

The New York Times
January 12, 1916

Allies' Grip on Food Keeps Greece Still

Country Cannot Afford to Take Any Action to Offend Nations Holding the Sea.

Situation Full of Snarls

Everybody, from Cabinet Ministers to Brigands, Ready and Eager to Explain It.

ATHENS, Nov. 29, 1915.—We are not allowed to tell what the situation is here. But in spite of the censor, I am going to tell what the situation is. It is involved. That is not because no one will explain it. In Athens no one does anything else. Since arriving yesterday I have had the situation explained to me by members of the Cabinet, guides to the Acropolis, Generals in the army, Teofani the cigarette king, three Ministers Plenipotentiary, the man from St. Louis who is over here to sell aeroplanes, the man from Cook's, and "extra people" like soldiers in cafes, brigands in petticoats, and peasants in peaked shoes with tassels. They asked me not to print their names, which was just as well, as I cannot spell them. They are written in the language that made Dr. Jowett famous. They each explained the situation differently, but all agree it is involved.

To understand it, you must go back to Helen of Troy, take a running jump from the Greek war for independence and Lord Byron to Mr. Gladstone and the Bulgarian atrocities, note the influence of the German emperor at Corfu, appreciate the intricacies of Russian diplomacy in Belgrade, the rise of Enver Pasha and the Young Turks, what Constantine said to Venizelos about giving up Kavalla, and the cablegram Prince Danilo, of "Merry Widow" fame, sent to his cousin of Italy. By following these events the Situation is as easy to grasp as an eel that has swallowed the hook and can't digest it.

For instance, Mr. Poneropolous, the well-known contractor who sells shoes to the army, informs me the Greeks as one man want war. They are even prepared to fight for it. On the other hand, Axon Skiadas, the popular barber of the Hotel Grande Bretagne, who has just been called to the colors, assures me no patriot would again plunge the country into conflict. To Axon the thought is personally so distasteful that he says, "It makes me a headache."

Diplomats Also Disagree

The diplomats here also disagree, especially as to which of them is responsible for the failure of Greece to join the Allies, The one who is to blame for that never is the one who is talking to you. The one who is talking is always the one who, had they followed his advice, could have saved the "Situation." They did not, and now it is involved, not to say addled. One military attaché of the Allies volunteered to set the Situation before me in a few words. After explaining for two hours, he asked me to promise not to repeat what he had said. I promised.

Another diplomat, who was projected into the service by the late William Jennings Bryan, said if he told all he knew about the situation “the world would burst.” Those are his exact words. It would have been an event of undoubted news value, and as a news gatherer I should have coaxed his secret from him, but it seemed as though the world is in trouble enough as it is, and if it must burst I want it to burst when I am nearer home. So I switched him off to the St. Louis Convention, where he was probably more useful than he will ever be in the Balkans.

While every one is guessing, your correspondent ventures to make a guess. It is that long before this letter reaches America, Greece will be demobilized, and will remain neutral, or will have joined the Allies. Without starving to death she cannot join the Germans. Greece is non-supporting. What she eats comes in the shape of wheat from outside her borders, from the grain fields of Russia, Egypt, Bulgaria, France, and America. Last week, when Denys Cochin, the French Minister to Athens, had his interview with the King, the latter became angry and said “We can get along without France’s money,” and Cochin said, “That is so, but you cannot get along without France’s wheat.”

The Allies are not going to bombard Greek ports or shell the Acropolis. They will not even blockade the ports. But their fleets—French, Italian, English—will stop all ships taking foodstuffs to Greece. They have just released seven grain ships from America that were held up at Malta, and ships carrying food to Greece have been stopped at points as far away as Gibraltar. The steamer on which we came here from Naples was held up at Messina for twenty-four hours until her cargo was overhauled. As we had nothing in the hold more health-sustaining than hides and barbed wire we were allowed to proceed.

Whatever course Greece follows, her dependence upon others for food explains her act. Today (Nov. 29) there is not enough wheat in the country to feed the people for, some say three—the most optimistic, ten—days. Should she decide to join Germany she would starve. It would be deliberate suicide. The French and Italian fleets are at Malta, less than a day distant; the English fleet is off the Gallipoli peninsula. Fifteen hours’ steaming could bring it to Saloniki. Greece is especially vulnerable from the sea. She is all islands, coast towns, and seaports. The German Navy could not help her. It will not leave the Kiel Canal. The Austrian Navy cannot leave Trieste. Should Greece decide against the allies their combined warships would pick up her islands and blockade her ports. In a week she would be starving. The railroad from Bulgaria to Saloniki, over which in peace times comes much wheat from Rumania, would be closed to her. Even if the Germans and Bulgarians succeeded in winning it to the coast, they could get no food for Greece further than that. They have no warships, and the Gulf of Saloniki is full of those of the Allies.

King’s Position Difficult

The position of King Constantine is very difficult. He is strongly pro-German, and the reason for his sympathy that is given here is the same as is accepted in America. Every act of his is supposed to be inspired by his sympathies, when, in several instances, he has been actuated solely by what he thought was best for his own people. Indeed, there are many who believe if the terms upon which Greece might join the Allies had been left to the King instead of to Venizelos, Greece would now be with the Entente.

As long as when the two German cruisers escaped from Messina and were sold to Turkey, the diplomatic representatives of the Allies in the Balkans were instructed to see that Turkey and Germany did not get together, and that, as a balance of power in case of such a

union, the Balkan States were kept in line. Instead of attending to this themselves, the diplomats placed this delicate job in the hands of one man. At the framing of the Treaty of London, of all the representatives from the Balkans, the one who most deeply impressed the other powers was M. Venizelos. And the task of keeping the Balkans neutral or with the Allies was left to him.

He has a dream of a Balkan "band," a union of all the Balkan principalities. It obsesses him. And to bring that dream true he was willing to make concessions which King Constantine, who considered only what was good for Greece, thought most unwise. Venizelos also was working for the good of Greece, but he was convinced it could come to her only through the union. He was willing to give Kavalla to Bulgaria in exchange for Asia Minor, from the Dardanelles to Smyrna. But the King would not consent. As a buffer against Turkey he considered Kavalla of the greatest strategic value, and he had the natural pride of a soldier in holding on to land he himself had added to his country. But in his opposition to Venizelos in this particular credit was not given him for acting in the interests of Greece, but of playing into the hands of Germany.

Another step he refused to take, which refusal the Allies attributed to his pro-German leanings, was to attack the Dardanelles. In the wars of 1912-1913 the King showed he was an able General. With his staff he had carefully considered an attack upon the Dardanelles. He submitted this plan to the Allies and was willing to aid them if they brought to the assault 400,000 men. They claim he failed them. He did fail them, but not until after they had failed him by bringing thousands of men instead of the tens of thousands he knew were needed.

The Dardanelles expedition was not required to prove the courage of the French and British. Beyond furnishing fresh evidence of that, it has been a failure. And in refusing to sacrifice the lives of his subjects the military judgment of Constantine has been vindicated. He was willing to attack Turkey through Kavalla and Thrace, because by that route he presented an armed front to Bulgaria. But, as he pointed out, if he sent his army to the Dardanelles, he left Kavalla at the mercy of his enemy. The mistrust of Bulgaria also has been justified.

But whether Constantine or Venizelos was the better friend of Greece is now ancient history and important only as a subject for discussion. It is a condition that confronts Greece. She cannot now choose whether she will follow the advice of King or Prime Minister. The Allies are using an argument that every goatherd can understand. When a man is hungry and only one man can feed him he may not become the ally of that man, but he will not fight him.