

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GREEK RESISTANCE
AGAINST THE AXIS IN WORLD WAR II

by

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INTRODUCTION

Greece, like the other Balkan countries during the years between the two great wars, was experiencing, after countless military revolutions and coups, a relatively new form of government, a modified type of National Socialism. The darkening of the horizon in Europe in the middle and late thirties could not leave Greece unconcerned due to her strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean. This uncertainty grew greater when Italy obtained a stronghold in the Balkans on April, 1939, with the occupation of Albania. Despite the sympathies of the Fascist government of Greece, the Italian expansion in Eastern Mediterranean could not be overlooked.

The struggle which followed the Italian ultimatum of October 28, 1940, was the struggle of the Greek people. The four years of dictatorship were not able to bend the heart and mind of the Greek nation. Out of the firm determination of the people to repel the invader arose the Epic of Greece, the Greek resistance and victory in the mountains of Epirus. The purpose of this work is to present an account of the diplomatic, and especially the military, aspects of the Greco-Italian conflict as well as of the Greco-German one, with emphasis on the fact that the Greek resistance was a significant factor in the defeat of the Axis. In this study I wish to examine the data available in order to determine if, in fact, the Greek resistance to the Germans in 1941 and to the Italians before that, was significant to the outcome of the German campaign against Russia in 1941.



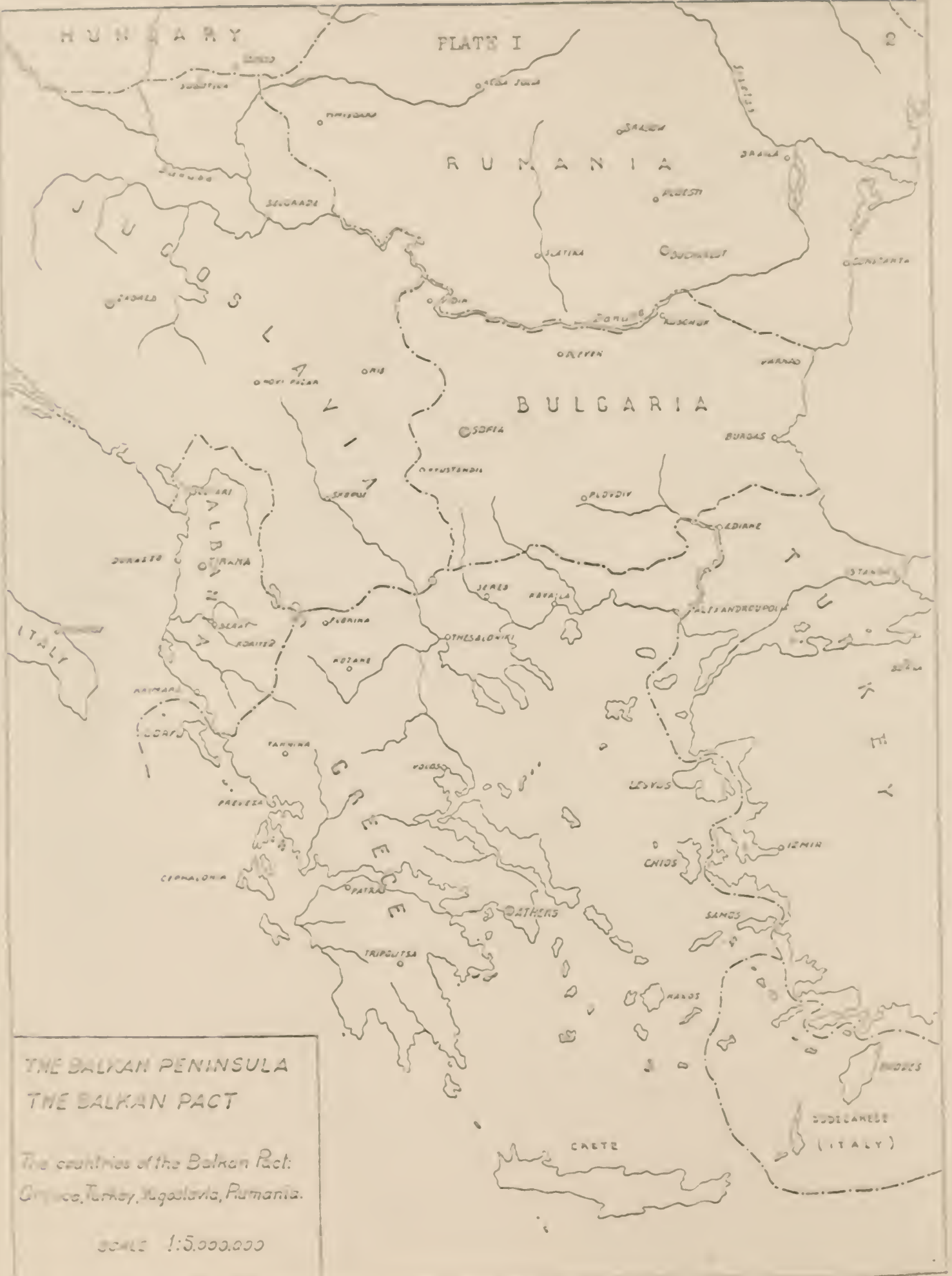
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PLATE I

2



**THE BALKAN PENINSULA
THE BALKAN PACT**

*The countries of the Balkan Pact:
Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Rumania.*

SCALE 1:5,000,000

CHAPTER ONE

INTERNAL SITUATION OF GREECE

Greece, in 1922, was defeated by the Turks in Asia Minor and lost all of the gains to which her participation in World War I had entitled her. Grave problems were created for the country by the forced transfer of almost two million Greeks from their ancient homes on the shores of Ionia to the mother country. Hellas, because she blamed the monarchy for the catastrophe, exiled King Constantine XII,¹ and proclaimed herself a democratic Republic in 1923 for the first time since her liberation from the Turkish yoke in 1821; but there was a chaotic situation in the country, involving revolutions and counter-revolutions by ambitious generals and admirals. Between 1923 and 1935 there were twenty-seven Greek administrations including two dictatorships, one of which under General George Pagalos lasted for fourteen months; the other under General Nikolaos Plastiras lasted only fourteen hours.

On November 3, 1935, the Royalist faction won a plebiscite returning the monarchy to power.² With the help of the British, the Anglophile King George II was restored to his father's throne. The restored king soon proclaimed an election for a new

¹ King Constantine XII came to the throne in 1913 and remained on it until he was forced by the Allies in 1917 to abdicate because of his neutral policies. He was back in the country in 1920, and fled again in 1922 after the defeat in Asia Minor.

² Leften Stavros Stavrianos, Greece, American Dilemma and Opportunity, p. 28.

Parliament. The Republican Party of Eleutherios Venizelos and the small Royalist parties were divided almost equally in the Parliament. The balance of power was held by fifteen Communists.³

The King, instead of attempting to solve the crisis through Parliamentary means, called on John Metaxas, at that time Minister of War in the transient government which held the elections, to form a new cabinet. Metaxas, a former army general with pro-Fascist ideas, was the leader of a small conservative party which had seven seats in the Parliament. In collaboration with the court and with the approval of the leading social elite of Athens, Metaxas formed a Fascist government, and in order to avoid a test vote the Parliament was dissolved.

The next day, August 4, 1936, the new regime abolished the constitution and the political parties and set up a dictatorship. This is the date which the authoritarian regime of Metaxas celebrated with great pomp every year.

The government of Metaxas had many of the elements of Fascism: regimentation of the people, government by decree, secret police, youth groups, and concentration of power in the hands of one man. Metaxas was Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of National Education and Religion, Minister of War, Minister of Marine, and Air Minister.

He imposed duties on the citizens without giving them rights.

³ "The elections of 1936 produced a political stalemate which enabled the Communist party (Kommunistikon Komma Ellados) with only fifteen deputies, to hold the balance between the two main political groups in Parliament, the liberals (Venizelists) and the Populists (Monarchists) ..." Dimitrios G. Kousoulas, The Price of Freedom, p. 15.

There was censorship of the press which was controlled by an official press bureau.⁴ Strikes were banned.⁵ Letters were stamped "Sleep quietly; Greece is safe," and the dictator promised "Severity without pity."⁶ He had organized a vast network of espionage, which, in collaboration with the secret police, terrorized the Greek people. Three to four thousand of his political enemies were exiled to the Aegean islands.⁷ This was a completely new phenomenon in Greek political life, but it did not bend the democratic spirit of the Greek people.

In the external affairs the government of Metaxas followed a policy of close relationship and friendship with the other Mediterranean powers. In the diplomatic field, the relations between Greece and Italy, despite the Corfu incident,⁸ were good. On September 23, 1928, in Rome, Greece and Italy agreed

⁴ Even the funeral oration of Pericles was forbidden in the schools because "extolling Democratic ideas may be misunderstood by the students"; also the Darwinian theory was excluded from the school curriculum.

⁵ Laird Archer, Balkan Journal, p. 44.

⁶ Greek letters and papers of the time seen by the author, a native of Greece, and resident there during the war.

⁷ Leften Stavros Stavrianos, Greece, American Dilemma and Opportunity, p. 33.

⁸ In 1923 an Italian member of the Delimitation Commission engaged in locating the boundary between Greece and Albania was killed on Greek soil. Italy demanded among other things a strict inquiry with the assistance of the Italian military attache. That was refused. In answer the Italian government bombarded and occupied the island of Corfu on August 31. Corfu was evacuated on September 27 after the payment of 50,000,000 lire by the Greek government.

"... to cooperate cordially for the purpose of maintaining the order established by the Treaties of Peace..."⁹ This pact of friendship was signed by the Prime Minister of Greece, Eleutherios Venizelos, and the leader of Italy, Benito Mussolini. The Hellenic government, after the Italian invasion of Albania in April, 1939, did not renew the pact which expired at the end of that year.

On February 9, 1934, the Balkan States, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Greece, formed the so-called "Balkan Pact" (see map, page 2) under the influence of the principle embodied in the slogan "The Balkan States for the Balkan people." The Balkan States under this plan hoped to maintain their territorial status quo. In July, 1938, Bulgaria, although never a member, signed an agreement with the Balkan Pact at Thessaloniki, Greece. This was a non-aggression agreement, and under the provisions of this treaty Bulgaria obliged herself not to seek violent overthrow of the Balkan status quo.

After the Italian invasion of Albania in April, 1939, by which the balance of power in the Balkan area was destroyed, Italy gave formal assurances to Greece that she would "... respect absolutely the integrity of both the Greek mainland and the islands."¹⁰

The Greek Prime Minister accepted the above Italian declara-

⁹ Royal Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Greek White Book, Doc. I, p. 81. The above book was issued by the Greek government in exile in 1942 and contains diplomatic documents relating to Italy's aggression against Greece. Hereafter referred to as Greek White Book.

¹⁰ Ibid., Doc. 27, p. 29.

tion, and expressed the idea that nothing would happen in the future to mar the traditional friendship existing between the two countries.¹¹

In accordance with her policy of neutrality, Greece cordially accepted the assurances about her national integrity which the British and the French governments extended to her on April 13, 1939, following the Italian invasion of Albania. On that date, the British Prime Minister stated in the House of Commons that:

... In the event of any action being taken which will clearly threaten the independence of Greece ... and which the Greek government considered it vital to resist with ... national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend¹² the Greek ... Government all the support in their power.

This declaration was also addressed to the Turkish Government because of the vital interests of Turkey in the area and in Greco-Turkish relations.¹³ A statement of the same nature was made on the same date in the House of Lords by the British Foreign Secretary Viscount Halifax.¹⁴

¹¹ Greek White Book, Doc. 28, p. 30.

¹² Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939, notes to Chapters I and II, p. 197.

¹³ On October 19, 1939, Turkey signed an agreement with England and France under whose terms Turkey was obligated to help Greece in case of war: "So long as the guarantees given by France and United Kingdom to Greece remain in force, Turkey will lend ...all aid and assistance in its power in the event France and the United Kingdom are engaged in hostilities by virtue of ...the said agreements." Davis Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942, p. 111.

¹⁴ Viscount Edward Frederick Halifax, Speeches on Foreign Policy, p. 258.

The French government reacted in a way similar to the British attitude toward the Italian invasion of Albania. The French Prime Minister, M. Edouard Daladier, issued this statement to the press on April 13, 1939:

...The French Government have given ... Greece the special assurance that, in the event of action which would constitute a distinct threat to the independence of ... Greece and which the ... Hellenic Government would regard themselves bound ... to resist by the use of their national forces, the French Government would consider themselves under an obligation to afford at once all the help in their power.¹⁵

The Hellenic Government accepted the assurances given by France and Britain as the only solution against the expanding policy of Italy in the Balkans.

The internal administration of the country, which naturally was a corrupt one, devoted all the resources of the country to the promotion of the party's goals, and neglected an important factor in the safety of the country, the army.

According to the mobilization plans of the Greek General Staff, Greece would have fifteen infantry regiments, nine battalions of machine guns, and one motorized regiment, the "Independent Cavalry."¹⁶ This excluded the island security units. Also, the following large units were in the process of being organized: five army corps, fifteen divisions, four infantry brigades, one cavalry division, one regiment of heavy

¹⁵ Greek White Book, Doc. 33, p. 31.

¹⁶ Cavalry, despite its relative obsolescence, was necessary in the mountainous terrain of Greece and especially in Epirus where it was expected that the war would be fought.

artillery (nine units), and one squadron of "Sconda 150" (three units). Greece had the same number of reserves as Bulgaria, that is, 700,000 men, but could use only two-thirds of them due to lack of war materiel.

The number of field officers of the Greek army was 3,414 and of the administrative officers in transportation service, supplies, and logistics 1,567. There were about 10,000 reserve officers, but only half of that number could be used due to poor training. The number of the reserve officers was not sufficient for the staffing of the planned fifteen divisions and four brigades. The army was ill-equipped; its war materiel were old and in some cases obsolete. The infantry used many different kinds of rifles¹⁷ and every division had two types of ammunition.¹⁸ There was a great need for heavy artillery; during the first phase of the war there were only 189 anti-aircraft guns which were of different types and diameters,¹⁹ and every regiment had four mortars. The Greek forces possessed twenty-four anti-tank guns, and no tanks. Four of the fifteen divisions

¹⁷ "The Greeks had started the war with a large variety of weapons mainly of French and German make." Major-General I.S.O. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, p. 335.

¹⁸ General Alexander Edipidis, Istoria tou Ellinoitalikou Kai Ellinogermanikou Poleμου (History of the Greco-Italian and Greco-German War), p. 117.

¹⁹ According to Marshal Papagos, Chief of the Greek army during the Greco-Italian war, the army had the following power in A/A guns: 28 -- 80 mm, 54 -- 37 mm, 107 -- 20 mm. Alexander Papagos, O Polemos tis Ellados. 1940-1941 (The War of Greece, 1940-1941), p. 232.

did not have either artillery or cavalry. The artillery of the other divisions was old and of various types. The ammunition supplies of the army at the outbreak of the Italo-Greek War in October, 1940, were as follows: the Infantry had a stock for fifty-five days, enough bombs for the mortars for a campaign of twenty-eight days, and the heavy artillery had a forty-five day supply.

In comparison with the Greek army the Italian army had the following:²⁰ each Italian division was composed of nine to ten battalions (two infantry regiments and one artillery regiment). The fire power of an Italian regiment, as far as the mortars were concerned, was far above that of the Greek regiment. The Italian regiment had sixty mortars as compared to four for the Greek regiment.²¹ Each Italian division had one regiment of field artillery consisting of nine batteries and two regiments of heavy artillery of nine batteries each. The Greek army corps had two regiments of heavy artillery, one of which was composed of nine batteries and the other of seven.

The Italian army in Albania was divided into two armies, the Ninth and the Eleventh.²² The Ninth Army had two corps. Each

²⁰ Ibid., p. 389.

²¹ Ibid., p. 390.

²² The Italian division was composed of two regiments as opposed to the three regiments of the Greek division, but the Italian divisions were reinforced by other units (for example, battalions of blackshirts of those twenty-two battalions in Albania plus five legions of Blackshirts composed of two battalions each. Also, five battalions of Albanians, three battalions of custom-guards, seven battalions of machine-guns, and three regiments of cavalry). Therefore the total amount of each Italian division was about nine to ten battalions, almost twice the number of a Greek division. Ibid., p. 389.

corps was composed of four divisions, each of which had two regiments of heavy artillery; the Eleventh Army had four corps. In comparison to this tremendous force, the entire Greek army at the outbreak of the war in 1940 had only one regiment of heavy artillery and one battery of "Sconda 150" guns. The Italian army had one armored division, the "Centauro," composed of two light Fiat tanks, and a great number of anti-tank guns.

The Royal Hellenic Navy, which had won great prestige in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 as well as in the First World War, was now a shadow of its former power. It consisted of a light cruiser, fifteen destroyers, seventeen torpedo boats, six old submarines and some auxiliary ships. The main mission of the Royal Navy was, first: to protect the convoys which would carry the army and its supplies to Epirus during the first days of mobilization, and second: to eliminate the movement of the Italian convoys in the Adriatic Sea in order to prevent the reinforcement of the Italian troops in Albania. The Royal Hellenic Air Force had thirty-six fighters and twenty-three bombers. The army had an air force of its own of seventy-three planes, while the Royal Navy maintained an air force of thirty-four planes. The above numbers do not include the 139 training planes. In the whole country there were only two air bases and fifty-four airfields.

This was the state of affairs in Greece on the eve of the conflict with Italy. The country was torn by internal discontent, its economy suffering from a chronic deficit, its armed forces backward and not fitted for a modern war.

