

MONTY WOODHOUSE

THE ALIAKMON LINE:
AN ANGLO-GREEK MISUNDERSTANDING IN 1941

Late at night on 4 March 1941 I was sent from the Hotel Grande Bretagne, where the British Military Mission to the Greek Army was accommodated, to carry a message to General Sir Archibald Wavell (Commander-in-Chief of the British Middle East Forces), who was staying at the British Legation. I never knew what the message contained. Wavell was an uncommunicative man, known to the Greeks as "England's most oligologous General".

The day of the week was Tuesday. Greeks do not like to start any new enterprise on a Tuesday, because on that day Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453. Whether or not, Tuesday 4 March 1941 was an unlucky day, it was certainly a dramatic one; and the scene I found in the large reception chamber of the Legation was also dramatic. I recognised first the Greek King, George II; his Prime Minister, Alexander Korizis; and the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. There was also a galaxy of Generals: Alexander Papagos, the Greek Commander-in-Chief; Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff; Sir Maitland Wilson, who was about to become Commander of the British (mainly Australian and New Zealand) Expeditionary Force in Greece; Arthur Smith, who was Wavell's Chief of Staff at GHQ in Cairo; Wavell himself; and T.G.G. Heywood, commanding the British Military Mission, in which I was a junior staff officer.

There were numerous other senior officers, most of whom were then unknown to me: Air-Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, commanding the RAF in the Middle East; Air Vice-Marshal John D'Albiac, commanding the RAF in Greece; Admiral C. E. Turle, commanding the British Naval Mission in Greece; Brigadier A.W.S. Mallaby, from the War Office in London; Colonel Kitrilakis, of the Greek General Staff; and no doubt others. Finally, there were the diplomatists: Sir Michael Palairot, the British Minister to Greece; Pierson (Bob) Dixon, Eden's Private Secretary; Leon Melas, from the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and again no doubt others. It is only from the Greek and English records of the day that I have made certain of all these names.

In fact I learned all that I know about that day, although I was present, entirely from studying the Greek and English records. At the time I was only aware that we were probably about to be engaged in a battle with the Germans in northern Greece, though even that was not yet quite certain on 4 March. The discussions which had just ended on that day were devoted to putting right to an almost fatal misunderstanding between the Greeks and the British, which had occurred at a meeting ten days earlier. The point at issue was whether the joint Anglo-Greek forces should try to withstand the German attack on the northern frontier or on a line further south which took its name from the River Aliakmon; and if it was to be the latter, at what point the Greek forces in the north-east should begin withdrawing to the Aliakmon line.

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There is plenty of evidence on the roots of the misunderstanding. There are personal accounts written by the two chief participants, General Papagos and Anthony Eden. There also survive the official records, in Greek and English, of all the discussions. The first account to be published in English was a short version by Papagos, published by the Greek Office of Information: *The German Attack on Greece* (London 1946). It was followed by Papagos' more substantial account (which is cited in this article simply by his name): *The Battle for Greece 1940-1941* (English translation, Athens 1949). Eden's version was published in volume II of his Memoirs: *The Reckoning* (London 1965). But his immediate reactions were described in telegrams sent to Churchill from Athens and Cairo, which were quoted by Churchill in volume III of *The Second World War: The Grand Alliance* (London 1950). Each of these works is cited also simply by the author's name. The Greek official records of the meetings were published in *1940-41: Ellinika diplomatika engrapha* (Athens 1980). They are cited here, for simplicity, as *MFA Documents*. The relevant English records are contained in a single folder at the Public Record Office (FO 371/33145, R 3870/G, 12 June 1942), cited here as *FO Report*. This is the final printed version of the report of the Secretary of State's mission to the Eastern Mediterranean in 1941¹.

1. The printed version (hereafter *FO Report*) begins with an extensive *Report on the Mission of the Secretary of State to the Eastern Mediterranean, February-April 1941* (pp. 3-15), written by Eden's private secretary, Pierson Dixon, and dated 21 April 1941. The original documents are included as twenty-two Annexes (pp. 16-109). An earlier, unprinted collection of the documents is in FO 371/29782, R 4102, 20 April 1941. It contains only eight documents, omitting among others Eden's account of his meeting with the Yugoslav Ambassador

Certain points which were crucial to the misunderstanding are worth emphasising from the start. The talks were conducted in French. The King, Korizis, Papagos and Eden were all fluent in French. Heywood was bilingual, being half-French by birth. Of the service personnel, Melas knew French and English, and Kitrilakis knew French but not English; neither of them was present throughout all the sessions. Dixon knew French and some Greek. The case of the rest of the senior officers is doubtful: Wavell could probably manage in French, but certainly none of them knew modern Greek.

Papagos stated that Heywood and Kitrilakis recorded the minutes of the conferences throughout². This cannot be wholly correct, first because Kitrilakis was not present at every session from beginning to end, and secondly because Heywood is described as having acted as interpreter³—an exacting role which could not be combined with recording minutes. On the Greek side, it seems probable that the recording of the minutes was shared between Melas and Colonel Kitrilakis⁴. On the British side, it is certain that all the principal discussions were recorded, jointly or severally, by Dixon (Eden's private secretary) and Mallaby (Dill's senior staff officer), apart from a preliminary conference in Athens on 13-15 January 1941, at which those two were not yet present and the record was made by Heywood⁵. It is also unfortunately certain that at no stage, until the eleventh hour (after the final session on 4 March), was any attempt made to compare the Greek and English records for accuracy and consistency.

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The story of the Anglo-Greek discussions of joint action on a defensive line in northern Greece begins with Wavell's visit to Athens on 13 January 1941. It was a natural consequence of the outbreak of war between Greece and Italy on 28 October 1940. The British government had given a guarantee, on 13 April 1939, to assist Greece (and also Roumania) against any threat of foreign aggression. When the Italians invaded Greece from Albania, Germany remained ostensibly neutral in this extension of the second world war, but

in Ankyra (*FO Report*, pp. 47-8) and two letters from Eden to Prince Paul on 3 and 18 March (*FO Report*, pp. 70 and 90-1).

2. Papagos, p. 310.

3. *MFA Documents*, p. 125; *FO Report*, pp. 20, 26.

4. Kitrilakis is sometimes miscalled Titrilakis in the English record: *FO Report*, pp. 51, 62.

5. FO 371/29782, R 4102, 20 April 1941, f. 115.

all the Balkan countries, as well as Britain, assumed that it was only a matter of time before the Germans also moved into south-east Europe. The Greek government was willing to accept British help at sea and in the air against Italy, but was reluctant to accept British land forces on Greek soil unless and until the German threat was seen to be inescapable. General Metaxas, the Greek Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, argued that to send an inadequate British force to Greece would merely provoke a German attack. He was prepared to resist a German attack, but not to give an excuse for it.

The Germans assured the Greeks, through diplomatic channels, that they would take no hostile action against Greece unless the British established a force at Thessaloniki or used Greek air bases to bomb the Roumanian oil-fields which were already under German control⁶. By mid-November the imminence of a German threat to the Balkans was intensified by the presence of German forces in Roumania and the arrival of German officers and technicians in Bulgaria, ostensibly as "tourists"⁷. The Yugoslav and Turkish governments shared the Greeks' anxieties, but were likewise reluctant to commit themselves to any military action unless their own countries were attacked. Both governments, however, regarded Thessaloniki as a vital interest of their own. Prince Paul, the Regent of Yugoslavia, repeatedly declared in private that Yugoslavia would never adhere to the Tripartite Pact (which had linked Germany, Italy and Japan since September 1940), but his strength of purpose was not beyond suspicion.

Until the last few weeks of his life, Metaxas was willing to discuss with the British only the war against Italy. He was reluctant, for example, to allow his country to be represented at an Inter-Allied Conference in London early in 1941, because all the other countries represented were at war with Germany as well as Italy⁸. He finally agreed, under pressure, to allow the Greek Minister in London to attend as an observer; but in fact his scruples were overtaken (after his death) by the course of events, before the Conference came to sign a joint declaration. All these understandable hesitations formed the political background to Wavell's visit to Athens in mid-January 1941.

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On 9 January the British Minister in Athens (Palairat) wrote a letter to Metaxas containing an offer from Eden to ask Wavell to visit Athens for

6. *MFA Documents*, pp. 37-8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19, 26, 28-9.

discussion of questions arising from the campaign against Italy⁹. The letter did not mention Germany, which made it easier for Metaxas to accept. Wavell was to arrive on the 13th. On the 12th, according to an internal memorandum by Metaxas, Palairet told him that the British government was sending strong warnings to the governments of Yugoslavia, Turkey and Bulgaria about the German threat to the Balkans¹⁰. Though Palairet did not say so, Roumania's fate was already regarded as a lost cause, which was embarrassing since the British guarantee in April 1939 had covered Roumania as well as Greece. Palairet further said that the British government would be able to increase its "reinforcement" to Greece because of the successful outcome of Wavell's campaign against the Italians in North Africa. Wavell, he said, would discuss the details¹¹.

