

Greek War Relief: Hellenic Americans' Finest Hour

By Steve Frangos 10/31/09
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The greatest single moment in Greek American history is the community-supplied relief provided to Greece during World War II. This humanitarian aid did not stop with the end of the war in Europe but, given the specific circumstances in Greece, continued onward throughout the Civil War into the early 1950s. No community of Hellenes in the United States or Canada was denied direct participation. Consequently, literally every Greek community in the Northern Hemisphere, has its own individual and local recollections related to these national and ultimately international relief efforts.

No endeavor was spared to save embattled Greece by their kith and kin in North America. The maturity and experience of the 1880 to 1920 generation of Greek immigrants was coupled with the youthful strength and optimism of their children in an all-out war effort. The actions and accomplishments of this Greek-led war relief remains a singular defining moment in American, as well as Greek American, history.

Early on October 28, 1940, Ioannis Metaxas, Greek premier, standing in his pajamas and robe is said to have shouted "Oxi!" in answer to the Italian ambassador to Greece's demand that Italian troops be allowed to travel through Greece unopposed as this army

moved on its way towards North Africa. With Italian troops streaming into Greece, "[T]he Hellenic Army counter-attacked and forced the Italians to retreat and by mid-December, the Greeks occupied a quarter of Albania, tying down 530,000 Italian troops. In March 1941, a major Italian counter-attack failed, humiliating Italian military pretensions. The Greek victory over the Italians was the first Allied land victory of the Second World War, and may have influenced its course of events because it forced Germany to postpone its Soviet invasion and take Greece itself. This led to an attack on the Soviet Union much later in the year and forced Germany to deal with the Russian winter (www.wikipedia.org)."

The Greek victory over the invading Italians was like a thunderbolt striking Greek diaspora communities throughout the world. Living memories all agree that this victory ignited the Greek American's ardent and sustained relief efforts.

Within two weeks of the invasion, on November 8, 1940, the formation of the Greek War Relief Association was announced. With Archbishop Athenagoras at his side, Spyros Skouras was elected president of the GWRA, with his first act being to immediately implement a drive for \$10 million. These monies were to be used to procure much needed foodstuffs, medical supplies and

Continued on page 8

Greek War Relief: Remembering the Greek

Continued from page 1

clothing for occupied Greece. Yet Skouras, at that moment in time, was not a well known figure within the general Greek community, so why was he, then, specifically selected for this critical position?

To win hearts for one's cause, one must first win minds. As Peter Boudoures recalls, he defended Skouras to his fellow Hellenes by reporting this one man: "was well known to millions of Americans...Had connections with thousands of people in the communications industry, including newspapers, radio, and public relations. I told them that the number of associates that he had in Hollywood was so large that I didn't think that there was another Greek in the United States that could fulfill the job of chairman as well as he (www.announcement.org)." Would a stumbling peasant smiling as he polished your shoes or tipping his hat as you bought fruit from his cart think of that, much less be convinced of the power of media as an argument for the choice of Skouras?

The overall sophistication of those involved with the Greek War Relief on the local, national and international levels still escapes scholars. None seem able to recognize, let alone take into full account, that local-to-international business connections already employed on a daily basis for years by these immigrant Greeks were all effortlessly and systematically put into use on behalf of the relief work. In point of fact, the Greeks commonly recognized that to save their families and brethren in Greece, they must first convince the American people, from the average citizen on the street to President Roosevelt himself, not only of the need to do so for humanitarian reasons, but for larger ideals and political goals as well.

Skouras was tireless in his efforts, visiting Greek communities around the country, urging each to form local War Relief committees, and by November 20, 1940 over 300 local committees had been established. During the next five months \$3,336,700 was cabled to Greece for the purchase of ambulances, the building of bombproof shelters, the setting up of soup kitchens, workshops for refugees, and to furnish financial assistance to the destitute families of slain soldiers (www.saintbarbara.org)."

What is recognized today as one

of the greatest single relief efforts in modern history was never a certainty. The GWRA, which reportedly operated with the lowest overhead of any such organization during the war, hit the ground running. "In the five-month interval between the attack on Greece and the occupation by the Nazis, \$3,336,700 was cabled to the GWRA committee in Athens (Theodore Saloutos, "The Greeks in the United States", Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964)." Still events in war-torn Greece moved like a raging fire across the land. On January 29, 1941 General John Metaxas died in Athens. On April 6, 1941 German troops, accompanied by their allies the Bulgarians, crossed the Greek border and by April 24 the Greek army surrendered, with the Germans entering Athens on April 27, 1941.

The American Field Service had been appointed by the GWRA to supply 50 ambulances to Greece. Just before Athens fell to the invading Germans, thirteen ambulances had already arrived from the General Motors plant in Bombay, which had, in fact, shipped twenty five ambulances. Of the 60,000 British Expeditionary forces (composed of a mix of British, Australian and New Zealand troops) drawn mostly from North Africa, some 48,000 were ultimately evacuated to Crete. On May 27, 1941, German paratrooper forces overwhelmed the British and Greek Allies on Crete. Twelve of the GWRA ambulances ended up at Suez along with the remaining Allied and Greek forces.

While raising relief funds for Greece was the GWRA's first priority, with the entrance of the United States into the war on December 7, 1941, their activities broadened. And again, Greek participation was singular. By all reports in war bond drives and in sponsorship of the Red Cross, the Greek American presence was especially evident. With thousands of Greek American servicemen and women entering the American armed forces, prayer books and other items were generated and sent to them by the GWRA. A now forgotten element of the GWRA was its steady issuance of books and pamphlets published on the national and local levels with the unabashed end of propaganda that showcased and promoted Greece's post-war territorial and political interests.

were undeniably among the

MACEDONIAN—C STALINGRAD—C CO MASSE



ZILBA GEORGIEVA
Spanish Dancer

Fundraising events like the one ad of Greek war relief. Much-needed.

most prominent bond sellers in the nation. Public documents report that Greek Americans consistently on the local, regional and national levels outsold all others. In fact, contests between individuals selling war bonds, during the various drives, often pitted one patriotic Greek against another.

