

GREEK WAR RELIEF

America's Formidable Response to Famine in World War II Greece

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For today's purposes, I'm going to assume you're familiar with the heroic deeds that -- fittingly -- we take the time to remember each October:

- How -- exactly seventy-three years ago today -- in the opening phases of World War II, tiny Greece answered Italy's demand for capitulation with a resounding "No."
- How Italy completely misjudged the Greek spirit, failing to grasp that Greeks were willing to die for the sake of dignity and freedom.
- And how, over the ensuing six months till April 1941, Greece's vastly out-gunned and largely un-mechanized army successfully repelled Mussolini's vaunted "eight million bayonets" and electrified the free world, proving that fascism -- till then seemingly invincible -- could in fact be defeated.¹

Today, I'm going to address an American aspect of the OXI Day story: Greek War Relief. It's the remarkable story of how a relatively small ethnic group,

¹ Summing it up on Greek Independence Day (March 25, 1941), the *New York Times* lauded Greece's blow struck for freedom in faithfulness to her ancient traditions: "She did not go into her present war as a democracy. She did not take up arms willingly. Few expected from her more than a few weeks' resistance -- a brave but brief gesture for freedom that would have to be recognized when the post-war settlement was made. She has surprised the world, revealed Mussolini's pitiful weakness, upset Hitler's plans. It is a poignant irony of our time that the will to resist should be so vehement in this little, half-armed nation, whereas in some greater nations it hardly existed at all. Greece has struck her modern blow for freedom not in blind fury but with impassioned skill. She has done the unpredictable, achieved the impossible. She has lighted a flame as bright as that which burned at Dunkerque and over London -- as bright as any that lit freedom's skies over Thermopylae, Salamis and Marathon. She may go down underneath overwhelming force, but it is as certain as tomorrow's dawn that she cannot be permanently enslaved."

whose roots in American soil were not yet very deep, responded quickly and effectively to a wartime emergency by raising millions of dollars to save lives during Greece's occupation by Axis forces and, after the war, continued to furnish desperately needed food, medical supplies, and other relief through Greece's bitter civil war years (1946-1949) and the period of rebuilding in the 1950s. Greek War Relief was a shining but now mostly forgotten moment in the history of the Greek American community. Today, I'll give you a little flavor of how these remarkable volunteers successfully came to the aid of Greece in its time of need.

First, a little context: Having failed to occupy Greece, Mussolini had no choice but to ask Hitler for help. The Nazi attack came from Bulgaria on April 6, 1941 (Palm Sunday). With British help, the Greeks resisted bravely, but they could not stop Hitler's *Panzer* divisions. The swastika was hoisted on the Acropolis on April 27. With British and Anzac aid, Crete held out until the end of May against the largest airborne assault in history.

For the remainder of the war until liberation in December 1944, Greece was occupied in German, Italian, and Bulgarian sectors. Immediately upon arrival, the occupying forces took food and whatever else they liked, including all means of transport. Besides plundering, they requisitioned huge quantities of food and goods for shipment north at the orders of the Wehrmacht High Command. As a result, unemployment quickly jumped, industrial output plummeted, rampant inflation set in, and food supplies disappeared.

An American relief worker in Athens at the time (Laird Archer) described how -- even before Crete fell -- the food situation in Athens had become desperate:

[May 11, 1941]: "Another week of Axis occupation ended with no salt in the market, many meat and vegetable shops closed and the bread ration cut from eighty to sixty drams (less than six ounces) per person when formerly the average workman consumed about three pounds daily as his principal diet."

[June 29, 1941]: "The eighth week of occupation ended with a riot near the Stadium where a crowd of women mobbed an Italian truckload of bread, stalled by a street car across its path. There was only one guard who feared to shoot. Next time, there will be more guards and some shooting no doubt."

By the autumn and winter of 1941, Greece was starving. The death toll from starvation and typhoid, typhus, cholera, pneumonia, and dysentery had risen to more than 1,500 persons daily in Athens and Piraeus alone. By the following spring, the death rate from starvation in Athens and Piraeus exceeded 2,000 a day. Of every ten children born, only one lived more than four weeks.

Within ten days after the Italian attack on Greece, prominent Greek Americans organized the Greek War Relief Association to relieve the dreadful conditions that already existed in Greece and were sure to continue as long as war conditions lasted. A week later, they had arranged with the AHEPA for district governors to send an urgent telegram to all chapters:

“YOU ARE FRATERNALLY COMMANDED AND PERSONALLY REQUESTED TO COMMENCE IMMEDIATELY AN AHEPA DRIVE IN YOUR DISTRICT TO COLLECT FUNDS FOR RELIEF TO THE GREEK MOTHERLAND THE VICTIM OF UNPROVOKED AGGRESSION.