Metaxas evidently assumed that the discussions with Wavell would touch on the German threat to Greece, and he placed no veto on such an extension. In his memorandum, he noted that Palairet had not specified whether the "reinforcement" would consist of "an increase in the air force or also the despatch of a land force". He himself had not put this question directly. Instead, he had emphasised to Palairet in reply that if the British proposed to send a land force, then (a) it must amount to not less than 10 divisions, and (b) it must arrive as a whole, not piecemeal¹². The first of these conditions could not possibly be met.

Wavell duly arrived the next day. He met Papagos on 14 January and Metaxas the following day. Both sides were accompanied by a number of senior officers: on the British side, Longmore and D'Albiac from the RAF, and Heywood from the British Military Mission; and others similarly on the Greek side, including Kitrilakis to record the minutes. At Wavell's meeting with Metaxas, Palairet and an Under-Secretary from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (N. Mavroudis) were also present. The discussions included the German threat as well as the war in Albania¹³. Initially Papagos assumed that the intention would be to hold a joint defensive line in Macedonia, north of Thessaloniki. But Wavell explained, disappointingly, that he could only provide some artillery units. Both Metaxas and Papagos argued that the arrival of an inadequate British force in Macedonia would merely provoke an immediate German

9. *Ibid.*, p. 48

10. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-7.

attack based on Bulgaria. Wavell argued that a British presence would encourage the Yugoslavs and Turks to resist German pressure, but Metaxas replied that, on the contrary, when they observed its small size, they would be discouraged. He argued, unexpectedly, that “the only obstacle to the Germans coming in today is Russia”¹⁴.

It was during these discussions that Papagos mentioned for the first time what came to be called the “Aliakmon line” (by the British) or the “Aliakmon position” (by the Greeks) as a possible defensive line to be held by a joint Anglo-Greek force¹⁵. The exact route of the line underwent a number of modifications (as can be seen on the map reproduced from Papagos’ memoirs)¹⁶. So did the full name of the line. The River Aliakmon did not figure in Papagos’ early definition, which spoke of the “Kaimakcalan-Vermion-Olympus position”; and this is not surprising, for the original line so described ran some fifty miles forward of the river, parallel to it, until the river changed course and cut across the line at right angles. Neither the Greek record of the discussion nor Wavell’s telegraphic report on it to the Chiefs of Staff in London make any mention of the Aliakmon line as such¹⁷. The only evidence that such a line was actually discussed is in Papagos’ post-war account.

The discussion on this point was evidently hypothetical and inconclusive. It also involved a paradox. To choose any variant of what was to become known as the Aliakmon line meant sacrificing the defence of Thessaloniki. Wavell was offering a British force, albeit an inadequate one, which would land at Thessaloniki and help the Greeks to form a defensive line north of the city. Metaxas and Papagos hesitated to accept it for fear of provoking the very attack which it was intended to resist. It was this reluctance on the part of the Greeks which led Papagos to hint at—one can hardly say “propose”—a line which presupposed the loss of Thessaloniki. There was only one possible escape from this dilemma: it lay in the hope that at least the Yugoslavs, and perhaps also the Turks (both of whom regarded Thessaloniki as vital to their own interests), might be induced to join the Greeks and the British in resisting a German attack. Much was to depend in the following weeks on the possibility of this hope being fulfilled.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

15. Papagos, p. 318. The spelling of place-names has been harmonised throughout, but in quotations from the English records English transliterations are retained.

16. See map on p. 193.

17. For Wavell’s report, see CAB 79/8, COS (41) 23rd meeting, 18 January 1941, quoting WO Tel. P. 26 Cypher, 15 January 1941. The first reference to the line as such in the Chiefs of Staff minutes calls it the “Veria line”: CAB 79/9, COS (41) 81st meeting, 3 March 1941.

No decision was taken on Papagos' suggestion during Wavell's visit. Metaxas made it clear that he did not contemplate inviting a British land force to Greece at all, unless and until the Germans entered Bulgaria in force. It would be difficult to define when that moment came, because the Germans were already arriving in Bulgaria as individuals in civilian clothes. In any case Metaxas would not accept a British force which he considered inadequate. In a formal note dated 18 January, he rejected Wavell's offer of a force consisting only of artillery and armoured fighting vehicles, unsupported by infantry¹⁸. But he confirmed that in principle a British force, provided it were sufficiently large, would be welcomed "if German troops were to enter Bulgaria by crossing the Danube or the Dobrudja frontier"¹⁹. Wavell returned to Cairo on the 17th.

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Events moved fast in the following weeks. On 29 January Metaxas died. In the absence of a Parliament, his successor as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister (Alexander Korizis) was simply nominated by the King. Korizis, who was a banker by profession, differed from Metaxas in having no military background and no past association with Germany. It was therefore reasonable to suppose that the King, who was closely associated with the British, would determine Greece's foreign policy. After a decent interval of mourning, on 8 February Palairot approached Korizis to ascertain whether the condition laid down by Metaxas, that British troops would be welcomed if and when the Germans entered Bulgaria in force, was still regarded as operative. This was confirmed, but it was again emphasised that an inadequate force would merely provoke a German attack²⁰.

On the same date the Foreign Office in London told the Greek Minister (Ch. Simopoulos) of Britain's increasing anxiety about German penetration of Bulgaria²¹. By 14 February the Foreign Office was pressing the Greek government, through Simopoulos, to invite the despatch of British troops to Macedonia as soon as the German army entered Bulgaria²². This course, which was assumed to be implicit in the assurance given by Metaxas and renewed by Korizis, apparently presupposed that it would be possible to form

18. *MFA Documents*, pp. 62-3.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-6, 77-9.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

a line north of Thessaloniki. The pressure was renewed on the 18th²³. Greek sources, however, suggested that the build-up of German forces in Bulgaria, although substantial, had been exaggerated²⁴. The Greeks continued to give first priority to the war against Italy in Albania when pressing the British for increased support.

The German build-up in Bulgaria could have been aimed at either Yugoslavia or Greece or Turkey. Each of the three governments understandably feared that its own territory would be the first target. Hitler had already decided that his ultimate target was the Soviet Union, but none of the governments concerned was yet aware of it, though the British already had some inkling from Ultra intelligence. It was against this background that Eden undertook a tour of the Middle East, Greece and Turkey, accompanied by Dill, in February and March 1941. He visited Athens (twice) and Ankyra, as well as Cyprus (where he had a second meeting with Turkish Ministers). Prince Paul, however, was too nervous to receive him in Belgrade, so Dill went there without him to meet senior officers of the Yugoslav General Staff.

The eventual outcome of the tour by Eden and Dill was a decision to send a British-ANZAC-Polish force to Greece to form a joint defensive line against German attack. The decision was taken in spite of the increasingly clear signs that the Yugoslavs and Turks were unlikely to enter the war of their own accord. It was once supposed that the decision had been thrust on Wavell against his better judgment for political reasons: for example, it would have made a bad impression world-wide if Britain had failed to honour her guarantee to Greece as well as to Roumania and, at an earlier date, to Poland. But Wavell's biographer has established that, on the contrary, he supported the decision on military grounds²⁵. At least, he did so before the misunderstanding emerged about the Aliakmon line. Unfortunately, his intelligence staff also failed to detect in time the build-up of German forces in North Africa, to bolster the defeated Italians, simultaneously with their penetration of the Balkans.

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Eden and Dill arrived in Athens from Cairo on 22 February, accompanied by Wavell and Longmore; also by Dixon (Eden's private secretary), Mallaby (Dill's staff officer), and a naval staff officer on behalf of the C-in-C of the

23. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

25. R. Lewin, *The Chief* (London 1980), pp. 102-116.

Mediterranean Fleet. In Athens they were joined by Heywood and Turle, commanding the British Military and Naval Missions respectively. Their discussions with the Greeks began that evening, a Saturday, at the King's residence at Tatoi, outside Athens. The discussions were divided into four sessions: (1) a plenary meeting, to discuss policy and resources; (2) a meeting of the senior officers, to discuss strategy and tactics; (3) an informal private meeting of the British political and military representatives; and (4) a final plenary meeting. From the English record, it appears that session (1) began at 17.30²⁶, and from the Greek record that session (2) began at 18.20²⁷. Both records indicate that the King presided at sessions (1) and (4)²⁸, though neither records any specific intervention by him. There is naturally no Greek record of session (3), nor is there any record of any corresponding Greek discussion in private at this stage.

The emergence of the fateful misunderstanding about what was agreed is best approached by an examination, first, of the personal impressions recorded by Eden and Papagos, and then of the Greek and English official records. Eden's version was drafted within 48 hours, in a telegram to Churchill, before he left Athens for Ankyra. Papagos' version was written between 1943 and 1945, in German captivity. It was published in Greek in 1945, and later in French and English translations. Eden's version is closer to the English record (Dixon and Mallaby clearly having a hand in both) than Papagos' version is to the Greek record. But much more serious than these internal discrepancies is the inconsistency between the two official records.

