

## **GREECE 1941 to 1945**

### **MAINLAND GREECE**

Prior to the Second World War Greece had been ruled by a royalist dictatorship: the country's dictator, General Ionnis Metaxas. Having suspended the Greek Parliament in April 1936 Metaxas ruled a totalitarian state with the support of the equally conservative monarch King George II. Both men were anti communist and, rather ironically given the Italian invasion of Greece in October 1940, took their fascistic leanings from Italy's model rather than Hitler's Germany. Metaxas died in January 1941 which effectively left the government in the hands of the monarch and a right wing conservative elite.

The Italian invasion of Greece in October 1940 and its subsequent failure concentrated Hitler's mind on the volatility of the Balkan region and the possibility of British intervention in the region. With his plans to attack Soviet Russia well advanced it was clear to Hitler that he needed a secure southern flank. On the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1941 he chose to secure this flank by invading both Yugoslavia and Greece. The Yugoslavian campaign was completed by the 17<sup>th</sup> April and the Germans then moved into Greece to support the forces that were moving southwards from Bulgaria. Both the Greek and the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) sent to aid them were forced to retreat until the Greek government surrendered on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April. Between the 24<sup>th</sup> April and 1st May the Royal Navy managed to evacuate some 40,000 men at considerable costs in ships and naval personnel.

With the Balkans under his control Hitler, with reluctance, was forced to view Crete as a possible platform for the British resurgence in the Balkans. Its occupation would prevent this happening as well as giving the Germans a good base in the Eastern Mediterranean from which to confront the British forces in Cyprus, Palestine and Egypt and encourage Turkey to either stay neutral or coerced into joining the Axis powers.

The invasion began on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> May and once, after heavy fighting, the key position of Maleme had been taken the campaign was effectively over. The remaining British and Dominion forces retreated to the islands south-eastern coast where the Royal Navy, at

considerable costs, evacuated as many as 17,000 men whilst a further 3,500 had been killed or wounded. 6,500 men were taken prisoner.

Two Hoxne men were captured during the Greek and Cretan campaigns. Alec Goldsmith, a member of the Royal Army Service Corps, and was serving with the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division and was captured in Greece. Gunner Alfred Knight of the Royal Artillery had been fortunate enough to be evacuated from Greece but was subsequently one of the 6,500 men taken prisoner at the fall of Crete. For both men it would be a long and hard four years before they were released from captivity. For his part Hitler was now free to concentrate on the Soviet Union, however the delays to the invasion by diverting into Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean ensured his plans were fatally flawed.

With the defeat of the Greek Army and the British Expeditionary Force in April 1941 and the subsequent capture of Crete the Germans were quick to exploit the simmering political tensions that had bedevilled Greek politics for decades. A “quisling” government was soon established under a turncoat, General George Tsolakoglu and other right wing politicians.

Resistance to the Italian and German occupation was quick to gain ground and by the Autumn of 1941 armed groups were attacking military installations. The inevitable round of reprisals followed with villages burnt and peasants murdered in an attempt to intimidate the population. Worse was to follow when the Bulgarian Army ethnically cleansed Thrace forcing tens of thousands of inhabitants to flee to central Greece.

Food became scarce very early in the occupation but the dislocation of transport links and the movement of refugees into the cities exacerbated the problem. Although the country suffered a widespread famine throughout the occupation, the winter of 1941 – 1942 proved the worst with some 30,000 deaths, in Athens the German records show that on average 300 people were dying a day. During the occupation it is estimated that the famine killed nearly 5 per cent of the population.

Greek resistance to the occupation initially centred on the Communist Party of Greece which was well versed in clandestine operations due to Metaxas’s dictatorship. The National Liberation Front (EAM) was formed as the political arm of resistance in September 1941 and quickly

established cadres in towns and villages throughout the country. In April 1942 the military arm, the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS), was established and quickly grew to 30,000 fighters in the field by the summer of 1943 by which time the occupation authorities had only a precarious hold of the North East, the Centre and the South West of the country. Orchestrated by EAM, civil disobedience increased throughout 1943 culminating with some 100,000 marching through central Athens in June.

As EAM consolidated its position in both the urban areas and countryside the puppet government also changed tack. In April Ioannis Rallis, a conservative and an old school monarchist, was appointed to head the government which was soon recruiting its own force of Security Battalions to support the Germans in attacking EAM. Italy's surrender to the Allies in September 1943 only added another level of chaos to an already confused and desperate situation.

The Greek government in exile, strongly supported by Winston Churchill, was seriously concerned that the communists were taking over control of the resistance. Far from criticising the puppet government the political elites in exile and their British ally were silent when confronted by the excesses of the Security Battalion's and sought to maintain contact with Rallis's regime. Greece became even more unstable in 1944 with waves of repression and violence dominating life in both the urban areas and countryside culminating in September with the German withdrawal from most of the country as the Red Army offensives into the Balkans threatened to cut them off.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> October the British arrived and installed a provisional government of National Unity under Georgios Papandreou. Fearful of a communist plot to take over Athens it was clear from the start that neither the British nor the provisional government would accept ELAS members into the reconstructed Greek National Guard instead they rehabilitated the pro Fascist members of the hated Security Battalions and members of other conservative resistance groups. To EAM and ELAS this was a clear message was that the pre war status quo was being revived and they mobilised demonstrations but these were countered by armed force. By December the state of affairs has deteriorated to such an extent that the new Greek Prime Minister Konstantinos Tsaldris, visited Washington to obtain American help, his visit and the general

political conditions in post war Europe led in March 1947 to President Truman declaring that America would intervene wherever communism was considered a threat. Greece was now engulfed in a civil war that did not end until a ceasefire was signed between the Government and the new Democratic Army of Greece (formerly ELAS) in October 1949.