

## AGGRESSION OF ITALY AGAINST GREECE AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE OF ITALIAN EXPANSION

A more intensive cooperation between Western democratic powers, France and Great Britain, in the Autumn of 1939, after conquering actions by Nazi Germany in Central Europe (the *Anschluss* of Austria, disintegration of Czechoslovakia etc.), influenced fascist Italy to calm down its militant attitude. Worried of the possibility of the world war, in Summer of 1939, Mussolini attempted to advise Hitler against attacking Poland, and at the same time he temporarily lessened his aggressiveness against Yugoslavia and Greece. Since he was not successful in dissuading Germans, after the beginning of war in Poland, he declared Italy's intention to lead neutral policy particularly in the Balkans where he wanted to reinforce his influence in the area of south hinterland of Germany. Along the lines of such intentions were Mussolini's actions to calm down the relations with Greece. After the initiative of Rome the notes were published at the same time in both capitals on friendship and mutual honouring of state borders, while the war in Poland was going on. Specific measures also followed, i.e. partial decrease of number of troops on both sides of the Albanian-Greek border, withdrawal of a part of Italian troops from the Dodecanese Islands, with the promise by the Greek government not to permit stay of British warships in Greek ports, etc. Motives for such measures both with Italian and Greek governments were mainly of a political nature. By their approaching Greece, Italians wanted to prevent closer relations between Greece and the belligerent powers, while at the same time to emphasize their independence from the belligerents. The act towards Greece should have been the first step in taking over the initiative in the Balkans from the Germans, since Italians expected them to be occupied for quite a time with the war in the West. On the other hand, Greek government wanted by its step, and in addition to other reasons, to prevent Turkish government to take an active part in the conflict between the great powers, which could mean misfortunes both for Greece and the Balkans.

Since Turkey did not abandon its flirting with Western powers, even attempting to conclude a pact of friendship and mutual assistance, it seemed that mentioned step of Italy and Greece did not reach the effect both sides wanted. In order to influence once more the indecis-

ive Turkish government not to engage actively in the war, at the end of November new statements from Rome and Athens followed according to which the line was emphasized of political cooperation and of prevention of war in the Mediterranean.

Hitler was fast in realizing his intentions in Poland, so that he continued with militant actions in the West in the scope dictated by his adversaries, while he did not show any sign of diminishing his interests for the South East Europe, or of abandoning the initiative in that part of continent to Italy. This caused the change in Mussolini's Balkan policy, which amounted to the intensification of aggression towards a significant part of the region, i.e. Yugoslavia. From the very beginning Hitler was against such a war, since he did not want to abandon the initiative to Mussolini in the Balkans, although formally he considered that region as Italian sphere of interests. At the times when Mussolini was useful to Hitler in preparations for his war against Poland and the West, Hitler was ready to permit the attack of Italy against Yugoslavia, or at least it seemed so, but as soon as critical moments were over, he was again not ready to spread the war over the Balkans. Thus after first great successes in the West, Hitler invited Mussolini to participate in destroying France, as he intended to take his attention off the Balkans. Italian government at that time too tried to persuade Greek government in its good intentions.

After mentioned successes of German Reich in the West and at the time of relating Hitler's expansion to the South East Mussolini's passion for war and the wishes not to be second after his ally became more and more intensive. His aggressiveness towards the Balkans, in its entirety, grew up, although its center was Yugoslavia, which looked to Mussolini an easy plunder due to its internal situation of national subjugation, and particularly of Croatian discontent, and he even expected the aid of Croats. With Greece too the relations deteriorated more and more. In July of 1940 Italians accused Greeks to secretly cooperate with the British, who were already at war with Italy. A request was submitted that Greek government renounces the guaranties given by Great Britain unilaterally to Greece already in the Spring of 1939<sup>1</sup>.

1. Diplomatski arhiv Sekretarijata inostranih poslova SFR Jugoslavije, skraćeno DASIP (Archives of the Federal Secretariat for Foreign Affairs of the SFRJ, abbrev. DASIP). Fond jugoslovenske ambasade u Ankari (Fund of the Yugoslav Embassy in Ankara abbrev. Amb. A.). Izveštaji Ministarstva inostranih poslova

These were the moments when Mussolini equally manaced Yugoslavia and Greece, while accumulating his troops on the borders of both countries. Incidents started to occur on Greek and on Yugoslav borders. In August and in the beginning of September, under the pressure from Berlin, the aggressiveness of Mussolini towards Yugoslavia eased, while at the same time it increased towards Greece. The ugly incidents became more frequent at the borders, Italian war planes flew over Greek territory, Greek ships were exposed to attacks and the like. On 15th August of 1940 Italian airplanes sank Greek cruiser  *Elli*  at the island of Tinos<sup>2</sup>.

All these menaces, contrary to the situation usually expected in other countries, calmed down internal Greek controversies and Greek people became united and ready to defend the country against the aggression of a great power. At the same time, great patience showed by Greece towards the incidents and provocations of Italian fascists raised the level of sympathy in the countries of the world towards Greece and its people, naturally with the exception of the Axis camp<sup>3</sup>.

Since the second part of September, Mussolini aimed his pressure mostly at Greece. The concentration of Italian troops at the Greek border took place, while the government in Belgrade had been continuously informed through various channels that there were no more danger of Italian attack against Yugoslavia. These informations, however, were received with caution in Belgrade, since the same thing was transmitted from Rome to Athens but in order to diminish Greek attention and caution<sup>4</sup>.