Eden reported to Churchill in a telegram dated 24 February that "agreement was reached today (23rd) with the Greek Government on all points"²⁹. On the question of the joint Anglo-Greek line to be held against German attack, he said that

"...in view of the doubtful attitude of Yugoslavia the only line that could be held and would give time for withdrawal of troops from Albania would be a line west of the Vardar, Olympus-Veria-Edessa-Kaimakalan. If we could be sure of Yugoslav moves it should be possible to hold a line farther north from the mouth of the Nestos to Beles, covering Salonika (Thessaloniki). It would be impossible, unless Yugoslavia came in, to hold a line covering Salonika in view

26. *FO Report*, p. 20.

27. *MFA Documents*, p. 101.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-9; *FO Report*, pp. 20, 26.

29. Churchill, III, p. 67.

of exposure of Greek left flank to German attack”³⁰.

Eden did not, in this telegram, call the proposed line the “Aliakmon line”, as he was to do later; nor did he claim that Papagos had agreed to withdraw his forces in the north-east to that line immediately: indeed, his exposition rather implied the contrary.

Papagos’ personal account, written over two years later, differed materially from that of Eden³¹. In the first place, Papagos made no reference to a “withdrawal of troops from Albania”. It is possible that on this point Eden misunderstood him when Papagos was speaking of a withdrawal not from Albania but from the north-east. Papagos also made it clear, in retrospect, that he was not contemplating an *immediate* withdrawal from the north-east either. He wrote that:

“I insisted, however, that before taking such a grave decision as would involve the evacuation of the whole region to the east of the Axios (Vardar) and the abandonment of this part of our national territory, the attitude of Yugoslavia should first be completely clarified, and I proposed that the Yugoslav Government should be informed of the decisions we were prepared to take depending on the policy they intended to adopt.

”This suggestion of mine was adopted, and it was decided that the British Foreign Secretary should send an urgent code message to the British Minister in Belgrade. Depending on the nature of the reply the order for evacuation and withdrawal would be issued or not, as the case might be”³².

Papagos repeatedly maintained, both at later meetings with Eden, Dill and Wavell, and in his post-war memoirs, that his own account of what had been agreed was “expressly recorded in the minutes”³³. He meant, of course, the Greek minutes, not the English minutes, which he never saw. But one would expect that, on a matter of such crucial importance, the two records would say the same thing. Unfortunately, this is not the case. It is clear that neither after this meeting nor after later meetings (apart from the final session on 4 March) was any attempt made to harmonise the two records, which consequently show not merely inconsistencies but contradictions.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

31. Papagos, pp. 322-3.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

They differ in style, presentation and detail. The Greek record is written in high *katharevousa*, which was the official language of the day. In session (2), concerned with military topics, it apparently reports the entire dialogue, speaker by speaker, in direct speech³⁴. The English record is rather a summary of what was said, not always in the same order as the Greek, and always in indirect speech. The Greek record does not mention the presence of Heywood and Kitrilakis, although Papagos' memoirs record that these two kept the minutes at all the conferences from January onwards. The English record mentions the presence of Heywood "who acted as interpreter", and of Kitrilakis "for part of the discussion"³⁵.

Sometimes the discrepancies reflect strongly felt national interests. The Greeks, according to their own record, asked for the inclusion of Greek troops of Dodecanesian origin in any operations aimed at capturing the Dodecanese islands from Italian occupation³⁶. (An attack on Castellorizo was in fact already planned, by the British alone, but it miscarried). Eden said that this could be considered, but there is no reference to it in the English record. On the other hand, the British, according to their own record, were insistent on defining the right of their designated commander, General Wilson, while serving under Papagos' overall command, to refer any substantial disagreement with him "to the C-in-C, Middle East, who, if unable to settle the question with General Papagos direct, would appeal to His Majesty's Government"³⁷. No such condition is mentioned in the Greek record.

Even where the two records cover the same facts, there are significant discrepancies in detail. In the list of units and equipment to be included in the British Expeditionary Force, most items are identical, but two are different: the English record specifies 100,000 men and 240 field guns; the Greek record has 97,000 men and 216 field guns³⁸. No doubt the latter is right, since the Greeks noted the composition of the three waves in which the BEF was to arrive (omitted from the English record) and correctly added up the figures supplied, whereas the British gave only the total, rounded upwards. On the other hand, according to the Greek record, Papagos specified that the Greek contribution to the combined front would be "about 30 battalions", whereas

34. *MFA Documents*, pp. 101-5.

35. *FO Report*, p. 20.

36. *MFA Documents*, p. 98.

37. *FO Report*, p. 29.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 21; *MFA Documents*, p. 99.

the English record has “35 battalions”, unqualified³⁹. A number of other examples could be cited.

The most important discrepancy, however, concerns the timing of the Greek withdrawal to the agreed line. The fact that the line itself was differently described at different times is not material. There is no doubt that the Greek and British Generals had the same understanding of what was meant by the eventual term, chosen for convenience and brevity: the “Aliakmon line” or “Aliakmon position”. (Both used both terms, though the British generally preferred “line” and the Greeks “position”). There is also no doubt that both had the same understanding of what was meant by the alternative “fortified lines”, which consisted of the frontier with Bulgaria, turning south-east along either the River Nestos or the River Strymon (Struma). On the question of the timing of a Greek withdrawal from the forward positions to the Aliakmon line, if there was to be such a withdrawal, there are inconsistencies between the two records which amount virtually to contradictions.

The two records agree that the attitude of Yugoslavia would be crucial. The attitude of Turkey was also important, since the Greeks had a force distantly located in Western Thrace, but it was tacitly recognised from an early stage that the Turks were most unlikely to take any risks in support of the Greeks. Papagos’ opinion, according to both records, was that it would only be possible to hold a line north of Thessaloniki (the “frontier line”, whether continued by the Nestos or the Strymon) if the Yugoslavs would join the alliance and resist a German attack⁴⁰. Otherwise it would be necessary to retire to the Aliakmon line. What was at issue was whether that withdrawal should begin immediately in any case or only after it had been ascertained that the Yugoslavs would not fight.

The Greek version comprises first a statement by Papagos and a discussion on it at session (2), and secondly a summary of the relevant political discussion at session (4). Papagos’ exposition was as follows:

“With regard to the position on which resistance to the German invasion is to be sought, the choice is significantly influenced by the attitude to be maintained by Yugoslavia. For our aim in the event of a German invasion is to establish somewhere a front covering the main body of Greece. In the event that the Yugoslavs do not enter the war, the Kaimakalan-Edessa-River Aliakmon position is indicated, to which the forces in Eastern Macedonia must withdraw. In

39. *MFA Documents*, p. 102; *FO Report*, p. 24, para. 6.

40. *FO Report*, p. 24, para. 3; *MFA Documents*, p. 102.

effect, any position from the River Strymon eastwards would easily fall in its entirety from the Germans operating on our left. On the other hand, if Yugoslavia entered the war against Germany, the course indicated is for us to secure a position covering Thessaloniki"⁴¹.

There followed a passage on Turkey. If the Turks came into the war, attacking Bulgaria, Papagos would leave Greek forces in Western Thrace to support them. If not, he would withdraw them along with those in Eastern Macedonia (the two regions being separated by the River Nestos). The later discussion showed that he thought active operations by the Turks unlikely: they might declare war, but do nothing unless attacked⁴².

His main exposition proceeded:

"In conclusion, if neither the Yugoslavs nor the Turks enter the war in the event of German action against Greece, the Kaimakalan-Aliakmon line is indicated as a defensive position. Onto this line we must withdraw all our forces in good time, leaving in Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace only the garrisons of the forts and a few small covering forces. As a consequence of the above, I consider that the problem of resisting a German attack on Greek soil will be significantly influenced by the relevant attitudes maintained by Yugoslavia and Turkey. This political datum is absolutely essential for the preparation of the appropriate plan of action"⁴³.

In answer to a question from Wavell, Papagos said that the withdrawal would take about 20 days, and should start as soon as possible in order to minimise the effect on local morale. He stressed the importance of an early decision again when Wavell asked if it would be possible for the BEF to disembark at Thessaloniki instead of Piraeus or Volos. The dialogue went on as follows in the Greek record:

"Papagos: Disembarkation will only be possible at Thessaloniki if the Greek forces in Macedonia have not withdrawn to the Veria-Aliakmon River position, since then obviously they cover Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki is a vital point for Yugoslavia. If Yugoslavia enters the war, then we can hold either the River Strymon position or the Beles-River Nestos position. The first of these has a front of about 123 km. (77 miles), the second about 215 km. (134 miles). Both require

41. *MFA Documents*, p. 102.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

the same force to make them secure, since the Nestos position has a number of weak points. Consequently one could say that, if the Yugoslavs enter the war, there is advantage in having the Greek forces secure the Nestos front, in which case the disembarkation can take place at Thessaloniki, and simultaneously at Amphipolis and even Kavala.

"Dill: Do you think the time has come to withdraw the forces in Eastern Macedonia to the Aliakmon River position?"

"Papagos: If Yugoslavia is going to take no action, it is advantageous to do so as soon as possible, not only from the military point of view but also from the political, as has been said already, and additionally to ensure that this withdrawal has the minimum possible impact on the morale of the Macedonian population.

