

THE DAY ITALIAN ROYALTY CAME TO KASTELLORIZO, 22 MAY 1929. by Nicholas Pappas, Sydney

Colonisers tend to be excellent chroniclers and the Italians were no exception when it came to preserving their colonial legacy in the Dodecanese Islands between 1912-1943.

A good example is the visit to the islands in May 1929 of the King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele III, his wife Queen Maria Elena and their daughters Yolanda, Mafalda and Giovanna. While only a fleeting stop on their far more extensive tour of the island group, the visit to Kastellorizo was an undoubted high-point for the islanders at a time when an economic malaise had set in and the after-effects of the devastating earthquake in March 1926 were still being felt.

Here are a series of stills, with accompanying commentary, from the official film of the Royal family's visit on 22 May, 1929 which is held by the Istituto Luce and was featured in *Friends of Kastellorizo's* March eNews <https://youtu.be/1OhIL7sm38U>.

The film begins with a slow pan of the houses on the edge of the Kavos promontory as far as the recently-constructed Palazzo della Delegazione (or 'dikitirio'):



The next shot is an edited harbour view that shows two of the island's ships adorned with welcome wishes to the visiting monarchs:



Next, we get our first glimpse of the motor launch that has transported the King, **Vittorio Emanuele III**, and his family to the 'Blue Grotto' that morning prior to their disembarkation:



In the next image, the King has disembarked and turns to wait for his family. We get our first glimpse of the hundreds of oriental carpets that have been laid out by the local population along the planned route of the Royal Family:



Queen **Maria Elena** and her three daughters have now also disembarked and the King turns to wait for the Governor of Italy's Aegean island possessions, **Mario Lago**, to lead them into the *dikitirio*:



Lago, dressed in white, joins the King and turns to his right to call upon the island's local governor ('delegato'), **Salvatore Tringali**, to greet the King:



Tringali comes forward and welcomes the monarch and his family to Kastellorizo, while the Queen moves forward towards the Kastellorizian women who bow deferentially towards her:



Passing the island's four priests and municipal councillors on their left, the Royal Family, accompanied by Lago, ascend the stairs of the *dikitirio*:



Another edited shot follows - this time of the island's womenfolk applauding the arrival:



A close-up of one of the women - **Evangelia Ilia Louka (nee Samatatzi)** - is next. Evangelia was chosen because she was the most recent bride on the island. Her marriage to **Ilia Louka (Livissianos)** had taken place ten days earlier on 12 May 1929:



Next we see the King & Queen on the balcony of the *dikitiria*:



TCR 00:32:38:20

And another (edited) shot of the women:



TCR 00:32:45:00

There now begins a fascinating sequence that shows the long walk of the Royal Family from the square of *Kavos* to the *Horafia* where a special church service was to be held in the island's Cathedral. We first see the Royal Family as they descend the stairs of the *dikitiria*:



TCR 00:32:48:12

A camera had been placed above the *Efe/Stamatoglou* shop in *Kavos* which allowed an aerial view of the proceedings:



TCR 00:32:53:00

Their walk is lined by flag-waving locals who greet the Royal Family rapturously:



TCR 00:32:57:18

As they approach the *Horafia*, the Royal Family is greeted by four female school students who nervously present bouquets of flowers to them. One of the young girls is *Maria Dimitriou Paltoglou*:



TCR 00:33:02:16

Another short (edited) sequence of the women in *Kavos* follows:



TCR 00:33:13:07

The King, escorted by *Lago*, is then seen entering the square of *Mesi tou Yialou*, where the tomb of the unknown soldier now lies:



TCR 00:33:26:03

He turns to acknowledge some locals who are gathered on the heavily-adorned balcony of the *Kondyliou* cafe:



TCR 00:33:32:16

Another edited shot follows - this time of uniformly-dressed young men in *Kavos* applauding the Royal Family. Leading the group is *Mihail Christodoulou Konstantinou*:



TCR 00:33:34:08

We jump now to the conclusion of the church service when the official party is seen exiting the Cathedral of *Sts Constantine & Helene* and making its way back down to the harbour for the Royal Family's departure:



TCR 00:33:37:08

Eagerly following them is a large section of the crowd:



TCR 00:33:45:07

We now get a glimpse of a heavily-adorned caique, the *Anna*, which was owned by its captain, *Nikos Yeorgiou Papanastasiou*, passing the square of *Kavos*. The *Anna* had escorted the King's motor launch to the Grotto that morning. The sign on the side of the vessel reads 'Welcome to our beloved King':



TCR 00:33:56:05

The concluding images show the launch leaving the square:



TCR 00:34:03:00

As will be evident from the film, the visit of the Italian Royal family was a moment for the distant Kastellorizians to feel a sense of belonging to what was then an ascending international power. As such, the visit served to mask momentarily any lingering resentment about foreign rule or about steadily-worsening economic conditions. Nevertheless, as the oldest-known surviving footage of the island, the film is an invaluable document that records a brief moment of celebration before the difficult years – and ultimate catastrophe – that lay ahead.