CHAPTER II

ITALIAN PREPARATIONS AND AGGRESSIONS AGAINST GREECE

After the Italian invasion of Albania, as was very natural, a state of uncertainty cast its shadow over the Balkan countries. They were confused as to the next step that the Italian government would take. As John Politis, the Greek Minister in Paris, said on April 8, 1939, the Italian aggression in Albania was the first step of the Fascist programme to obtain predominance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Politis in his talks with Georges Bonnet, French Foreign Minister, at the Quai d'Orsay remarked that "Greece would fight ... but that it would be a losing battle."¹

A few days after the invasion of Albania rumors were spread that Italy intended to occupy the Greek Island of Corfu in the Ionian Sea.² Even before the deterioration of the Italo-Greek

¹ Metaxas called the British Minister at Athens at midnight, April 9, expressing his anxieties concerning the Italian occupation of Corfu. Information to that point was given to the Greek government by her representatives in various European cities. The British Minister in Athens wired his government, "Prime Minister Metaxas made no appeal to me, but was deeply moved ... He said he had made all preparations to resist to the utmost and at the cost of all sacrifices." Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939, Doc. 97, p. 145.

² The American Ambassador in Rome, William Phillips, was able to inform Washington on April 10, 1939, that "... no move [on the part of Italy] against Corfu ... is contemplated." Foreign Relations of the United States 1939, p. 394. In a memorandum given to the Prime Minister of Greece by the Italian Charge d'Affaires in Athens on April 10, 1939, it was stated that "all rumors that may have circulated as regards alleged Italian action against Greece are false. They can only be spread by agents provocateurs." Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939, Doc. 118, p. 161.

relations in 1940, as early as 1938, Galeazzo Ciano, in his Hidden Diary, stated that "In any case the line of advance drawn by destiny is Salonika [Thessaloniki] for the Serbs, Tirana and Corfu for us. The Greeks know this and are frightened... It is, after all, an idea for the realization of which I have for some time been working."³ In Athens, the Italian Minister to Greece issued a statement: "All rumors, present or future concerning the supposed Italian action against Greece are false."⁴ This information was transmitted to London through the British Minister in Rome who reported that Mussolini had assured him that "all rumours were false... Italy intended to respect in the most absolute manner the territorial and insular integrity of Greece."⁵

On April 27, 1940, the Greek Minister in Tirana, Albania, reported to his government that "... in the event of complications Italy intended occupying at once the whole of Epirus as far as Preveza."⁶ On August 29, the Italian military attaché visited the Chief of the Greek General Staff and among other things he stated, "I have been instructed by the Minister of War, General Alberto Pariani, to repeat assurances given."⁷ By that he meant the assurances which Italy had given as to the respect

³ Galeazzo Ciano, Hidden Diary, p. 27.

⁴ Greek White Book, Doc. 27, p. 29.

⁵ Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939, Doc. 105, p. 151.

⁶ Greek White Book, Doc. 40, p. 33.

⁷ Ibid., Doc. 46, p. 39.

for Greek territorial integrity.⁸

On September 17, 1939, the Italian Minister in Athens, Signor Emanuele Grazzi, on behalf of the Italian Government, told the Prime Minister of Greece, General Metaxas: "Italy will not take the initiative in resorting to any military action against Greece."⁹ And as demonstration of her peaceful intent she was willing to withdraw the Italian troops from the Greek frontier to a depth of twenty kilometers. The Greek government responded to this proposition and ordered reduction of the Greek troops stationed in the Epirus, Western Macedonia and the Island of Corfu. Furthermore, she decided to withdraw troops from the Greco-Albanian frontier to a depth of twenty kilometers as the Italians did. The Italian proposition put Greece into a great

⁸ Lord Halifax, on Easter eve in April, 1939, was given assurances by the Italian Chargé d' Affaires in London that his government did not intend to occupy part of the neighboring countries, that is, Greece and Yugoslavia. On the next day, once again Lord Halifax summoned him and expressed the anxiety of the English government concerning rumors of probable Italian occupation of the Island of Corfu. Signior Grola, on his own initiative, took the responsibility on behalf of his government to deny any such rumors. The British government, not being satisfied with Grola's words, wished these assurances to be given by the Italian government itself. This request was transmitted to Rome and on the same evening Mussolini sent a message to the effect that the Italian government had no intention whatsoever of attacking Greece. This information was wired to the British Minister at Athens at once, with the order to bring it to the knowledge of the Greek Prime Minister as soon as possible. The British Minister at once visited Metaxas and conveyed to him the assurances of the Italian government. Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939, Doc. 101, 105, 117, pp. 146, 151, 161. The above conversations were also reported to Washington by Joseph Kennedy, the American Ambassador in London. Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. II, p. 392.

⁹ Greek White Book, Doc. 49, p. 41.

dilemma: either to remain defenseless at the mercy of the enemy in case he should decide it opportune to attack her, or on the other hand, to be considered by the world an aggressor and a trouble maker; if the situation required the movement of Greek armed forces on the frontier for defensive purposes or in case Greece decided to come to a closer understanding with her traditional friends, Italy might attack her. The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ciano, commented as follows about this agreement: "As we had been led to expect, the conference between Grazzi and Metaxas had had good results. Tomorrow we shall issue our first report, which will give France and Great Britain another piece of bad news ..."¹⁰

In Albania the Italians started preparing the natives for the forthcoming attack against Greece. They organized local Albanian National Guard units and regular battalions, to be incorporated into the Italian army. Albanian peasants living as far as six kilometers from the Greek frontier were ordered on May 9, 1939, to withdraw.¹¹

Italian forces concentrated in great numbers along the main arteries leading to the Greek frontier and in the cities of Elbasan and Koritsa (see map, Chapter V). No logical reason for that concentration could be given except that they were sent there for a possible movement toward Greece. Great amounts of

¹⁰ Galeazzo Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, p. 147.

¹¹ Strategic military roads were built as early as May, 1939, from Durrazzo to Argyrocastro and Koritsa, cities located near the Greek border.

materials were stored. These materials were disproportionate to the needs of the army there. By June, 1939, 150 tanks were concentrated close to the Greek frontier. On June 2, the French Foreign Minister inquired of Ciano as to why Italy had sent so many men into Albania.

That the Italians systematically attempted to exploit the Albanian National aspirations against their neighbors is shown by this statement of Ciano: "They want Kossovo and Ciamuria. It is easy for us to increase our popularity by becoming champions of Albanian nationalism."¹² Kossovo, as we know, belonged to Yugoslavia with whom Italy had friendly relations, and Tsamuria (Ciamuria) was Greek. Speaking in Koritsa, Albania, where the majority of the people were Greek, the Italian Minister of Education stated that the Albanian nation under the friendly protection of Italy would expand its frontiers in two or three years.¹³ Marshal Pietro Badoglio, chief of the Italian army, addressing an Albanian delegation in Italy, assured them that Italy would devote herself to helping Albanians to expand.¹⁴ At a reception for Count Ciano in Koritsa placards inscribed with the names of Kossovo and Koritsa were raised. These acts

¹² Galeazzo Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, p. 254.

¹³ The American Minister at Tirana, Grand, reported to the Department of State on April 24, 1939: "The Albanian peasants who paraded in their native costumes received a franc each for their participation." Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. II, p. 403.

¹⁴ Commenting on the Albanians, Count Ciano writes: "The Albanian people are grateful to us for having taught them to eat twice a day, for this rarely happened before." Galeazzo Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, p. 254.

of Italy encouraged Albanian irregulars to roam into Greek territory. The Greek permanent Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs delivered to the Italian legation in Athens a memorandum about the moves of the Albanian bandits in the vicinity of the Greek frontiers. A few days later, the Greek diplomatic representatives in several European capitals started reporting rumors of an Italian attack against the Greek Island of Corfu. The Greek Prime Minister called on the Italian Ambassador in Greece who denied all charges. In the meantime, the Italian press started an anti-Greek campaign accusing Greece of having become a base for the British fleet.¹⁵ This charge from that time on was the favorite weapon which the Italians used against Greece. This also was the reason that the Germans gave later for their attack against Greece. Also the different Fascistic organizations in accordance with this policy started a propaganda campaign against the Balkan countries, proclaiming the whole Mediterranean area as Italian.

At the same time, the government of Italy officially denied that she had any intentions against Greece. On June 10, 1940, the Italian Prime Minister, Signor Mussolini, in a speech to the Italian people in which he declared war against France and England, stated: "...I solemnly declare that Italy has no intention of dragging into the conflict [Second World War] other nations... Greece ...should take note of these words."¹⁶ A

¹⁵ Major-General I.S.O. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, p. 223.

¹⁶ Greek White Book, Doc. 77, p. 56.

month later Mussolini was "furious" with Greece¹⁷ and charged his Minister of Foreign Affairs to announce to Hitler that he intended to land on the Ionian Islands.

After the declaration of war was issued by Italy against England and France, in June, 1940, Prime Minister Metaxas assured Italy that Greece would continue to remain neutral as long as the war did not spread into the Balkans. As for the Italian charges against Greece that she was helping the British fleet, the Hellenic government informed Italy that "...not a single British war vessel has entered a Cretan port; not a single British warship of any description has ever been signaled within the range of visibility from the shore."¹⁸

On July 3, 1940, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs called upon the Greek representative in Rome to announce to him that he had proof that English warships were using Greek ports, and pointed out that an Italian submarine was attacked by an English plane forty nautical miles off Leukas, and that another Italian submarine was attacked off Zante. The Greek government denied all these charges, emphasizing the fact that "... there is not an air base on the Island of Leukas and that no military aircraft has ever touched at any of the Ionian Islands ... no

¹⁷ Galeazzo Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, p. 272.

¹⁸ Spies & Whistle Blowers, Doc. 20, p. 57. Strict Greek neutrality was proclaimed and preserved; on September 30, 1940, British planes made an emergency landing in Crete, and General Metaxas forbade local authorities to permit the planes to take off again; the airmen were interned." John A. Lukacs, The Great Powers and Eastern Europe, p. 244.

destroyer has called at any of the Ionian Islands."¹⁹

Now the Italian provocations became active. On July 12, 1940, three Italian planes bombed and machine gunned Orion, an auxiliary ship of the Royal Hellenic Navy and the destroyer Hydra which had gone to her rescue. These attacks took place inside Greek territorial waters. On July 30, Italian aircraft bombed two Greek destroyers, King George and Queen Olga, as well as two submarines. The Greek government protested these actions to the Italian government but received no answer.²⁰

On August 11, 1940, Mussolini openly advocated a "surprise" attack against Greece. The government issued instructions to the official Italian news agency "Stefani" to start "an agitation" about Ciamuria, a province of Epirus where a small minority of Albanians of Greek culture lived. Mussolini did not want to give time to the Greeks, for as Ciano said, "It is dangerous to give the Greeks time to prepare."²¹ On August 12, 1940, Mussolini in a conference with his military advisers set down the political and military lines for action against Greece. His military advisers wanted immediate action, but Mussolini (for general military reasons) was of the opinion that it should

¹⁹ On July 5, 1940, the Greek Minister in Rome assured the Italian government of Greek neutrality. These assurances were received by the Duce "incredulously" as a result of De Vecchi's reports. Galeazzo Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, p. 276.

²⁰ Ciano, speaking with the German Minister in Rome on October 19, 1940, made "... the usual comments on Greece's persistently unneutral attitude, which had caused Italy substantial naval losses." Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, p. 237.

²¹ Ciano, op. cit., p. 283.

be postponed until the end of September.

The Italian army was greatly increased during the summer of 1940, as can be seen from the following comments of Churchill:

"... a rapid increase in the Italian forces in Albania and a consequent menace to Greece."²² The Italian Official History states that on June 10, 1940, there were in Albania 70,290 men.²³

In accordance with their policy of aggression against Greece, the Italians started a propaganda campaign against "Greek crimes in Albania" through the news agency "Stefani." On August 11, this agency dispatched this famous report:

A deep impression has been produced on the Albanian population ...by a terrible political crime committed on the Greco-Albanian border.

The great Albanian patriot Dacut Hodja ...has been savagely murdered on Albanian territory... According to the latest information, the murderers were Greek agents who carried the head back into Greek territory and delivered it to the authorities, who had already set a 24 price on this Albanian patriot's head many years ago.

We shall see later who this so-called "patriot" was.²⁵ The Italian Embassy in Athens stated the facts a little differently. In a note addressed to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Embassy acknowledged that the murderers were Albanian subjects and that this "patriot" had taken refuge in Albania

²² Winston Churchill, Their Finest Hour, p. 434.

²³ L'Esercito Italiano dal I° tricolore al I° centenario (The Italian Army from the First Tricolored Flag to the First Centennial of the Italian Independence), p. 258.

²⁴ Greek White Book, Doc. 111, p. 77.

²⁵ "The charge was fabricated, but its significance was evident. The Italian-controlled Albanian newspapers began a campaign for the 'liberation' of the Ciamuria territory." John Lukacs, The Great Powers and Eastern Europe, p. 340.

twenty years earlier; also that the murder took place in Albanian territory and not on the Greco-Albanian territory. But who was this man, and why did he take refuge in Albania twenty years earlier? Originally, he was a Greek subject from the region of Epirus. He was a common bandit on whose head a price had been set. The latest sentence imposed on him in a series of nine trials was on October 25, 1925, at the Yannina Assize Court (Decision No. 23) where he was sentenced to death for brigandage. This fugitive was the man called by the Italians a "great patriot."

As a result of this intensified propaganda campaign the Italian intentions against Greece were an open subject all over Europe, but the climax had not yet been reached. As is customary in Greece, every year on August 15 on the Island of Tenos a religious festival is held honoring the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. To the Greek people this is an important occasion. Twenty to thirty thousand people attend this festival. The state honors the day by sending some warships and detachments of marines. On this day in 1940 the Italians sent a submarine that sank the Greek cruiser Helle which was giving ceremonial honors to the festival.²⁶ This was the official Greek account of the incident: "Yesterday morning at 8:30 one of the units of the fleet was torpedoed by a submarine of unknown nationality."²⁷ The Greek government, in its desire to preserve

²⁶ "On August 15, 1940, the Greek cruiser Helle was sunk by a submarine which was unidentified, but believed - rightly - to be Italian; the Italians also opened a violent press campaign against Greece." Sir Ernest Llewellyn Woodward, British Foreign Policy in the Second World War, p. 128.

²⁷ General Alexander Edipidis, Istoria, p. 8.

peace, ordered the controlled press to avoid publishing any information concerning the nationality of the submarine.²⁸

Meantime the Naval General Staff on August 17, 1940, conducted an examination of the recovered fragments of the torpedoes which had sunk the cruiser. Here is the conclusion of their report:

"... The above proves conclusively that the cruiser 'Helle' was sunk by Italian torpedoes fired from an Italian submarine."²⁹

The official Italian press bureau released a statement that the attack against the cruiser was an English "ruse." The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs records the episode as follows in his diaries: "As for me, I considered the intemperance of De Vecchi at the bottom of it. I confer with the Duce, who desires to settle this incident peacefully."³⁰ A few days later on

August 31, the leading Italian newspaper Giornale d' Italia stated: "And if (Greece) wishes in 1940 to recall the glorious memory of Thermopylae and its spears, we must again remind her

²⁸ The official Italian Navy history ignores the fact altogether, but taking into account the above statement by Ciano about De Vecchi's involvement and the fact that in Leros, one of the Dodecanese islands, there existed a great Italian naval base, we can be sure that the submarine was from the Italian base of Leros.

²⁹ According to Order Number 3165/427--15.8.1940 of the Ministry of the Navy, a committee of high officers of the Hellenic Royal Navy conducted an investigation of the fragments of the torpedoes that sank Helle. Article 8 of their report refers to the fact that the registration numbers of the torpedoes, as well as inscriptions in Italian, were found on the fragments; for instance: "UNIONE TIM.VERT.
(TIMONI VERTICALI), FORPETTA
I.T. 109 11529." Edipidis, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁰ Ciano, op. cit., p. 294.

that today war is waged and won with tanks, aircraft and heavy guns..."³¹

On September 19, 1940, in a conference with the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, Mussolini stated that, "The Greeks represent for Italy what the Norwegians represented for Germany... It is necessary for us to proceed with the liquidation of Greece..."³²

After the German occupation of the Rumanian oil fields Mussolini definitely decided to attack Greece.³³ His final decision was taken on October 12, 1940.³⁴ On October 14, 1940, in a meeting with his foreign minister, Ciano, he fixed the date of the attack for October 26. The final decision for the attack was taken on October 15. According to Churchill, Mussolini commented as follows: "The object of this meeting is to define the course of action -- in general terms -- which I have decided to initiate against Greece... I have laid down the date ... that is... 26th of this month."³⁵ Ciano, commenting about

31

Lukacs, op. cit., p. 342.

32

Churchill, op. cit., p. 522.

33

"Hitler had decided to send a military mission to Bucharest and to entrust the defense of the Rumanian oil wells to the German air force. These decisions impressed Mussolini unfavorably, for he saw in them an attempt by Hitler to reinforce his position in the Balkans, to the detriment of that of Italy. This was one of the reasons for the Duce's decision with regard to Greece." Luigi Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 272.

34

Ciano, op. cit., p. 300.

35

Churchill, op. cit., p. 532.

the same meeting, said: "A meeting with the Duce ...to discuss the Greek enterprise."³⁶ Mussolini himself outlined the plan of attack: first, the occupation of the Ionian Islands and the whole of Epirus; second, "the complete occupation of Greece, in order to put her out of action and to assure that in all circumstances she will remain in our political and economic sphere."³⁷

At the same time in the Italian General Staff there was a great disagreement about the future attack.³⁸ Chief of the Italian General Staff Marshal Pietro Badoglio expressed the idea that the Italians would not be able to carry this war from Albania into Greece.³⁹ On October 17, he visited Ciano and told him that the three heads of the General Staff were unanimously against any movement into Albania.⁴⁰ Also he spoke with Mussolini himself and threatened that he would resign if the Ital-

³⁶ Ciano, op. cit., p. 301.