"Wavell: And if at this moment we were to receive a telegram that the Yugoslavs will enter the war?"

"Papagos: Then we will hold a position covering Thessaloniki"⁴⁴.

The discussion of Papagos' exposition at session (2) covered a number of other points, most of them very briefly. The only reference to the Albanian front in conjunction with the Aliakmon line made it clear that Papagos intended simply a "contraction" (symptyxis) of the line in Albania, in order to align its right flank with the left flank of the new line in Macedonia⁴⁵: he never spoke of withdrawing troops from Albania to man the new line. He did also outline, in response to a question from Dill, his intentions if the Turks entered the war and the Yugoslavs did not⁴⁶. But this improbable contingency was soon dismissed from consideration.

On the crucial question of Yugoslav intentions, the Greek record of session (4)—the final plenary session—reads as follows:

"After the private discussion between the Commander-in-Chief and the British Generals, there followed the final plenary discussion, at which General Papagos spoke first and summarised the military position.

"Mr. Eden then stated that the British Generals agreed with General Papagos' views, which took as a presupposition for the deployment and location of forces the non-participation of the Yugoslav army.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

"The position of Yugoslavia was discussed in this connection, and it was decided in the first instance that Mr. Eden should send a letter to the Regent of Yugoslavia in which, after setting out the decisions taken during his visit to Athens, he would ask the Regent to state on that basis what attitude Yugoslavia would adopt in the event of German forces entering Bulgaria. However, after reservations had been expressed, initially by General Papagos and then by the British Generals, about the dangers which might arise from the communication of military plans, it was preferred that Mr. Eden should send a telegram to the British Minister in Belgrade instructing him to put the question to Prince Paul, what would Yugoslavia do in the event of a German threat to Thessaloniki"⁴⁷.

The Greek record goes no further on the subject of the timing of any withdrawal of Greek forces to the Aliakmon line. By implication, it seems to confirm that Papagos, in his own mind, expected to hear of an answer from Belgrade before he decided whether to order the withdrawal or not. But it cannot be said to confirm his post-war claim that the procedure ("depending on the nature of the reply the order for evacuation and withdrawal would be issued or not, as the case might be") was "expressly recorded in the minutes"⁴⁸. The English record, on the contrary, expressly contradicts Papagos' claim.

Although it agrees substantially with the Greek record in defining the strategic options, the English record differs diametrically on the timing of the decision. The following passage from the record of session (2) is crucial:

"5. General Papagos realised the extreme importance of time, which makes it impossible to wait for Yugoslavia and Turkey to declare themselves. He had therefore asked his government for permission to begin the withdrawal as soon as possible, and in any case before a German move makes the withdrawal look like a retreat. It could be made to appear that the Greek troops were being sent to reinforce the Albanian front. Troops would be withdrawn first from rear areas in Macedonia, then (if agreed with Turkey) from Thrace, and lastly from the frontier of Macedonia"⁴⁹.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

48. Papagos, p. 324.

49. *FO Report*, p. 24, para. 5. In this paragraph the printed text differs from the unprinted (FO 371/29782, R 4102, 20 April 1941, f. 121) in that the verbs which were in the present tense in the earlier version have been shifted to the past tense in the later ("realised" for "realises" etc.).

The English record does not suggest at this point that the British Generals thought the withdrawal had already been ordered, nor even that it was to be issued forthwith. A later paragraph in the record of the same session indicates a recognition that other options were still available:

“11. The British forces could not disembark at Salonika (Thessaloniki), but must use Piraeus and Volos. Though the use of Salonika would help towards a more rapid concentration, its use must depend on whether Yugoslavia takes action or not.

”Salonika is vital to Yugoslavia; if she realises the danger and comes in, the Nestos River line is the best to hold, and it needs no larger forces than would the Struma (Strymon) line; moreover, Kavalla would then be available as a port in addition to Salonika.

”12. If Yugoslavia said tonight that she was going to fight, the Greeks would hold the Nestos line and ask the British to land at Salonika and Kavalla. Asked if the Greeks could cover disembarkation at Salonika, General Papagos said they would do their best...”⁵⁰.

At this point the Generals were evidently contemplating at least the possibility of holding a frontier line. If the Yugoslavs entered the war, they would have to try to do so; if the Greeks had already started their withdrawal, they could not cover a British disembarkation at Thessaloniki, still less at Kavalla; and it would make no sense for the British to disembark at these northern ports (particularly Kavalla) if they were to retire immediately to the Aliakmon line. Consequently, at session (2) the question was still open. It could only be decided at the plenary session (4).

After session (2) was adjourned, there was a private meeting between Eden and the Generals, which is recorded (in the English record only) as session (3). Several points were discussed, of which the most important was minuted as follows:

“Unless we could be sure of the Yugoslavs joining in, it was not possible to contemplate holding a line covering Salonika (Thessaloniki); in view of the doubtful attitude of Yugoslavia, the only sound plan from the military point of view was to stand on the Haliakmon (Aliakmon) line.

”It was agreed that the Greeks should be informed accordingly at the forthcoming plenary meeting”⁵¹.

50. *FO Report*, pp. 24-5, para. 11-12.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

A curious feature of the record of session (3) is that the name of Wavell is not included among those present, though he was certainly present at sessions (2) and (4).

The English record of session (4) shows Papagos immediately making the British Generals' point for them:

"...in view of the dubious attitude of the Yugoslavs and Turks, it was not possible to contemplate holding a line covering Salonika (Thessaloniki) and that the only sound line in the circumstances was the line of the Haliacmon (Aliakmon)"⁵².

This judgment was endorsed at once by Wavell. Eden re-emphasised it a little later:

"Firstly, the attitude of Yugoslavia made it desirable, from the military point of view, to organise the Haliacmon line at the earliest possible moment....

"Secondly, military requirements demanded an immediate withdrawal of the Greek forces in Eastern Macedonia to the Haliacmon line"⁵³.

But Eden then proceeded to outline three possibilities "from the political aspect". The first was "to withdraw the troops without waiting for Yugoslavia to declare herself"; the second was "to begin the withdrawal concurrently with an approach to the Yugoslav Government"; the third was "to wait until Yugoslavia had made her intentions clear". Eden was doubtful whether a quick answer could be obtained from the Yugoslavs, but he was prepared "if the Greek Government wished it, to send a Staff Officer to Belgrade to discuss the position with the Prince Regent"⁵⁴.

The contributions of Eden at this point are important in view of their later disagreements. The Greek record has been quoted above. The English record reads as follows, reporting Eden's own words:

"It was questionable how much the Prince Regent should be told of our plans. It might be desirable to tell him that H.M.G., in agreement with the Greek Government intended to send a British force to Greece, and to explain that choice of a line for the Anglo-Greek forces must depend on the attitude of Yugo-Slavia; if we could be certain of Yugo-Slavia joining in upon a German attack upon Greece,

52. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

it would be possible to constitute a line to defend Salonika; so long as we were uncertain of the Yugoslav attitude we could only contemplate holding a line West and South of Salonika. It must, however, be borne in mind that, in revealing our intentions to Prince Paul, we ran the risk of them being passed on to the Germans"⁵⁵.

The English record then gives Papagos' proposal that Prince Paul should be told only "in general terms" of the British intention, with emphasis on the effect that the Yugoslav attitude would have on "the dispositions of the Anglo-Greek forces", and on Yugoslavia's "capital interest" in Thessaloniki. Eden then put three questions to the meeting for decision. The first was: "Whether a British Staff Officer should be sent to Belgrade to see Prince Paul"; the second was: "Whether preparations should at once be made and put into execution to withdraw the Greek advanced troops in Thrace and Macedonia to the line which we should be obliged to hold if the Yugoslavs did not come in"; the third was: "Whether work should at once be begun on the improvement of communications in Greece in order to facilitate the deployment of our mechanised forces"⁵⁶.

According to the English record, in each case: "It was agreed that this should be done". But in the first case, the decision was amended by an Addendum to the effect that "instead of sending an Officer to Belgrade, Mr. Eden should telegraph a message to Prince Paul...(to) draw attention to the danger to Salonika which was inherent in German activities in the Balkans and enquire what were the views of the Prince Regent on this subject"⁵⁷. Eden did so, through the British Minister in Belgrade (Ronald Campbell). The Addendum brings the English record more or less into harmony with the Greek record on this point (though later Papagos was seemingly uncertain whether what was despatched as a letter or a telegram)⁵⁸. But it is possible that the re-opening of the discussion on Eden's first question may have overshadowed the discussion of his second question, and left uncertainty in Papagos' mind whether that too had been re-opened.

The failure to compare the Greek and English records at the time now becomes tragically plain. Papagos' recollection was that the decision on the timing of the withdrawal to the Aliakmon line was conditional on the reply from Belgrade. The Greek record does not, as he claimed, expressly support

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

58. *MFA Documents*, p. 125 (referring to a telegram); p. 128 (referring to a letter).

him, though it is consistent, in its silence, with his recollection. The English record almost explicitly contradicts him. It could perhaps, he argued in an exercise of grammatical pedantry, that in the phrase "whether preparations should at once be made and put into execution", the words "at once" qualify only the preparations and not the execution. But that would be a tenuous argument on which to rest the fate of a campaign. Nor could such a pedantry have survived close examination of the two records at the time.