With guns at the ready, 300 Italian military land at Kastellorizo in February of 1941, WWII, on the counter-attack, having just disembarked from the Royal Italian navy destroyer Francesco Crispi. They are manning their guns in anticipation of commando fire by British special forces, who invaded Kastellorizo, 2 days prior. Photo credit: www.lavocedelmarineo.com <http://www.lavocedelmarinaio.com/2017/02/25-2-1941-affondamento-regio-cacciatorpediniere-crispi/>

OPERATION ABSTENTION: THE BATTLE FOR KASTELLORIZO, 1941

Part 2: The fierce battle on the island by Dr George Stabelos, Melbourne.

This is the second of three articles to follow in future editions of Filia

Today, we admire Greek islands such as Kastellorizo, for their breathtaking natural beauty and as pleasurable holiday destinations. However, nearly 80 years ago, they were the scenes of a brutal war. Operation Abstinence was a code name given to the British and allied assisted invasion of the Greek populated island of Kastellorizo, from the 25th-28th February 1941, World War Two (WWII) (1-5).

Background: life on Kastellorizo & Greece during the Second World War

On the 25th February 1941, during WWII, Triantafilia (Filia) Atherinos (Kalimeri), now known as Rose Stabelos by marriage, was nearly 10 years old. She lived in a two level house at the Kavos residential promontory on Kastellorizo, with her parents George Atherinos (Kalimeri) aged 43, a mariner and shopkeeper, Zafiro Atherinos, (nee Peronis/Papanastasiou), aged 39, a housewife and her brother Antoni, aged 13, sisters Maria 12 (later Mary Patiniotis-dec.), Christina, 8 (later Christina Bisas), Anna, 4 (later Anna Adgemis) and Catina, nearly 2 (later Catina Miriklis-dec.).

The Atherinos family, had earlier lost their brother Marco to bacterial meningitis, reducing their numbers to eight. Soon, they would lose another brother. At the age of 18, Antoni's life was tragically ended by unexploded ordinance that he had found in Megisti harbour. Such was the magnitude of tragic circumstances and life-changing events that Kastellorizians endured.

During WWII, the Atherinos family were part of an island population of around 1500 Greek Kastellorizians, struggling just to survive, like many others in Greece. They were living under Italian occupation and governance (1). At least they mostly did survive. 300,000 Greeks are estimated to have died of famine and imposed mass starvation alone (i.e., deaths associated with starvation only and not the conflict itself), during WWII (6). This occurred on the mainland and on the islands under occupation by Axis powers Nazi Germany and to a lesser extent fascist Italy.

"During the war, Kastellorizo suffered greatly. We had no food, people's stomachs were bloated", described one Kastellorizian (16). In Athens, the price of bread increased 89-fold during WWII, as a

result of the imposed famine and the consequent hyperinflation (7). Imagine the effect of such circumstances today, if bread suddenly rose to over 89 times its current value in Australia, ie \$300 per loaf, if indeed, food was available? These circumstances are hard for us to even contemplate.

I recall my mother's description, as a ten-year-old girl, of the British invasion of the island in 1941. It was the 25th of February, early morning after 3am and still pitch dark. There had been gunfire and explosions in the early morning hours, which had startled and awakened the Kastellorizians in fright. The rawness of war had come to Kastellorizo.

The Atherinos family and other Kastellorizians were wide awake in the dark of night, concerned about what was going on outside. George and Zaphiro Atherinos could hear voices and troop movements in the alleyways (sokakia) outside of their house. The voices were not in Italian or Greek. "They are speaking English.. the British have come to free the island!"