At the beginning of October of 1940 there existed several signs of imminent attack of Italian army against Greece. This was even the subject of open writing and conversation between the diplomats of various countries in Rome, Ankara and other European centers<sup>5</sup>.

Kraljevine Jugoslavije (Reports of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom Yugoslavia abbrev. MIP KJ). Fascicle (abbrev. F.) 31. Strogo pov. nr. (Confidential abbrev. Con. nr.) 2755, 4 June, nr. 20514, 7 July, nr. 20343, 27 July, Con. nr. 2089, 26 Sept., nr. 23657, 28 Oct. 1940.

For more detailed information see: nr. 20647, 25 Sept., nr. 20805, 28 Oct., Con. nr. 2562, 30 Oct. and 2613, 13 Nov. 1940.

2. Public Record Office London, Foreign Office (abbrev. PRO FO) 371/24917, R. 7250/764/19, Report, Athens, 22 Aug. 1940. DASIP, Amb. A. 1940, F-34, MIP KJ nr. 22075, 24 Aug. 1940.

3. DASIP Amb. A. 1940. F-34, Report Con. nr. 2700, 3. Sept. 1940.

4. Ibid., nr. Amb. A. 1466, 26. Sept. 1940 and nr. MIP KJ 27084, 5. Oct. 1940.

5. Ibid., nr. Amb. A. 1622. 25. Oct. 1940.

Greek government had a very controlled behaviour at that time in order not to provoke Italian fascists even more. The situation in the Balkans and in the world in general was not at all favourable for the Greeks at the moment of imminent aggression by one of the great world powers of the time. In Bulgaria there was a revisionist movement which claimed territorial extension in the Western Thrace. The allies from the Balkan Pact had their own troubles and were also exposed to threats, so that they were not willing to help Greece. Great Britain had promised all aid it could supply and it hoped for the conflict to take effect. In fact Britain even instigated it, expecting to establish, in order to defend Greece, a Balkan front, which was planned. However, engaged in many other battles of the war, and particularly at sea and in the air, Britain was not able to supply troops or materials for such a Balkan theater of operations. Britain's expectations that the defense of the Balkans be taken over by the Balkan states themselves could not be fulfilled, since the regimes in those countries were eroded by internal weakness.

The attitude of Germans was most undetermined as far as Greece was concerned, since it seemed, first of all, that they did not believe Mussolini would attack or, if he did, the war would not be intensive and that its solution would be found in a compromise manner, meaning compliance of Metaxas to the requests of Mussolini. At the time of intensive crisis in Italian - Greek relations, in August and September, Germans did not change their attitude towards Greeks, so that trade and other relationships continued to develop. When, in the middle of August Italian threats became conspicuous, Greek government addressed Berlin to act and mediate with its Italian ally<sup>6</sup>.

Greeks were stubbornly advised by Berlin to avoid cooperation with the British, to yield to Italians and even to accept Mussolini's requests. Influenced by these suggestions, Metaxas, in order to appease his adversary, did not permit the raising of the troops, otherwise requested by the military<sup>7</sup>.

In September Berlin's attitude began to change, so that pressures replaced advices, in order to win over Metaxas and king George to

6. Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Politik, Serie D, Band 10 (abbrev. ADAP), nr. 363, p. 420 and nr. 372, p. 430. See, *ibid.*, nr. 333, p. 388, nr. 334, p. 389, nr. 377, p. 434 and nr. 386, p. 443.

7. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bonn (abbrev. PA), Note Ernst Woermann, 24. Aug. 1940.

accept Italian requests. In such a way there would be no war in the Balkans according to Germans. Greek government was advised to renounce unilateral British guaranties and the cooperation with Great Britain as well as to stop receiving British war supplies<sup>8</sup>.

Being exposed to pressures from both sides — from Berlin to accept compromise and make concessions, and from London to engage in an open and active defense, Metaxas attempted to find a middle solution. He expected to postpone Mussolini's aggression through giving minimum concessions and by obtaining favours and support of Berlin. It was believed that it was not in the interest of the Axis powers to create a new theater of war, where in addition to Greeks new participants could emerge including the British and neighbouring nations<sup>9</sup>.

However, since the pressures of Italy were more and more arrogant and the attitude of Berlin more and more unfriendly, Metaxas and king George, who were main factors of the policy in Greece, had to take stand according to the mood of people and turn to the British. This caused condemnation by Berlin and the relations between Greece and Germany began to cool down<sup>10</sup>. However, on both sides there still were attempts at appeasement and compromising. Germans requested from Greek government to abandon its relations with Britain, while promising support and aid for the Greek cause in Rome. At the time of deterioration of relations between the two countries at the Greek - Albanian border, Hitler sent words to Metaxas according to which he would not allow Mussolini to attack Greece. Believing in such promises, Metaxas continued to deny the requests of military commanders to order the mobilization, in spite of Italians accumulating their troops towards Greece<sup>11</sup>.

The entering of the advance elements of German army into Bu-

8. Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945, Serie D, Band. 10, (abbrev. ADAP), nr. 394, pp. 449-450.

