

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Terror: Greece

American Research Institute
in Turkey
Serencebey Yokuşu 61-63/10-11
Beşiktaş İstanbul
TURKEY
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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USA

Dear Peter,

Had you been searching diligently for me at about 3 p.m. on Wednesday, the 2nd of April, you would have found me in the restaurant on the second floor of the Athens International Airport, inhaling a plate of spaghetti. I had arrived a couple of hours before, and I had quickly made arrangements to fly on that evening to Kalamata whence I would taxi down to Kardamyli in the Mani to visit some friends. In the meantime, there was little point in going on in to Athens; so, I called some friends and acquaintances to set up meetings for the time when I would be back in the capital, and I settled down to read a bit, thinking that I could do without lunch.

Had hunger not overcome my inhibitions, I might have missed seeing Trans World Airlines Flight 840 land, a sizeable hole gaping in the aircraft's side near the right wing. No alarms went off, no announcements were made, no one I spoke to at the airport seemed to know anything about it. But there it was—out on the tarmac, the evidence clear that something dreadful had transpired. The taxi driver who took me on to the domestic terminal two hours later had heard on the radio that there had been an explosion, but he knew little more and for some reason he thought that the airline involved was British Air. It was not until two days later that I was able to get my hands on a newspaper with a more or less full account. A bomb had apparently been placed under seat 10-F. Had it gone off while the airliner was at a high altitude (as was no doubt intended), it probably would have resulted in a crash and the death of everyone or nearly everyone aboard. As it worked out, four passengers—three Greek-Americans and a Colombian resident in Connecticut—who had been sitting in the immediate vicinity of the explosion made an unscheduled exit from the aircraft some 15,000 feet above the Argolid. They were, needless to say, never heard from again. After they were sucked out

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of the aircraft, the pilot managed the feat of landing the stricken plane without anyone else being killed or seriously hurt.

The event brought back unpleasant memories. In late July or early August, 1973, I flew from Athens airport to Izmir on the coast of Asia Minor to spend a week touring some of the ancient Lydian and Greek sites--Smyrna, Erythrae, Sardis, Ephesus, Priene, Didyma--stretched along Turkey's Aegean coast or not too many miles inland. Just two hours after I left the departure lounge and my flight took off, a group of PLO gunmen sprayed that lounge with automatic weapons. It was a reasonably close shave.

This past December, a day or so after I flew from Larnaca airport in Cyprus to Budapest and then journeyed by train to Vienna to spend Christmas with former Institute Fellow Dennison Rusinow, his wife Mary, and their two spunky young daughters, a platoon of terrorists made a similar assault with fragmentation grenades and automatic weapons on travellers standing at or near the El Al counter in the airport at Vienna. In the last few years, I have had ample reminders that those stumbling about this part of the world may from time to time be in for a few unwanted surprises.

I feared that the Greek press--particularly those elements most friendly to the Papandreou government--would prove less than sympathetic to the victims of the bombing, and I regret to have to report that I was in no way disappointed. There were the usual pieties justifying the murder of innocent men, women, and children: until the Palestinian problem was solved, we were told, one would have to expect these attacks to continue. The press also showed an acute sensitivity to any hint of a suggestion that security was inadequate at the Athens airport. This had clearly been the case in the summer of 1985 when the same TWA airliner was hijacked to Beirut by Shi'ite gunmen. Well before that event, on the 29th of April, 1985, a number of the airlines using Athens airport had sent a telex to Andreas Papandreou that read: "We want to express our deepest concern at the total inadequacy of security at Athens." The Greek authorities had responded to this charge with the sort of ultra-nationalist bombast that typifies the rhetoric of the current regime: the suggestion that airport security was inadequate in Athens was taken to be a slur on Greek national honor, and those in authority actually ordered the airlines which had installed electronic screening devices of their own to remove them all forthwith. Not surprisingly, then, last summer, when President Reagan--in the wake of the Shi'ite hijacking of the ill-fated TWA Flight 840--issued a public warning that American travellers should avoid the Athens airport because security was lax, the Greek press had reacted with cries of anguish and outrage. The response of that same press to the incident of April 2, 1986 was but a distant echo of what had been heard before.