The war years were a difficult time for the Kastellorizians. Written accounts provide some understanding of the political circumstances, which impacted significantly on daily life:

"Kastellorizo...has gone through a great deal of suffering..But the most barbaric and ruthless occupation came with the shiny spears of the indiscernible and insane actor of Roman Impero- Benito Mussolini. The fascist presence on our persecuted island, with the imposition of the new philosophies of Rome, created an unbearable atmosphere...Enchainings, persecutions, exiles and imprisonment. humiliations... and.... the prohibiting of the teaching of the Greek language..." (17)

The commander of the 200 British no. 50 ME Commandos on Kastellorizo, reported that:

"The (Kastellorizian) population was most friendly and obviously glad to see them. They gave every assistance. As far as could be discovered, they had little bread and butter or eggs since Italy's entry into the war and were only allowed bread twice per week. This was borne out by the appearance of the inhabitants, who looked very thin and children very white with swollen eyes.(8)



HMS Parthian,, in the Mediterranean, 1941. This submarine played a vital role in guiding British naval vessels and Special Forces towards Kastellorizo on 25th February 1941 . Parthian assisted the commando's landing under cover of darkness at Point Nifti , by using her signalling light as a beacon. Image source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Parthian_\(N75\)#/media/File:Hms_parthian_submarine.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Parthian_(N75)#/media/File:Hms_parthian_submarine.jpg)

These descriptions are consistent with a population suffering from the effects of food deprivation and severe malnutrition. Perhaps these circumstances explain my mother Triantafilia's comments to us as children, when my brother John and I left food on our plates, or were complaining about a food .."You have not lived war" she would say... and... "I pray you never will".

How 'Operation Abstention' unfolded: 4 fateful days, 24-28th Feb 1941

The preparation for the British invasion of Kastellorizo began under water. During 18-19 February 1941, a secret reconnaissance was undertaken by the British submarine HMS Parthian, via secret periscope surveys of Kastellorizo from a submerged position. (10)

On the 24th of February 1941, British destroyers HMS Decoy and Hereward, departed Souda Bay on the north coast of Crete. They arrived at Kastellorizo under cover of darkness at 2am. "Weather conditions are good, with a clear sky, light airs and a smooth sea." (8)

The 200 commandos disembark on the destroyers' 10 whaler boats to reach Point Nifti. Only 50 of the 200 (2 whaler boats) initially land at Nifti. Some boats accidentally end up in the darkness at Megisti harbour and are fired upon by Italians, including bursts of machine gun fire (8).

In the darkness, the first commandos stealthily make their way past the cemetery to arrive at the harbour by 5.50am. They ambush and are discovered by an Italian patrol on a truck (probably at or near Mandraki bay) and are fired upon. They kill two Italian soldiers. The admiralty report states, "They (the commandos) were fired at by three (Italian) men, probably coast guards... who were disposed of.. " (8). The commando force makes its way to Megisti harbour and "occupied the (Italian) wireless transmission station, **where a great deal of food was found...**, the Governor's house, which was empty, **although the bed was still warm..** the Customs House" and others (8).

The Italian garrison of about 50 military, has fled and taken refuge in the mountains at Paleocastro fort. At 6.15am, HMS Ladybird, a British gunboat, steams into Megisti harbour. She is attacked and fired upon by Italian machine guns from Cape Stefano and Paleocastro (8). Ladybird's 6 inch guns pound Paleocastro. The commandos, taking cover behind stone fences, make their way up the mountain. There are multiple exchanges of gunfire. Paleocastro is captured by the British and the Italians become prisoners. Before the commandos succeed, the Italians send a radio alert to Rhodes and Leros, Italian air and naval bases in the Dodecanese islands (8).

The British are now in control of Kastellorizo. The Union Jack is hoisted at the Customs House, and the Kastellorizians come out from the shelter of their houses. They are elated at the British having arrived and are cheering the hoisting of the British flag (8). They begin to sing the Greek national anthem together... "Se gnorizo apo tin opsi, tou spathiou tin tromeri...". This moment, being freed from oppression and fascism, is what the Kastellorizians have only dreamed of.

The celebration is short-lived. Soon two Italian airforce CR42 bombers appear in the skies. HMS Ladybird rapidly discharges explosive anti-aircraft fire at the enemy planes. Three more aircraft appear and begin dive bombing attacks at Megisti harbour (8). The explosions and bombing attacks are constant. For hours, "The enemy aircraft were vigorously engaged and two were seen to be hit" (8).

