

TAC NEWS

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GERMAN INVASION OF GREECE, APRIL 1941

Background: The Greco-Italian War

Relations between Greece and Italy could be considered strained at best by the end of the 1930s. Following the war with Turkey in 1912, Italy occupied the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea. These islands were mostly inhabited by Greeks, but Italy refused to return them—despite an agreement to do so. In 1923 an Italian general and his staff were killed in Greek territory. Italy made a series of punitive demands which the Greeks considered too harsh to meet in full. Once the Greeks refused to meet all the demands the Italians shelled and occupied the island of Corfu. The Italians occupied the island for almost a month before finally giving the island back to Greece. Relations slowly normalized over the next decade but in April 1939 the Italians occupied Albania. Albania began vocally protesting the conditions of the Albanian minority in Northern Epirus and seeking Italian support.

Relations continued to deteriorate between Italy and Greece—and relations between Mussolini and Hitler did not help matters. Mussolini felt Hitler did not respect him enough. In particular, it upset Mussolini that Hitler would only inform him of his decisions after Germany had acted. Mussolini decided to make Greece an example of how he too could act unilaterally. Between June and October of 1940 Italy began an intense propaganda campaign against Greece and began to fly over Greek territory and even attack Greek ships. These provocations reached their peak on August 15th 1940 when an Italian submarine sank the Greek light cruiser, Elli. Late on October 27th, Italy presented an ultimatum to Greece—allow free passage for Italian troops to occupy Greek territory. When the Greeks refused, Italian troops crossed the border from Albania before the first light on the 28th.

The First Italian Offensive

The Italian offensive had three prongs: a northern thrust by the Julia Alpine Division, a central thrust by the main Italian forces, and then the southern flank of the attack per-

formed by Raggruppamento Litorale. This last group reached the Kalamas River, but the terrain was ill-suited to their tanks and slowed them considerably. The main thrust reached the main defensive line of the Greeks, but during the next eight days failed to break through, and offensive operations were halted. Only the Julia Division was able to achieve initial success, breaking through the Greek defenses, shrugging off the first Greek counterattack and capturing the town of Vovousa. However more Greek forces continued to arrive in the area and began to encircle the division, forcing it back. By November 13th the entire area was clear, and the Julia Division was effectively destroyed as a fighting formation.

The Greek Counterattack

Now that Greek reserves were moving to the front, the Greeks changed over to offensive operations. On November 14th, the Greeks began the attack, breaking through the Italian lines on the 17th. The Greeks captured great swaths of southern Albania, including Klisura Pass. Italian reinforcements now began to shift the tide of battle again, and the Greek army's logistics were unable to keep up with the army's demand. By the end of January, the offensive had halted, and a short stalemate began.



Greek Gun Crew, Albania, 1940

The Second Italian Offensive

Mussolini, aware that he was running out of time before the Germans invaded Greece, gathered 17 divisions to make a

renewed push against the Greeks. This new operation, code-named “Primavera”, began on March 9 and failed miserably. In less than two weeks, the attack had ground to a halt, making only limited gains. The positions would remain static until the German invasion on April 6th.

OPERATION MARITA

Beginnings: the Commonwealth Enters the Balkans

With the Italian invasion, Britain was bound by treaty to come to Greece’s aid. The troops to be dispatched to Greece were elements of the RAF. British forces also landed on Crete to free up the 5th Cretan Division to be moved to mainland Greece. By mid-November, the Greeks were pushing for more British aid, specifically a strong commitment of ground forces, in order to launch a combined Greek and British campaign in the Balkans. The British were unwilling to commit to this, since they did not feel they had the forces to fight both in Greece and North Africa at the time.

By February of 1941, however, Churchill and the British had changed their mind, deciding to create another front in the Balkans. On March 2nd, 1941 the British began landing troops at the port of Piraeus. Over the next month, approximately 60,000 men were brought into Greece. The force was composed of the 6th Australian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division, and the British 1st Armoured Brigade. It was under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson and was known as “W” Force.

The Allied Plan

Britain and Greece had different thoughts on how best to defend Greece. The Greek plan was to keep the Greek forces in Albania and use the remaining Greek troops and the Allied ones to defend the Metaxas Line; a chain of fortifications along the Greco-Bulgarian border. The British plan, however, was to combine with Greek forces to defend the Haliacmon Line—a shorter front, and one that faced northeast along the Vermion Mountains and the Haliacmon River. The British feared that defending the Metaxas Line left their flank exposed to a thrust through Yugoslavia from the north. However, on March 7th, the British agreed to comply with the Greek defense plan. The overall command was to be retained by the Greek General Papagos, and the Greeks and British would fight a delaying action in the northeast if necessary. However, Wilson did not move his troops as agreed, but instead took up position about 40 miles west of Axios. This allowed him to maintain contact with the Greek forces still in Albania, as well as covering central Greece.

As the German invasion neared, Wilson set up his command post northwest of Larissa. He deployed the New Zealand Division north of Mount Olympus, and the Australians blocked the Haliacmon valley.

The German Plan

Hitler initially ordered his generals to plan an attack from Romania and Bulgaria, code named Operation Marita. However, with a coup in Yugoslavia at the end of March, the plan had to be revised to include an attack in Albania, and then punch through southern Yugoslavia. Once they pushed through Yugoslavia into Greece they would outflank the Metaxas Line and drive down the Monastir and Axios valleys.

