

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE GERMAN
WITHDRAWAL FROM GREECE IN 1944

After 3½ years the German occupation of Greece ended in October 1944. It was not ended by any action fought in Greece, but forced primarily by the western advance of the Red Army, which threatened to cut off the entire German garrison from its homeland. A secondary factor was the imagined threat of Anglo-American landings in the Balkans from Italy. Hitler believed in this threat up to the last, although it never really existed. He was still ordering reinforcements to be sent to Crete at a time when his Generals were already planning their withdrawal.

The German withdrawal took place at a moment of considerable delicacy and mistrust between the allies. Churchill was reported to be obsessed by the fear of Communism becoming rooted in Greece, either because the KKE would seize power as the Germans left or because the Red Army would reach Greece ahead of the British forces. Churchill and Eden were conducting negotiations with Stalin from May 1944 onwards, aimed at securing the predominance of British interests in Greece, but these did not reach a conclusion until their meeting in Moscow, on 9th October. During the summer and early autumn therefore Churchill felt great anxiety about the fate of Greece.

It has often been suggested since the war that this anxiety affected Churchill's policy towards the Germans in Greece during the last stage of the occupation. In the absence of firm evidence from British sources, the whole matter is speculative, and speculation has taken several forms. The extreme form alleges that there was a formal agreement between Churchill and the Germans to allow the latter to escape from Greece unimpeded; though naturally it was not put on paper. The most moderate form alleges a tacit concurrence of interest between the British and the Germans. The evidence for these alternatives, as well as for intermediate nuances, has recently been examined in articles by two historians of the post-war generation, Hagen Fleischer¹ and Lars Bae-

1. Hagen Fleischer, *The Don Stott Affair, in Greece: from Resistance to Civil War* (ed. Marion Sarafis, London 1980), pp. 91-107.

rentzen², who are free from the faults of prejudice and faulty recollection which have affected some earlier contributors to the argument.

Both their articles deal in particular with the circumstances of the withdrawal of the German garrisons from the Aegean islands to the mainland and the question whether the British naval and air forces deliberately allowed it to take place unimpeded. Baerentzen concludes that there was a surprising failure to impede the withdrawal, but that it was not the result of any secret agreement. Fleischer also discounts the theory of a secret agreement, but argues that there was probably tacit connivance on the part of Churchill. Neither writer deals in detail with the further stage of the German withdrawal, from the mainland itself.

Each of the two articles also deals with particular cases of secret contacts between the British and the Germans in Greece during the occupation, though not with the same ones. Fleischer describes the contacts between Don Stott, a New Zealand officer of the Allied Military Mission to the Greek Resistance, and German officials in Athens during the autumn of 1943, which were unauthorised by the British authorities. Baerentzen describes the authorised contacts in the late summer of 1944 between Tom Barnes, another New Zealand officer of the Mission who was senior liaison officer with Zervas, and the German General Lanz in Epirus; and also between British and German agents in Athens at the same period. As none of these contacts led to a positive result, I do not intend to examine them in detail, apart from a passing comment on each of the two articles.

My first comment is that Fleischer's references to myself in connection with the Stott affair in 1943 were mistaken, as he has subsequently acknowledged in a letter³. My comment on Baerentzen's article concerns what he calls the «general principle» that «documents concerning matters of this kind (sc. reports on secret contacts) (are more trustworthy when reporting enemy statements or offers... than when reporting what had been said or done by one's own side...)»⁴.

This principle leads Baerentzen to infer that when the German

2. Lars Baerentzen, *Anglo-German Negotiations during the German Retreat from Greece in 1944*, in *Scandinavian Studies in Modern Greek*, No. 48 (Copenhagen-Göteborg, 1980), pp. 23-62.

3. Fleischer, pp. 93, 97, 100; letter to CMW, 12th July 1981.

4. Baerentzen, p. 31, n. 1.

account of the British position on a given point differs from the contemporary British account, the German account is more likely to be accurate; and the converse would also apply. It seems to me more likely that each side sometimes misconceived the position of the other owing to the circumstances in which they were negotiating: at a distance, through intermediaries, with nothing committed in writing, and with three languages involved (German, English, Greek). I have known such misconceptions to arise even in much simpler circumstances: with two parties face to face, using skilled interpreters and only two languages.