HMS Ladybird is then targeted by a multi-ordinance bomb and three gun crew are hit. HMS Ladybird's commander fears she will be sunk and re-embarks the Marines, setting sail for Famagusta, Cyprus (8). Later in the afternoon, a Rhodes postal caique arrives and the Italian sailors taken prisoners and mail on board seized by the British. (8). That night, there was a secret probe of the island's defences by Italian troops sent from Rhodes, who landed after dark on the 25th, gathered reconnaissance information and departed five hours later. (12)

Overnight, the commandos camped at Nifti Point. The next day, the sun rises over beautiful Kastellorizo and things are quiet, but not for long. The Italian Torpedo Boats Lince and Lupo have been travelling from nearby Leros island and together with two Italian fast-attack boats arrive off the island.

The Royal Italian Navy counter-attack began at around 9pm on 26 February, when torpedo boats Lupo and Lince suddenly entered Megisti harbour, surprising the British. The torpedo boats switched on search lights, illuminating the harbour promenade in the darkness and proceeded to ruthlessly blast armour piercing shells and powerful guns at all principal buildings including the Customs House, Wireless Station and Governor's House, virtually at point-blank range. The noise is piercing, deafening, the bombardment and explosions terrorising. The Kastellorizians would have been at their wits' end. Three British commandos are killed and seven wounded. The British, overwhelmed, some stunned, retreat to their encampment at the landing point near Cape Nifti and the port is retaken by the Italians. The Italian warships evacuate a number of Italian civilians.



HMS Jaguar, a British Destroyer at sea in the Mediterranean circa 1941, with an explosion behind her bow (depth charge). During Operation Abstention, HMS Jaguar "swung into the mouth of Megisti harbour. It executed a 'hit and run' attack on the Italians. Perhaps not wishing to get entwined in a shooting match in the confined area of the harbor, the Jaguar fired all four torpedoes from the mouth of the Kastellorizo port and fled. All missed the Italian Navy MAS patrol boats docked in the harbour and slammed harmlessly into the shore"(9). Image source: <http://www.comandosupremo.com/operation-abstention-the-battle-for-Kastellorizo-25-28-february-1941.html/4>

Under the overall command of Ammiraglio di Divisione Luigi Biancheri, and local command of Capitano di Vascello Francesco Mimbelli, the Italian airforce squadron again returns (14-15). The attack on the British by the Italians from the air, sea and land is relentless. "During the day, Italian bombers arrived in relays and with a combination of bombing and shelling from Torpedo Boats and infantry attacks on shore, the situation by dusk was serious".... The Italian torpedo boats shelled the troops close to the cemetery from outside Mandraki bay, and likewise at point Nifti. The British Bren guns "fired almost continuously, but troops here (close to the cemetery) had to withdraw to the hill above"(8). "Many of our (British) troops had lost arms and equipment and were almost surrounded by enemy troops".(8)

Late on the 27th, an Italian mortar platoon with 11 men and two 81-mm mortars also arrived by seaplane. On the evening of the 27th an Italian flame-thrower squad with a dozen flame-throwers arrived. Finally, a "contingent" of the 201st Black Shirt Battalion arrived that night (15). The British were hopelessly outgunned and outmaneuvered.

The British destroyer HMS Decoy, arrived with Sherwood Forrester troop reinforcements at Kastellorizo one day later than planned. "It appeared the commando men were in a bad way and were hemmed in by enemy troops at Nifti Point". Two signals were received from British commandos on shore as follows..."Embarkation now or never" and "Suicide to land any more men here" (8). Things were desperate for the British, to say the least.

"Some of the soldiers (Sherwood Forresters) met four or five commando men, who were without arms or equipment, and obviously demoralised and badly shaken"(8). The landing site at point Nifti was also not ideal for the Sherwood Forrester Soldiers and several cases of ammunition were accidentally dropped into the sea. Without sustained naval and air support, British withdrawal was unavoidable. It was resolved that the British withdraw (8).

By the 28th of February 1941, to the dismay of most Kastellorizians, the British flag was lowered by the victorious Italian military and the Italian flag, flew high again on the island. The lack of British preparation for and the underestimation of such an impressive Italian military retaliation, resulted in victory to the Italians and a humiliating British defeat. The beautiful island of Kastellorizo and its people, were once again back in Italian fascist control, **for now**.