³⁷ Churchill, op. cit., p. 532.

³⁸ "Marshal Badoglio comes to see me, and speaks very seriously about our action in Greece. The three heads of the General Staff have unanimously pronounced themselves against it..." Ciano, op. cit., p. 301.

³⁹ Mussolini was determined to proceed with his enterprise in Greece. On October 19, 1940, Il Duce, having in mind the disagreement with Badoglio, told Ciano, "I shall send in my resignation as an Italian if anyone objects to our fighting the Greeks." Ciano, op. cit., p. 300.

⁴⁰ On September 19, 1940, Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, Chief of Staff of the Italian Navy, in a memorandum to the Supreme Command of the Italian army stated "the absolute necessity of not dissipating our energies in other directions" (meaning to concentrate on Africa). Commander Marc A. Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, p. 33.

ians attacked Greece. Mussolini after this meeting said that he would go personally to Greece to witness the incredible shame of the Italians who were afraid of Greeks. On October 22, he set the exact day for the Italian attack -- October 28, 1940. Ciano with great clarity and cynicism describes the famous Italian ultimatum which he drew up on October 22 and which was to be handed to the Greek Prime Minister at two o'clock in the morning of the 28th of October. "Naturally it is a document that allows no way to Greece. Either she accepts occupation or she will be attacked."⁴¹ On the eve of the attack, there were numerous incidents on the Greco-Albanian border. The official agency "Stefani" charged that Greek armed companies had invaded the Albanian territory killing two Albanian soldiers and wounding three. The Greek military authorities on the frontier replied that no "incident" had occurred on the Albanian frontier. This was the military and the political situation on the eve of the Italian attack.⁴²

⁴¹ On October 18, Mackensen, German Minister in Rome, reported to the Wilhelmstrasse that Ciano had called the Governor of Albania and the head of the Italian armed forces to consult with them about the coming Italian attack against Greece. Francisco Jacomoni, the Italian Governor-General and Visconti Praska, Chief of the Italian armed forces there, agreed with Ciano "... for action against Greece, which should be carried out by the army from Albania, and to the extent that the Ionian Islands are to be occupied by the navy." Mackensen also reported the disagreement of Badoglio, but expressed the opinion that he would eventually be won over. Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 191, p. 323.

⁴² To German inquiries as to the Italian attitude in Greece, Ciano declared on October 19 that Italy reserved her future actions in that matter according to her interests. General Ritter von Pohl, liaison officer of the German army in Italy, reported to Berlin on October 23 that "Italy would launch military action against Greece within the next days." Ibid., Doc. 225, p. 383.

From the very beginning of their occupation of Albania, the Italians started preparing the country as an advance base for the future attack against Greece. They built military roads with a terminus on the Greek frontier. They constructed air as well as naval bases. An enormous army was maintained there despite the size of the country. We know from official Italian sources that on the eve of the attack against Greece there were 155,000 men, equipped with 3600 lorries and 21,000 quadrupeds.⁴³ Mussolini, speaking on September 19, 1940, said that 200,000 Italians were facing Greece on the Albanian frontier.

On August 22, from a report of the Greek Chief of Staff General Alexander Papagos, to his government, we learn that at this time on the Greco-Albanian frontier facing the Greeks were the following units of the Italian army:

1 -- the main part of the 131st Mechanized Division, and a group of heavy artillery composed of three batteries; 2 -- a cavalry force of 1,000 men stationed at the border town of Koritsa; 3 -- the whole of the 19th Division which had also moved toward the frontier town of Koritsa; and 4 -- the 53rd Division which had seven Infantry battalions and twelve batteries of light artillery. This Division was earlier stationed at the Tepeleni-Klisoura district but now moved toward the Greco-Albanian border.⁴⁴ (See map, Chapter V, page 30.)

On September 25, 1940, the Italian General Staff informed

⁴³ L'Esercito Italiano, p. 243.

⁴⁴ Greek White Book, Doc. 153, p. 90.

the German military attaché in Rome, that to the five Italian divisions already in Albania three more were added. There was also a strong Air Force. The Italian government on October 25 informed the Yugoslav Foreign Minister, Jovan Cincar-Marcovic, that the Italian troops in Albania were exclusively for use against Greece and that Yugoslavia had nothing to fear from them. In an interview with the German minister in Belgrade the Yugoslavian Minister expressed his fears of an upset in the Balkans should the Italians attack Greece. Finally, on October 27, Ciano made known to the German Chargé d' Affaires in Rome the contents of the Italian ultimatum that was to be delivered to Greece the next morning.⁴⁵

On October 21, 1940, the Greek Vice-Consul in Santa Quaranta (Albania) reported that the military forces previously stationed there had been moved toward the Greco-Albanian frontier. On this frontier there were also the Alpine Division and the Wolves of Tuscany Division. All of them took part in the first phase of the attack. The Italian General Staff had decided to attack Greece with three columns, of which the first two had a similar aim. They would attack in the Kalamas River sector along the coast of the Ionian Sea, their main objective being the capture of Preveza, a coastal city in the southern part of Epirus, some seventy-seven miles south of the Greek borders, which was an important naval and military base. Preveza was of great importance to the Greek army in Epirus because it

⁴⁵ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Doc. 242, p. 408.

was the main base of supplies; due to the lack of good transportation systems in the land, all the supplies and the reinforcements to the Greek army in Epirus had to be sent by sea to Preveza and from there they continued by truck as far as possible. From there the supplies proceeded on mule back and the men marched. Preveza could also be used by the Italian army as an advance base in their operations against the Greek mainland.

The capture of Preveza was not of as great importance as the second objective which had to be achieved by the third column. This was the main attack. The whole area of Epirus is isolated from Western and Southern Greece, by the Pindus Mountains, the highest in the Balkans. There are only two roads linking the two sections. The Italians planned this operation in the German "blitz-krieg" fashion. By this movement they wanted to advance through the Pindus Mountains into Thessaly and on to the Aegean Sea cutting off Southern Greece from Macedonia, isolating the troops in Epirus, cutting the Greek armies in the North off from the only railway that connects Northern with Southern Greece, as well as the only highway to the north. The Greek armies would be cut off from their main bases of supplies; therefore, the whole defense system of the country would collapse and the Greek armies would be obliged to surrender. This was a well-prepared "encircling maneuver," which as we shall see, was smashed by the Greek resistance. The third force which was mainly composed of the armored division "Centauro" had as its main purpose the capture of Yannina, the capital of Epirus, about forty-three miles from the Greco-

Albanian frontier and thirty-one miles from Preveza, and from there to advance southward, unite with the column which would advance along the coast to Preveza, build up a bridge head there, pushing them further into Greek territory toward the Gulf of Corinth to Athens. (See map, Chapter I, page 2.) The Italians were successful in the first of their plans, advancing about fifty miles into Greek territory along the coast, but they were cut up by the Greek Army in the Pindus Mountains, so that they had to retreat.

Churchill writes that Germany, knowing the weakness of Italy, did not like the adventure of attacking Greece, but "... accepted the decision of his ally."⁴⁶ On October 22, 1940, Mussolini sent a letter to Hitler announcing his plan of attacking Greece.⁴⁷ He did not make clear the date because he feared "... that once again an order might come to halt us."⁴⁸ When Hitler received the letter from Mussolini he was in France. He at once proposed a meeting "... to discuss the general political situation in Europe."⁴⁹ This took place October 28, a few hours after the Italians had already attacked Greece. Hitler approved

⁴⁶ Churchill, op. cit., p. 533.

⁴⁷ "Hitler was beside himself, ... Ribbentrop, 'his master's voice,' said to us at dinner... 'The Italians will never get anywhere against the Greeks... The Fuhrer intends at all costs to hold up this crazy scheme of the Duce's, so we are to go to Italy at once to talk to Mussolini personally.'" Paul Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter, p. 199.

⁴⁸ Ciano, op. cit., p. 303.

⁴⁹ Churchill, op. cit., p. 532.

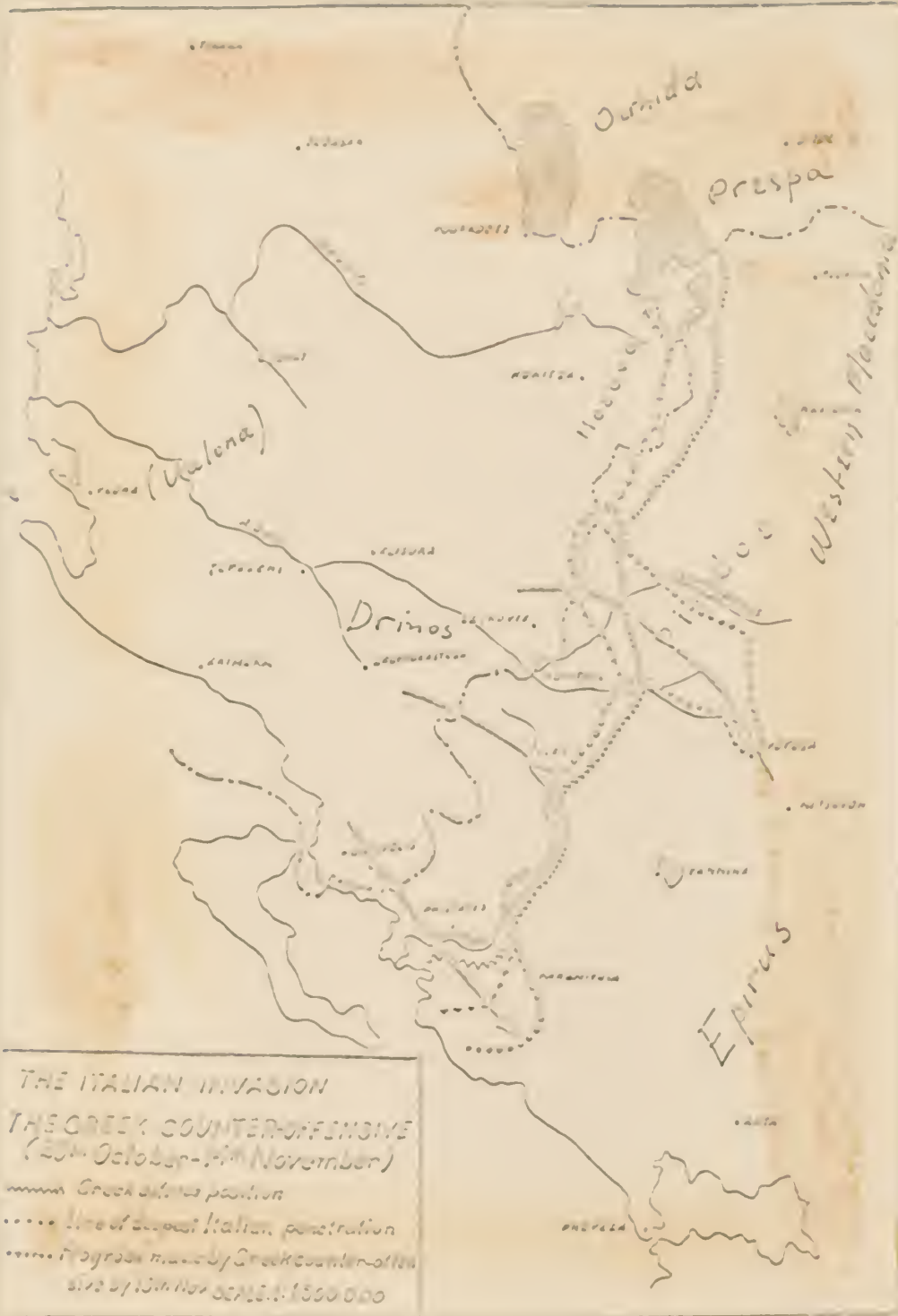
the Italian attack as is shown from the Ciano Diaries: "... at Florence the conference ... is of the greatest interest to us and proves that German solidarity has not failed us."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ciano, op. cit., p. 305.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE II

Fig. 2. A map of the Italian invasion of Greece, and the Greek Counter-Offensive (modified by author). General Alexander Papagos, The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941, p. 263.

PLATE II



THE ITALIAN INVASION
 THE GREEK COUNTER-OFFENSIVE
 (20th October - 15th November)

--- Greek defensive position
 line of deepest Italian penetration
 progress made by Greek counter-offensive by 15th Nov

SCALE: 1:500,000

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLE OF PINDUS AND THE GREEK DEFENSE

At 3:00 a.m., October 28, 1940, the Italian Minister to Greece, Emanuelo Grazzi, presented General Metaxas, the Prime Minister of Greece, with the ultimatum. It demanded that Greece allow Fascist occupation of certain strategic places on the mainland and on the islands. Furthermore, it stated that in case the Greek government did not accept these terms the Italian troops would start to move into the Greek territory within three hours. Metaxas reluctantly refused the ultimatum; thus, the Greco-Italian War started in the early hours of the 28th of October, 1940.

At 5:30 a.m. on the same morning, the first Italian troops crossed the Greco-Albanian frontier aiming eastward toward the Pindus Mountains. The first troops to invade Greece belonged to the Third Alpine Division.¹ The commander of the troops in Albania, General Viscordi Praska, decided to attack first on the Epirus front and later to drive into West Macedonia. The Italian forces facing the Greek army on the Epirus front were, according to Field Marshal Papagos, the following: in the Morovas-Koritsa sector, the 19th Infantry Division Venetsia, and the 49th Infantry Division reinforced with some tanks and field artillery; in the Leskoviki area, the Third Alpine Division Julia. In Argyrocastron, the 23rd Infantry Division Ferrara

¹ L'Esercito Italiano, p. 243.

and the 131st Armored Division Centauro. Along the Konitsopolis district, there was deployed the 51st Infantry Division Sienna; in reserve, the Italian army had two divisions in Elbasan and two more in Northern Albania.² (See map, page 31.)

The Greek forces in the Greco-Albanian frontier on the night of October 27, 1940, according to General Alexander Edipidis, Vice Chief of Staff of the Greek army during the Greco-Italian War, were the following: in the Florina-Kostoria area, the 4th Infantry Brigade, and the 11th Infantry Division reinforced with five infantry battalions, as well as some light and field artillery. These forces were under the over-all command of the Army of Western Macedonia. In the Epirus sector from Mount Smolikas to the Ionian Sea, the 8th Infantry Division was reinforced with the 3rd Infantry Brigade, which was composed of one regiment equipped with mountain artillery.

The prelude to the main assault was a barrage of field artillery and heavy mortars directed against the Greek military posts on the frontier and the main military roads leading to the border. In the Paramithia sector of the Epirus war theater, the attack was aimed toward Konitsopolis-Philippines and was undertaken by the 5th Infantry Division reinforced with grenadiers, some battalions of Albanians, Italian "Black Shirts," and the 6th Cavalry Regiment. In the same theater, in the Elaia-Kalamas sector, they attacked toward the Elaia-Yannina axis through the valley of the Kalamas River. The attack was carried

² Edipidis, op. cit., p. 149.

out by the 23rd Infantry Division, and the 131st Armored Division. In both sectors the weak Greek forces, according to the defense plan of the Greek General Staff, retreated. During the day of October 29, the Greek army continued to retreat under heavy fire toward the new defense line of Kalpaki, near Yannina.

In the early hours of October 30, the Italians continued their offensive toward the Elaia-Yannina axis. The Italian advance was checked before the defensive line of Elaia. A more complete story of the battle of the Elaia sector will be given later. In the Kalamas River and Paramithia sectors the situation was stationary during the day of October 30. The war communique of the Greek General Staff of October 31 speaks of light retreats of the frontier forces, according to the defense plan.³ The Greek army, despite the overwhelming Italian attacks, was able to hold the movements of the enemy columns. The Italians in their first reports acknowledged that things were not so good on the Albanian fronts. The Fascist government started blaming the leadership of the Italian army for "ill will." The Italian government and especially Mussolini were dissatisfied with the news from the front. As a result of the general dissatisfaction, Mussolini made changes in the General Staff. General Ubaldo Soddu took command of the army in Albania in the place of General Viscondi Praska, who was given the command of the army of Epirus.

The Greek headquarters, having in mind a possible Italian

³ Eleutheron Vema, November 1, 1940.

attack on the Epirus front, had organized the defense of the Elaia-Kalpaki-Kalamas line. This area covered all the roads from the North and Northwest approaching Yannina, capital of Epirus. The length of this defense line was about seventeen to nineteen miles and the depth about six to seven miles. Special attention had to be given to the organization of anti-tank ditches.

The defense of this line had to be entrusted to the 8th Infantry Division which was reinforced by the 3rd Infantry Brigade. A detachment of three infantry battalions with two squadrons of artillery was covering the Paramithia sector protecting the Southern route of the Kalamas River.

According to the plan of the General Staff, the 8th Division had complete freedom of action. It could fight either in the Kalamas-Elaia line or under heavy enemy pressure, could retreat further East.

The aim of this retiring movement was to cover the lines to Southern Greece, thus giving time for the mobilization of the Greek army. But the Commander of the 8th Division, having in mind that a retreat to the south of this line would leave Yannina and the whole of Epirus in the hands of the enemy, decided to fight this defensive action on the Elaia-Kalamas line. This Greek defensive line was powerful at the center, but the left was held with light forces. On the right, because of the Pindus Mountains, no strong forces were required.

The chief of the Italian army, General Praska, having decided to attack first in Epirus and later in the Macedonian

area (Northwest Macedonia), assigned the task of the Epirus operation to the Italian army of Ciamuria under the command of General Carlo Rossi. General Praska's main plan was to have the Italian infantry attack in the center of the Elaia-Kalamas sector, and the Centauro Armored Division to attack through the narrow valley of the Kalamas River, attempting also an "encircling maneuver" against the left wing of the Greek defense line. This attack would be helped by a similar maneuver against the right wing of the Greek line in the Pindus Mountains toward Metsovo.