9. DASIP Amb. A. Teleg. MIP KJ nr. 26716, 2. Oct. and Con. nr. 2922, 3. Oct. 1940.

10. Deutsches Zentralarchiv Potsdam (abbrev. DZA) PA, 68435 B. 167-168. Report OKW nr. 4592, 12. Oct. 1940. PRO FO 371/24891 R-7849/5/67, Report, 9. Oct. 1940. Г.Д. КИРЬЯКИДИКС, ГРЕЦИЯ ВО ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЕ (Greece in the Second World War) Москва 1967, pp. 38-42. J. S. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection 1935-1941*. Oxford 1977, pp. 138-143.

11. A. Papagos, *Grčka u ratu 1940-1941* (Greece et War, serbo-croatian Edition translated from French), Beograd 1954, p. 80.

carest, on October 12, 1940 was more than enough for Mussolini, who envied his ally, so that he finally decided to continue the raid over the Balkans. At the October 15 meeting with his closest associates he stated that he is going to requite with his friend Hitler by destroying small Greece. He did not even think that this could be a tough nut to crack, and even believed that Bulgarians would march too over Thrace and Macedonia, while he thought that the Greek allies from the Balkan Pact would not extend their help. It was then agreed that the attack should begin at the end of October or in the beginning of November<sup>12</sup>.

German intelligence agents found out of that agreement and informed accordingly Berlin, while quoting October 18th as a possible date of attack. German Embassy in Rome sent a new information on October 19th with another term, i.e., October 23rd<sup>13</sup>. During the second half of October a series of informations emerged from Belgrade and other centers, according to which Italians were prepared to attack Greece. In his letter to Hitler on October 19th Mussolini too spoke of his intention to attack Greece. At the time Hitler was on his way to France where, on the French - Spanish border and in Vichy, he had talks with the Spanish dictator Franco and with the president of the Vichy government marshal Pétain, the subject of conversations being the coordination of actions in the war against Britain. As soon as he learned of the contents of the letter, he requested a prompt meeting with Mussolini, with the intention to talk him again out of the attack. However, this meeting took place only on October 28th, so that it was too late, since Italian troops already began the attack<sup>14</sup>.

German Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been informed on Italy's ultimatum to Greece on October 27th<sup>15</sup>. That same evening German

12. ADAP D, 11/1, nr. 191, pp. 274-275. I documenti diplomatici italiani, Nona serie (abbrev. DDI IX), vol. 5, nr. 728, pp. 699-705, nr. 738, pp. 712-713, nr. 740, p. 730, nr. 746, pp. 716-717, nr. 754, pp. 722-725. For more detailed information see, A. Hilgruber, *Hitlers Strategie, Politik und Kriegführung 1940-1941*, Frankfurt a/M, 1965, pp. 284. D. M. Smith, *Musolinijevo rimsko carstvo*, Zagreb 1980, pp. 207-208. В. ЧЕРЧИЛ, ДРУГИ СВЕТСКИ РАТ БЕОГРАД (Serbo-croatian Edition translated in cyrillic translated from English, The Second World War), III, 1980, pp. 207-208.

13. ADAP D 11/1, nr. 191, pp. 274-275 and nr. 194, p. 278.

14. Ibid., nr. 229, p. 334. DDI, IX/5, nr. 753, pp. 720-722. В. ЧЕРЧИЛ, о.с., II, p. 488.

15. ADAP D 11/1, nr. 242, pp. 345-346. DDI, IX/5, nr. 789, pp. 753-755.

ambassador in Rome Hans Georg von Mackensen sent to his Ministry an extensive cable containing full text of the Italian ultimatum, followed by the explanation of Italian requests. The statement by Ciano has also been quoted according to which if the Greeks did not meet the requests of giving bases to Italians and did not disrupt coordination with the British, they had to be attacked the day after, i.e. on October the 28th. Immediately before the attack the representatives of Yugoslavia, Rumania and Bulgaria in Rome have been notified accordingly. Greek prime minister Metaxas after receiving the ultimatum of October 27th requested at once the intervention and support from Berlin<sup>16</sup>. However, it seemed that in this occasion otherwise perfect German intelligence service had failed. Hitler was not informed on time on the above events, so that he was not aware that the war would break out so soon. In his letter to Mussolini, written later, on November 20th, Hitler admitted that he was mistaken. As soon as he received mentioned letter from Mussolini with the news on the beginning of war, he rushed to Florence still hoping that he would win over Mussolini not to spread the war over the Balkans. But when he arrived there, Mussolini's troops have already attacked<sup>17</sup>.

This was a sort of returning the debt, so that there was not much dissatisfaction over that move of Mussolini. At the Florence meeting both dictators discussed many subjects concerning the activity of the Axis powers, but Greece and the Balkans were hardly mentioned. Along the lines of his earlier declaration according to which Hitler will learn of the fall of Greece from the newspaper, Mussolini expected at that very moment an easy and fast victory. On the other hand, Hitler still believed that, with the help of pro-German forces in Athens, and after the first Italian successes in the war, he shall find the solution of conflict which would mean both accepting Italian requests and closer relations between Germany and Greece in the future<sup>18</sup>.

16. ADAP D 11/1, nr. 247, pp. 357-358. PA U. St. S. Griechenland, Februar 1940 - September 1942. Telegramm, Roma, nr. 1946, 27. Oct. 1940. DASIP NAW T-120, Rol. 348, 258392-258403, Report of the German Embassy, Roma, 28. Oct. 1940.

