

Moving Forward Together

Canada-Greece Relations since 1942

In late May 2011, on his first trip abroad after winning a majority during the recent federal election, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper headed for Greece. In Athens, with Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou at his side, he boarded a helicopter for the long journey northwards, to the small village of Kalavryta. This is hallowed ground. The site of the ancient monastery of Agia Lavra and a wellspring of rebellion against Greece's 19th-century Ottoman overlords, Kalavryta is also home to more recent memories. There, on a chilly December morning in 1943, occupying troops from Nazi Germany rounded up the town's men, marched them up a nearby hill, and cut them down with machine-guns. Almost five hundred men, including eight monks, torn from their prayers and meditations, died. "These are things we must never forget," observed Prime Minister Harper quietly as he visited their memorial, "even as we move forward together".¹

Harper's visit to Kalavryta, the first by a foreign head of government, echoes many of the central themes in Canada's long and close relationship with Greece. Forged in war and cold war, and honed during a lingering era of global unrest, this trans-Atlantic partnership joined two distant countries and disparate peoples in a shared struggle for freedom, democracy, and prosperity. Seventy years on, this is its story of perseverance in the service of friendship.

Bonds That Unite

Canada-Greece relations stretch back to 1899 when the first Greek Consul-General arrived in Montreal, but early bilateral ties were tenuous and insignificant. By 1931, there were still just 9,444 Greek immigrants scattered across Canada, and the total trade between the two countries was negligible.²

Relations changed, suddenly and forever, in the spring of 1941, when Hitler's Nazi Germany marched south through the Balkans and defeated Greek and British Commonwealth forces allied in defence of freedom. Greek leaders fled the mainland, located the government-in-exile in Cairo, and reached out for friends. They found one in Canada. In June 1942, Greece opened a mission in Ottawa to strengthen "the bonds which united the Greek and [British] Imperial forces on the battlefield".³ Canada, which had gone to war at Britain's side in September 1939, quickly reciprocated. In