“TAKE PROPER STEPS | ORGANIZE CHAPTER COMMITTEE | INVITE ASSISTANCE AND COLLABORATION OF PROMINENT PERSONS OF NON-HELLENIC DESCENT AND MOBILIZE PUBLIC OPINION THROUGH PRESS, THEATRE, RADIO, CHURCHES OF ALL DENOMINATIONS, AND CHAPTERS OF NATIONAL FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS.

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“NOW IS THE TIME TO SHOW OUR SPIRIT.

“ACT AT ONCE AND WISELY.”

The desperate situation in Greece aroused the sympathies of ordinary Americans. At first, local committees raised funds by direct solicitation through radio and newspaper appeals. Then, in 1941 and 1942, the local committees raised funds by including Greek War Relief in local Community Chests and the United War Chest. The Community Chest’s National Budget Committee identified Greek War Relief as the “most insistent and urgent” appeal presented by any relief group. Through this arrangement, the Community Chests allocated an annual sum to Greek War Relief. Where this arrangement was in place, local solicitation was prohibited. By August 1942, Greek War Relief and the Community Chests were cooperating very effectively. Contributions poured in.

By February 1943, Greek War Relief efforts were beginning to turn the tide: the Greek starvation rate had been reduced by two-thirds, and relief foods were being distributed in all provinces and in the Greek islands. By May 1943, Greek War Relief was hailing its five-millionth bushel of wheat shipped to Greece.

In April 1943, Greek War Relief joined nineteen other privately organized war relief agencies in the National War Fund (NWF). This Fund, formed at President Roosevelt's direction, took over responsibility for the budgets of Greek War Relief and the other member agencies. From the fall of 1943 through 1946, the NWF raised money through co-ordinated local war chest campaigns around the country. Local committees were responsible for getting Greek War Relief admitted to local war chests and seeing that it received a fair quota; and they were urged to work for the success of the local war chest drives.

Every effort was made to ensure that the lion's share of contributions were dedicated to securing relief supplies for Greece. Official correspondence, for example, was typed on the blank reverse side of out-of-date stationery. Through mid-1943, Greek War Relief's administrative costs were less than six percent of gifts.

Greek War Relief's shipping arrangements were rather unusual. With the Axis occupation of Greece beginning in April 1941, Great Britain blockaded all shipping lanes and refused to loosen the blockade for the sake of starving Greece. A solution was found when Greek War Relief's leaders proposed that a neutral party functioning in Greece could oversee the distribution of relief supplies. As a condition for accepting the plan, the Nazis insisted that the people of Greece not be informed that the supplies came from the people of the U.S. and Canada.

The plan was implemented by the Swedish Red Cross putting a fleet of eight Swedish vessels at the disposal of Greek War Relief beginning in August 1942. Over the course of two-and-a-half years, these ships made more than one hundred voyages, often originating in neutral Turkey but some direct from New York and Canada. They delivered 700,000 tons of desperately needed food, clothing, medicine, and other vital supplies to the joint commission of the Swedish and Swiss Red Cross Societies, which (under the auspices of the International Swiss Red Cross Committee) was in charge of distributing relief supplies in Greece. Not until after liberation in December 1944 did the Greek people learn that more than \$30 million in relief supplies had reached them due to the efforts of the American people through the work of Greek War Relief. Archbishop Damaskinos of Athens (who also was briefly head of the Greek

government) estimated that this relief saved fully one-third of the Greek population from death (Greece's population according to the 1940 census was 7,344,860).

Apart from soliciting cash contributions for food, Greek War Relief also undertook clothing drives. The goal of one such drive was to send twenty million garments to Greece. Local committees received ready-made press kits to get the word out to newspapers and radio stations. State-by-state pie charts published in the Association's monthly newsletters kept the local committees abreast of progress. In addition to bulk shipments of 7 million articles of clothing and shoes, 33,000 individual clothing packages were received at the Greek War Relief warehouse and forwarded to individuals in Greece.

By the end of the war, Greek War Relief had established 150 community medical clinics throughout Greece, each serving a population of 6,000 to 10,000. Eighteen mobile medical units (fully equipped and staffed by Greek War Relief) were in operation. (Among the sponsors of these units, by the way, were the Philoptohos Society of St. Sophia Cathedral right here in Washington.) Sites had been selected for twenty-five permanent health centers and land was in the process of expropriation.

In 1946, Greece again faced starvation, and once again Greek War Relief stepped forward to help. Child-feeding stations were opened in Epirus and Macedonia. Their goal was to feed a quarter million children with one nourishing meal (600-700 calories) each day by the spring of 1946. By August 1946, the program was feeding hot noon meals to 92,010 children between ages two and six and 422,809 children between ages six and fourteen.