17. DDI IX/5 nr. 807, pp. 771-775. A. Hillgruber, *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler*, Frankfurt a/M, 1967, nr. 40, pp. 281-294. ADAP D XI/1 nr. 246, pp. 348-357, nr. 365, pp. 535. M. L. V. Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940-1941. The Balkan Clue*, Cambridge 1974, pp. 36-49.

18. DDI IX/5 nr. 807, pp. 771-775. J. Lukacs, *The Great Powers and Eastern Europe*, Chichago 1953, pp. 228-412. D. Lukač, *Uloga Balkana u osvajačkim pla-*

However, even the very beginning of the aggression, at dawn of October 28, 1940, did not develop according to expectations of both dictators. Although much weaker, both in number and equipment, Greek border troops were not run down as Mussolini expected, their withdrawal instead being organized and followed by inflicting heavy casualties to the aggressor<sup>19</sup>. While respecting the orientation of its people, Greek government asked Britain for aid in the spirit of duties to extend guarantees to Greece, assumed in the Spring of 1939. The British promised all aid they could provide<sup>20</sup>.

It seemed that the resistance with the aid of Britain would be long, and the developments turned out differently than expected by the Nazis, so that Berlin decided to amend accordingly its plans for future war actions in the South East of Europe. Until the beginning of war in the Balkans, the Nazis expected quite a different development of situation in the wider area of Europe, including the Balkans. Along these lines during the war in the West, Hitler got the idea to move the center of war and aggression towards the Soviet Union. Already at the end of July of 1940, Hitler submitted this idea to his closest associates<sup>21</sup>, while particularly emphasizing the significance of preserving achieved positions, and first of all the peace in the South East of Europe. Unexpectedly strong resistance of Greek people caused great worries to Hitler and dictated changes in his strategic plan on campaign to the East and on the realization of supremacy over the European continent.

Hitler thought that the most important task was to narrow down the conflict and to prevent intervention of neighbouring countries. It was considered that even the intervention of Bulgaria on the Italian side would be detrimental to the interests of the Axis powers, and particularly to those of the Reich, since it could provoke engagement of other Balkan countries on the other side. New orientation of Germany in this region was enforced by the intention of all surrounding

*novima «osovinskih sila»* (Role of the Balkans in Conquering Plans of the «Axis Powers») in *Putevi mira*, Zagreb 1978, pp. 200-202.

19. DASIP Amb. A. 1940, F-40, Tel. MIP KJ Con. nr. 3274, 3. Nov. Con. nr. 2984, 30. Oct. and 3274, 3. Nov. 1940. See: ADAP D 11/1, nr. 248, p. 359 and A. Hillgruber, *Strategie...*, pp. 287-290.

20. B. ЧЕРЧИЛ, *o.c.*, II, p. 489.

21. W. L. Shirer, *Uspon i pad Trećeg Reicha* (Serbo-croatian Edition translated from English, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich), Zagreb 1977, III, pp. 238-239.



countries to stay out of armed conflict and eventual wider complications. As soon as the war began, i.e. when it became clear that it will last long, German diplomacy started to be active in Belgrade, Sofia, and Ankara. It seemed that most important was the attitude of Yugoslavia. At the request of Berlin, Belgrade issued promises already on October 29th that Yugoslavia would not interfere in the Italian - Greek conflict, and that it would keep the neutrality status. There was much concern in Belgrade regarding eventual Italian occupying Thessaloniki, although it was believed that Berlin would find some way which would mean the end of the war. When the British promised aid, it was hoped that due to that Italians would not be able to reach Thessaloniki<sup>22</sup>.

Other forces which did not agree with the promise of the government of Yugoslavia were also influential in that country. The stumbling - block was Thessaloniki which for decades was the object of aspirations by Serbian bourgeoisie, and which, according to the opinion of that current, should never be left over to Italians. Under the influence of these forces the government had to change its attitude and already on October the 30th it was advised to Germans that the attack of Bulgarians towards Thessaloniki in order to help Italian actions, would amount to the reaction by Yugoslav troops. Germans had to take seriously into account this decision by Yugoslav government, the more so as the government of Turkey too announced the same intention<sup>23</sup>.

The way out of the danger and new entanglement and complications had to be found in the attitude and policy of Bulgaria towards the Greek-Italian war. Berlin exerted corresponding pressure in that direction too, so that Bulgarian government declared its intention not to interfere, i.e. to keep the neutrality status<sup>24</sup>.

Basic unknown elements over the war have been cleared up since the intervention of the Balkan countries was avoided, while the British aid was manifested through occupation of ports in the Cyprus and sending of the first squadron of airplanes on November 1st. At

22. Aprilski rat (April War), Beograd 1961, nr. 870, p. 871.

23. DASIP Amb. A. 1940, F-34. Tel. Yug. Embassy Ankara, Con. nr. 1636, 30. Oct. and 1647, 31 Oct. 1940. Aprilski rat, nr. 293, pp. 872-874. PA Büro St. S. Türkei, Bd. 2. Tel. Germ. Embassy Ankara nr. 876, 2, Nov. 1940.

24. DASIP Amb. A. 1940 F-40, Reports MIP KJ nr. 29934 and 29935, 31, Oct. 1940. Ibid., NAW T-120 R-348, 258388, Report Germ., Embassy 31. Oct. 1940.

least for the time being, it was known who is against whom in the war and what were the intentions<sup>25</sup>.