In this context, the conduct of General Heywood (who was later killed in an air crash) seems inexplicable. As interpreter (in French and English) throughout all four sessions, he was the only man present who could understand every argument from both sides at first hand. He did not, as Papagos thought, keep the English record, but he must have seen it. As head of the Mission to the Greek Army, he was in regular contact with Papagos: they frequently dined together at the Hotel Grande Bretagne, where Heywood had his HQ. Papagos, by his own account, repeatedly asked Heywood whether a reply from Belgrade to Eden's message had been received, and the answer was always negative. At a later meeting, on 3 March, according to the Greek account, Papagos expressly asked Heywood to confirm this, which he did⁵⁹. How could he have failed to tell Papagos that the withdrawal to the Aliakmon line was not, in the British view, conditional on the reply from Belgrade, or to tell his own superiors that in Papagos' view it was so conditional?

This question can never be answered. Nor can a similar question about Eden's conduct, or rather what he failed to do, during the same period. The telegram to Campbell in Belgrade for Prince Paul had been sent. It drew attention to the German threat to Thessaloniki, and invited the Prince Regent's views on it⁶⁰. On 26 February, when Eden arrived in Ankyra, he received a telegram from Campbell to the effect that the Prince Regent's reply would be communicated through the Yugoslav Ambassador in Ankyra⁶¹. The Yugoslav Ambassador eventually called on Eden at the British Embassy on the evening of the 27th. By then Eden was in a bad temper, for several reasons. The Anglo-Turkish discussions had not gone satisfactorily. The Yugoslav Ambassador had come from a dinner with his Italian and German colleagues and he had forgotten to bring the message⁶².

Eden peremptorily required him to go back for it. On his return, Eden

59. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

60. *FO Report*, p. 6.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

62. Eden, II, pp. 208-9.

told him the substance of Campbell's telegram, and asked for Prince Paul's reply. The Yugoslav Ambassador explained that when he had learned of Eden's impending visit, he had asked Belgrade for instructions about the lines on which he should speak to Eden. He had received these instructions on 26 February, but (in Eden's words) he did not think they were "in any sense intended to be a reply to the message from The King or to one from myself". (King George VI had also communicated separately with Prince Paul). The message which the Ambassador read out (or summarised) fully justified his negative description. It was evasive and apologetic. The only positive statement in it was that "Yugoslavia is decided to defend herself against any aggression and not to permit the passage of foreign troops across her territory". It argued that this was helpful to the British, because it meant that the Germans would have to by-pass Yugoslavia in order to invade Greece. In conclusion, the Ambassador added that "Yugoslavia could not in present circumstances assume a definite attitude and begged His Majesty's Government not to insist on her doing so". There was evidently no reference to the question of Yugoslavia's attitude towards the German threat to Thessaloniki⁶³.

Eden in reply described the message as a "deplorable communication" and said that "the policy revealed was a purely negative one"⁶⁴. He ironically commiserated with the Ambassador for having to deliver it. Nevertheless, he chose to regard it as a reply to his communication from Athens to Belgrade. It was so described in his private secretary's summary: "The Yugoslav Ambassador, after several delays, finally brought the answer late on the evening of the 27th February, and it proved to be unsatisfactory"⁶⁵. If it was regarded as the expected answer, it seems strange that it was not communicated immediately to the Greeks, who were anxiously awaiting it.

The whole treatment of this episode on the British side is curiously off-hand. Eden's *Memoirs* do not even mention his own telegram to Belgrade, though they do mention the unsatisfactory message delivered by the Yugoslav Ambassador in Ankyra. At the time (though not when he came to write his *Memoirs*) he did not recognise the connection in the minds of the Greeks between the message and their military dispositions. But it is still surprising that he did not think of informing the Greeks until his return to Athens.

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63. *FO Report*, p. 47.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

After their visit to Ankyra, Eden and Dill returned to Athens on 2 March. They were joined there by Campbell from Belgrade and by Air-Marshal Longmore from Cairo. Wavell was not present on the first day, being represented by Arthur Smith, his Chief of Staff. The usual assemblage of staff officers and diplomatic officials was also in attendance. Although only eight days had passed since the previous meeting, the situation had dramatically changed. Eden's report to Churchill, dated 5 March, began ominously: "On arrival here we found a changed and disturbing situation and the atmosphere quite different from that of our last visit"⁶⁶. The reason lay in the fateful misunderstanding about the Aliakmon line.

At a preliminary private meeting in the Legation on 2 March, Heywood reported to Eden and Dill, without any reference to his own role in the matter, that Papagos had made no move to withdraw his forces in the north-east to the Aliakmon line⁶⁷. Papagos' reasons, as cited by Heywood, included shortage of time and anxiety about the effect on local morale. He made no mention of the absence of a reply from Belgrade to Eden's telegram, which was in fact Papagos' prime consideration. Although Campbell was present at the first plenary session with the Greeks later on 2 March, no question about it seems to have been put to him either. It is again clear that the British regarded it as irrelevant to the decision on the withdrawal from the north-east.

Eden in fact said at the private meeting that he had no doubt that the plenary session on 22 February had agreed on the withdrawal forthwith⁶⁸. Dill added that it would be "militarily unsound to attempt to hold any line other than the Aliakmon line", which would require eight divisions plus one in reserve. If Papagos could not withdraw the requisite force from the north-east, he said, then sufficient troops would have to be withdrawn from Albania instead. Other topics were also discussed at the private meeting: the bombing of Roumanian oil-fields, and the possible need to support the Turks if they came into the war. But nothing was said between them about the requirement of a reply from Belgrade to Eden's telegram.

The subsequent meeting with the Greeks began at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which also housed the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Two sessions took place in parallel: a military meeting, attended by Papagos, Dill, Longmore, D'Albiac, Turle, Smith, Heywood, Kitrilakis (called "Titrilakis"

66. Churchill, III, p. 87; Eden, II, p. 211.

67. *FO Report*, pp. 48-50.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 49. Eden repeated this account, adding that it was confirmed by Wavell, in his *Memoirs*, II, pp. 202-3.

in the English record), and other staff officers; and a political-diplomatic meeting, attended by Eden, Korizis, Palairot and Campbell, with other officials (including Dixon)⁶⁹. According to the Greek record, the former meeting began at 22.00⁷⁰; according to the English record, the latter meeting began at 22.45⁷¹. At some point before midnight, the two meetings merged, and later separated. The English record distinguishes four sessions: one political-diplomatic, two military, and one plenary. The Greek record consists of two documents only, one political-diplomatic, the other military. Once again it is clear that the respective records were not compared for accuracy.

Eden began the first session with an account of his conversations in Ankyra. According to the Greek record, but not the English one, he was reluctant at first to discuss his impressions, because he had already given an account to the Greek Minister in Ankyra, but he eventually repeated them under pressure⁷². The Turks, he said, would fight if they were attacked, but were unlikely otherwise to assist the Greeks. His report on the Yugoslavs was also disappointing. He had “done everything possible to persuade Prince Paul to meet him but without success”. Campbell reported that the Yugoslavs “were in no state to act”, due to internal difficulties and German pressures⁷³. Neither mentioned the telegram which had so much exercised Papagos.

Korizis said that the Greeks would nevertheless resist a German attack. He again asked for some gesture from Britain to raise Greek morale. As examples, he suggested the abolition of the International Finance Commission in Greece, a commitment to settle the question of Cyprus “according to Greek desires”, and once more the participation of Greek troops (the Dodecanese Legion) in any operations against the Italians in the Dodecanese. Eden firmly ruled out the second request, but agreed that the other two could be discussed. The two records are substantially in accord on these points⁷⁴.

Eden then turned, with some impatience, to the strategic question which was uppermost in his mind. Why had Papagos departed from the agreement reached on 22 February about the Greek troops’ withdrawal to the Aliakmon line? Korizis invoked Papagos’ argument about shortage of time, according to the English record, or “material shortages”, according to the Greek⁷⁵. But

69. *FO Report*, pp. 51-5; *MFA Documents*, pp. 120-30.

70. *MFA Documents*, p. 125.

71. *FO Report*, p. 51.

72. *MFA Documents*, pp. 120-2.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-4; *FO Report*, p. 53.

75. *FO Report*, p. 53; *MFA Documents*. p. 124.

in neither record did he mention the Belgrade telegram. Evidently he did not really understand the problem, which was remitted to the concurrent military session. The Generals had already reached this point on their own. Dill and Papagos were fencing almost acrimoniously over it, according to both records, though the Greek record gives the initiative to Papagos and the English record gives it to Dill⁷⁶.