During the war and occupation, 325,000 Greek boys and girls lost either a father or a mother; more than 45,000 were robbed of both. Under Greek War Relief's 1946 orphan support program, \$80 cared for one child for a year.

During the six-month "Give an Animal to Greece" campaign, launched in February 1946 and undertaken through a special arrangement with the United Nations Relief & Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), Greek War Relief allowed more than 9,500 American donors to purchase 10,979 mules, horses, and cows valued at \$1,393,137 to restore Greece's war-decimated herds and draft animal stocks.

Another 1946 program (announced in April) provided for the shipment of food parcels directly to friends and family members in Greece. Packages cost \$12.75

and weighed about thirty-five pounds.² The price included the cost of packing, shipping, insurance, and delivery to any part of Greece. By special arrangement with the Greek government, a continuous flow of these parcels entered Greece without custom inspection or duty. As soon as a purchaser's money order was received, Greek War Relief cabled its Athens office, which moved packages out of its Greek warehouse so that the recipient could expect to receive a parcel in two to three weeks from the time it was ordered in the U.S. Sometimes deliveries were made using Greek War Relief's own trucks; island deliveries were made with Greek War Relief's own vessel, a converted naval convoy escort that flew the American flag, sailed under American registry, and was manned by an American crew.

My investigation drops off as of February 1947, when Greek War Relief became a member agency of C.A.R.E. (originally "Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe," and later "Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere").

By any standard of measurement, Greek War Relief was a stunning success. Within six months after the Italian attack on Greece, the organization had collected more than \$4 million. That's somewhere between 54 and 62 million in today's dollars.

How did they accomplish such a remarkable success?

It was due in no small part to Greek War Relief's national leaders, who were well assimilated into the mainstream business community (especially in entertainment). Their ability to quickly mobilize sophisticated mass communication skills allowed them to raise huge sums on a sustained basis for the relief of Greece.

The leadership also had great connections, and through them they were able to enlist active support at the highest levels of American society. Within three months of the Association's founding, its National Citizens Committee reflected a cross-section of the top ranks of American business, academia, politics, the arts, and society.

² Each package contained: spaghetti (5 lbs.), coffee (5 lbs.), spiced ham (3 cans), evaporated milk (3 cans), spaghetti dinners (2 cans), maple syrup (1 can), tea (½ lb.), cocoa (½ lb.), crackers (1 pkg.), dried milk (1 lb.), spry (2 lbs.), sugar (2 lbs.), canned fish (1 lb.), chicken noodle soup (22 oz.), Quaker Oats (20 oz.), Cream of Wheat (28 oz.), dehydrated chicken soup (2 pkgs.), soap (8 oz.), and razor blades (1 pkg.).

Listen to some of the names: Winthrop Aldrich (chairman of Chase National Bank); Nicholas Murray Butler (president of Columbia University); Carl Blegen (the renowned excavator of Troy and Pylos); Mrs. Andrew Carnegie; Mrs. Roosevelt; Mrs. Coolidge; Will Durant (the famous historian and philosopher); Samuel Goldwyn, Jack Warner, Daryl Zanuck, and David O. Selznick (the major players in Hollywood); William Randolph Hearst, Arthur Hayes Sulzberger, and John Hay Whitney (publishers of the major U.S. newspapers), and it goes on and on like that. Of the 400 members of the National Citizens Committee, only nineteen names were Greek.

And many of these important people were not mere figureheads. Harold S. Vanderbilt, for instance, president of the New York Central railroad, served as honorary chairman of Greek War Relief's national committee throughout the war. He diligently engaged in the Association's activities and contributed his social cachet to its success, such as by hosting a dinner for Greece's King George II when he visited New York in mid-1942.

From Greek War Relief's national headquarters at 730 Fifth Avenue in New York, monthly newsletters and a steady flow of press releases, radio scripts, sample solicitation letters, sample letterhead, sample organizational charts for local committees, pamphlets, leaflets, posters, buttons, specially designed men's lapel pins and ladies' brooches, clothing labels, shipping labels, matchbook covers, contribution forms, contribution boxes, authorization cards for solicitors, receipt booklets, and other such useful materials poured out for the aid of local fundraising committees. The local committees were kept regularly abreast of the dreadful state of affairs in Greece, the quantities of funds being raised competitively in each state, how funds were being utilized in Greece, and what stateside events were being planned to keep the fundraising effort in the forefront of peoples' minds. Most communications were in English, but as time went on, monthly newsletters were issued in both English and Greek.

The local committees were given detailed instructions on how to give speeches, gain effective publicity, organize sporting events, conduct radio interviews, put on banquets, utilize tributes furnished by famous authors and columnists, and use theatres for fundraising purposes. The national leadership produced movie trailers and short features for local showings. Photographic mats and advertising copy were made available to aid daily and weekly newspapers in distributing illustrated news stories.