On October 27, 1940, the Italian army of Ciamuria was arrayed against the Greek defense line of the Elaia-Kalamas sector as follows: the Ferrara division, composed of nine infantry battalions, one battalion of mortars, nine units of light artillery, and six units of field artillery; and the Centauro Armored Division and one regiment of Versaliers. Against the left of the Greek line was the Italian "Sienna" Infantry Division composed of nine battalions of infantry, nine light squadrons of artillery and one cavalry regiment. This division moved in the direction of the Filiates-Brisela line, having as its aim the crossing of the Kalamas River, and an enveloping movement against the Greek defense line in the Elaia-Kalamas area so as to take it from behind.

For the occupation of the coastal zone, a special force had been organized under General Francisco Rivolta. This was composed of two cavalry regiments and one of grenadiers. The coastal column with a flanking movement was able to strike

south to the Kalamas River, cross to the southern bank and establish a bridgehead position, fifty miles inside Greek territory, but the crossing of the Kalamas River by Sienna did not take place until November 7. The new commander of the Italian army, General Soddu, who succeeded Praska as commander of the Italian forces on the Albanian front, having in mind the failure of his attack on the Pindus sector, as well as the failure of the attack against the main Greek defense line in the Elaia-Kalamas sector, ordered his coastal column to stop the advance to await the coming of new reinforcements from Italy; furthermore, he ordered the organization of a new defense line.

Not only in the Paramithia sector (coastal zone) did the Italians take a defensive position, but on the whole front. One order of the Italian Division Ferrara (Register No. 331, November 8, 1940, time 15) said: "Until the arrival of new reinforcements, the Italian army will hold a defensive position."⁴ The line of defense of the Greek 8th Division had been unbroken.

Reconnaissance sent out by the 8th Division brought back the information that in the Paramithia, as well as in the Kalamas sectors, there was no contact with the enemy who occupied the North bank of the Kalamas River. After these reports, the 3th Division decided to attack the enemy on the whole front. For this purpose, the division ordered all units to be ready for an attack.

Two days after the Italian invasion of Greece, British

⁴ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 190.

forces landed on the Greek Island of Crete, established air bases, and took over the natural harbor of Suda, sheltered by the rocky promontory of Akrotiri.⁵ The first British forces on the island consisted of a battalion or so and a few air squadrons.⁶ In February, 1941, the British reinforced them with the 14th Infantry Brigade and about 2,000 marines.⁷

Crete stretches 160 miles from east to west, is from seven and one-half to thirty-five miles wide, and is shaped roughly like a bottle opener. The island not only forms a barrier between the Mediterranean and the Aegean Seas but lies strategically close to Asia and Africa. Hence its occupation by the British, as long as they could hold the island, were advantageously placed to isolate Italy's Dodecanese Islands and to stop Italian transports and ships destined for the armies in North Africa.⁸

Prime Minister Churchill, in a telegram to his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden, on October 29, 1940, said:

It seems of prime importance to hold the best airfield possible and a naval fueling base at Suda Bay. Successful defense of Crete is an invaluable aid to defense of Egypt. Loss of Crete to [the] Italians [would be a] grievous aggravation [of] all Mediterranean difficulties.

⁵ Playfair, op. cit., p. 228.

⁶ The second battalion of the York and Lancaster Regiments was sent to Crete on November 1, 1940. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 229.

⁷ Gavin Long, Greece, Crete and Syria, p. 203.

⁸ Ibid., p. 197.

⁹ Churchill, op. cit., p. 534.

British help to Greece consisted of some air squadrons and some anti-tank guns, the latter being sent to Crete. The British were not able, being pressed hard by the Italians in North Africa, to send sufficient air or land forces. On April 11, 1940, the British government sent some additional air squadrons, one Gladiator and two Blenheim. This was the only British help to Greece until the actual outbreak of the Greco-German War in 1941. The British Forces, as Eden admitted in a telegram to the Prime Minister, did not have any decisive influence on the war in Albania.

The battle on Kalpaki started on November 2, 1940.¹⁰ It was supported by strong armored forces, the entire Armored Division Centauro, and the Italian Air Force. On the same night, the Greek 8th Division, according to the defense plan, evacuated the area west of the Kalamas River. After the Greeks successfully checked the Italian attack in the Pindus Mountains, the High Command informed the 8th Division that its main mission now was the defense of the Elaia area.

The attempts to break through the Elaia defense area lasted until November 9 and all of them were unsuccessful. From November 9 to 13, the attempts of the Italians in the Elaia sector consisted mainly of actions of artillery and air force. The Greek forces during the period of November 11 until 13 reoccupied the abandoned first line of defense, which had been evacuated during the night of November 3.

¹⁰ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 170.

In Paramithia, the Italian army, after repairing the road from Konitsopolis to Philiates to enable trucks to move, crossed the Kalamas River on November 5 and began advancing southward into Epirus.¹¹ The Greek General Staff ordered a retreat of about thirty miles and the occupation of a new defense line.¹²

During the day of November 7, the advance continued in the Elaia sector. General Praska, in his account of the battle, writes that the fiery resistance of the Greek forces in the Elaia sector made the situation of the Italian army in the Epirus worse and worse as time passed. The Italians, according to General Karamitsos, commander of the 8th Division, no longer had any hope that they would be able to break the defense of the area of Kalpaki.

Now it was an established fact that the enemy plans had been liquidated by the resistance of the army of Epirus. There is not any doubt that without the battle of Epirus, which was fought under the pressure of numerous enemy forces, the situation in the Eastern front and in the Mediterranean would have been different.

The initial success of the Italians in Epirus was not exploited; the resolute Greek defense in the Elaia sector annulled Italian progress in Paramithia. By November 8, the Italian offensive had collapsed. The Greeks were quick to take advantage of their victories and carry out the mobilization and concentration of their armed forces.

¹¹ Papagos, op. cit., p. 266.

¹² Ibid., p. 166.

CHAPTER IV

THE BATTLE OF PINDUS AND THE GREEK OFFENSE

Simultaneously with the attack on the Epirus front, General Praska sent the Third Alpine Division, Julia, to attack the right flank of the Greek front at Pindus. Its goal was to encircle the Greek forces in Epirus as well as to cut the communications between Metsovo, Thessaly and Northwest Macedonia. (See maps, Chapter V.) The mountainous mass of the Pindus develops east of the high summit of Mount Tymphy, and extends Northeast connecting the Epirus with the Macedonian theater. The whole is drained by the Sarantaporos River in the northern part, and in the center by the Aoos River. Mount Smolikas, 8,749 feet high, divides the narrow valleys of these two rivers which were the main approaches used by the Italians for their advance into Greek soil.

The defense of the Pindus area had been assigned to the Pindus detachment under the high command of Colonel Konstantinos Davakis. It consisted of the 51st Reserve Infantry Regiment and one unit of mountain artillery. The Greek General Staff believed that the main enemy attack would come along the Koritsa-Florina-Salonika axis; therefore, the area of Pindus was held with light forces. The mission of the Pindus detachment then was of a defensive nature. The central sector of the Pindus front held the enemy attacks during October 28 and 29, but in the night of October 29 they collapsed. They were retreating

in a disorderly manner and on October 30, they lost contact with the enemy.¹

The Greek General Staff, realizing the gravity of the developments in the Epirus front, dispatched at once all available units to the Pindus war theater.

These are the characteristic points of the battle of Pindus: first, the success of the Italian army, due to their great numerical superiority, was nullified by measures taken by the Greek General Staff. Second, Italian General Praska, in his hurry to occupy Metsovo, made a great strategic mistake by not seizing Mount Smolikas and Mount Tambouri with enough forces to hold them. Third, General Basil Brachnos attacked Mount Tambouri and successfully occupied it while the Italian columns were moving south of it, enabling the Greek cavalry brigade to occupy the Italian defense area of Samarina, thus cutting off communications of the 8th Italian Alpine Regiment.

Finally, there was the defensive action of the 8th Greek Infantry Company during the day of November 3. This gave time to the coming reinforcements, the cavalry division and other units, to check the attack of the Italian Alpine Division and to force it to retreat toward the city of Konitsa.

With the successful cooperation of all units which undertook the attack in the Pindus area, the Greek forces decimated the attacking enemy force. They captured the entire Alpine Division. On November 4, the Italians had thrown into the battle

¹ Papagos, op. cit., p. 240.

the Bari Infantry Division which had been transported hurriedly from Italy.² The retreating Italian forces had established a new line of defense in the Konitsa area. By November 8, the Greek forces had obliged the enemy to evacuate the whole Pindus area. The enemy now held the hills in the east, northeast and north of Konitsa.

From November 8, 1940, to November 13, 1940, the Greek offensive was steady and by noon on the 13th, the Greek forces in the Pindus sector were on the Albanian Greek frontier line. A new Greek attack against Konitsa started on November 13. The enemy made a stubborn defense; however, on November 16, the Italians evacuated Konitsa, after burning it, leaving great quantities of supplies and war materiel in the hands of the victors.

As we have seen, the supplies of the Greek army in Pindus were poor or nonexistent. There were no roads by which the army could be supplied; also, the Italians during their stay in the area had taken away all available resources.³

Due to the critical situation, the Greek General Staff had given specific orders to all units to move into the Pindus

² This division was destined for a landing operation against Corfu. However, "... the units assigned to the landing at Corfu moved out on the night of 31 October, but received orders the next day to land all the troops at Valona as soon as possible and to cancel the Corfu landing. It was necessary to send these troops immediately to the front to plug the dangerous holes that had been opened in the Italian line." Commander Marc A. Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, p. 42.

³ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 261.

front "even without supplies."⁴ The Commander of the corps made an appeal to the civilian population of the Pindus area to help the fighting "Fatherland." But there was no need for such appeal. The inhabitants of Pindus came with great enthusiasm to the aid of the Greek army. Women, old men, and children, loaded with ammunition and supplies, climbed the Pindus Mountains (6560 - 8200 feet high) to supply the fighting forces. Their lives and their property were at the disposal of Greece.⁵ The Pindus women hauled the cannon with ropes, took on their shoulders the bombs, brought arms, blankets, bread and ammunition to the army. In the Battle of Pindus the inhabitants of the Pindus region fought side by side with the army.

After the successful Greek resistance and counterattack in the Epirus as well as on the Pindus fronts, Greek General Headquarters decided to undertake a general attack against the Italian army on the whole front.⁶ In accordance with this policy, the Army of Western Macedonia was ordered to attack the mountainous area of Morovas and the strategic city of Koritsa. After this, they were to close all the roads from north, west and northwest into Koritsa. In the southern tip of the front (western Macedonian sector) the army of Western Macedonia was to occupy the strategic Koritsa-Leskoviki road. In the meantime, the Italian Chief of Staff General Soddu, attempted to

⁴ Kathimerini, November 12, 1940.

⁵ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 264.

⁶ Papagos, op. cit., p. 273.

gain time by a defensive struggle until the arrival of new reinforcements from Italy.

Mount Morovas, with the northern Mount Ivan, belongs to the great Pindus Mountain Range. Morovas has a length of eighteen miles, and forms a barrier covering the city and the plateau of Koritsa. There are only two ways to Koritsa. One goes north through the valley which is located between Morovas and Ivan; the other passes northwest through the Valley of the Darde. Through these two valleys pass the roads to Koritsa from Florina.

The whole area had been fortified by the Italians with semi-permanent fortifications. For the defense of the area, the Italians had the 3rd Corps of the army consisting of the 49th Parma Infantry Division, the 29th Piamonde Infantry Division, and the 19th Venetsia Infantry Division with one hundred and twenty field guns in support. During the battle, the 3rd Army Corps was reinforced by the 53rd Aretzo Infantry Division and the 2nd Triestina Infantry Division.

Facing the Italian forces was the 3rd Greek Army Corps. It had three infantry divisions, the 9th, 10th and 15th. Now for the first time since the war began, the Greek forces were supported by artillery in adequate numbers.

The whole front had been divided into two parts. The 3rd Army Corps held the northern sector with the 15th, the 13th, and the 9th Divisions. "K" Corps held the southern sector with the 10th and 11th divisions.

The Greek forces attacked on the whole front from Lake

Prespa to Mount Grammos. The attack was directed against the Morovas-Ivan area. The main Greek attack was organized against the southern part of the area where the enemy could not use his armored forces, due to the mountainous terrain. In the northern part of the front the Greek forces were to exercise great pressure on the enemy, holding down as many Italian forces as they could. Greek headquarters, recognizing the fact that the army lacked any armored divisions and anti-tank guns, tried to avoid any direct attack against the valley of Tsagoni and Darde.⁷

The attack started in the morning of November 14, 1940. The 15th Division, after a three and a half hour struggle, was able to break the Italian defense line. Mount Ivan was by now isolated. In the southern sector, the Greek forces seized the supply lines of the enemy. Meanwhile, in the southern part of the Darde Valley the attack was successful, and the Greek forces advanced along the high ridge of Mount Morovas.

Thus ended the Battle of Pindus, with the complete annihilation of the attacking Italian division. The grave danger Greece had faced was overcome.

At 5:45 on the afternoon of November 22, 1940, the Greek forces belonging to the 9th Division liberated the city of Koritsa, the base of the Italian attack against Greece. Fifteen hundred Italians were taken prisoner, along with a great amount of war materiel. During the battle of Koritsa, which had lasted nine days, the Greek army had fought against a

⁷ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 322.

superior Italian force. Although the Italians were supported by a large air force, and had the advantage of a terrain favorable to defense, and although it was fortified with permanent installations, they were forced back.⁸ The loss of Koritsa was not an ordinary failure.⁹ The city was the center of the Italian campaign in the north.¹⁰

During the last phase of the battle the Italian commander decided to retreat from Koritsa.¹¹ The Italians made every possible effort to hold the city. Mussolini telegraphed General Soddu to reconsider his previously announced decision to abandon Koritsa, but it was too late. The Greek attack swept back the weak Italian defense, and General Soddu had to retreat.¹²

⁸ "... The British Military Attaché described the affair as a major victory... He believes that the Italians have thrown nearly the whole of their Albanian Army into the effort to hold the line, now broken at its most important point, and that withdrawal will be difficult." Foreign Relations of the United States, 1940, p. 563.

⁹ London Daily Mail, November 25, 1940.

¹⁰ New York Times, November 25, 1940.

¹¹ Concerning the impression of the Greek victories abroad, Matthews, American Chargé d'Affairs in Vichy, France, reported to his government on November 29, 1940: "Unoccupied France is indulging in many chuckles at a sign which has been posted on the Franco-Italian frontier at Mentone reading as follows: 'Notice to the Greeks: This is the French frontier'.... the Italians have officially 'protested' to the French government." Foreign Relations of the United States, 1940, p. 567.

¹² "The enemy, after a heroic resistance, occupied the line of Lake Ochrida-Tepeleni-Klisoura that permitted the shortening of the front and the utilization to the utmost of the positions." L'Esertito Italiano, p. 245.

In the last phase of the struggle in the Morova-Ivan region, the commander of the Third Italian Army was not able to stabilize a defense line on the Koritsa plateau. General Soddu, being hard-pressed by the advancing Greek forces, retreated in disorder toward Ochrida and Elbasan, as well as Klisura. This, for the time, would be the new Italian defense line. It stretched from northeast to northwest as follows: the 9th Army, under General Berchelino in the Pogradets-Kamia-Ostrobista front, was composed of six infantry divisions. The 2nd Italian Army, under General Carlo Geloso on the Epirus front, faced the Greek Army Corps A and B. The 2nd Army had, in addition to the veteran Ferrara, Julia, Siena, and Centauro divisions, three new ones, the 5th Alpine Division Pusteria, the 37th Infantry Division Modena, and the Infantry Division Piemonte, facing the Greek Army Corps B. Each of these infantry divisions was composed of three regiments. In addition, they had Bersalier's regiments and battalions of machine guns. The Italian army under this arrangement was far superior numerically and in fire power to the Greek forces.

After the fall of Koritsa, the Greek General Staff defined the objective of the new offensive as the occupation and security of the mountain masses from the northwest to the northeast of Argyrocastron.¹³ With this strategic plan in mind, the missions of the A and B Army Corps and of the Army of West Macedonia, under the direct command of Chief of the Army Field Marshal

¹³ General Alexander Papagos, The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941, p. 281.

Alexander Papagos, were as follows: with the Army of West Macedonia composed of the 3rd Army Corps of the 9th, 15, and 18th Infantry Divisions and the group "K" composed of only the 10th Infantry Division, they should secure the Koritsa Plateau from any attack from either north or west. At the same time, they should attempt to penetrate as much as possible toward the north and west. This was calculated to exercise a great degree of pressure on the enemy, and to absorb a great part of his power, thus relieving the other large Greek units.

