

Mussolini and the corfu crisis of 1923 essay sample



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On 27 August 1923 in Greece, near the town of Yannina, unidentified individuals assaulted the car, which carried several members of the international commission established for the delimitation of the Greco-Albanian border. Four Italians were killed: General Enrico Tellini, two officers of his staff, and his driver. This incident was immediately exploited by Mussolini, who in retaliation decided to seize the island of Corfu (Kerkyra), located across the end-point of the Albano-Greek borderline on the land, and partly protruding with its rocky massif towards the Albanian coastline.

Already on 28 August the Italian ambassador in Athens paid a sudden visit at the Greek Foreign Office and handed over to the representatives of the Greek government a vigorous protest, as well as an ultimatum, which in its letter and spirit very much resembled the ultimatum presented to Serbia by Austro-Hungary at the eve of the First World War. Through its envoy Mussolini's government demanded an immediate investigation with the participation of Italian authorities into the case, the arrest of the perpetrators, their execution, and payment of 50 million lire in damages.

Besides, the Greek navy had to lower the ensigns and salute the Italian flag. As it could be expected, the Greek government agreed to pay the damages and apologize before Italy in the way not violating Greece's national honour, but refused to accept those conditions, which were in direct violation of its honour. Mussolini's government, seeking any pretext to undertake military action, deemed such an answer for unequivocal rejection of the ultimatum.

On 31 August the Italian fleet bombarded Corfu; it concentrated the fire of its guns on the old castle, which was since long demilitarized and served as a

shelter for the refugees from Asia Minor. In result of the bombardment were killed 20 adults and 16 children, and over 80 people were wounded. There were no soldiers among the victims. After several hours of bombardment, Italian infantry troops landed on Corfu. The island was occupied, and Mussolini handed over to king Victor Emmanuel III the pompous report from Admiral Emilio Solari - the commander of the fleet, which carried out the landing.

Simultaneously he announced, that Italy would not relinquish Corfu until the Greek government fulfilled all the conditions stated in the ultimatum of 28 August. Now the problem was that although Mussolini had achieved an immediate success in the military operation, fortunate to the Italians, he was not able to support it with equally successful diplomatic achievements. And that was a painful miscalculation. It turned out that the British government was not only afraid of a stronger France's position, but it was also jealous about growing Italian influence in the Mediterranean region.

Therefore, as soon as the Greek government failed at the League of Nations a complaint regarding the occupation of Corfu, it immediately gained more than favourable British support. The Corfu case was dropped from the League of Nations agenda, and handed over to the Conference of Ambassadors whose plenipotentiary commission was investigating into the disputable questions of the Greco-Albanian delimitation. Behind the scenes of the Conference of Ambassadors was prepared a seemingly compromise, but in fact favourable to Italy, resolution, which became the basis for the note presented to the Greek government.

The conditions to exhaust the conflict, listed in that note, provided for Greece's apologies for the incident at Yannina to the member countries of the Conference of Ambassadors, and for financial compensation to the Italians; the sum of the compensation was lower than that demanded previously by Rome. The governments of both Italy and Greece agreed to accept those conditions. The conflict was solved. On 27 September Italian troops relinquished Corfu. This way Mussolini's adventurous expedition to the Greek island located off the shores of Albania, despite certain diplomatic success, ended up in a political fiasco.

Nevertheless the Corfu affair did not make Mussolini more sober. Having his Greek card beaten, he pulled out of the sleeve the Yugoslav card again. Rijeka found itself again in sight of Rome's imperial ambitions. After the withdrawal of the Italian troops from Corfu, the fascist press more and more often demanded annexation of Dalmatia, and especially Rijeka - that much coveted Fiume. The Italo-Yugoslav relations strained by hours. Any day one could expect the outbreak of an open conflict.

The savage anti-Yugoslav campaign of the Italian media was accompanied by the concentration of the Italian troops on the Yugoslav frontier, as well as in the ports of the southern part of the Italian "boot". The result of the Corfu crisis was a resounding failure for the League of Nations however Mussolini now had his taste for true occupation and now turned his eyes to Yugoslavia and the African colonies.