Excessive evaluations of Italian reserves and of their possibilities to engage on the Greek front even stronger forces, aided by armoured units and air force, caused much concern of the great-Serbian forces in Belgrade, who connected the fate of Thessaloniki with that of their own aspirations. These forces were the strongest and most numerous around the royal court, so that the regal council was continuously in session. Pro-German forces in that council forced over the idea according to which it would by all means be appropriate to make preparations to occupy Thessaloniki as soon as possible by Yugoslav troops, after the agreement by Berlin. Everybody was impatient over this, so that Yugoslav military attaché in Berlin Vauhnik transmitted that possibility to the Germans. When Italian troops slowed down their movements in the beginning of November and when the British forces started to engage more intensively in defending the Greeks, this action was tacitly postponed<sup>26</sup>.

Germans found this idea rather appealing. This single move could create a deep misunderstanding between Yugoslavia, on the one hand, and Great Britain and its allies, on the other, while at the same time the ground to work on the compromise solution of the Greek-Italian conflict. Moreover, German influence in Yugoslavia would only become stronger. Vauhnik's information on the idea was transmitted immediately to Italians, together with the statement on the positive sides of such a movement. Mussolini, however, discovered on time that such positive sides were only in favour of Hitler, who did not abandon his efforts to stop the war and to give to Italy only the chips, while he could continue his campaign and take over the entire South East of Europe. In order to cut off this combination at the very beginning Mussolini sent, on November the 5th, his airplanes to bombard Bitolj, where first Yugoslav victims of the new war in the Balkans fell — ten dead and twenty three wounded<sup>27</sup>.

All these events in the Balkans at the end of October and the beginning of November of 1940 made visible to Germans the fact that

25. PRO Cab. 64/16, Minutes, 4. Nov. 1940, pp. 8-14. B. ЧЕРЧИЛ *о.с.*, II, pp. 490-491.

26. Aprilski rat, nr. 293, 294, 296, 297, 298, 300, 301, 302. PA U. St. S. Griechenland, Februar 1940 - September 1942, tel. Belgrad, nr. 796, 3. Nov. 1940.

27. PA Büro St. S. Türkei, Bd. 2. Telegramm, Ankara nr. 898, 6. Nov. 1940. PRO FO 371/25117 R-8441/316/44, 9. Nov. 1940.

the war in the Balkans was a serious matter which might bring a lot of surprise. Therefore Germans continued to transport new divisions to Rumania.

The offensive in mid - November of 1940 effected by major Italian forces did not yield significant results. At the northern part of the front Greeks succeeded to consolidate their positions either on the frontier or near it. In the middle section of the front and on the right wing, Italian forces advanced some tens of kilometers, down the Ionian coast, and in the center towards the town of Vovus, north of Ioanina — but this was all they accomplished. Italians were not much more successful in the war in North Africa, as well as in battles at sea against British navy and air force. Although considered as being on the defensive, the British even suddenly attacked with airplanes from the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* a concentration of Italian navy in the Taranto Bay, destroying considerable number of Italian battleships and damaging many others<sup>28</sup>.

In the middle of November reorganized Greek troops launched an offensive against still more numerous Italian troops, and after havy fighting where mostly decisive were unity, bravery and readiness of Greek soldiers and officers, they succeeded until the middle of December to defeat Italian army on the entire front, while throwing them out of the Greek territory and even chasing them some thirty to fifty kilometers deep into Albania<sup>29</sup>.

Thus small in number but courageous and unified Greek people, for the first time in the initial period of the Second World War, forced to panic retreat Axis divisions, which had to worry the other member of the Axis and the main creator of the «new» order Adolf Hitler. In such a situation Hitler was forced to amend the program of his strategy in the South East and to seriously reconsider his own engagement in the Greek territory. Prior to this, however, he had to save the honour and pride of Mussolini, since there was quite a danger that the flurried Italian army could be thrown to the sea, burrying thus the pride of the other member of the Axis<sup>30</sup>.

28. PRO FO 371/2491 R-8715/764/19 Report, Athens, 9. Nov. 1940. See: B. ЧЕРЧИЛ, *o.c.*, II, p. 499. Richter Heinz, *Griechenlan zwischen Revolution und Konterrevolution, 1936-1946*, Frankfurt a/M 1973, pp. 91-92. E. Schramm-Thaden, *Griechenland und die Grossmächte im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Wiesbaden 1955, pp. 118-134.

29. A. Papagos, *o.c.*, pp. 267-286.

30. DASIP Amb. A. 1940, F-40, Teleg. MIP KJ Con. nr. 3470, 20, Nov. 1940. ADAP D 11/2 nr. 470, p. 676 and nr. 499, p. 710.

In the action of saving Italian honour Hitler counted very much also on German friends in Greece who were indulgent towards Berlin. Fear of too much success and of the confrontation with the Germans forced Greek prime minister Metaxas to give in, so that Greek divisions were stopped, although they could continue to advance since Italian resistance was weak. That fear caused his continuous caution over the scope and width of cooperation with the British. He received material aid from them, as well as the help of British air force, but refused to receive British troops for the action against Italians on Greek territory, hoping that in such a way he would avoid the attack of Germans. Along the lines of such a policy was Metaxas' refusal to participate in the British-Turkish talks in the beginning of January of 1941 in Ankara, which were related to the creation of an active Balkan front against both of the Axis powers<sup>31</sup>. This was already known tactics and the policy of all governments of the Balkan countries.