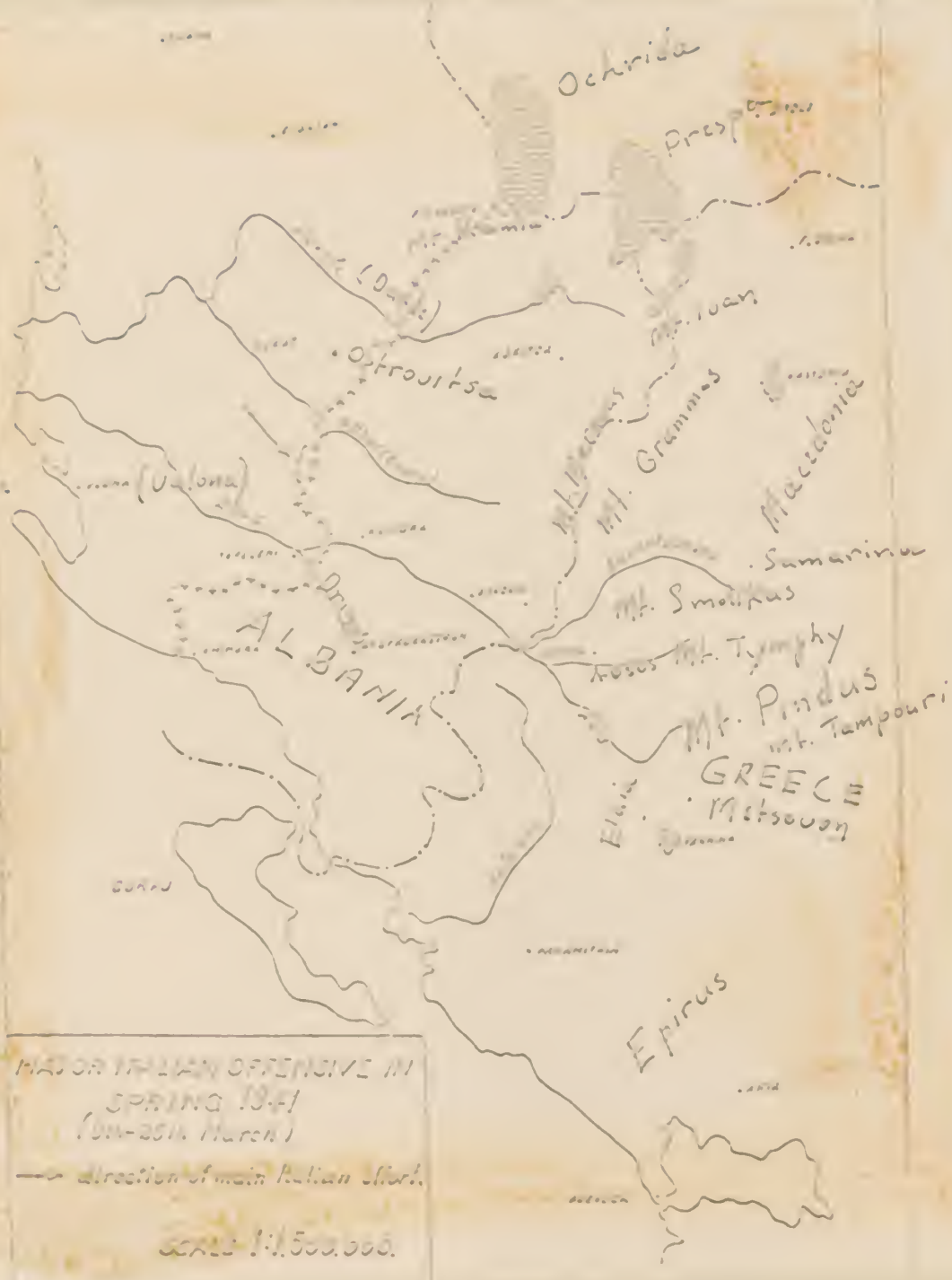
The B Corps of the Greek army, composed of the 1st and 11th Infantry Division, of the 5th Infantry Brigade, and of one cavalry brigade had the center of the attacking line. It would advance toward Leskoviki Berat through the valleys of the Aoos and Aosos Rivers. The right of the B Army Corps would cooperate with the army of West Macedonia, and its left wing would cooperate with the right flank of the A Army Corps. The left wing of the attacking line was held by the A Army Corps, which was composed of the 2nd, 3rd, and 8th Infantry Divisions, the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, and an independent cavalry division. It would advance toward the Elaia-Argyrocastron-Tepeleni-Aulon line. At the disposition of the Chief of Staff, there remained the 3rd Infantry Division, the 5th Infantry Division, and the 16th Infantry Brigade.¹⁴

¹⁴ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 309.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE III

Fig. 3. A map of the major Italian Offensive in Spring, 1941. General Alexander Papagos, The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941, p. 301.

PLATE III



MAJOR ITALIAN OFFENSIVE IN
 SPRING 1941
 (20th-25th March)

— direction of main Italian attack.

SCALE 1:1,500,000.

CHAPTER V

THE ITALIAN SPRING ATTACK

The Greek victories on the Albanian front came as a complete surprise to the Italians. Mussolini, despite the warnings from the Italian Chiefs of Staff, thought that the Greek adventure would be a "military promenade" for his army; no serious resistance was expected, as can be seen from a dialog between Mussolini and General Visconti Praska. Mussolini asked, "What do you know about the morale of the Greek army?" Praska replied, "They don't like to fight. We've planned our operation so as to impress them with the fact that we can crush them within the space of a few days."¹

After the collapse of Koritsa, Francisco Jacomoni, Commander of the Italian forces in Albania, reported that the situation at the front was far more desperate than the Italian government had thought. Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Supreme Commander of the Italian army, asked for four months before launching a new offensive. Mussolini began to think seriously about dismissing Badoglio and the rest of the leaders of his army. He actually studied the Annuario, an official publication listing the officers of the Italian army, in order to find substitutes for Badoglio and Soddu. Badoglio resigned his post on November 26, 1940. A few days earlier Cesare Di Vecchi, Italian High Commissioner for the Dodecanese Islands and one of the most active

¹ Stavrianos, op. cit., p. 43.

promoters of the war, was forced to resign.² At the Council of Ministers on November 30, 1940, the Duce, describing the crisis in Albania, said, "The situation is serious; it might even become tragic."³

With the withdrawal of the Italian army from Argyrocastron, the loss of Pogradets, and with the breaking of the Italian lines in the Pogradets' sector, the Italian army, according to General Ugo Cavallero, was in the same position as it was in Caporetto in World War I, where the Italians suffered a severe defeat by the German-Austrian army.⁴

General Soddu telegraphed the Italian War Ministry in the early hours of December 4 that the Italians had lost Pogradets, and that the Greeks had broken through their lines. He thought that military action had become impossible and the situation must be settled through political intervention. Soddu also thought that only an intervention by the Germans against the Greek flank could save the military situation.⁵ This telegraphic report was submitted to Mussolini in the early morning hours

² Ciano, op. cit., p. 311.

³ Ibid., p. 319.

⁴ "... Italian losses are described as very heavy... The High Command now considers that 4 to 5 months will be required for the successful conclusion of the campaign." Foreign Relations of the United States, 1940, Vol. III, p. 568.

⁵ Mussolini told Ciano on November 4, 1940, "There is nothing else to do. This is grotesque and absurd, but it is a fact. We have to ask for a truce through Hitler." Ciano, op. cit., p. 318. In fact, an offer was made by the Germans as it is reported by the American Charge in Berlin, but was rejected by the Greeks. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1940, p. 572.

of December 6, 1940. Mussolini was inclined to ask for a truce through Hitler. The members of his cabinet and especially the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ciano, vigorously rejected this idea.⁶ Instead, they sent General Cavallero, a candidate to succeed Badoglio, to the front with complete freedom of action to take any measures he thought necessary. He was given ten minutes to leave for the front. Cavallero returned on December 7 to report that the situation was indeed critical, but there could be a solution.⁷ He was of the opinion that the Italian lines could be stabilized. After the withdrawal of the Italian army from Klisura and Tepeleni, the Duce sent a letter to Cavallero with an order to the troops to die at their posts rather than to retreat.⁸

On December 19, 1940, the right flank of the Italian army was broken, and the Siena Infantry Division was crushed. There was imminent danger of losing Valona. General Cavallero's first action was the reinforcement of his army. By the time of the spring attack, he was able to build up a force consisting of twenty-five infantry divisions, one armored division, twenty-seven Black Shirt battalions, and five battalions of Albanians. With these forces, he attempted to hold the Straits of Klisura and the Port of Valona.

⁶ "I would rather put a bullet through my head than telephone Ribbentrop." Ciano, op. cit., p. 318.

⁷ Count Ugo Cavallero, Commando Supremo Diario (Supreme Command Diary), p. 210.

⁸ "More than an order from me; ... it is an order from our country." Ciano, op. cit., p. 324.

From the very beginning of the Italian failures in Albania, Mussolini was anxious and concerned about the German intentions in relation to Greece.⁹ Mussolini wanted Italy to bring Greece to her knees, without any German help.¹⁰ In a letter to Hitler on November 22, 1940, Mussolini explained the Italian failures in Albania as the result of bad weather and of Bulgarian neutrality. These factors had enabled Greece to withdraw all her forces from the Greco-Bulgarian frontiers. On the 16th of November, the Italian Chief of Staff, General Badoglio, had a conference with Marshal Wilhelm von Kietel in Innsbruck, Austria. On the 18th of the same month, Ciano met in Obersalzberg with Hitler and Joachim von Ribbentrop. In all of these meetings, it was made clear that the Germans were preparing their own attack against Greece, because of the failure of the Italians. No wonder the Italians worried. They were afraid that the Germans would attack Greece without waiting for them; then the whole world would know and history would record that Italy was unable to defeat Greece without the aid of her Axis partner. Having all this in mind, Mussolini wrote on November 22, 1940, to Hitler that Italy would accept any change in Balkan affairs asked by the German leaders after an Italian victory in Albania.¹¹

⁹ "I believe that Mussolini will raise strong objections, at least he will refuse all military help in the matter before he has taken his revenge on the Greeks." Ciano, op. cit., p. 313.

¹⁰ Von Hassell recorded in his diary on February 3, 1941: "Mussolini rejected help in Albania." Ulrich Von Hassell, Von Hassell Diaries, p. 166.

¹¹ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 383, p. 671.

The situation in the Albanian war theater was critical and acute. The important objective was to raise the morale of the Italian troops; for that purpose there was need for a man with "iron nerves and barbaric determination."¹² Mussolini, putting aside his pride and prestige, asked the Germans, through his Ambassador in Berlin, Dinno Alfieri, for a quick movement into the Balkans to relieve the hard-pressed Italian army. On December 8, 1940, Alfieri was called to a personal meeting with the Fuhrer, who proposed and insisted upon a personal meeting with the Duce on the tenth of the same month. On the same night, Mussolini refused the Fuhrer's invitation. According to Alfieri, "Mussolini could not leave Rome at this moment ... Current important and comprehensive military operations made it inadvisable for the Duce to leave Italy at the present."¹³

On December 31, 1940, Hitler wrote a personal letter to Mussolini again urging a direct meeting. "I can understand, Duce, that you have little time, now, and in particular that you do not like to leave Rome ... I am at your disposal at any time, Duce..."¹⁴ Again Mussolini refused. Ciano was of the opinion that "He [Mussolini] does not like to meet Hitler, burdened by these numerous failures, until they have been at least in part redressed."¹⁵ The negative answers by Mussolini can be

¹² Ibid., Doc. 477, p. 822.

¹³ Dinno Alfieri, Due Dittatori di Fronte (The Two Dictators), p. 108.

¹⁴ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI. Doc. 586, p. 994.

¹⁵ Ciano, op. cit., p. 333.

easily explained. He did not want to hear the German rebukes for his miserable failure in Albania.¹⁶ Especially, he did not want to receive direct German help. Alfieri now asked Ribbentrop that the German army, which at that time was in Rumania, make a decoy movement toward the Bulgarian frontiers in order that the Greeks might transfer some of their troops from Albania to the Greco-Bulgarian border.¹⁷ Ribbentrop refused to consider such action.

However, the military situation forced Mussolini to agree to a conference with Hitler on January 18, 1941, in Salzburg. The Germans agreed to send an armored division into Libya, and one mountain division or perhaps a whole army corps into Albania. The Italians gratefully accepted the German proposition concerning Libya, but they rejected the offer of help in Albania.¹⁸ Then the Italians presented plans for a great attack against Greece by which they hoped to smash all Greek resistance. Hitler, in private talks with Mussolini, consented to this plan on condition that the attack begin within the following thirty

¹⁶ Hitler, in a letter to Mussolini on December 31, 1940, notes that "... It is only necessary, Duce, that your front in Albania be consolidated." Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 586, p. 992.

¹⁷ "Another possibility of lessening this pressure ... by means of a 'journalistic indiscretion' to start a rumor abroad that Germany was concentrating rather large numbers of troops in Rumania." Ibid., Doc.477, p. 820.

¹⁸ "The Italians were not enthusiastic about this offer (a strong German detachment for Albania) and succeeded in getting the proposed force whittled down to one mountain division by stressing the difficulty of supplying a German force..." Playfair, op. cit., p. 337.

days. From that very day the Duce devoted himself to the preparation of this offensive. Ten new Italian divisions were transferred to Albania, increasing the number there to twenty-five. Airplanes, fighters and bombers alike, were removed from the other fronts to reinforce the already powerful Italian air force in Albania. Thousands of trucks and hundreds of guns came day and night into Albania to give power to the Italian army. On December 4, speaking to his Foreign Minister Ciano, Mussolini said: "The human material I have to work with is useless, worthless."¹⁹ About the middle of January, the Vice Chief of the Italian General Staff, General Giovanni Armellini, speaking about the new Greek attack in Albania against Tepeleni and about the Italian retreat, said: "It was something unbelievable. We are in a moral crisis."²⁰

As soon as Mussolini came back from Germany, he issued an order by which all the Ministers were sent to fight in Albania in order to lift the morale of the Italian army. By the end of February there had gone to Albania most Cabinet Ministers, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ciano, who was the leader of a squadron of fighters.²¹

At the end of February, 1941, everything was ready for the

¹⁹ Ciano, op. cit., p. 319.

²⁰ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 501.

²¹ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 731, p. 1225.

launching of the great Italian attack.²² This attack was to be directed personally by Mussolini. Mussolini left Rome on the morning of March 2 in his private airplane, and at 10:15 a.m. he arrived in Tirana. General Cavallero received him there, together with the Italian Viceroy in Albania, General Giacconi, and General Ercole Ronco. During his stay in Albania, and until the launching of the attack on March 9, Mussolini visited all the Italian units on the front; he spoke to the officers and to the plain soldiers in an attempt to elevate their morale. Finally, Mussolini thought that everything was ready and he gave the order for the attack. On the night of March 8, Mussolini left for an advanced observation post, from which he could not only observe the operation but also personally direct it.

The Italian attack started at 6:30 in the morning, March 9, 1941, after a great artillery preparation.²³ After a week of bitter fighting, it was clear that the offensive had failed.

In a conference with the commanders of the major units, Mussolini was told that the morale of the army was low. A suggestion was made for the postponement of the offensive; at Mussolini's insistence, however, the operation was not delayed, but its objectives were now the reoccupation of Klisura and the defense of Tepeleni. The Italian army was forced by the unex-

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The equivalent of the twenty-eight divisions were assembled in Albania supported by 26 bombers and 105 fighters, and in addition, working from bases in Italy 134 bombers and 59 fighters. The Greek army in Albania consisted of 14 divisions. There was not any Greek Air Force. Playfair, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 75.

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Papagos, op. cit., p. 300.

pectedly stubborn defense to alter its plans. From March 15 to March 18 there was no major activity along the whole front; the only action was sporadic artillery fire. The last attempt was made on the morning of March 25, 1941.²⁴ The significance of the Italian spring attack is the fact that its failure definitely made necessary the German intervention in the Balkans, not in small scale collaboration with the Italians, but as a major German operation, which required a minimum of thirty German divisions.

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The Germans commented as follows on the Italian operation: "During the last few days the Italians wanted to attack in Albania in the presence of Mussolini, in order to achieve a Vittorio Veneto [Great Victory] ... but they were stopped again." Von Hassell, op. cit., p. 175.

CHAPTER VI

GERMAN PREPARATIONS FOR THE OPERATIONS AGAINST GREECE -- ANGLO-GREEK NEGOTIATIONS

On November 12, 1940, Hitler issued a directive for the preparation of the German military machine for operations against Greece.¹ The above-named order entitled "Operation Balkans" contained the plans for the German campaign in Greece. The German General Staff was instructed to take all necessary preliminary measures to secure the occupation of mainland Greece north of the Aegean.²

The German army, in case of need, would come down through Bulgarian soil. In order to be able to face all eventualities and also to isolate Turkey, there was need of an army group of a basic power of ten divisions. In order to eliminate all possible waste of time, all necessary measures should be taken for the increase of the German military mission in Rumania. November 20, 1940, Hitler wrote Mussolini presenting a picture of the whole situation.³ This is a valuable document for an evaluation of the whole German-Italian conspiracy against the Balkans. In this letter, Hitler refers to the fact that the Italian defeats in Albania and other areas had serious political and military consequences, political because nations like Serbia and Turkey, observing the Italian defeats in Al-

¹ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 323, p. 530.

² Ibid., Doc. 323, p. 530.

³ Ibid., Doc. 369, p. 639.

bania, would resist Axis overtures for alliance. The military consequences would be far more serious. England was gaining certain air bases which would enable her to hit not only the oil wells of Ploesti, Rumania, but also the harbors of South Italy and Albania. All southern Italy, as well as the whole of Albania, was now under the threat of the British bombers. The Germans, continued the letter, had firmly decided not to let the English establish a new front in Macedonia.

It was necessary that the whole situation be clear by the end of the winter of 1940-41. For that purpose, Russian attention had to be directed toward the East and out of the Balkans; Hungary would be forced to allow the passing of great German forces over her soil; Rumania was to agree to an increase of German forces; an understanding with Turkey was necessary in order to neutralize the Turkish pressure on Bulgaria; Yugoslavia had to be persuaded to abandon her hostile attitude toward the Axis, and to collaborate with the Axis for the elimination of the problem of the Greeks.