I return now to the central question concerning the unimpeded withdrawal of the German garrisons from the Aegean islands. What is supposed to have been the British motive in allowing them to reach the mainland with little interference? There are various versions. One has it that Churchill wanted the German forces to escape from Greece intact so that they could help to slow down the advance of the Red Army further north. A variant of this version has it that the purpose was to hold Thessaloniki against the Red Army until the city could be taken over by the British forces. Another version has it that the object was to retain a considerable German force further south on the Greek mainland, in order to forestall the seizure of power by ELAS on behalf of the KKE. None of these things in fact happened, but it is indisputable that the Germans succeeded in withdrawing from the islands at least as far as the mainland with much less difficulty than they had expected.

How and why did this come about? I am not in a position to make any revelations about secret agreements or understandings because if there were any it was entirely outside my knowledge. The most that I can do is to try to throw some light on an obscure and puzzling episode from my limited first-hand experience, and also to try to introduce the light of reason.

The evidence for the Germans' unimpeded withdrawal from the islands is reviewed in detail by Baerentzen, and is summarised thus by Fleischer: «When at the end of August 1944 the Wehrmacht started to evacuate the Greek islands by means of inadequate and improvised transport, the highly superior Royal Navy und Air Force contented themselves with a close but peaceful observation»⁵. Fleischer gives re-

5. Fleischer, pp. 98, 102.

ferences to a number of German documents, and adds that there are «many other German sources». The point is also made that German shipping losses in the Aegean, which had been heavy in July 1944, were much lighter in August and negligible in September — the very period in which the main evacuation took place⁶.

No evidence has so far been found in British sources. Documentary evidence from British sources is hardly to be expected if this was, as Fleischer argues, a case of «tacit connivance» on the part of Churchill. But even to carry out a policy of tacit connivance, orders would have had to be sent somehow to the officers and staffs of the Navy and RAF who were to carry out the «close but peaceful observation» and to refrain from opening fire. Both officers and other ranks, who must have known of these orders, would have been surprised to receive them without explanation, and they would normally have resented them. It seems strange that in the 37 years since these events, not a whisper of such resentment has ever been heard from any of the British sailors or airmen who served in the Aegean in 1944, and many of whom must still be alive.

It would be interesting to study the naval and RAF records in the Public Record Office to see if it can be ascertained precisely what forces were available in the Aegean during July, August and September, and if possible, what orders they received. One factor worth examining would be the preparations for the allied landings in southern France, which began on 15th August. Presumably these would have had a higher priority than the Aegean for ships and aircraft. Nevertheless, whatever the explanation, the fact remains that there are several recorded cases of ships and aircraft being seen by the German convoys and failing to attack them. This passivity on the British side was also remarked by pro-British Greek observers⁷.

Before examining the reasons for this so-called passivity, it should be noted that the positive evidence for it applies only to the German withdrawal from the islands to the mainland. But that was not an end in itself. What about the next stage of the German withdrawal northwards, by both the troops evacuated from the islands and those already stationed on the mainland? In this case there is no positive evidence of passivity, only speculative assumptions. The basic assumption is that there was either a secret agreement or a «tacit concurrence of

6. Baerentzen, p. 27.

7. Fleischer, p. 99.

interest» that the Germans would follow a course of action suited to British policy. Three of the possible options have already been mentioned: they might escape from Greece altogether, in order to form a front against the Red Army further north; they might hold Thessaloniki against the Russians until the British could take it over; or they might surrender in force on the Greek mainland and help to prevent a seizure of power by ELAS. Could any of these options have been a common interest between the Germans and the British?

Surrender in Greece could not in itself have been an attractive option for the Germans. They would have to be persuaded that it was worthwhile. In fact it is known that attempts were made to persuade them to surrender, both in Athens and in Epirus⁸. There is no evidence that any specially attractive incentives were offered to them, and the British approaches were all rejected. So there was no tacit concurrence of interest, still less any secret agreement, in this case.

The idea of forming a German front to protect Thessaloniki was equally a mirage⁹. If it were to occur at all, it would have had to be the subject not merely of an explicit agreement but of detailed planning. There is no evidence that the formidable problems of supply and communications were ever considered at all. The German retreat did not halt at Thessaloniki, nor did the Red Army ever approach the city. In this case tacit connivance was a pure figment of the imagination.