Italian propaganda during WWII, as appeared in the Sunday Milan publication, "La Domenica Del Corriere", 9th March 1941, depicting Italian military forces recapturing Kastellorizo. Note the symbolism of the downed British flag and the Italian forces overwhelming the British. Fascist Italy invaded Greece from Albania on 28 October 1940 (when OXI day is celebrated). However, the invasion was turned into a defeat for the Italians and the Greek forces managed to successfully counter-attack, penetrating deep into Albanian territory. Given earlier losses to the Greeks by Italy in the war, the lack of success by the British through Operation Abstention was an important victory for and an impressive show of force and military initiative by Italy. Image source: <https://vitesenzafine.wordpress.com/domenica-del-corriere/marzo-1941/>

Acknowledgements: Charles W. Stewart (Scotland- father Bill Stewart ex-British commando on Kastellorizo, 1941)- sourced British Admiralty report, London. Florence Livery, KAV Archivist, Sylvia Varsamis, Connie Gregory, Marilyn Tsolakis and Nick Pappas AM, for support".

References on request.

VOLUNTEERS OF KASTELLORIZO by Theona Mitaros, Perth



On Friday 4 August 2017 after spending a month relaxing on Kastellorizo my husband and I settled in for the 3.5 hour Blue Star Paros ferry ride to Rhodes.

Joining us on the journey to Rhodes were three Red Cross volunteers whom we had often seen outside the Megisti Medical Centre but never actually chatted to.

Below is an interview with these wonderful volunteers, Giannis Siampanis, Georgia Kapottou (standing) and Stamatia Paraskeva (seated), which they kindly agreed to participate on their way home to Rhodes.

What organisation do you belong to?

We are Greek Red Cross, Rhodes Division.

What do you do?

As members of the Red Cross we volunteer for natural disasters, such as earthquakes and bushfires, for people in need or lately to assist the refugees from Syria.

How long have you been volunteering?

Stamatia: 17 years

Georgia: 15 years

Giannis: First year

How many people are in the Rhodes Division of the Red Cross?

There are 80 people and another 50 people volunteer at the Rhodes Hospital.

Do you work anywhere else?

Stamatia: We have a plumbing business, but Red Cross is my life and I volunteer at least 10 hours per week.

Georgia: I am a full time teacher, but any free time I have, I volunteer.

Giannis: I am a Police Officer in Rhodes and volunteer as much as I can.

How many hours do you volunteer monthly?

To stay a part of the Red Cross you must volunteer a minimum 150 hours per year, but we give many more hours each year.

As you all work in other jobs, do you tend to volunteer on your holidays?

Yes we volunteer on holidays, but also after work.

Georgia: As an example we get called in for a fire while we are at work. We will volunteer at night after work.

What sort of work have you done while volunteering?

Georgia: Everything. First of all we have paramedic backgrounds.

Then after that we have been trained as fire fighters and for earthquakes, to help the people in local disasters.

Do you have families?

Yes we are parents and grandparents.

What were you doing in Kastellorizo?

Kastellorizo only had one doctor and one nurse and we were there for one week to assist the medical team.

Today two new volunteers arrived to replace us.

How long do you stay on Kastelloizo?

Because we can't stay long, we change volunteers every week in the months of May to October.

During your stay whom did you see?

We saw local people, specialists saw people with different ailments, and many visitors to the island that required basic medical help.

Did you attend to any refugees?

Yes last week.

What do they need you for?

Food, water, shelter, blankets. We do all sorts of things. Sometimes to find a place for them to live for one or two days.

What more do you do on Kastellorizo to help them?

Georgia: I can't do anything more really because we are assigned to the Medical Centre.

I'm there volunteering for the Medical Centre.

I'm not there to specifically help refugees.

Of course I will help, but we have limited resources.

Stamatia: In Rhodes we have resources there, but in Kastellorizo we only have medicines.

But from Rhodes we send things to Kastellorizo.

Blankets, food whatever they need.

Do you encourage other people to join the Red Cross volunteering programme in Rhodes? How do you do that?

Of course... Posters and an exhibition explaining to new volunteers.

What sort of response do you receive?

Yes we get a good response, but it can be difficult as you must commit to do 500 practical hours for training ... it's a big commitment ... 200 lessons ... 50 tests ... 100 hours in the hospital ... from October to the following December ... one and a half years.

You must do 500 hours to achieve your Diploma.

When you are on Kastellorizo where do you stay?

The Municipality houses us.

The Army feeds us.

What is the age range of volunteers?

Usually 16- 45 years, but we also have volunteers up to 60 years of age

How long have you known each other?

We have known each other for many, many years.

We are like family... volunteers are family.

What does volunteering mean to you?

Stamatia: Volunteering is in you... something you feel... it's the best... it truly is the best.

We leave families behind to do this and often we wake up at 6am to do this, but it is something we love and is personally very rewarding.

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