After all this preparation had taken place, Hitler issued his order of December 13, 1940. The order was entitled: "Direction No. 20: Operation Marita." Top secret, it was dispatched to only twelve persons.⁴

Roughly, the contents of the order were as given in the following paragraph: On account of the dangerous situation in Albania, it was of vital importance, with the improvement of the

⁴ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 511, p. 867.

weather in March, that German Armed Forces occupy the area of Macedonia and Thrace, by way of Bulgaria, and, depending upon the circumstances, it might be necessary that they occupy the whole of Greece. For the concentration of this power in Rumania, there were needed: the 15th Armored Division, which would soon arrive there; a force of seven divisions, with engineer units, which would assist the rest of the army in the crossing of the Danube; preparation, already taking place, for a timely concentration of the remaining part of the forces required for Operation Marita, making a total of twenty-four divisions. The objective of the operation was the occupation of the Aegean Coast and of Thessalonika. There was a possibility that the occupation of Thessaly and the Corinth Canal would be necessary. The protection of the flanks from a possible Turkish movement would be assigned to the Bulgarian forces, assisted by Germans. It was not yet certain whether the Bulgarian army would take an active role in the operation. This plan closed with the following sentence, with the underlining by the Fuhrer himself: "After operation Marita is carried out, it is the intention to withdraw the mass of the units employed in it, for further use."⁵ Later, we shall see what mission Hitler had in mind. Hitler's directives prove very interesting things, and especially that Germany had been obliged by the Greek resistance of the Italians to send against Greece not only the one mountain division and

⁵ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 511, p. 868.

the one airborne that he had mentioned to Mussolini in Florence in October, 1940, but the colossal force of twenty-four divisions which would be added to the twenty Italian divisions already fighting on the Albanian front. The operation was to begin in March "after favorable weather conditions set in."⁶

The High Commander of the German forces in the Balkans was Field Marshal Wilhelm von List. This army started moving toward the Greco-Bulgarian frontier in January, 1941; General Paul Ludwig von Kleist's armored group was to participate and to be the spearhead of the German offensive. This group was the one which had crushed Poland in September, 1940, and the same one which in May, 1940, smashed the Allied line in Belgium and northern France, resulting in the tragedy of Dunkirk. One month later it broke the second line of defense of the French army, the so-called Weygand line.

In the diplomatic field, the Germans were able to win over the Rumanians who were under the government of the Fascist regime of Jon Antonesku, of whom Hitler said, "I believe that we have found in him a man at the head of the Rumanian government who is firmly resolved to carry out our important demands here."⁷ Bulgaria showed less good will toward the Axis plans, or rather we can say she was hesitating until the beginning of 1941. There were two main reasons for the Bulgarian hesitation: 1- the Greek victories had produced a great impression on the

⁶ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 511, p. 867.

⁷ Ibid., Doc. 19, p. 25.

Bulgarians; 2- there were signs that Soviet Russia, despite her alliance with Germany, still showed a great interest in the Balkan area and was not favorable to German penetration into Bulgaria. Hitler wrote Mussolini on December 31, 1940, that Bulgaria was not willing to join the Axis,⁸ but the Bulgarian attitude toward Germany radically changed after January 1, 1941. On January 1, 1941, Bogdan Philov, Premier of Bulgaria, was called to Germany by the Fuhrer. There the Germans proposed that Bulgarians become members of the Triple Alliance. In return, Germany promised Bulgaria the Aegean coastline and the southern portion of Yugoslavia which Bulgaria had long coveted.⁹ On January 7, King Boris of Bulgaria gave his consent to the participation of Bulgaria in the Triple Alliance. Only some minor details were left, concerning the extent of the area which would be given to Bulgaria, and the nature of Bulgarian military contribution in the operations against Greece.

The military negotiations in Bucharest between the Germans and the Bulgarians under von List's chairmanship concluded on January 30, 1940. It was agreed the Bulgarians would sign the Triple Alliance Treaty and accept the military terms proposed by the Germans. This agreement between the Germans and the Bulgarian representatives was ratified by a special Council of the Ministers of the Bulgarian government called on the same

⁸ "Bulgaria, too, has shown itself to be disinclined to accede to the tripartite pact." Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 586, p. 992.

⁹ Derek Patmore, Balkan Correspondent, p. 281.

day. On March 1, 1941, the Bulgarian representatives signed in the palace of Belventere in Vienna the treaty by which Bulgaria became a member of the Triple Alliance. In the morning of the same day the German army started crossing the Danube into the Bulgarian territory.

The political and diplomatic preparation of the German attack against Greece did not end with the inclusion of Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary in the Axis. There remained two more countries, Yugoslavia and Turkey, which could be very dangerous to the flanks of the German forces. A neutral Turkey was favored by Germany. The German Foreign Office was completely successful in this respect also for on February 17, 1941, Bulgaria and Turkey signed a non-aggression pact in which Turkey agreed to remain neutral even when Bulgaria entered the war on the side of the Axis.¹⁰

Yugoslavia was the only country in the Balkans which, from the German point of view, was doubtful. On November 11, 1940, the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, Dragiza Cvetkovic, sent Danilo Gregorovic,¹¹ a Yugoslavian journalist with pro-Axis links, on an official mission to Berlin. Gregorovic proposed the possible entrance of Yugoslavia into the Triple Alliance if the Germans would cede to the Yugoslavs Salonika and the area around

¹⁰ "The Turkish-Bulgarian declaration of friendship and non-aggression was signed on February 17, 1941." Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 714, p. 1204.

¹¹ Editor of the pro-German newspaper Breme.

it.¹²

During these days the Germans were busy with their talks with Molotov. Gregorovic could not see von Ribbentrop, so he had a conference with the director of the German Foreign Office, Dr. Paul Schmidt, who assured Gregorovic that the German inclinations toward the Yugoslavian claims were the best, and that he would call him back to Berlin as soon as possible. In the first days of February, von Ribbentrop being anxious to finish negotiations with Yugoslavia called the Prime Minister of that country to Berlin to discuss the whole matter with Hitler.¹³ Cvetkovic, accompanied by Marcovich, arrived in Berlin on February 12, 1941. There, in the negotiations that followed, the Yugoslavians proposed a Balkan Alliance in which Yugoslavia, Turkey and Bulgaria would unite. This Alliance should persuade Greece to capitulate and become a satellite of the Axis. The Germans did not even want to discuss it, so the Yugoslavian officials returned without obtaining any results. After the Bulgarians became members of the Triple Alliance, the Yugoslavian Prince-Regent Paul, a pro-Fascist, called a special "Council of the Crown" in his palace in Belgrade.¹⁴ In this

¹² "In the background, of course, as he hinted time and again, the question of Salonika (Thessalonika) becomes very large." Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 324, p. 533.

¹³ Ibid., Doc. 20, p. 35.

¹⁴ The above information is confirmed by von Hassell (he was in Belgrade at the time), who reports that "Today, the Yugoslav Crown Council met... The Prince told me right away that ... perhaps, Yugoslavia would work more closely with Germany." Ulrich von Hassell, The Von Hassell Diaries, p. 176.

meeting the Prime Minister proposed that Yugoslavia should join the Axis Alliance at once. Finally in a new meeting of the Council of the Ministers on March 19, 1941, they voted the alliance of the country with the Axis. Strong reactions were expressed against it, mainly by the Serbs, and on March 22, the Serb General Dusan Simovic on behalf of the army made strong appeals to the Regent to reconsider his decision. The Yugoslavian government, having in mind the reactionary elements in Croatia and their strong ties with Germany as well as the inability of Yugoslavia to face Germany, on March 25, 1941, in Vienna, amidst great pomp, became a member of the Triple Alliance.

In the meantime, the patriotic forces in Yugoslavia under the leadership of the young Crown Prince Peter revolted against this agreement and overthrew the semi-fascist regime of Cvetkovic. There was a complete change in the foreign policy of the country. The former ally of Hitler had been transformed into a neutral country ready to defend her neutrality and national integrity even if that would mean war against the Axis. The response of the Fuhrer to this was instant. A special meeting was called in Berlin as soon as the news of the coup d'etat was received. Now the Germans would, as soon as the German army was ready, attack Yugoslavia without even issuing the typical ultimatum.¹⁵ For this purpose seven new divisions were added

¹⁵ "The Fuhrer is determined, without waiting for possible loyalty declarations of the new government, to make all preparations in order to smash Yugoslavia militarily and as a state." Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XII, Doc. 127, p. 373.

to the original twenty-four. There were two semi-divisions equal to one full unit so the total number of the German divisions was thirty-two. To these must be added twelve Bulgarian and four Hungarian divisions, totaling fifty-two with twenty more as reserves; these belonged to the two strongest powers of Europe and would now be used for military operations in the Balkan area, where the main opponent was Greece who had only nineteen tired divisions which had fought continuously for six months, plus two and a half British divisions sent from the Western Desert.

With the entrance of the German army into Rumania, the German threat against Greece became imminent. The Greek government decided that the following policy would be the proper one for the welfare and interest of the Greek nation:

1. Since the Greek government had been openly following the Allied policy, she would continue to do so, even if that should mean war with Germany. Having in mind that the war (meaning the Great War) would last a long time, and though there would be many reverses, the Greek government would not make any compromises with Germany.
2. In case of German attack, the main Greek effort would continue to be on the Albanian front, thus the Greek army would continue to be the victor as far as the Italians were concerned, despite the consequences of defeat on the new German front.¹⁶

On January 13, 1941, the British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, arrived in Athens for informal talks with the Greek General Staff. In the conferences that followed on January 14 and 15, there were present the

¹⁶ Edipidis, Istoria, p. 589.

British Ambassador Sir Michael Palairret; the Commander-in-Chief of the British Air Forces in the Middle East, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore; the British Naval Attache in Athens, Admiral Turle; the Commander of British Air Forces in Greece, Air Commodore D'Albiac; the liaison officer of the Imperial British Staff at the Greek Headquarters, Major-General Heywood; the Greek Prime Minister General Metaxas; the Chief of the Greek General Staff General Papagos; the Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Greek government, Mavroudis; and representatives from the Royal Hellenic Navy and the Royal Hellenic Air Force. At this conference, General Metaxas was very skeptical of the whole military and political situation in the Balkans. He did not think that Yugoslavia and Turkey would come openly to the side of Britain, or that they would keep their promises as members of the Balkan Pact. England was anxious to create a new Macedonian front like the one in the First World War.¹⁷

Prime Minister Metaxas felt the Germans would take it as an excuse to attack the Balkan countries. Metaxas' ideas were quite sound and prophetic; the German ultimatum to Greece revealed that their main reason for attacking Greece was their

¹⁷ As early as November 16, 1940, "... several thousand" troops were in Greece. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1940, Vol. III, p. 561. The above information could not be confirmed from the other sources; apparently it refers to the auxiliary forces which came as ground support to the British air squadrons. According to the British Official History the total British Forces in Greece before March, 1941, were as follows: "The whole expedition numbered: Royal Air Force, 2,200 men and 310 vehicles; Army, 2,030 men and 400 vehicles from over 40 different units." Major-General I.S.O. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, p. 233.

fear of a British sponsored Macedonian front.¹⁸

Field Marshal Papagos reviewed the whole situation in the Balkans after the entrance of the Germans into Rumania.¹⁹ According to his report, there were already twelve divisions in Rumania. Since Turkey and possibly Yugoslavia would remain neutral, and Bulgaria was a member of the tripartite pact, the main German attack would be against Greece.

Under these circumstances, the only forces that Greece could deploy in the Macedonian and the Thracian fronts would be the 7th, 12th and 14th Infantry Divisions. They could also count on the forces in the "Metaxas line" defense fortifications covering the Greco-Bulgarian borders in Eastern Macedonia. Having all this in mind, Field Marshal Papagos, proposed that in order to establish a firm defense line against the Germans a force of at least nine English divisions was needed.²⁰ General Wavell replied that England at that time would not be able to spare this force from the Near East, where she was hard-pressed

¹⁸ In a conversation between the Fuhrer and the Yugoslav Foreign Minister, Cincar-Markovic in Berghof, on November 28, 1940, Hitler said, "He was already very sorry for the Greeks and would rather go to their country as a peaceful traveler to see the Acropolis than to organize a military action against the English there." Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 417, p. 732.

¹⁹ General Alexander Papagos, The German Attack on Greece, p. 3.

²⁰ "He [Papagos] estimated that for the defense of Eastern Macedonia and Salonika a further nine divisions with appropriate air forces would be needed." Playfair, op. cit., p. 341.

by the Italian army under Marshal Rodolfo Grazziani.²¹ The only force available would be two divisions with a small air force, and even that would take about two months to materialize, due to the lack of transportation facilities. The only units immediately available would be one regiment of heavy artillery, one combined anti-aircraft and anti-tank regiment, and one unit of sixty tanks.²²

Metaxas refused the proposed military mission from Great Britain. He did not even discuss the idea of sending a limited force of two divisions. The only solution, according to Metaxas, which would serve the best interests of Britain would be the sending of the nine divisions originally proposed by Marshal Papagos.²³ Thus the conference ended without any agreement. Admiral H. T. Baillie-Grohman in the prologue of his extremely accurate account of the evacuation of the British troops from

²¹ What was the British help that the Greek government refused to accept? According to Mr. Churchill the following, "It will be seen that our intentions at this time did not amount to the offer to Greece of any army, but only to special and technical units." Winston Churchill, The Grand Alliance, p. 19.

²² General Wavell, during the above described meeting, offered, according to General Papagos, "One artillery regiment and a unit of 60-65 armored cars." General Alexander Papagos, The German Attack on Greece, p. 10.

²³ "General Metaxas considered that the arrival of such a force would have none of the desired results. It was likely to provoke an attack by the Germans and possibly by the Bulgarians also, which the British and Greeks would not be strong enough to check." Playfair, op. cit., p. 341. Even the British General Wavell, despite the official policy of Whitehall, felt the same way as Metaxas. "He [Wavell] thought that the British proposal was a dangerous half measure. The help suggested would not be enough... his conclusions: that the Greek refusal should be accepted." Ibid., p. 343.

Greece in April, 1941, writes concerning the British proposal for help as follows: "But unfortunately for all concerned, Metaxas did not foresee the future with the same clarity ... when we felt secure enough ... to offer to send an expeditionary force to his aid, he declined."²⁴

Metaxas, a great strategist, who had in the First World War advised the Allies against the ill-fated operation against Gallipoli, knew that Greece was no match for the Germans. Greece could not fight a two-front war.²⁵ It would be an unnecessary sacrifice and a holocaust. Metaxas died suddenly on January 29, 1941, and was succeeded by Alexander Koryzis, director of the Greek National Bank, on the next day.

After the death of Metaxas, Field Marshal Papagos submitted to the new Prime Minister a plan according to which Britain would be invited to send the two available divisions so Greece's good faith as an ally of Britain would not be in doubt.²⁶ According to this plan, the British forces would land on the Greek soil after the entrance of the Germans into Bulgaria. In accordance with this policy, a conference was called on February

²⁴ Anthony Heckstall-Smith and H. T. Baillie-Grohman, Greek Tragedy 1941, p. 15.

²⁵ "Of all the British enterprises during the War, the expedition to Greece seems to me the most difficult to justify on purely military grounds. The Greeks fought well in Albania... The British forces sent to their support ... were a mere drop in the ocean..." Von Friedrich Mellenthin, Panzer Battles, p. 31.

²⁶ Papagos, op. cit., p. 12.

22, 1941, in Athens. Present were the King of Hellenes, George II; the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden;²⁷ the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill; the Commander of the Imperial Forces in Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell; the British Ambassador in Athens Sir Michael Palairret; the Greek Prime Minister Alexander Koryzis; and Field Marshal Papagos accompanied by the Director of Intelligence of the Greek General Staff.

The British Foreign Secretary was of the opinion that Yugoslavia and Turkey would remain neutral, and that the purpose of the conference was to find a way of facing the German attack without them. Marshal Papagos proposed that the combined Greco-British forces hold the Kaimatsalan-Vermion-Olympus line, having in mind that Yugoslavia would remain neutral; while Papagos proposed the evacuation of Western Thrace and of Eastern Macedonia.²⁸ After the entrance of Yugoslavia into the Axis camp, Papagos canceled this plan of evacuation.²⁹

²⁷

"Eden was invested with extraordinary powers by Churchill, who gave him carte blanche to 'initiate any action he may think necessary with ... the governments of Greece.'" Heckstall-Smith and Baillie-Grohman, op. cit., p. 21.

²⁸

This was suggested originally by Eden and under the circumstances Papagos agreed but not before proposing that the Yugoslavs should be informed of this plan and be requested to state their positions vis a vis the German aggression against Greece. Ibid., p. 25.

²⁹

This was the original agreement which depended upon the direction of the Yugoslavian government, the agreement signed in Athens on March 4, 1941, between the British and Greek governments provided that "...the Greek Army will leave in Macedonia three divisions to defend the prepared positions in the Nestos-Rupel line." Playfair, op. cit., p. 470.

On March 4, the Greek and British officials agreed that the Greek armed forces of Eastern Macedonia, along with the forces in the fortifications, would defend the sector from Mount Beles to the Nestos River. This is the natural boundary separating Eastern from Central Macedonia. Western Thrace would be evacuated, with the exception of two fortifications. The 12th Thracian Division, the newly-organized 20th Infantry Division and the 19th Armored Division³⁰ would defend the Kaimatsalan-Vermion-Olympus sector. British forces would join in this action.

At 5:15 on the morning of April 6, 1941, the Germans struck along the Greco-Bulgarian borders. At 5:30 the German ambassador to Greece delivered a note to Prime Minister Koryzin that the Germans would attack Greece in order to push the British out of the country.

³⁰ "... The Greek 19th (Motorized) Division consisted of just over 2,000 quite untrained and recently enlisted garage hands with no possible prospect of fighting usefully as a mobile force, having only a few Bren carriers, motor cycles and small cars." Christopher Buckley, Greece and Crete, 1941, p. 32.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE IV

Fig. 4. The German attack against the Fortified Position. General Alexander Papagos, The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941, p. 345.

PLATE IV



CHAPTER VII

THE GERMAN ATTACK

The Macedonian war theater was held by two divisions and one infantry brigade. One infantry division and the brigade were placed as reserve forces in support of the fortified Metaxas line which was defended by the permanent guard in the forts and the other infantry division.