While accepting such a policy of Metaxas towards Germany and using the soft attitude of Greek government, Hitler started to find new ways to neutralize Greece and to subdue it to the interests of the Axis, since it was clear to him that Italians were not able to do this. He knew that the decisive role had to be played in this respect by German army, but prior to that and in the aim to get ready for German intervention, he had to benefit from other possibilities in order to save Italy and to ease the way for the main attack of German troops. Along the lines of such a strategy, the services of Yugoslavia were also taken into account. However, this idea did not meet any strong reaction even by the bourgeois leading circles in Belgrade, since there were only a few protagonists of the active cooperation with Mussolini's Italy<sup>32</sup>.

In the policy of preventing new complications, according to evaluation of Berlin, significant position was held by Turkey. Therefore in the moments of crisis of Italian army in the war against Greece, Germans intensified their activity in Ankara, while using all available connections and influences in calming Turkey down. They began from the realistic assessments that one could not request more from Turkey than to effect its promise to stay neutral, i.e. not to engage on either side. The possibility was permitted of its adhering to the Treaty on Mutual Assistance with Britain, concluded on October 18, 1939, i.e.

31. ADAP D 11/2 nr. 584, pp. 822-823 and 665, pp. 928-930.

32. Aprilski rat, nr. 304, p. 905, 305, pp. 305-306 and 307, pp. 911-912.

its use in relation to the right of defense of Turkey. In such a situation Hitler was very far from even thinking to attack that country. Ambassador Papen explained that Turkey's duties in the treaty with Britain related only to the case of Turkey being attacked, as well as that this should be the ground in attempts at obtaining the policy of non-interference by Turkey<sup>33</sup>.

Turkish governing circles dominated by the well-known Balkan policy of avoiding to be entangled in the conflict between the great powers, favoured the line enforced by Berlin. The Turks endeavoured not to relate too closely to Britain, hoping not to become entangled between the fists of the two great powers. All their promises on helping Greeks were within the framework of Bulgarian-Greek conflict, i.e. of an eventual Bulgarian attack, while the case of German military engagement into the Italian-Greek conflict was continuously passed over in silence<sup>34</sup>.

All these measures in relation to the neighbours of Greece were now of a secondary and temporary character and their aim was to prevent the extending of war, while final solution had to be found by the Axis powers, i.e. by the German armed forces. At the end of 1940 and in the beginning of 1941 several talks had been held between highest functionaries of the two Axis powers with the aim of coordinating the actions for the decisive movement.

One of such talks was the Obersalzberg meeting between Hitler and Ciano on November 18, 1940 when Italian campaign against Greece became unsuccessful. On that occasion Hitler emphasized all negative consequences of Italian attack against Greece, then the weaknesses of Italian army and the like, all that in order to point out the greatness of power of German armed forces, so that such an ally would by all means have the upper hand in the actions. He then formulated German aid as the only way of restoring the situation in that region of Europe. This, however, could be realized only in Spring of next year and after completing a series of affairs, the most important being the winning over of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia for joining the Tripartite Pact, and ensuring Turkish neutrality<sup>35</sup>.

33. ADAP D 11/2 nr. 396, pp. 587-588.

34. DASIP Amb. A. 1940. F-34, Tel. MIP KJ Con. nr. 3543, 26. Nov. 1940 and nr. Amb. A. 1799, 25. Nov. 1940. PRO Cab. 65, Vol. 16, Minute, 25. Nov. 1940, pp. 35-36.

35. See: A. Hillgruber, *Staatsmänner...*, nr. 44, pp. 330-335. Aprilski rat, nr.

In his letter to Mussolini transmitted through Ciano, Hitler once again and in more details explained all these tasks which, due to defeat of Italian army, faced the shaken Axis. Here again the significance has been emphasized of winning Yugoslavia over to the Tripartite Pact and to cooperation, as a prerequisite to war engagement for solving the Greek question. Without disclosing the main reason, i.e. preparing the attack against Soviet Union, he emphasized that all this has to be completed until the Spring of next year, so that would-be powerful Italian navy could be employed during Summer in some more important war theaters against Britain<sup>36</sup>.

In order to prove his capacity to defeat the Greeks with his own forces, Mussolini received from Hitler only several squadrons of war planes and a small number of transportation means. In November and December, after renewing his forces again, he attempted several times to repulse the Greeks from Albanian territory. The success, however, was insignificant. In order to find some excuse, Italians informed that Greeks were aided by British troops, but the truth of the matter was that during that whole period, i.e. until the beginning of 1941, only the Greeks were engaged in battle and they were the ones who had been winning. Germans too knew the situation, since they had exact data according to which there were about eight thousand British troops in the island of Crete, while only about five thousand in the entire territory of continental Greece — in the airfields and in ports, i.e. in various professional and rear services, in addition to some two hundred thirty British airplanes supporting Greek troops<sup>37</sup>.

World public knew and Germans too recognized that victories over Italians were won by the Greek soldiers who were courageous, unified and devoted<sup>38</sup>.