To cite but one example, towards the end of the war, we can turn to a letter sent by Mr. Earl H. Shackelford, Executive Manager of the Missouri War Finance Committee to Mr. Gus Maggos of Alton, Illinois o

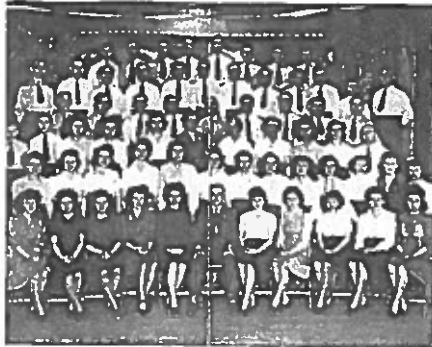
Within this expanded framework of war work, Greek American publications have long contended that, aside from its regular outlets, the Treasury Department allowed only the Greeks to directly sell defense bonds. I have seen small circular stamps with the words "AHEPA" or "GWRA" on unredeemed savings bonds still proudly held by Greek American families as evidence of their long-term patriotism. Whatever future research will ultimately determine, Greeks n Treasury Department War Finance Committee stationery. It is important to note that this letter is dated January 1945 and speaks of the Sixth War Loan Drive Mr Shackelford reports

American Community's Finest Hour

AMERICAN WAR RELIEF COMMITTEE
AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR CAMPAIGN

CONCERT

Y HALL SUNDAY, OCT. 29th, 1944, 7 P.M.
DOORS OPEN 6.30 P.M.



MACEDONIAN PROGRESSIVE CHOIR
Jim Campbell, Conductor



HELEN NICHOLS
Soprano

advertised in the above poster were held across North America in support of food, medical supplies and clothing were sent to the people of Greece

that, "Our records reveal that during the War Loan Drive just concluded you sold a total of \$2,450,000 worth of Government securities, which added to the \$21,000,000 sold in previous drives, makes the grand total of \$23,450,000 that you have sold to date." Other examples from all parts of the nation could be cited.

Without diminishing the importance of the overall general GWRA relief and aid generated during the Second World War era, the organization's principal accomplishment may well have been "Operation Blockade". With the Axis occupation of Greece all shipping lanes were blockaded by Great Britain. By early July 1941, reports began to filter out of wide-spread starvation throughout Greece.

To learn more about this decisive moment in Greek American history, we are well served to consult Professor Alexandros K. Kyrou, in his "Greek Nationalism and Diaspora Politics in America, 1940-1945: Background and Analysis of Ethnic Responses to Wartime Crisis." We find that "The Greek-language press was exceedingly vigorous in promoting the notion that effective action could be taken to loosen

Britain's blockade and dispatch vital aid to prominent New York daily, *Ethnikos Keryx*. Through a multitude of public appearances and his own newspaper's editorials, Vlavianos argued for the modification of Britain's blockade. Reflecting the basic sentiments of the Greek American community, Vlavianos believed Greece's resistance and her unique food dependency warranted qualifying considerations in regard to the implementation of the Allied plans. Vlavianos asserted that German propaganda would capitalize on a largely British imposed famine, and that fundamental humanitarian imperatives should be afforded greater importance among the Allies than temporal great power strategy. Vlavianos, therefore, summarily maintained that Britain should permit and even lend support to a conveyance of relief supplies to Greece (Indiana University, 1993)."

The "Leaders of the GWRA...suggested that the problem of distribution might be solved if a neutral commission functioning within Greece was appointed to see to it that the supplies were distributed to the starving Greeks. However, the Nazis, as a condition for ac-

cepting the plan, insisted that the people of Greece were not to be told that the supplies were donated by the people of the United States and Canada. During the two-and-a-half-year period that the program was in operation, a fleet of fourteen Swedish vessels made more than a hundred trips and carried almost, 700,000 tons of food, clothing, medicine and other vital supplies to Greece...But it was not until after the liberation that the Greek people were informed that supplies valued at more than \$100 million...According to Archbishop Damaskinos, the Metropolitan of Athens and for a time the head of the Greek government, more than one third of the Greek population, or about two million people, were saved from death because of the GWRA efforts (Saloutos)."

We must repeat here that GWRA relief efforts did not end with the conclusion of World War II but continued through the Greek Civil War period well into the 1950s. Sending cloths, food stuff, tools and even animals to Greece continued throughout the early 1950s.

Without question more research and writing needs to take place on this intricate complex of events, actors and activities. For the most recent and comprehensive research on the Greek War Relief Association, see the article by Alexandros K. Kyrou, "The Greek-American Community and the Famine in Axis-Occupied Greece," in Richard Clogg, ed., "Bearing Gifts to Greeks: Humanitarian Aid to Greece in the 1940s" (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan and St Antony's College, Oxford University, 2008, pp. 58-84).

The Greek War Relief Association, Incorporated was a national organization that today survives in the memories of the senior generation still to be found in any of our local communities. Whether the Greek American senior you are speaking with at coffee hour or at the festival was born in the United States or was in Greece during World War II, they all have their own unique recollections of this world-wide conflict. Hearing their experiences is a far greater account than any I could ever hope to offer here.

Be quick, to hear their stories. There are, oh so few, of any of these individuals left. We will be poorer as a community when they are gone from our midst.