The German forces which attacked the forts were, according to the reports of the Greek General Staff, five mountain divisions, one regular infantry division, one armored division, one motorized, and one Alpine division.¹ Their orders were: those divisions of the mountain type would attack the Beles sector. The 18th German Army Corps, consisting of the 5th and 6th Infantry Division, would attack the fortified area east of Strimon. The corps had as its reserve one division. Against the Ekhinos-Neurokop front near the Bulgarian frontier, the Germans would attack with the 5th Army Corps. As reserve, the 5th Army Corps had one motorized division. The German attack was supported by a great number of tanks, and about 1,000 airplanes.² The German army made a great use of automatic weapons and heavy

¹ General Alexander Edipidis, Istoria tou Ellinoitalikou kai Ellinogermanikou Polemou, p. 614.

² General I.S.O. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, p. 85.

artillery. The Greek defense units in the fortified area were able to hold the German attempts during the first day, but the sudden Yugoslavian collapse changed the whole situation.³ Now there was a great danger to the flank of the fighting forces in Eastern Macedonia. Under the pressure of this new development, the General Staff ordered the Greek units outside of the fortified area to retreat to the east bank of the Strimon River. The second day of the German attack ended with the complete defeat of the Germans, who were not able to break the Greek line, except in two of the forts, which capitulated in the early morning hours of April 7th, after a heroic defense.⁴ The resistance of the Greek army in the Metaxas line, and the defeat of the Germans were in vain. The Yugoslavian defense line had collapsed in a matter of days, and the German armies were already on the Greco-Yugoslav frontier, which was not fortified, since Greece had considered Yugoslavia as a friendly power. Now with the Yugoslavian collapse, the road towards Thessalonika through the valley of the Axios River was wide open to the Germans. The Greek Army in East Macedonia and Thrace had been encircled. Despite all these new developments, the Metaxas line was still

³ "It was evident that the knowledge of the treachery of the Regent Prince Paul, his Ministers and a proportion of the military leaders had so shaken the faith of the people that little resistance was likely except by small, stubborn groups which had not succumbed to the general despair." Gavin Long, Greece, Crete and Syria, p. 51.

⁴ "But the forts were doggedly held. The 'Hellas' fort fell only after the entire artillery of the XXX Corps had been in action against it for thirty-six hours." Ibid., p. 52.

holding the main German attack.⁵ The Greek General Staff, realizing the difficult position of the Greek army in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, issued the following general order of April 8, 12 a.m., 1941: "We order that ... in the event of such resistance not being feasible ... we authorize you to lay down your arms on the spot, seeking to secure terms as honourable as possible."⁶

The British army units destined for the defense of Macedonia arrived in Greece late in March, 1941. They were made up of 1st Australian Army Corps under the Supreme Command of Major-General Sir Thomas Blamey.⁷ The total strength including the auxiliary services, was 62,564.⁸ As soon as they landed in Pireus, they were transported to Macedonia. There they collaborated with the Greek T.S.K.M. (Army of Central Macedonia) along the Kaimatsalan-Mount Vermion-Mount Olympus lines.

On the morning of April 7, 1941, the Greek liaison officer at the Yugoslavian General Staff reported by telephone to the Greek staff the collapse of the southern Yugoslavian front. All the roads leading from Yugoslavia to Greece were filled with automobiles carrying Yugoslavian officers and civilians.

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For a picture of the sacrifice at the Greco-Bulgarian frontiers during the German attack see the reliable account of Laird Archer, Balkan Journal, p. 167.

6 General Alexander Papagos, The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941, p. 402.

7

Long, op. cit., p. 23.

8

Playfair, op. cit., p. 104.

With the entrance of the Germans into the Axios Valley, the left flank of the Greek army had been exposed to a German flank attack. The Greek staff attempted, by withdrawing the First Cavalry Division from the Albanian front, to close the gap on the Yugoslavian frontier. At the same time, the Greco-British forces were withdrawn to a new defense line.⁹ The struggle from then until the twenty-fourth of April, when the Germans occupied Athens, was clearly defensive. The Greek forces after the Yugoslavian collapse attempted to delay the enemy as much as possible, in order to give the British time to evacuate their force from Greece. The last battle on the mainland of Greece was fought in the historic straits of Thermopylae on April 23. The battle on the mainland of Greece had come to an end. The German attack against the Metaxas line, the heroic defense of the forts, the Yugoslavian collapse, the surrender of the Greek army in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace were now in the painful past.

⁹ Ibid., p. 79; Winston Churchill, The Grand Alliance, p. 20; Edipidis, op. cit., p. 645.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BATTLE OF CRETE

The Greek government, in accord with the British, decided to continue the struggle in the last piece of Greek land which was still free. After the suicide of the Greek Prime Minister, Alexandros Koryzis, who had been against the continuation of the war, the Chairmanship of the Greek government was taken by King George himself, after the refusal of all the leading Greek politicians to accept the portfolio. Finally, Emanuel Tsouderos accepted appointment as Prime Minister of the Greek government. The Hellenic government, accordingly, decided to continue the war on the Island of Crete. The Cabinet and the King fled to Crete in the early morning hours of April 22, 1941.

As soon as the Greek government was installed in Crete it called to arms all the available reserves in the island. An attempt was also made to organize into fighting units all the forces fleeing the mainland. These, along with the British troops in the island, would fight the Battle of Crete. The Greek forces in Crete were composed of eight battalions from the Greek mainland and three Cretan battalions.¹ In addition to these forces, there were 10,000 gendarmes, 300 cadets from the Royal Greek Military Academy, and 800 cadets from the Royal Greek Air Force Academy. The total number of the Greek forces was 14,000. This army was largely

¹ General Alexander Edipidis, Istoria tou Ellinoitalikou kai Ellinogermanikou Polemou, p. 692.

composed of young recruits untrained for any kind of war.² The British contingent numbered 27,000 largely made up of Dominion troops (7,100 New Zealanders and 6,500 Australians). To these numbers must be added 1,000 auxiliary Cypriots and Palestinians used mainly for labor purposes.

The Supreme Commander in charge of the defense of the island was the New Zealander, General B. C. Freyberg. He organized the Allied units into three independent forces in such a way as to be able to defend the three air bases of Maleme, Heraklion, and Retimo, as well as the Suda Naval Base,³ which was defended by two English brigades, one of which had been placed in the Maleme sector and the other in the Canea area. One Greek infantry battalion was controlling the Galatas area, one infantry regiment had been placed in the Canea Plateau, one regiment was protecting the port of Suda, one battalion was supervising the concentration camp of the Italian prisoners of war, and one battalion had been charged with the defense of the city of Canea. The total Allied power in this area was 18,000. In Retimo the defense of the area was largely a Greek responsibility. The total power in this area, including a British Brigade, was about 7,500 strong. The only Air Force available consisted of No. 112 Squadron RAF (12 Gladiators) which remained in Crete until May 19.⁴ The German Air Force which attacked the island has

² General I.S.O. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. II, p. 123.

³ Ibid., p. 127.

⁴ John Herington, Air War Against Germany and Italy, p. 25.

been calculated to contain about 315 bombardment airplanes, 60 fighters, 240 Stukas, and 270 single engine fighters.⁵ The defense plan drawn by the Allied headquarters provided that in case of an airborne invasion, the infantry in collaboration with the available tank units would attempt a mop-up operation to clear the ground of the enemy and prevent him from establishing a bridge head. In case of a sea landing, something that was not probable, owing to the presence of the Royal Navy which was constantly patrolling off the shores of Crete, the above described plan would be used with certain modifications, that is, putting more emphasis on the beaches.

The German plan of invasion, as it became known later, provided for: 1- a sudden occupation of the cities and the aerodromes with paratroopers; 2- the destruction of the telephone lines between the cities of Canea, Retimo and Heraklion; 3- airborne supply of munitions; and 4- the provisions for the landing army to be provided from the storehouses of the British Army. The Supreme Commander of the German Forces was General Alexander Loehr. The assaulting army belonged to the 8th Army Air Corps, about 16,000 strong.

The attack in the Canea area began in the morning of May 20, 1941. The main aim of the German attack in this area was the

⁵ Edipidis gives the following numbers: 750 warplanes, 530 transportation planes, and 53 gliders. Edipidis, op. cit., p 700. Churchill estimates that the total air power of the Germans in the Battle of Crete was 1,280 planes. Winston Churchill, The Grand Alliance, p. 279. In the Official British History of the Second World War the figures are as follows: 716 warplanes, 500 transports, and 72 gliders, a total of 1,298. Playfair, op. cit., p. 129.

Maleme Air Base. At 8:00 in the morning of May 20, the Germans started landing from transport planes and gliders. In the Alikianou sector, where the camp of the Italian prisoners was located, the struggle was unique. The local peasants came to the assistance of the weak Greek forces with great enthusiasm,⁶ fighting with old guns, even hunting guns and knives.⁷ All the German forces in the area were annihilated. The Suda area was the target of the enemy long before the actual assault. Two and three times every day the enemy air force bombarded the city and the installations around it, and the air defense positions in particular. Therefore, on the day of the attack nearly all the anti-aircraft batteries protecting the area had been destroyed. Until May 23, all the enemy forces landed were killed or taken prisoner. From that day on, the enemy increased his pressure on Maleme, and at the same time started ferocious attacks against the city of Canea. The bombardment of the city lasted until May 26.

⁶ "... When the Germans launched an attack upon the village and bridge of Alikianon from the East it was decisively repulsed, women, and even children turning out against the invader..." Christopher Buckley, Greece and Crete 1941, p. 194.

⁷ "This episode marks the beginning of numerous German 'reprisals' against the Cretans... Since nearly half the Greek troops lacked rifles, it would not be surprising if Germans had been killed with knives and clubs. According to a German report the dead had been slashed in the neck or body, had their private parts cut out or eyes gouged out; as a reprisal 200 men of the town were shot..."

"A report available from the Chief Medical Inspector of the Luftwaffe says: '...all interrogations revealed a total of six or eight cases of mutilation in Kastelli ... The crimes were attributed to fanatical civilians.'" Gavin Long, Greece, Crete and Syria, p. 240.

The Maleme sector, where Maleme Aerodrome is located, is a continuation of the Galatas area. It included, in the east, the suburbs of Saint Marina. In the west, it was connected with the Kastelli defense position; southeast, the Alikianou stronghold was protecting its flanks, and in the north it was surrounded by the sea. The protection of the area was in the hands of the British forces. The 5th New Zealand Brigade had taken positions around the air base. The 4th Brigade was holding the eastern side of Saint Marina as a reserve unit in case of attack from the sea. They had only a few field guns and some tanks. By the afternoon of May 20, 1941, around the air base of Maleme, and along a strip of land ten miles in length and three miles wide, the Germans had established a bridgehead, which was held by three thousand parachutists. Before night, the anti-aircraft guns of the base had been put out of action and the 22nd New Zealand Battalion had pulled back from its position around the airfield. The establishment of the German bridgehead in the air field was serious. The Allied High Command was hopeful that with the expected reinforcements from Cyprus, the German parachutists would be destroyed, but for reasons unknown, the reinforcements never came.⁸ The next morning, May 21, 1941, the enemy air force attacked the Allied positions from an altitude of only twenty-five meters. By

8

Edipidis, op. cit., p. 705. Playfair does not refer to the matter. The "Australian Official History" says: "...on the night of the 22nd, General Wavell sent a signal to General Freyberg informing him that it was impossible to land reinforcements at Suda and 'the gallant troops must stick it.'" Long, op. cit., p. 241.

8:30, the first transport plane started to discharge their cargoes of armed men. By 5:00 in the evening of the same day about 12,000 parachutists had been landed in the Maleme sector.

In Galatas, the Germans were obliged to pull back, but in Maleme, they gained ground constantly.⁹ In order to relieve this critical situation, the High Allied Command ordered two battalions of the 5th New Zealand Brigade to attack the enemy during the night. The New Zealanders were able to reach the air field in the early morning hours of May 22, but with the dawn, the German Air Force attacked, and the New Zealanders were obliged to retreat with heavy casualties.¹⁰

Now the enemy was able to reinforce his army in Maleme without facing any threat to his communications; as a result of the enemy pressure, the Allied armies had to retreat toward Saint Marina, where they joined the forces of the 4th Brigade.

⁹ "The British grip on the air field having been prised open, that of the Germans was beginning to tighten. By 5 p.m. the air field was in their hands." Playfair, op. cit., p. 134.

¹⁰ The attack was undertaken with the support of two '11' tanks that had been allotted to the defense of Maleme Aerodrome. Supported by them "... the troops made good progress... Then the mechanical inefficiency which seemed inseparable from British tanks during the Greek and Cretan campaigns decided the issue. The two-pounder gun ... the machine gun of one of the tanks jammed hopelessly; worse still the engine of the second tank ... broke down." Buckley, op. cit., p. 135.

¹¹ Ismay, the Chief of Staff, in his memoirs laconically but emphatically records the significance of the battle of Maleme: "... But on the second day the airfield at Maleme fell into German hands... It was the beginning of the end." Baron Hastings Lionel Ismay, The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay, p. 206.

In the other sectors of the area, the collaboration of the peasants and the regular forces prevented the Germans from establishing a bridgehead. During the night of May 24, the enemy pressure in the Galatas sector obliged the Allied units to retreat; the main German attack was launched in the late hours of May 25. The Greek forces could not intercept the enemy who, after ferocious street fighting, occupied Galata; Allied units, reinforced with peasants, launched a counterattack, but were turned back, suffering heavy casualties.

The battle of Galatas has been characterized by the German High Command as one of the most important battles in Crete.¹² The British suffered 149 deaths; the Greek army, 71, including officers; and the peasant volunteers, 42. At the same time, a battle was in progress in the Maleme sector. In Mournies (near the city of Canea), the British had fallen back. In the other parts of the Canea defense area, except Canea itself, the Allied forces were being either surrounded or falling back toward the mountains of Central Crete. Despite the gallant fighting of the British army, the last hope of reoccupation of the air base and its area was lost. Now the defense of the island was out of the question. The British forces were in constant retreat west of Canea. This forced the High Command of the Greek army to order its units to pull back almost six miles southeast of Canea. The Allies in the inner perimeter

¹² "A Senior German officer who arrived at Galatas after its capture said, 'Galatas, the most important center of resistance in Crete, fell. Tomorrow morning we shall be in Canea.'" Edipidis, op. cit., p. 708.

of the city were able to retreat west at midnight on May 26. The German advance in the Mournies sector made necessary the surrender of the Greek armies in that area. During the day of May 27, powerful Alpine units, supported by tanks, occupied Mournies. At the same time, the first German units made their entrance into the city of Canea.¹³

The city of Retimo lies halfway between Canea and Meraklion. For that very reason, it could not be excluded from the German attack. It came, as in the rest of Crete, during the day of May 20. But here, in contrast to what happened in the Canea sector, the enemy was unable to establish a bridgehead. Two Greek units, fighting gallantly, pushed the Nazis ten kilometers out of the city. For a moment, the Germans were able to take possession of the aerodrome, but a sudden Allied attack forced them out. The only Germans now left were those who had been dropped east and west of the air base. Since the air base was firmly held by the Allied forces, a cleaning-up operation could be undertaken to get rid of the Germans. This operation had been assigned to the Greek 3rd Battalion, under the command of Major George Calonas. In the east part of the air base, there were about five hundred parachutists; on the west side of the aerodrome, about three hundred Germans occupied the village of Platene. The Greek attack succeeded in forcing them

¹³ General Archibald Wavell, the Supreme Commander in the Middle East, telegraphed the night of May 27, 1941, to Churchill: "... Canea front has collapsed and Suda Bay only likely to be covered for another twenty-four hours if as long. There is no possibility of hurling in reinforcements." Churchill, op. cit., p. 295.

out of their position. By May 27, only a few islands of German resistance remained in Retimo;¹⁴ all those "resistance areas" being isolated from each other sooner or later would capitulate. On May 28, 1941, the military situation in the Retimo area was extremely favorable for the Allies. In no place were the Germans able to advance and establish a base. The small islands of resistance were under Allied siege. Therefore, the Allied Command ordered the Greeks and the Australians to attack the remaining Germans in the area in the morning of May 29. The situation in the Canea area was critical; according to the latest information that came to the Retimo Greek headquarters, the Germans had occupied the Maleme air base. King George and his cabinet left for Egypt.¹⁵ The English and the Imperial troops, according to the same sources, were retreating toward Sfakia, in the southern part of the island, in order to board ships. From all the above information, it was clear that the continuation of the struggle was impossible. In the light of the newly-developed situation, the Greek commander of the area, Major Calonas, ordered his forces to disperse, too. In that way they would not be taken as prisoners of war; but it was too late.

¹⁴ "At Retimo the position was firmly held although the troops were completely surrounded ...and food and ammunition ran low..." Churchill, op. cit., p. 297.

¹⁵ "... Parachutists landed in the garden of the King's house. Protected by New Zealanders and some armed Cretans the King and his ministers made their way into the hills. On the night of May 22, 1941, the King and his party embarked in H.M.S. Decoy and Hero." Long, op. cit., p. 226.

All the Allied forces were encircled and taken prisoners by the advancing motorized German units from Canea.