April 6th: The Invasion Begins

The XL Panzer Corps moved across the Bulgarian border at two points, and by the 8th of April, the German 73rd Infantry Division had captured Prilep, severing the rail line from Belgrade to Thessaloniki, cutting off Yugoslavia from aid. By the 9th, the German forces were deployed north of Monastir, ready to attack down the Florina Valley. Meanwhile, elements of the 9th Panzer Division moved west to link up with the Italians at the Albanian border.

The German XVIII Mountain Corps moved to break the Metaxas Line, sending several divisions to do so. The Greek defenders of the East Macedonian Army section held on stubbornly only allowing two of the 24 forts that composed the Metaxas Line to be taken. The Germans, taking heavy losses, managed to push the 6th Mountain Division across a treacherous mountain pass to cut the rail line to Thessaloniki on April 7th, but still the forts held out. The 2nd Panzer Division invaded Yugoslavia from the east, and moved down the Struma Valley. By the 8th it had entered Greece and pushed aside elements of the Greek 19th Motorized Infantry Division. When the German forces arrived in Thessaloniki on the 9th of April, the Greek East Macedonian Army Section surrendered the following day on the orders of General Bakopoulos.



On the left flank, XXX Infantry Corps punched through the Greek line and captured Xanthi on April 8th. Field Marshal List decided that he was now able to begin a race toward central Greece and requested that the 5th Panzer Division be transferred to the XL Panzer Corps to help reinforce the drive through the Monastir Gap.

The Drive to Central Greece

The Germans were ready to begin their push down the Monastir Gap on April 10th. They first encountered resistance north of the town of Veve, but were able to take the town the next day. The Allied forces finally stopped the Germans temporarily at Klidi Pass, but the Germans broke the position and drove on to Kozani by the 14th.

With the German advance threatening to flank them, British forces began a withdrawal to the Haliacmon River, and then on to the pass at Thermopylae. As they withdrew, they continued to battle Germans trying to push past them. Although the 9th Panzer Division bridged the Haliacmon on the 14th, they were prevented from advancing any further by the Allied forces. The Allies were able to use the natural topography to their advantage, channeling the Germans through several defiles and holding them for three days. The Germans put in attack after attack and on the night of the 16th, hit the 21st New Zealand Battalion, pushing it back across the Pincios River. Here the Allies held the Germans for several more days, until enemy forces crossed the river on floats, and the 6th Mountain Division outflanked them. By the 19th, the Germans had captured Larissa and its airfield, and two days later the port of Volos fell, with the Germans capturing large quantities of fuel.

The Greek Epirus Army Surrenders

While the Germans were pushing through Greece, the Greek forces in Albania did not want to retreat. They stayed in position for a full week after the German invasion, only beginning to fall back on the 13th of April. With the British forces retreating to Thermopylae, the Germans were now able to flank the Greek Epirus Army, and cut off their line of retreat back from Albania. On the 18th of April the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH) Brigade became involved in a pitched battle with the Greek units moving through the Metsovon Pass. The following day, the Germans moved on and captured Ioannina, cutting the final supply route of the Greek Army. On the 20th, the Greek commander surrendered his force of fourteen divisions to the German commander Sepp Dietrich, ending the fighting in the area.

Pursuit to the Sea and the Fall of Athens

The Germans realized that they had the opportunity to eliminate the British forces before they could be evacuated by ship. They began shifting infantry divisions back and their motorized units to the front in order to increase the speed of their pursuit. The British, knowing that they had to buy time for the main force to get away, ordered a last stand at the pass at Thermopylae. The rearguard held their ground until the morning of April 23rd when they received the order to retrieve again. They left two brigades behind to allow the rest of the rearguard to fall back. These brigades held out the rest of the 23rd and then fell back again to set up another position at Thebes. On the 25th of April the Germans staged an airborne operation to seize the bridge over the Corinth Canal, with the double aim of cutting off the British line of retreat and securing their own way across the isthmus. Two days later, after breaching the British rearguard at Thebes, the German 2nd Panzer Division entered Athens, capturing large amounts of oil, ammunition, and food.

Evacuation and Aftermath

The Allied forces, having known as early as the 13th of April that no further reinforcements would be coming, continued their evacuation. The 5th New Zealand Brigade managed to get approximately 5,000 men out of Greece on the night of the 24th, and in the 25th, another 10,000 Australian troops and the few remaining RAF squadrons were evacuated. Two thousand more Australians were forced to wait until the 27th to embark. Eventually the Allies were able to withdraw almost 50,000 men, leaving approximately 8,000 behind to be captured by the Germans. With the evacuation of Allied forces and the capitulation of the Greek forces, Greece was split into zones occupied by Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria.



German officer with abandoned British tanks. Balkans, April 1941.

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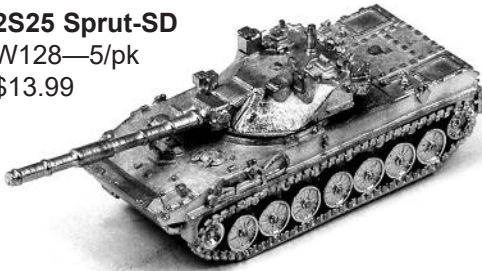
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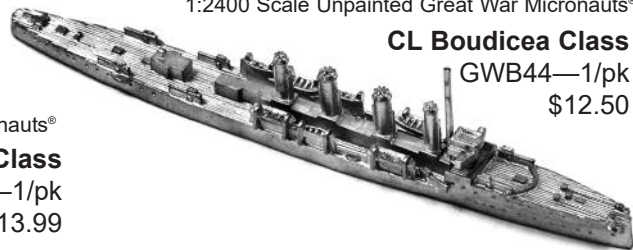
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