The level of detail is shown by these excerpts from instructional materials

distributed for purposes of organizing movie-theatre events:

“Arrange for the most suitable theatre in as many localities as possible for a Midnight Show which should consist of a picture, vaudeville acts, amateurs, orchestras, night club entertainers, high school orchestras and any tie-ups possible to get the maximum audience for that Midnight Show. . . . In order to enhance the attractiveness of the girls in the lobby taking collections, we have decided to send you distinctive headgear similar to that worn by the Red Cross. This will be in light blue and white, which are the Greek colors and will have the Greek insignia. In addition, these girls will have buttons and flowers to be given to the men and women as their donation is made.”

Greek War Relief’s fundraising events could count on support from top-name entertainers and political figures. Five great national events were arranged in the first year alone -- a Hollywood radio broadcast, a national banquet, a national charity ball, a motion picture theatre benefit, and a national “tag day.” The first of these -- a 90-minute radio extravaganza titled “America Calling” -- was arranged by Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn and was hosted by Jack Benny and Bob Hope. Music was furnished by a 75-piece symphony orchestra and a chorus of thirty-five voices. The announcement to the local committees not only boasted that “[i]t will be one of the finest shows ever broadcast, with practically all outstanding Hollywood personalities participating,” but also provided guidance on how to leverage the broadcast into contributions.

A sampling of the Hollywood luminaries who participated in the “America Calling” broadcast reveals how effectively Greek War Relief made Greece’s wartime plight a topic of mainstream interest and importance: Mickey Rooney, Bette Davis, Fanny Brice, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Clark Gable, Charles Laughton, Carole Lombard, Myrna Loy, Mary Martin, Groucho Marx, Paul Muni, Merle Oberon, Eddie (“Rochester”) Anderson, Jimmy Stewart, Shirley Temple, and Spencer Tracy, and the list goes on and on.

When it is considered that Greek War Relief was just one among many worthy targets for wartime giving and volunteerism, and that its activities were conducted not with computers, cell phones, and the internet, but with manual typewriters, carbon copies, offset printers, rotary-dial telephones, and telegrams, the level of its success is astounding. Thanks to the skill of its national leaders and the hard

work of the local committees, Greek War Relief achieved results wildly out of proportion to the size of the ethnic community whose personal interests were at stake. As a result, millions of dollars were raised, and millions of lives were saved.

Looking back from November 1946, Greek War Relief could proudly tally the following accomplishments:

War against the Axis (Nov. 1940-April 1941)

Cash remittances to Greece	\$3,336,700
Purchased relief supplies (chiefly medicines)	<u>482,693</u>
	\$3,819,393

Occupation (April 1941-Oct. 1944)

Food purchases	1,400,000
Donations of medical supplies and vitamins	41,441
Relief for refugees in the Middle East	23,000
Aid to Greek fighting forces in N. Africa	120,345
Purchase of 297,450 Red Cross food parcels for POWs and hospitalized veterans	856,540
Charter expense for vessels	2,895,800
Purchase and shipment of relief supplies	<u>6,213,130</u>
	\$11,555,257

After Liberation (Oct. 1944-Oct. 1946)

20 mobile medical units; 474 community clinics	\$1,500,000
Child-feeding centers for 1.2 million children	1,370,000
Aid to disabled soldiers (including maintenance of artificial limb factory)	31,708
Malaria eradication project on Crete	75,000
Anti-tuberculosis program (including three mass radiology units)	16,452
Home placement and supplementary aid for war orphans	200,000
Scholarships for training of doctors, nurses, and science students	85,500
Grants to American educational institutions in Greece	190,000
Purchase and shipment of food, clothing,	

medicine, and other relief supplies for	
general distribution	<u>2,171,211</u>
	\$5,639,872

The foregoing figures do not include the value of the animal program (\$5,000,000), clothing packages (\$3,000,000), food packages (\$1,275,000), or management and operation of the Swedish ships.

Greek War Relief succeeded so well because it was able to make Greece's plight a subject of national interest and importance. Its inspiration -- and its challenge -- was Greece's heroic example of sacrifice for the sake of freedom. Here's how Greek War Relief's national secretary (K.P. Tsolainos) summed it up in a late-1943 speech:

"Only one force could have impelled this virtual miracle, and that force was the challenge of the sacrifice made by the Greek people, who were the first to break the evil spell that had burdened the soul of humanity, by administering to the Axis its first major defeat on land.

It was the challenge of their unhesitating and unfaltering determination to continue their centuries-long fight for freedom; their proud choice of death in preference to slavery; and finally their refusal to accept the ignominious role of a conquered nation."

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