Heraklion is located in the center of the north coast of the island of Crete; because of its strategic position and its excellent air base, it became the second main target of the German attack. The operations against it began eight hours after the German assault in Canea. This delay, according to the German General Staff, was due to the fact that the German High Command did not expect any serious resistance in the Canea area.¹⁶ The German Command hoped that with the easy occupation of the air base of Maleme in the Canea area, they would be able to land enough regular army and armored units to occupy the island without the use of any more paratroopers. The combined Allied forces there were 3,000 British and 3,500 Greeks. The city of Heraklion and the nearby air base of Rousou were the centers of the German attack. The first German attempt was a complete failure. Not only on the first day of the attack, but during the whole period of the battle of Crete, the Allied forces were the masters of the area. The German casualties in the first day were more than a thousand. On the third day, the enemy attempted to occupy the city of Heraklion with great forces, which were able to break the first line of defense and enter the city. Then the defending garrisons were reinforced with a great number of civilians, who attacked the German units from houses with machine guns and grenades, and launched a

¹⁶ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 717.

counter-attack which pulled the invaders out. By noon of the same day, the city was clear. More than two hundred Germans were taken prisoner. During the remaining days, until May 28, the situation in Heraklion was static. The Allied forces were in command of the whole area. During the last days of May, information came into the Greek headquarters that the British in the Canea sector, as well as in Retimo, were retreating toward the coast to get aboard the ships. Greek officers coming from Canea reported that Maleme had capitulated. King George had fled to Egypt. The Allied forces were in the process of evacuating the island. The only fighting forces in the island were the Greek units, who were attempting to hold the German advance, thus giving time to the British to evacuate.

On May 26, General Freyberg, Supreme Allied Commander in Crete, reported to the Imperial Headquarters in the Near East that the fighting British forces in Suda Bay had been exhausted. "I regret to have to report [said Freyberg] that in my opinion the limit of endurance has been reached by the troops under my command here at Suda Bay ... our position here is hopeless."¹⁷ He asked for an order to retreat; otherwise, if the order was not soon issued, any later evacuation would be impossible. Despite the urging of Prime Minister Churchill to hold the island, General Wavell, Supreme Commander of the Imperial forces in the Near East, in a telegraphic report to London indicated

¹⁷ Churchill, op. cit., p. 295.

that the Canea front had collapsed.¹⁸ The forces there in the Suda area, as well as in Malame, could not resist more than twenty-four hours more; therefore, an order for the evacuation of the island was issued. The British forces started pulling back through the White Mountains to Sfakia in the southern part of Crete. The evacuation had been assigned to the British Mediterranean Fleet. The Luftwaffe, being in possession of several Cretan air bases, severely attacked it. During the night of May 30, General Freyberg, accompanied by Captain J.H.K. Morse, Commander of the naval base of Suda, left for Egypt. The command of the remaining British forces in Crete was entrusted to the hands of General Weston, Commander of the Marines.

On a monument installed by the Germans in the entrance of the harbor of Heraklion they wrote: "Germans, do not forget that here died eighteen thousand parachutists."¹⁹ In those numbers were, of course, included the thousands who were lost in the unsuccessful German attempt to land by sea. This repulse was carried out by the British Naval forces on the night of May 21, 1941. The British fleet, under Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, in two groups was patrolling the area westward of Crete. During that night the light cruisers of the British fleet destroyed the landing forces of the German Admiral

¹⁸ "On the 27th General Wavell informed the Chiefs of Staff that the Canea front had collapsed ... He had therefore ordered evacuation to proceed as opportunity offered... The Chiefs of Staff replied at once authorizing evacuation." Playfair, op. cit., p. 142.

¹⁹ Yann, Canea, Crete, 1948.

Schaster.²⁰ The same night, the British fleet left the Aegean sea. Because of lack of Allied air protection during the thirty-six hours of its patrol, the fleet suffered heavy casualties. Two cruisers and two destroyers were total losses, and two battleships and two heavy cruisers were seriously damaged, but the German attempt to land troops in Crete failed.

The Allied casualties, with the exception of the Greeks, were relatively small. Six thousand Imperial troops were listed as dead and wounded and 5,000 were captured. The Greek forces must be considered as a total loss, since all the surviving formations were taken prisoner.

The battle of Crete was characterized by: a- the great precautions that the Germans took for the preparation of the operation; b- inadequate preparation by the Allied forces in the island; c- the great heroism and gallantry by which the Allied forces and the brave inhabitants of Crete fought.²¹ The German parachute units which took part in the operation had been transferred from Germany to Greece in April of that year; the mountain units had been especially trained in Greece for the peculiar conditions of a war like this; finally, the Germans had secured air force protection.

The British government, despite the fact that in the out-

²⁰ The Official Italian Naval History attributes the destruction of the German convoy to the fact that the German Air Force had not warned the convoys of the presence of the British Warships. Commander Marc Antonio Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, p. 108.

²¹ Edipidis, op. cit., p. 738.

break of the war between Italy and Greece they had officially declared that the defense of the island would be their concern, really made no preparation.²² The British sent to the island a small detachment of 3,400 in November, 1940, accompanied by some units of artillery and tanks. The Allied Forces that had been sent in April were the survivors of the British Expeditionary Force to Greece. In their withdrawal from the mainland they lost all heavy weapons, and sometimes even went to Crete without rifles. The Greek units were a parody of an army corps of young untrained men from Crete and stragglers from the mainland.²³ The famous Cretan Division was not in the island.²⁴ It had been sent to Epirus as early as November 4, 1940.²⁵ The Greek General Staff had decided as early as April to organize a local militia in the island. For this reason, they sent 4,000 rifles from Athens. The Ministry of Security of the Greek government canceled this order. In conclusion, we can say that, in comparison to the well-equipped and trained German forces, the Greek units were ill-prepared and without proper military training.

²² The British did not provide more forces for the protection of Crete owing to the fact that they were engaged in the desert war with the Italians in North Africa. Playfair, op. cit., p. 122.

²³ "General Wavell in a telegram to C.I.G.S. on May 2, 1941, reported: "Greek troops at present are mostly untrained and unarmed." Churchill, op. cit., p. 275.

²⁴ Winston Churchill, Their Finest Hour, p. 540.

²⁵ A further consequence of the move into Crete (British reinforcements): "General Metaxas expressed the wish to remove the bulk of the Greek troops for use in Epirus." Playfair, op. cit., p. 232.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE V

Fig. 5. A map of Crete, 1941. Christopher Buckley,
Greece and Crete, 1941, p. 148.

PLATE V



CHAPTER IX

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GREEK RESISTANCE AGAINST THE AXIS

From official German papers which became known after the war, and from other related sources, such as the General Order of the German General Staff, Number 20, December 13, 1940, one thing was made very forcefully clear. The German forces involved in the operations against Greece should be freed as soon as possible for "further use."¹ This "further use" was the campaign against Russia.

On December 18, 1940, five days after the issuing of the Order Number 20, for the "Operation Marita" against Greece, Hitler issued the Number 21 General Order of Directions. This contained details for "Operation Barbarossa" as the Germans called the attack against Russia. This order, signed by Hitler and co-signed by Field Marshal Keitel and General Warlimont, is a long document describing basic aims of Operation Barbarossa. The points that are of importance to us are those which prove how correct Hitler was in his belief that the operations against Russia should be undertaken as soon as possible, in order to give time to the Germans to terminate their campaign before the severe Russian winter. It is flatly stated in this order that "Barbarossa" could not start before the end of the German attack against Greece. Hitler himself had underlined the following:

¹ Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Vol. XI, Doc. 511, p. 868.

"The German Wehrmacht must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign (Operation Barbarossa)... For this purpose the Army will have to employ all available units."²

Furthermore, Hitler continued,

"I shall order the concentration against Soviet Russia possibly 8 weeks before the intended beginning of operations... Preparations ... are to be completed by May 15, 1941."³

The date of May 15 was mentioned again in Hitler's letter to Mussolini of November 20, 1940. Here Hitler underlined the fact that May should be the date for the termination of the use of the German troops in the Balkan campaign,⁴ so they would be free to be used against Russia. History has proved that Hitler was thinking correctly, in supporting the idea that the campaign against Russia should be started in the early days of spring if it was to be successful.⁵

Napoleon, for other reasons, delayed his campaign against Russia. He started on the 22nd of June, 1812, and passed the Nieman River two days later. Despite his original success and the fact that he had occupied Moscow in September, the severe winter caught him in the process of his campaign, resulting in a retreat that became one of the greatest military catastrophes

² Ibid., Doc. 532, p. 899.

³ Ibid., Doc. 532, p. 899.

⁴ Ibid., Doc. 369, p. 642.

⁵

"... D-Day was finally fixed for June 22, 1941...late in the year, but it was necessary to eliminate Greece first and then withdraw the Panzer divisions from the Balkans to Russia." Major-General Friedrich von Mellenthin, Panzer Battles, p. 28.

in history.

Hitler wanted to avoid all these dangers. For that reason, he set the beginning of his campaign a month, at least, earlier than Napoleon's. General Walter Warlimont, Deputy Chief of the Operations Staff, of the German army, records in his diary: "Because of the campaign in the Balkans the attack on Russia had to be postponed from the middle of May to 22 June."⁶

The famous Field Marshal von Paulus, the "hero" of Stalin-grad, said that the operations should have started either on Sunday, May 11, or on Sunday, May 18, depending on the weather. From what we have seen, it is an established fact that the German campaign against Russia could not start before the completion of the German campaign against Greece.

On February 3, 1941, Hitler called a secret conference of the Chiefs of Staff of the German armed forces. The Fuhrer, Marshal Keitel and General Jodl emphasized the fact that all the troops used against the Balkans were of primary importance to the Operation Barbarossa. General Handel, Chief of Staff, was quoted as follows: "Six armored divisions are required from the 'Marita' operation... it all depends on the Balkan situation."⁷ The Chief of the General Staff at the same meeting emphasized the difficulties that the German army would face in transporting its units from the Balkan front to Russia.⁸ A similar

⁶ Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 1939-1945, p. 143.

⁷ Office of the United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Vol. III, p. 628.

⁸

Ibid., p. 630.

opinion was expressed by the British General Ismay who said, "... It may also be claimed that, on a long term view, our action to support Greece was vindicated in that it delayed the German attack on Russia for four or five weeks..."⁹

During the Nuremberg trials Hermann Goering stated that Germany had moved troops to Rumania for the forthcoming war with Russia, but she was obliged to use those troops for the campaign in the Balkans.¹⁰ On another occasion Goering stated that "... it is true that the attack against Russia would have happened earlier if the Yugoslavian affair hadn't come."¹¹

In the interrogation of Goering by Colonel John H. Amen of the United States Army, the following dialogue took place:

Q. "Is it a fact that the necessity to intervene in the Balkans caused the delay of the opening of the Russian campaign from May, '41 to the latter part of June?"

A. "Yes, I said that."¹²

The War Diary of the German Naval Staff stated, "Balkan operations delayed 'Barbarossa' at first for about 5 weeks."¹³

On October 23, 1941, in a speece at Manchester, Anthony Eden expressed the idea that Greece's "brave defiance upset

⁹ Baron Hastings Lionel Ismay, The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay, p. 202.

¹⁰ Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Supplement B, p. 1108.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1109.

¹² Ibid., p. 1109.

¹³ Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 996.

the time-table of Hitler's plans and delayed his pre-arranged attack on Russia for at least six most important weeks..."¹⁴

In the semi-official Turkish newspaper, Ulush of Ankara, appeared an article on November 15, 1941, concerning the war operations in the eastern front. In this, the writer expressed the opinion that the German operations against Russia had been scheduled for the spring of 1941.¹⁵ The delay had to be credited to the Balkan operations. He expressed the idea that without this operation in the Balkans the Germans would have reached the Caucasus in good time, and would have carried their plans to success.

The German newspaper, the Basler Nachrichten of January 11, 1942, with the traditional German sincerity, accepted the fact that the German attack on Greece delayed their assault against Russia for at least six weeks.

Taking into account all of the above evidence, we come to the following conclusion: it is beyond any doubt that the Greek resistance against Italy obliged the Germans to over-extend their Balkan campaign. The German operations in the Balkans were mainly against Greece, since Yugoslavia collapsed in a matter of days. If we want to be historically true, we must add that if the Yugoslavians with their numerical superiority to the German army had not collapsed so suddenly, the plan of creating a Macedonian front would have been a fact. The

¹⁴ Royal Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Greek White Book, p. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

four to six weeks that the German campaign against Russia had to be delayed proved disastrous to the whole outcome of the campaign.

CONCLUSION

It has been the argument of this thesis that the Greek resistance to the Axis in 1940-1941 was of great significance not only to the Balkans, but also influenced considerably the outcome of the German campaign against Russia in 1941. This operation against Russia which was scheduled to begin sometime during the first part of May, 1941, was delayed because of the German offensive in the Balkans. The German operations against Greece and Yugoslavia were undertaken by Germany as a necessary measure to secure its southern flank from a possible British attempt to create a new front in Europe against Germany.

The Italians met with much stiffer resistance from the Greeks than they had expected and, within a week, they withdrew into Albania where they reorganized and rebuilt their army. The political and the military position of the Axis suffered greatly in Southern Europe as a result of the Greek victory. By the spring of 1941 the Italian forces were numerically superior to those of the Greeks, but they were still unable to achieve their objective, the breaking of the Greek front. There was not any other solution to the problem except German interference.

The Germans, who had gained a foothold in the Balkans by the accession of Rumania and later Bulgaria to the Tripartite Pact, began moving troops into the Peninsula in early March, 1941. Not only the German army participated in the operation but also the Bulgarian and Hungarian armies which were used to protect the flank of the attacking forces. This campaign started

in the first week of April, 1941, and came to an end at the beginning of May. As soon as the defeat of Greece and Yugoslavia permitted the withdrawal of the German troops from the Balkans, they were assembled along the southern part of Russia to be ready to participate in the campaign against that country. From the documents of the German Foreign Office and from the testimonies of the Nuremberg trials we learn that the operation against Russia could not start until all the units employed in the Balkans could be transported to the Russian front. Therefore, the German offensive had to be delayed from early May until all the German forces had assembled along the German-Russian frontiers, in the latter part of June.

It has been argued that the Greek resistance was the turning point in the outcome of the Second World War because it delayed the German attack against Russia, so that the German advance was stopped by the cold winter of 1941-1942, for which the troops were inadequately prepared. The purpose of this writer is not to support so extreme a position, but to defend the thesis that the Greek resistance was an important factor in Germany's defeat in Russia and thus in her defeat in the Second World War.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The source materials used in this work vary, and an attempt has been made to obtain materials from all sides involved, so as to present a complete account of the described events. In the diplomatic field, and in the chapter concerning the German preparations for the attack against Greece, extensive use has been made of the Italian and German original sources, either in the form of diaries of the protagonists like Ciano or Alfieri, or official papers like the Documents on German Foreign Policy.

The diplomatic correspondence of this country's State Department has been used; despite its celebrated objectivity, it is not so valuable as the European documents because the American diplomats were not directly involved in the events; many times their informants were British. The British diplomatic papers are usually accurate. As a leading European statesman once said, the British diplomats live in constant fear that their correspondence will be published in the form of a "blue book"; therefore they are quite careful in the wording of their dispatches. The same can be said about the correspondence of the Greek diplomats. Other sources, mainly Italian, were used to check British and Greek sources. All of these materials proved to be valuable because they presented a reasonable account of the Greco-Italian relations before and during the war.

The military part of the work has been based on the accounts of the main participants; excellent materials are avail-

able in this field from English, German, Italian and Greek sources. The British and Italian Official Histories, which have been compiled by Major-General Playfair of England and Commander Bragadin, have been useful in analyzing the strategical aspects of the Greco-Italian war, as have the personal accounts of Papagos and Edipidis who were Chief and Vice Chief, respectively, of the Greek General Staff. The work of the official historians is a unique one. They compile their histories from governmental materials (documents, dispatches, etc.) and do not always follow the official governmental position in their interpretation of the facts. While the Italian diplomatic papers were not used, the Ciano diaries and Alfieri's work on Mussolini were.

Finally, my background as a Greek citizen proved most helpful in the chapter concerning the internal situation in Greece during the Metaxas era. Mention should be made of Dr. Stavrianos' work on Greece during Metaxas' dictatorship. It is quite objective and accurate, although it does not contain materials from the Greek archives.

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GREEK RESISTANCE
AGAINST THE AXIS IN WORLD WAR II

by

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The purpose of this thesis is to emphasize the significance of the Greek resistance to the Axis and to show how this resistance aided in the defeat of Germany, by delaying her attack against Russia from the middle of May to June 22, 1941, the date on which the German invasion actually began.

Before we develop this hypothesis, certain related factors have to be taken into consideration, that is, the political and social conditions in Greece before the outbreak of the Greco-Italian War of 1940. Greece and the rest of the South-European countries in the late 1930's experienced a new kind of political order, a modified form of Fascism. In 1936, the regime of General Ioannis Metaxas, with help from the Greek Dynasty, was established in Greece, despite the opposition of the Parliament, to "save its Western civilization from the conspiring forces of the liberal parties." Metaxas took very effective measures indeed. On his second day in office, the constitution was officially abolished, the Parliament was dissolved, and naturally, the political parties were suspended. A regimentation of the Greek people followed on the model of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

Despite the fact that Metaxas had imitated the type of governments that were in effect in Germany and Italy, he was closely connected with England and France, or rather, he was controlled to a large extent by England, through the influence that the Anglophile King of Hellenes, George II, was exerting on him; therefore, it is not surprising to find Greece fighting

on the side of the Democracies in the Second World War.

The Fascist regime of Metaxas did not prepare the country for the forthcoming conflict; for instance, the Air Force was non-existent. The Italians therefore had good reason to believe that their campaign against Greece would be similar to the Ethiopian one in 1935. The other factor which led to this illusion was that they believed that the morale of the Greek people under Metaxas was such that no serious resistance could be offered to an invader.

When the Italians, after a campaign of six months, not only failed to achieve their objectives, but were driven back into Albania, the Germans intervened. This intervention was natural; it was a necessary move to clear the Balkans and to eliminate the possibility of a new "Macedonian Front" on German's southern flank.

The campaign which Germany was forced to undertake in the Balkans delayed her attack on Russia from four to six weeks; this was one of the major factors in the defeat of the German armies in Russia, since they were not able to reach their objectives before the terrible Russian winter.