This was all predictable and far less surprising than the one article I came across that virtually gloated over the most recent disaster. The author of the piece denied what was then predicted (and is now coming to pass): that American tourists would give Europe a miss in the summer. He suggested, instead, with unconcealed glee that Greece would get its usual complement of wandering Americans, but that this year they would fly Olympic Airlines, the Greek national

line, rather than TWA or Pan Am. For the most part, however, the press reported the story and quickly let it pass. By now, terrorism is old hat in the eastern Mediterranean; and, though the bomb went off in Greek airspace and three Greek-Americans were killed, the event was not considered a Greek matter.

I

The morning I left the Mani for Athens, I called my friend Bruce Clarke at Reuters to arrange for us to get together that evening. He was able to come to the phone only briefly because he was typing up a major story at that very moment: while he was strolling earlier that day through Kolonaki Square on his way to the Reuters office nearby, he had happened upon a crowd grouped about the dead body of Dimitris Angelopoulos, the 79-year-old owner of Greece's largest steel-making concern. Angelopoulos had also been on his way to work; and, just before Bruce arrived, a gunman in his early thirties, dressed in a trenchcoat, and carrying a small bag had pumped four or five shots into the aging steel magnate's chest and stomach at point-blank range; in the chaos that ensued, the gunman managed to escape on a motorcycle driven by an accomplice.

The murder might have been given short shrift had it not been for the fact that, near the body, the Athens police had found a statement from "Revolutionary Organization November 17," trumpeting its responsibility for the deed. This terrorist group, which takes its name from the date of the 1973 leftist student uprising at the Athens Polytechnic University against the Greek Colonels, has now been operating with impunity for more than ten years. It began a decade ago by murdering the CIA Station Chief in Athens. In the years since it first appeared, "November 17" has claimed responsibility for assassinating a Greek-American US Navy Captain and for shooting the owner of one of Greece's most important conservative newspapers; last November, in the midst of riots occasioned by Andreas Papandreou's imposition of an economic austerity program, it blew up a police bus, killing one policeman and injuring 15 others.

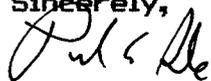
The reappearance of "November 17" was particularly newsworthy chiefly because it would lead to a political fracas: no one doubted that the leaders of New Democracy, which had never been able to catch anyone from "November 17" when it was in power, would inevitably take the event as an occasion to charge the government with incompetence in the maintenance of security. No one was surprised when rightwing columnists pointed out that the rhetoric in the "November 17" leaflet found near the body was virtually indistinguishable from the sort of anti-capitalist diatribe often to be found in Ethnos, Avriani, and other publications supportive of Andreas Papandreou's Panhellenic Socialist Union (PASOK). Nor was anyone shocked at rightwing hints that "November 17" might actually have allies within the PASOK regime. The fate of Dimitris Angelopoulos was far less interesting than what a crafty politician could make of it.

One can measure the event's importance by one simple fact: Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou, who was in China at the time, thought the matter of sufficient moment for him to cut his trip short and fly immediately home.

II

Shortly after Papandreou returned from Peking, I flew back to Istanbul on Türk Hava Yolları (THY). I was gratified to see a security firm set up tables where we were to have our luggage inspected, and I was extremely pleased when the man assigned to deal with the hanging bag that I was checking made a point of going through every pocket thoroughly. When I fly, I tend to avoid Olympic Airlines, which is poorly run and often on strike; when I can, I use THY because the threat posed by Armenian terrorists has caused Turkey's national airlines to take precautions on a scale exceeded only by El Al. As it happened, none of the other airlines serving the Athens airport were taking great care the day I made my return, and for a while I was satisfied with THY. But when I passed through customs and made my way to the departure lounge, I was appalled that my hand luggage was merely put through the x-ray machines by the Greek authorities--and never opened and searched at all. Had I possessed a plastic explosive or one of the new pistols, made almost entirely of plastic, that the Austrians are now producing, I am pretty sure that I would have slipped right through. Those who claim that security at Athens airport is tight are using the word security in a fashion new to me. Don't be surprised to hear of another hijacking or bombing made possible by the absence of serious precautions at the Athens airport.

Sincerely,


Paul A. Rahe

Received in Hanover 6/12/86