Defeats of Italian army revealed to Germans the fact that the crisis in Albania could be resolved only by direct intervention of their army, so that the situation in the South East of Europe could be put

312, pp. 921-925. G. Ciano, *Diario 1939-1943*, I, Milano 1963, pp. 364-365. ADAP D 11/2, nr. 353, pp. 509-512.

36. ADAP D, 11/2 nr. 369, pp. 535-539.

37. PA Büro St. S. Griechenland Bd. 1. Report, Athens, 30. Nov. 1940.

38. Ibid., U. St. S. Broader report on the Situation in Greece in the first half of November 1940, p. 7. DASIP Amb. A. 1940, F-34, Teleg. MIP KJ nr. 34431, 14. Dec. 1940, Report Yug. Emb. Ankara nr. 1898, 14. Dec. 1940. See: PRO FO 371/24892 R-8860/5/67, 9. Dec. 1940. DASIP NAW T-120 R-348, 258381, 20. Dec. 1940.

to order prior to effecting the Barbarossa plan in the East. Therefore Hitler decided in the middle of December of 1940 to intervene militarily in Greece, and that plan was called Marita. Prior to the intervention in Greece, which was planned for the end of March of 1941, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia had to be won over to the Tripartite Pact, while Turkey for neutrality and non-interference in the British-German conflict. Prior to engaging the troops, twenty four complete German divisions had to be sent across Rumania and Bulgaria, to form shock troops for fast penetration over the Greek territory<sup>39</sup>.

In his letter to Mussolini, dated December 31, Hitler informed Italians on his decision to intervene across Bulgarian territory<sup>40</sup>. The British discovered Hitler's intention and the plan to solve the problem of his relations with Bulgaria and Yugoslavia until Spring, as well as to clear the situation in Greece later on by using the army. They attempted therefore to take some counter-actions in order to establish a Balkan front and eventually check German expansion towards the south of the Balkan Peninsula.

At the end of 1940 and in the beginning of 1941 Germans, while using the services of Hungaria and Rumania, effected the concentration of a strong contingent of crack units of the *Wehrmacht* down the lower Danube, as well as prepared the conditions, with the help of Bulgaria, to quickly put this army across Danube<sup>41</sup>.

German readiness to engage militarily in the Balkans influenced negatively the behaviour of Greeks on the front with Italians. In the so-called third stage of war, which began in January, there were less and less active movements and victories of the Greek army. This was not due to Italians eventually becoming dominant in the moral and military way. The leading forces in Greece, namely, became less dedicated to take advantage and win new victories. Prime minister Metaxas was affraid of his own victories, which would cause rage of Germans, so that Greek government in a way tried to maintain relations with Germany. Pro-German groups tried to emphasize that Greece was

39. ADAP D 11/2 nr. 511, pp. 724-725. Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, RW 4/5 587 nr. 1/0317/40, 21. Dec. 1940. E. Schramm-Thadden, *o.c.*, pp. 135-173.

40. ADAP D 11/2 nr. 586, pp. 825-826.

41. ADAP D 11/2 nr. 642, pp. 894-985. See: PRO Cab. 65. Vol. 16, 27, Dec. 1940, FO 371/29934 R-129/22, 1. Jan. 1941. PA Büro St. S. Griechenland, Bd. 1. Telegramm RAM nr. 1650, 7. Jan. 1941. W. Ansel, *Hitler and the Middle Sea*, Durham 1972, pp. 61-111. M.L.V. Creveld, *o.c.*, pp. 27-65.

not fighting against Germans and that it is only defending from Italian attack<sup>42</sup>. According to assessment of some contemporaries and, later, of historians, Greek army in its great dash already in November and December of 1940 had considerable opportunities to chase Italian army out of Albania, liquidating thus the problem of Italian aggression in the Balkan Peninsula. However, leading people of Greece were not ready to undertake such a great action<sup>43</sup>.

One of those who hesitated was the prime minister Metaxas, particularly since the end of December, i.e. since it became clear that Germany would interfere in the conflict. Therefore the agreement for British troops to land had been delayed<sup>44</sup>. New prime minister Alexandros Korizis who came to position after the death of Metaxas, under the pressure from the people and the British, who insisted on creating a Balkan front, accepted the active struggle against the aggression. At that time the British began intensive preparations to resist the Germans<sup>45</sup>.

In spite of failure to win over the governments in Belgrade and Ankara for the active resistance against Germans and for the defense of Greece, as well as in spite of refusal of Greece to confront both Axis powers directly, the British continued with their efforts to form a Balkan front which should stop the oncoming German offensive. In order to persuade the Greek government, British minister for foreign affairs Eden came to Athens on February 22nd. In his contacts with the leading figures of Greece, he attempted to emphasize the need for an uncompromising resistance against the Germans, which at that time made preparations to force Danube in order to continue their aggression towards the south. It was agreed to intensify the efforts at winning over Yugoslav and Turkish governments for the active cooperation in checking the aggression and expansion of the Axis powers<sup>46</sup>.

Already weak hopes that something could be done in activating

42. See: J. S. Koliopoulos, *o.c.*, pp. 169-213.

43. Г.Д. КИРЪЯКИДИС, ГРЕЦИЯ ВО ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЕ, pp. 68-69.

44. A. Papagos, *o.c.*, pp. 303-305.

45. H. Richter, *o.c.*, pp. 91-107. ADAP D 11/2 nr. 665, pp. 928-929. See: PRO FO 371/29798 R-4000/1483/67, 13, Febr. 1941. A. Papagos, *o.c.*, pp. 302-304. J. S. Koliopoulos, *o.c.*, pp. 211-213.