Both records agree that the military session began with a report by Dill on the talks in Ankyra. Then the Greek record says that Papagos asked for news about the Yugoslavs' intentions. Dill replied that there was none yet, thus again discounting the message received in Ankyra. He went on: "For the present, we can only count on ourselves alone, and we must consider the Aliakmon position". Papagos said that since the Germans were already in Bulgaria and could attack within 10 days, there was too little time for withdrawal to that position. The English record says he estimated that the withdrawal would take "at least 15 days"; the Greek record says "about 20 days"⁷⁷. At a later point in the discussion, both records agree that Dill said German movements would be handicapped by winter conditions; but only the English record gives his estimate that "three weeks might be a pessimistic forecast of the date of their attack on Greece"⁷⁸. Dill proved right on this point, for the German invasion did not begin until 6 April, nearly five weeks later; but their time-table was upset by unforeseen events in Yugoslavia on 25-27 March, which led to the simultaneous invasion of that country as well.

Inevitably some time was spent in discussion between Papagos and Dill of the reasons why the withdrawal of the Greek forces to the Aliakmon line had not begun. Papagos argued that "he had been waiting, as agreed at Tatoi, for a firm reply from Yugoslavia". Dill said "his impression of the decision at Tatoi had been that the movement of Greek forces to the Aliakmon line was to start at once". Papagos again disagreed⁷⁹. What was more important, however, was that he now insisted that it was too late to carry out the withdrawal. It was therefore preferable, he said, to hold a line based on the northern frontier. By making clear the intention to "secure Thessaloniki", this would encourage the Yugoslavs to resist German pressure⁸⁰. (Paradoxically, this was

76. *FO Report*, pp. 53-5; *MFA Documents*, pp. 125-8.

77. *FO Report*, p. 54; *MFA Documents*, p. 125.

78. *FO Report*, p. 54; *MFA Documents*, p. 127.

79. *FO Report*, p. 54; *MFA Documents*, pp. 125-6.

80. *FO Report*, p. 55.

similar to the argument which Wavell had used in January, and which Papagos had then rejected).

Of the two possible "frontier lines", one continued by the River Nestos and the other by the River Struma, Papagos preferred the former because, although longer, it was better prepared and would not require a larger force than the latter⁸¹. Dill said that it was impossible to hold such a line with the three or four Greek divisions available in the north-east; and he could not commit the British forces to the risk of landing partly at Piraeus, as already planned, and partly at Thessaloniki to help cover eastern Macedonia⁸². (Thus he in turn reversed the argument used by Wavell in January).

While this argument was in progress, Eden and Korizis entered the room, so turning the military discussion into a plenary session. Eden immediately demanded to know why the Greek withdrawal to the Aliakmon line had not been ordered. Papagos gave the familiar explanation. Eden read out the relevant passage from the English record of 22 February, and added that "consequently the transfer of the Greek forces in eastern Macedonia to the Aliakmon position ought to have been ordered"⁸³. Papagos made a detailed reply, arguing that he had himself posed the political question which depended on Yugoslavia's intentions: either to hold the Aliakmon position if the Yugoslavs would not come in, or to hold the "fortified position" (the frontier and the Nestos or Struma) in order to secure Thessaloniki if the Yugoslavs would come in.

Papagos quoted in particular the subsequent discussion on 22 February (of which there is no trace in the English record of either 22 February or 2 March):

"On the other hand, you will certainly recall that during the drafting of your letter⁸⁴ the question was raised whether something like the following phrase should be put in: that 'the deployment of the Greek forces will depend on Yugoslavia's reply, and thus it is urgent that the reply should be given'; but it was thought dangerous to put in such a phrase, and it was preferred, on my suggestion, to put in something like the following instead: 'if Yugoslavia feels concern in the event that Thessaloniki were at risk'. As I was in a hurry to decide on the transfer, or otherwise, of the forces in eastern Macedonia,

81. *Ibid.*

82. *MFA Documents*, p. 129.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

84. Papagos had referred to it (correctly) as a telegram earlier on the same day: *MFA Documents*, p. 125.

I was asking General Heywood every day if the expected reply from Yugoslavia had been received, and he was always replying in the negative. Up to this moment I have had no information on Yugoslavia's attitude, though I have had information about a mobilisation of the Yugoslav army at Skoplje"⁸⁵.

Seeing that it was pointless to argue over the responsibility for a past error, Eden left the room with Korizis. The military discussion then continued on what was to be done in the new situation. There were further brief references to the misunderstanding of 22 February, which showed that there was no way of reconciling the Greek and British recollections. There was also a serious disagreement about the line that ought now to be held: the Aliakmon position, or the "fortified position" of the frontier and the River Nestos.

In a sharp exchange which followed, there was perhaps another misunderstanding. When Papagos pressed for the forward line, Dill replied, in the English record: "General Papagos will have to fight the battle"⁸⁶. He may have meant only that the final choice must rest with Papagos because his would be the responsibility as Commander-in-Chief. But the Greeks took him to mean that they would have to fight alone, for in the Greek record Dill's reply reads: "If the defensive battle is to be fought on the fortified line, the British forces will not be able to come and help"⁸⁷. On this sombre note, after Papagos had once more insisted (in the Greek record) that the Greek withdrawal to the Aliakmon line was never intended to take place before a reply to Eden's telegram was received from Belgrade, the series of meetings on 2 March ended at midnight⁸⁸.

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On 3 March the military representatives met at 18.30 to continue the search for a solution to their problem. The interval was used to summon Wavell and Wilson from Cairo. There was no political or plenary session on this day. The King evidently learned, however, that things were going wrong, and he felt obliged to intervene personally. He summoned Korizis and Papagos to a meeting (the first of two such private sessions) on the morning of 4 March, before the joint meetings of the two sides⁸⁹.

85. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-9.

86. *FO Report*, p. 56, bottom.

87. *MFA Documents*, p. 130.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

By then the deadlock between the Generals had become complete. At the military session on 3 March, Papagos and Dill did no more than re-state their positions. Papagos was still determined to justify his decision not to order the withdrawal immediately after 22 February. To reinforce his position, he turned at one point to General Heywood and asked two questions (in the Greek record only):

“Do you remember that, from the day after the telegram in question was despatched to Yugoslavia, I was asking you every day whether Yugoslavia had replied, precisely in order that I might order the occupation of the position and the consequent transfer of forces to the Aliakmon position? If you had had any other understanding, would you not have said to me: what do you want the reply for, and that I ought to order the position to be occupied regardless of it?”⁹⁰.

Heywood replied, according to the Greek record (which gives his words in Greek, though they must have been spoken in French): “oui, mon Général”. This is the only occasion in either record when Heywood made a personal contribution to the discussion, other than acting as interpreter.

Wavell, who arrived during the meeting, supported Dill in saying that they had expected Papagos to have begun withdrawing his forces from the north-east already⁹¹. But both men were more concerned with what was to be done in the new circumstances. Dill still insisted on the Aliakmon line: the British force, he argued, should therefore be disembarked at Piraeus (and presumably Volos), as already planned, and not at Thessaloniki and Kavalla in order to man a forward position. Papagos argued that this would entail a division of forces, since it was too late to withdraw the entire Greek force from the north-east. He also invoked a new argument: the Bulgarian Prime Minister had announced on the previous day that Germany had promised to fulfil all his country’s revisionist aims—in other words, to allow Bulgaria to annex eastern Macedonia⁹². Therefore a withdrawal from the north-east would be seen as a betrayal of Greece’s national interests. (Surprisingly, this argument appears only in the English record). He also refused to withdraw troops from Albania, since they were already exhausted by several months in the front line⁹³. He urged again that the British should join the Greeks in

90. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 131; *FO Report*, p. 57.

92. *FO Report*, p. 57.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 59; *MFA Documents*, pp. 132-3.

forming a line north of Thessaloniki. Dill replied that the Aliakmon line was still "the lesser of two evils"⁹⁴. Later he argued that Papagos' plan was "not sound". Papagos replied: "Yes, but it is the only feasible one". Dill, however, said that "he could not recommend putting the only British reserves in the Middle East into this plan which he considered unsound"⁹⁵.

In both records the argument appears dispassionate, but in the end almost despairing. Each side said that it appreciated the difficulties of the other, but could not solve them. After each had repeated its proposals and objections once more, the final exchange is given in these words by the English record:

"C.I.G.S. said General Papagos was asking the British to put their only reserve into a situation which he himself considered unsolvable (*sic*).

"General Papagos said: 'I understand that perfectly, but you cannot get away from the fact that Germany has at present the initiative in the Balkans'⁹⁶.

In the Greek record, Dill concluded that "the problem is very difficult and must be re-examined by the politicians"⁹⁷. After a brief discussion of the bombing of Roumanian oil-fields, which is not included in the Greek record, the meeting adjourned for the night.

