style, Greek political factions sought to manipulate the European powers.) In expressing attitudes on Greeks, English diplomats, harboring some old-school prejudices, tended to focus on negative traits, because it was these very peculiarities which appeared to contribute to problematic conditions and which therefore merited reporting. Cultural bias and sensitive politics in combination rarely result in detached, evenhanded judgments.

Greek perceptions of English character are harder to come by — not that they do not exist — and will not be dealt with here. However, in order to provide just a little ballast to offset the above listing of pointed remarks, it is appropriate to refer to at least one critique, even if by a non-Greek, of Sir Sydney Waterlow, who seemed so adroit at recording pontifical statements on the Greeks. Lincoln MacVeagh, America's representative to Athens before and after World War II, began a January 1939 dispatch on British policy towards the Metaxas dictatorship by stating, "Sir Sydney is a large, pink-cheeked, walrus-mustachioed, bureaucratic martinet, whose aspect recalls the Major General of *The Pirates of Penzance*. As might be expected from this, he is thoroughly flat-footed and tactless in diplomacy, but it is impossible not to have a warm spot in one's heart for him, since among the wily Greeks he often appears like some bewildered old bear, badgered by a lot of naughty boys. He is cordially disliked by his colony and laughed at by many people behind his back, but the natives respect him to his face, as the local blunderbuss of the British Raj." So much for the infallibility of British diplomats.

CURIOSITY about possible changes in the patterns of diplomatic reporting in recent years led me to conduct informal interviews with some British diplomats in Athens. I was informed that one of the most significant departures is in the greater emphasis on brevity.

The scale of operations for the Foreign Office is so much larger than before World War II that it would be impossible to evaluate consistently long reports effectively. Thus, lengthy dispatches of a routine nature are discouraged and infrequent. The telegram, as might be expected, is the dominant mode of communication. The ambassador still writes dispatches at regular intervals which may be reflective and analytical, but these are restricted in length. Efforts are made to uphold the tradition of fine writing, but it can probably be concluded that stress on economy of space somewhat curbs creative initiative and tendencies to comment on subjects such as national character. And, in comparison with the tone of pre-1945 dispatches, according to one Embassy member, there is little, if any, of the old arrogance. Self-images can and do change with political realities.

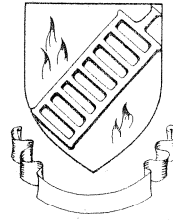
Informal chats with members of the American Embassy in Athens provided some parallel statements on the form of current diplomatic reporting. Staffers strive for good communication with accurate information. There is very strict emphasis on economy of space in reports, and this inhibits any inclinations to drift into a more creative style. Even without this restraint it can probably be stated that American Foreign Service personnel have not had as many quality writers as their British cousins. More recently, American diplomats have had to be especially careful of what they write because of instances of leakage and because of the impact of the Freedom of Information Act which facilitates early access (before the passage of 25 years) to classified materials by journalists and scholars. And since American relations with Greece have been rather sensitive of late, Embassy personnel have to be wary of recording thoughts on certain subjects, among which must be included national character — to the point where, if they do, considerable care has to be taken in the choice of nouns, but even more of adjectives. Such trends in both the British and American services do not bode well for historians who will be investigating the reportage of more recent years: the documents may be informative but they will be lacking some of the literate qualities of the past, thus making for duller reading.

And what of the Greeks? In the last three decades the changes in Greece have been dramatic. The rapid economic development can be rather easily assessed by scholars. And political life after the fall of the seven-year military dictatorship in the summer of 1974 seems headed in the direction of accepted Western European patterns, particularly now with Greece's entry into the European Economic Community as its tenth member in January 1981. But actual shifts in national character are harder to pinpoint, although generalizations and impressionistic statements, similar to those cited above, still circulate among Europeans and Americans. Perhaps it should be the mission of social scientists with their more sophisticated methodology to analyze what they refer to as 'civic culture' and 'political culture'.

Remarks made in conjunction with the Common Market signing ceremonies on May 28, 1979, hardly clear up the muddle about differences between the character of Greeks and Western Europeans. Constantine Karamanlis, then Greece's prime minister, declared, "To withstand the strain of EEC membership, the Greeks must learn to swim or sink. I am certain that they will prove good swimmers in the future because above all they possess the ability to learn and to adapt." Karamanlis, who for several years has emphasized that "Greece belongs to the West", also proclaimed, "As of today, Greece irrevocably accepts this historical challenge and her European destiny while conserving her national identity. We have confidence both in Europe and in Greece." But President Valery Giscard d'Estaing of France implied something different with his remark: "Europe, by coming to Athens today to welcome the dynamic and creative Greek people into the Community, rediscovers its own identity." And at the airport the French leader stated, "France has been a daughter of Greece, but now she becomes a sister." Who has whose identity?

If, as Matthew Arnold remarked in *Hebraism and Hellenism*, "The uppermost idea of Hellenism is to see things as they really are," then it is still a difficult chore to figure out who these Greeks really are and what their relation is to Europe and vice versa.

ST. LAWRENCE COLLEGE



The Chairman and Governing Body of St. Lawrence College, the new British Public School, Prep. School and Kindergarten has appointed as headmaster Mr. R.J.O Meyer O.B.E., M.A. (Cantab), founder and for 35 years headmaster of the famous Millfield School, Somerset, England and for 7 years headmaster of Campion School, Athens.

The headmaster has selected an outstanding team of highly qualified and successful teachers to assist him and the Governing body in their aim of establishing in Greece a school worthy of its famous setting — a school which will try to combine all that is best in the Hellenic heritage and culture with the benefits of several hundred years of British educational developments.

ALL school subjects will be available through G.C.E 'O' level, S.A.T.S. etc to 'A' levels and Oxbridge/Ivy League scholarship standards in grades 12/13 (= British VIth forms).

Modern or Classical Greek and English will of course be compulsory subjects but at least 8 other languages (including Arabic) will be taught. Scholarship Mathematics and Science will be treated as subjects of the utmost importance at the top with literacy and numeracy essentials throughout. Indeed special departments have been set up under trained experts for all levels of E.F.L. and for general remedial education.

An out of school programme will be developed to cover the production of plays, visits to places of outstanding interest and of course sport skills up to the very highest point of excellence. This year's productions will be Euripides' 'Hippolytus', 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'Oliver'.

The aims of the school will be:

1. To develop to the fullest possible extent the all round potentialities of each individual pupil — very much on the well known Millfield pattern.
2. To ensure that ALL members of the school are given every possible opportunity of learning to appreciate the glorious past and fast developing present of the host country.
3. To attempt in some small measure to repay part of the enormous debt we all owe to Greece.

Information from R.J.O. Meyer, 8 Diamantidou Street, Paleo Psychico, Tel. 671 3496 and 747 502.

NOTE: 1) St. Lawrence is the Centre in Greece of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. Instruction in most instruments and in Music Theory.

2) A persistent demand for a branch of St. Lawrence College, the BRITISH international school (KG to upper VIth) to be developed in the Glyfada area has led the Governing body to consider the proposition seriously.

A decision will have to be made before the end of May so enquires of interested parents should be made as early as possible.