46. PRO FO 371/29787. Minutes of the Session of the British and Greek Delegation 22 and 23 Febr. 1941 et Athens, pp. 1-19 and 102-105. See: J. S. Koliopoulos, *o.c.*, pp. 221-247, E. Schramm-Thaddenn, *o.c.*, pp. 174-190, В. ЧЕРЧИЛ, *o.c.*, III, pp. 60 and 62-71.



Yugoslavia and Turkey, lost even more ground with Bulgaria joining the Tripartite Pact on March 1st, and with the beginning of Danube crossing by German army, and of its fast moving towards Greek frontier<sup>47</sup>.

While expecting that a more intensive cooperation between the military missions of Greece and Britain on preparing defense and on including Greece into a complete alliance with Britain would amount to strengthening of the anti-Axis forces in Yugoslavia and Turkey, the British intensified their contacts with the Greeks. At the meetings between high political and military delegations of both countries, held on March 2-4, 1941, the subject of talks was again the cooperation in organizing resistance against German aggression. Due to hesitant attitude of Yugoslav government, Greek general staff could not establish any firm plan of resistance in the north-eastern parts of Greece. Also it was not known what would be eventual Yugoslav protection of the parts of Greek border in the north.

In such an uncertain situation it was decided that large part of the Aegean Macedonia should be defended by all means, naturally counting on the protection by Yugoslav army from the north, i.e. from Vardar Macedonia, while leaving the possibility to move towards the west if the need be, in order to organize final resistance along the line Kaymakchalan - Vermion - Olympus<sup>48</sup>. At these meetings the schedule of coming and distribution of British troops had been also agreed upon. These troops landed already on March 4th to be immediately sent to the defending line in the north of Greece, where German attack was expected soon. The presence of a secret deputy of the Yugoslav general staff into mentioned talks between military missions of Britain and Greece again raised hopes that Yugoslavia should finally join the efforts in organizing the resistance against the aggression of Axis powers, but these expectations did not materialize due to the hesitant attitude of the government in Belgrade<sup>49</sup>.

At the time of these difficult dilemmas of the Greek general staff over instituting a definite defense plan in the northern part of the country,

47. DASIP Amb. A. 1941 F-37, Report Yug. Embassy Ankara Con. nr. 288, 25 Febr. 1941.

48. A. Papagos, *o.c.*, pp. 317-326. PRO FO 371/29787, Minutes of the Session 2-4 Marz 1941, pp. 37-70.

49. PRO FO 371/29782, Minutes 8-12 Febr. 1940. A. Papagos, *o.c.*, pp. 320-326. B. ЧЕРЧИЛ, *o.c.*, III, pp. 85-101.

mainly caused by uncertain and hesitant attitude of the governments of Yugoslavia and Turkey, Mussolini launched a new offensive in the middle of March against Greek army on the Albanian front, since he wanted to erase the shame and defeat by an unexpected victory. He hoped thus to raise his prestige with the Germans. Strong concentration of Italian army had been effected most secretly, and the attack started on March 9, with combined actions by air force, artillery and armed cars and under direct supreme command of Mussolini. However, in heavy fightings, from March 9th to 15th, all attempts of Mussolini to disintegrate Greek defense and to throw out Greeks from Albania failed. Greek units, although less numerous and not adequately equipped, but with a high morale, repulsed the attacks of Italian army, so that Mussolini had again to quit unsuccessfully his great offensive in the war with Greece<sup>50</sup>.

After the abortive Italian offensive there was a period of waiting on an extended front. Italians did not attempt to effect any larger movement in the western front after the above failure. Germans made their preparations for invasion while, on the other side, Greeks and British invested great efforts to create strong defense line against German forces. Relations between Greece and Germany, in spite of efforts exerted by pro-German forces in Greece, deteriorated rapidly. At the same time between British and German diplomacies heavy and unequal struggle was going on in relation to winning over the two remaining countries of the region, which did not yet take their stand, i.e. Yugoslavia and Turkey<sup>51</sup>.

The events would later on prove that Germany succeeded in preventing these two countries to organize on time cooperation with Britain and Greece with the aim of effecting resistance to the Axis expansion over the Balkans.

However, heroic resistance of the Greek people against a large power in course of half a year period, positively influenced the events in the South East of Europe at the time of German preparations to attack the Soviet Union. The victory of Greek arms pointed at the weakness of the block of totalitarian powers, while considerably contributing to weakening of confidence between the two Axis powers. At

50. A. Papagos, *o.c.*, pp. 223-230. ADAP D 12/1 nr. 111, pp. 163-164.

51. ADAP D 12/1, nr. 77, p. 144, nr. 143, pp. 209-210, nr. 155, pp. 230-231, nr. 170, pp. 246-247 and nr. 189, pp. 268-270.

the same time, this victory, in spite of hesitant and defeatist attitude of governments of the neighbouring countries, was a stimulus to the anti-fascist forces in these countries and contributed to their resistance against the Axis powers. Greek people by its bravery and unity in the struggle against much more numerous fascist forces showed its fidelity to the traditions of liberation struggle, as well as steadiness to defend the homeland against assaults of aggressors, regardless of their might and number.

*Institute for Balkan Studies  
Belgrade*