It was as a result of this deadlock that the King held the first of his two private meetings on 4 March with Korizis and Papagos. Papagos submitted a memorandum concluding that "if a force is not made available on the Aliakmon position amounting to about three divisions, whether those now deployed in eastern Macedonia or others to be taken from elsewhere, the British will refuse to send reinforcements to Greece". The discussion between the Greek King, Prime Minister and C-in-C, to judge from the Greek record, was brief. The King told Papagos that it was essential "at all costs to find a solution satisfying the British demands that their landings at Volos and Piraeus should be covered by the provision of Greek forces on the Aliakmon position". Papagos pointed out the inconvenience of dividing the Greek forces between two positions, but he reluctantly agreed that "in order to avert the non-appearance of the British forces in Greece", he would propose to transfer two divisions from eastern Macedonia and one in reserve near Korytsa (in Albania) to the Aliakmon position⁹⁸. The stage was now set for the final day's work.

94. *FO Report*, p. 58.

95. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

97. *MFA Documents* p. 133.

98. *Ibid.*

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There were three joint sessions on Tuesday 4 March, all of which took place at the British Legation. The King also held a second private audience with Korizis and Papagos (of which naturally there is only a Greek record) and a separate audience with Eden and the British Generals (of which there seems to be no record). The Greek and English records of the first two joint sessions show discrepancies, as usual; but those of the final session are identical, for the first time.

The first joint session, at 11.00, was attended by Papagos, Dill, Wavell, Wilson, Smith, Turle, D'Albiac, Mallaby and Kitrilakis. The Greek record omits the last three names⁹⁹. Again Heywood acted as interpreter. The records were presumably kept by Mallaby and Kitrilakis. The meeting was adjourned for twenty minutes at one point, to enable Dill, Wavell and Wilson to confer in private. The English record says that it resumed at 12.20¹⁰⁰. On the other hand, the Greek record says that after this adjournment and resumption, the meeting was adjourned "about 12.00" until the afternoon¹⁰¹. During the interval, two crucial meetings took place in private: one between the King, Korizis and Papagos (for the second time that day); the other between the King, Eden, Dill and Wavell. This was presumably the order in which the two private meetings were held, since Eden suggested that Papagos should see the King first¹⁰². In order to preserve Wavell's incognito, the King agreed to come to the British Legation, arriving at 12.30.

The second joint session on 4 March began at 17.45 according to the English record¹⁰³ or 18.30 according to the Greek¹⁰⁴. It was attended initially by the King, Papagos, Dill, Wavell, Mallaby and Kitrilakis. At one point it was adjourned to enable the British Generals to consult Eden. When it resumed, Eden himself joined the meeting, together with Turle, D'Albiac and Smith¹⁰⁵. Later, according to the English record (or at the same time, according to the Greek), Wilson joined the meeting. At the end of this session an agreed document was drafted in French, for signature at the third session by Papagos and

99. *Ibid.*, p. 136; *FO Report*, p. 60.

100. *FO Report*, p. 61, bottom.

101. *MFA Documents*, p. 138.

102. *FO Report*, p. 62, top.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

104. *MFA Documents*, p. 138.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 141; *FO Report*, p. 64.

Dill¹⁰⁶. In fact it seems not to have been signed until the following day, although dated 4 March¹⁰⁷.

The third joint session began, according to both records, at 22.00¹⁰⁸. It was attended by the King, Korizis, Eden, Papagos, Dill, Wavell, Wilson, Smith, Heywood, D'Albiac, and by staff officers including Mallaby and Kitrilakis; also by Dixon and presumably officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at some stage. The first business was the draft agreement, which was read out by Heywood. One amendment was made, and the document was remitted for signature without further discussion. The rest of the meeting was taken up with a discussion of tactical plans, especially for air operations. This was the only meeting in the whole series after which a close comparison of the Greek and English texts was made. It seems certain that one was a direct translation of the other. Evidently the English text was the original, since a remark by Eden is given in the Greek text as well as the English referring to the British as "us"¹⁰⁹.

The two records of the earlier meetings on 4 March show equally clearly, on the contrary, that they cannot have been compared for accuracy at the time. A few substantial discrepancies confirm this point. At the opening of the first session, the Greek record reports Papagos as quoting an intelligence report that the German attack could be expected "within 10-15 days"; the English record (which identifies the source as the Greek Military Attaché in Sofia) says "eight or ten days"¹¹⁰. In speaking of the location of Greek forces, the Greek record places a cavalry division "in the area of Korytsa"; the English record has "Konitsa", which is some 40 miles south of Korytsa¹¹¹. These discrepancies should not have survived a detailed comparison.

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The overriding problem on 4 March was Papagos' state of mind. Both records show that he harped continually on the strategic consequences of the misunderstanding on 22 February¹¹². He still thought that the logical course

106. French text in *MFA Documents*, pp. 145-6; Greek translation, *ibid.*, pp. 237-8; English and French texts in *FO Report*, pp. 68-9.

107. *FO Report*, p. 66, top.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 65; *MFA Documents*, p. 142.

109. 'The Secretary of State said that he fully realised it was for the Greek Government and not for us to say when the first attack could be made': identically in *MFA Documents*, p. 144 and *FO Report*, p. 67.

110. *MFA Documents*, p. 136; *FO Report*, p. 60.

111. *MFA Documents*, p. 137; *FO Report*, p. 61.

112. *MFA Documents*, pp. 137-8; *FO Report*, p. 62.

was to hold the “frontier position”, which was well fortified. But since the British did not agree, and since (in the Greek record) “we are concerned that the British forces should come to our aid”¹¹³, he had revised his plans and ordered a partial withdrawal from the north-east so as to concentrate a sufficient force on the “Kaimakcalan-Vermion-Aliakmon position”. Since he could not be expected to denude the frontier forts entirely of troops, this would mean “dividing his forces”, as he repeatedly emphasised.

The British Generals, however, still did not regard his provision for the Aliakmon line as adequate¹¹⁴. This was the reason why Eden asked to see the King, and the King, after discussing the matter again with Papagos in private, agreed to attend the subsequent sessions in person. This second private meeting between the King, Korizis and Papagos is recorded in the Greek archives, in a short memorandum by Papagos himself.

Papagos argued to the King once more that “the only correct military solution was to establish all the Greek forces on the fortified position”; in other words, to defend the Bulgarian frontier, continued by the River Nestos, and try to save Thessaloniki. The King replied that it was imperative to find a solution “whereby the English reinforcements would come”. Otherwise, “not only would they be absent from the struggle but also hostility would be provoked on the part of England—hostility which could have the severest consequences for the country and of which there were already some indications”. Therefore “the military arguments must yield to the political”. Papagos then agreed to give way on condition that a last attempt should first be made to persuade the British to change their minds and not to insist upon “a division of the Greek forces on two positions”. The King evidently agreed to this condition¹¹⁵.

Such was the background to the second joint session on 4 March, at which the King was to preside. So far, the two records of the first joint session do not present major discrepancies on the strategic issue, though clearly they were not compared. On the second session of 4 March, however, the records diverge more seriously. Points of tactical planning are presented in different order, and not always attributed to the same speaker. These are matters of presentation rather than substance, which need not be further analysed in detail. More important are the distinct impressions left by the two records at the psychological level, and also the discrepancies on the role of the King. In the English

113. *MFA Documents*, pp. 136-7.

114. *FO Report*, p. 62.

115. *MFA Documents*, p. 138.

record of this second session, there are two significant interventions by the King; in the Greek record there are none¹¹⁶.

The first critical point in the second session of 4 March came when Dill tried to extract from Papagos a declaration of confidence in the plan which he was to put into execution. In the English version, Dill said that he himself believed it was possible "to hold and stop the Germans". Did Papagos share that confidence? Before Papagos replied, Dill added: "We want a position on which we could meet, stop, and finally build up forces with which to beat the Germans". Papagos replied that "the fortified position on the Nestos-Rupel line would offer the best and longest resistance". But this line had already been rejected by the British, and Dill immediately repeated the arguments against it. So the question had not been answered¹¹⁷.

The Greek record is somewhat different. It phrases the question put by Dill to Papagos as: "whether you can oppose a decisive resistance against the Germans". Papagos' reply was that by concentrating all the available forces on the fortified line, "we can achieve the strongest possible resistance". Dill pressed him to say "whether you can achieve the defeat of the German effort?" (The word *battre* is added in brackets after "defeat"). Papagos replied: "Such a result (*battre*) I do not believe is achievable on any position"¹¹⁸.

This would seem to have been virtually a confession of defeatism, but the point was not immediately pursued—perhaps because it was imperfectly understood. Some time later in the session, however, Dill remarked to Papagos (in the English record) that "it was not a good start if he did not believe in the plan"¹¹⁹; or (in the Greek record): "How can you agree to execute a plan with which you do not agree?"¹²⁰. At this stage the two accounts diverge still further. In the Greek record, Papagos replied: "Yes, I do, and I accept a solution which is not the best, because the other solutions preclude the arrival of the British in Greece". After another intervention by Dill, Papagos added (in the Greek record): "Once whatever decision is finally taken, I will do everything to achieve the object". Evidently he had still not made the declaration of confidence which Dill wanted him to make.

In the English version, however, Papagos' words at this point were that "he would of course carry out his mission as Commander-in-Chief with

116. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-42; *FO Report*, pp. 62-5.

117. *FO Report*, p. 63.

118. *MFA Documents*, p. 139.

119. *FO Report*, p. 63.

120. *MFA Documents*, p. 140.

confidence and determination” Dill then said, somewhat ambiguously, that “we should be confident of meeting and holding the Germans on the Aliakmon line”. Much more important, and in no way ambiguous, was the first intervention of the King at this point. He said: “General Papagos, now that he had decided to face the Germans, would do it with the same determination whatever troops were available and whatever plan was adopted”¹²¹. This decisive intervention is missing from the Greek record.

The King’s second intervention at this session was less momentous psychologically, though still important. When Eden joined the meeting, he requested that Wilson should be put in command of the preparation of the Aliakmon line, including command of the Greek troops to be deployed on it. The Greek and English versions are more or less the same, but the English record alone adds to Eden’s remarks: “The moment at which responsibility passed to General Wilson would be decided by General Papagos after discussion with him. His Majesty the King and General Papagos agreed”¹²². Papagos was no doubt simply following the King’s lead; but the Greek record says nothing of the King, merely that Papagos undertook to issue the appropriate orders¹²³.

When it comes to the third and final session on 4 March, there are no further discrepancies in the two records, since one is a translation of the other¹²⁴. The text of the agreement signed by Papagos and Dill is also of course identical (being in French) in both records¹²⁵. During this session five contributions by the King and three by Korizis are recorded. All of them tended to reinforce accord between the two allies on matters of military tactics. Questions of strategy had now been finally resolved: the allied front was to be formed on the Aliakmon line, regardless of the attitude the Yugoslavs might adopt.

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The final session on 4 March was not the end of the matter, though it was the end of the Anglo-Greek misunderstanding. In the further stages before the War Cabinet in London confirmed the agreement reached in Athens, there were anguished exchanges between London, Cairo and Athens. The War

121. *FO Report*, p. 63, bottom.

122. *Ibid.*, p. 64. According to the English record, Wilson joined the meeting only after this point was reached. The Greek record implies that he was present throughout: *MFA Documents*, p. 141.

123. *MFA Documents*, p. 141.

124. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-5; *FO Report*, pp. 65-9.

125. See note 106. The English translation is also given in Eden, II, p. 213.

Cabinet finally agreed on 7 March to authorise Eden "to proceed with the operation"¹²⁶. Even after that, misunderstandings could persist: for example, on 14 March Churchill demanded to know why Papagos could not "draw three or four divisions from Albania to strengthen his right front"¹²⁷—a question already answered in Athens.

Eden flew from Athens to Cairo on 6 March, and later to Cyprus for further talks, fruitless as before, with Turkish Ministers on 18 March¹²⁸. Meanwhile staff talks were held in Athens by Greek and British senior officers (headed by Papagos and Smith) with a Yugoslav officer sent in great secrecy from the Ministry of War and Marine on 8 March. The Yugoslav officer put seven questions in writing to the Anglo-Greek team. The questions implied a mood of great caution, if not defeatism. The British and Greek teams, having learned their lesson, took care to concert their reply in writing¹²⁹. There were to be no more Anglo-Greek misunderstandings.

When Eden and Dill returned to Athens again on 28 March, Papagos' mood had changed for the better. The reason was the changed situation in Yugoslavia. After the Yugoslav government and Regent had reluctantly succumbed to German pressure on 25 March, by adhering to the Tripartite Pact, the government was overthrown by a revolution on the 27th. The new government was led by the anti-German Serb General Simović. Papagos now talked euphorically of "constituting a solid and continuous defensive front from the Adriatic to the Black Sea", after first "cleaning up Albania"¹³⁰. His assumption was that not only Yugoslavia but perhaps also Turkey would now join the alliance. Eden and Dill, who had just encountered the Turks in a negative mood, were both sceptical. They proposed that talks should first be held with the new Yugoslav regime¹³¹.

This proved to be scarcely easier than before. Talks were held, but with little profit. The new Yugoslav government would not explicitly denounce the Tripartite Pact, nor would it allow Eden to visit Belgrade. Although Dill was received there, with Eden's private secretary (Dixon), their meetings with the Yugoslavs on 31 March and 1 April were inauspicious¹³². All that

126. Churchill, III, p. 94.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

128. *FO Report*, pp. 84-90.

129. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-4.

130. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-5. The English text is significantly headed: 'Agreed Record...': p. 92, top.

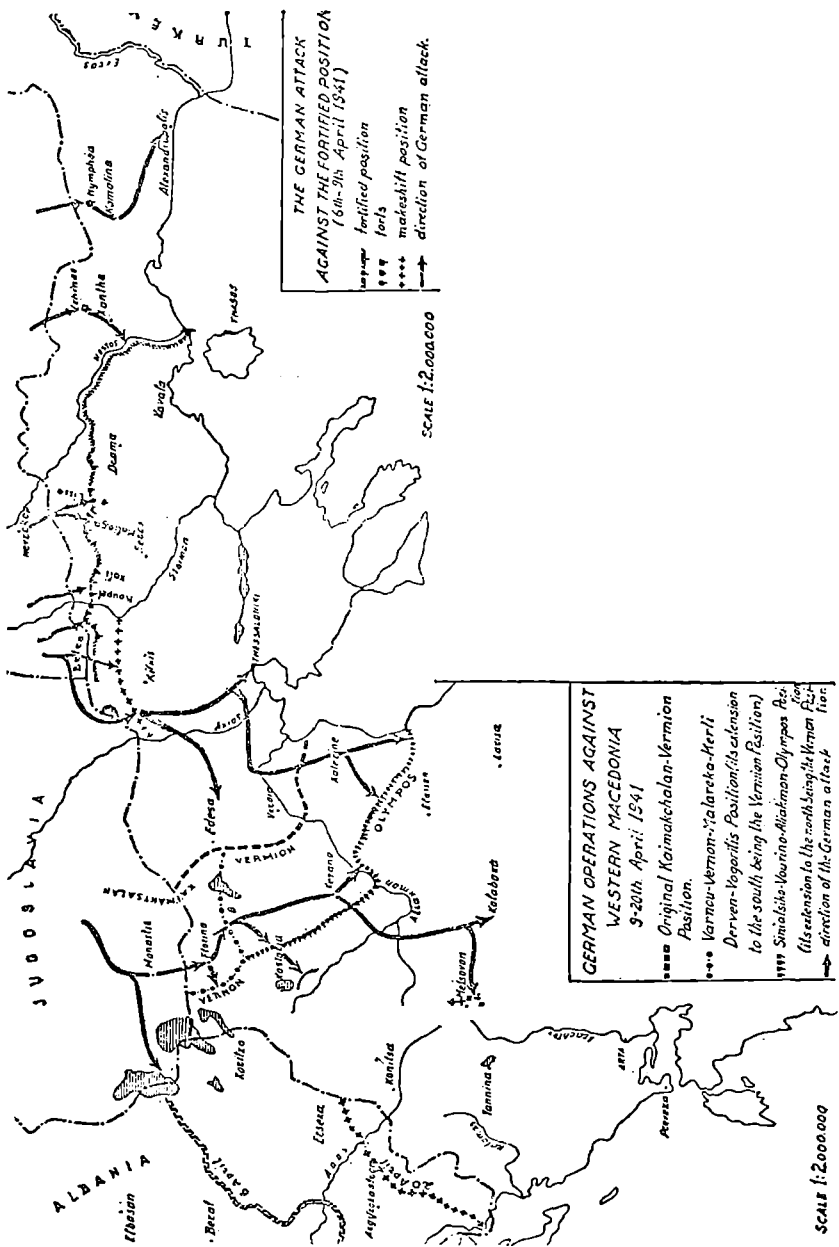
131. *FO Report*, pp. 93-4.

132. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-104.

was agreed was that staff talks should take place at Florina, in northern Greece, on 3 April. The staff talks were attended by Papagos, Wilson, Heywood, D'Albiac, Turle, and the Yugoslav General Janković, with other staff officers¹³³. But they achieved little. Three days later the Germans simultaneously attacked Yugoslavia and Greece (but not Turkey).

It quickly proved impossible for the allies to hold the Aliakmon line, or any other. Probably it never would have been possible in any circumstances. It is possible to devise hypotheses which would have made the circumstances slightly more favourable: if Heywood had warned Papagos that in the British view he was committed to withdraw from the north-east without waiting for the Yugoslav reply to Eden's telegram; if alternatively Heywood had pressed urgently for a quick reply from Belgrade; if the Yugoslav revolution had taken place a month earlier; and so on. Perhaps it would have been better, in the first week of March, to accept Papagos' proposal that the allies should jointly hold the frontier line rather than the Aliakmon line: at least it could not have been worse. But in the last analysis it must be conceded that Papagos was almost certainly right in saying that to defeat the German attack was unachievable on any defensive line; and Dill and Wavell were wrong in holding the contrary view. The one certainty which comes out of this examination, however, is that allies are unwise not to compare their records of what they have agreed, especially if some of those participating do not have a common language.

133. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-9.



(Adapted from Alexander Papagos, The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941, English translation 1949, pp. 345, 365)