There remains the last option, that the Germans were to be allowed to escape unmolested from Greece altogether, in order to strengthen German defences against the Red Army further north¹⁰. This could conceivably have been the subject of a tacit concurrence of interest between the Germans and the British. But it would have required some degree of planning within the allied military command. Churchill could not have taken it for granted that the Greek guerrillas, the Yugoslav Partisans, and the allied liaison officers with both, would do nothing to impede the German retreat unless they had orders to remain passive. Indeed, even if they had such orders, they could not have been relied on to do nothing. But in fact their orders, at any rate in Greece, were to exactly the opposite effect.

The operational plan code-named Noah's Ark (in Greek, *Kivotos*) was the last mounted by the Greek Resistance against the occu-

8. Baerentzen, pp. 30-45.

9. Baerentzen, p. 25 (quoting Albert Speer).

10. Baerentzen, p. 24 (quoting Roland Hampe).

pation. It came into effect at different dates around the middle of August, according to the enemy situation in different parts of the country; and it lasted until the last German forces crossed the frontier into Yugoslavia on 1st November. The object was to harass and impede the German withdrawal. I have said elsewhere that the operation was not very successful, but I have also said that it was more successful than I expected. No one has ever suggested that we did not try at all, still less that we were ordered not to try or discouraged from trying.

The evidence does not depend simply on my word for it. The Noah's Ark plan was explicit. Substantial supplies of weapons and ammunition were infiltrated, both to ELAS and to Zervas, in the weeks before the operation was launched. Specially trained units of British and American troops equipped with heavy weapons (the Raiding Support Regiment and the Operation Groups) were infiltrated to strengthen the guerrillas. The Balkan Air Force of the RAF provided air support, and landing grounds were prepared in the Greek mountains on which Mustang aircraft could touch down to re-fuel. Much anecdotal evidence could be collected, both from my own experience and that of other allied officers, and also from the German records, to show that Noah's Ark was not simply an expensive deception.

Let me first give one or two examples from German sources. Baerentzen quotes an interesting case on the authority of the German War Diaries. It appears that «a significant percentage» of the unimpeded movement of German shipping in the three weeks between 25th August and 15th September was to carry men and supplies from Patras to Preveza for an operation against Zervas»¹¹. This came at the height of Operation Noah's Ark, which Zervas had launched shortly before. It is interesting to see in a document also quoted by Baerentzen that on 13th August the German high command in Thessaloniki reported that Lt. - Col. Tom Barnes, the senior liaison officer with Zervas, «has recently returned from Cairo and is at present trying to stop the fighting which has broken out between EDES and the 104 Jg. Div. during his absence»¹². This German report represents the exact reverse of the truth: Barnes had in fact returned to launch Zervas on Operation Noah's Ark.

In the eastern half of Greece, where ELAS was in control of operations, there were also some significant efforts. In the British offi-

11. Baerentzen, pp. 54-55.

12. Baerentzen, p. 32.

cial history of the war, John Ehrman estimated that during Noah's Ark the Germans lost up to 10,000 men killed or wounded and captured, together with about 100 locomotives and 500 vehicles¹³. The locomotives can obviously only have been destroyed in eastern Greece and therefore mainly by ELAS. I have always regarded these figures as considerably exaggerated, but even if they are scaled down they show that there was at least some aggressive effort against the German withdrawal. I can speak also from some personal experience, since I took part myself in two operations, each lasting 48 hours: one against the railway line in Thessaly (27th-29th September) and one against the road from Kozani to Florina (27th-28th October). The evidence seems to me as substantial as in the case of the unimpeded withdrawal from the islands.

At this point it may be helpful if I carry further the account of my personal experience, since this is the only original contribution I can make to the subject. From 15th June to 10th September 1944 I was out of Greece, visiting Cairo, Algiers, London and Caserta. During these visits I met Churchill, Eden, Macmillan (Resident Minister in Algiers), Lord Selborne (Minister responsible for SOE), the Secretary of State for War, the Head of the Foreign Office, Rex Leeper (Ambassador to Greece), the Chiefs of Staff of the three services, the Commanders-in-Chief of the Middle East and Central Mediterranean Commands, as well as all the senior officers and officials of SOE in each place. None of them gave me the slightest hint that there was any other intention than the ostensible one of Noah's Ark, to inflict the maximum damage on the Germans during the final phase of the occupation.

Of course the fact that I was not informed does not necessarily mean that there was no secret plan. There were other matters too about which I was told nothing. I was told nothing by SOE about the secret contacts between Stott and the Germans in 1943, not about the current contacts with the Germans in Athens and Epirus while I was out of Greece. I was told nothing about the negotiations between Churchill and Stalin which eventually culminated in the «percentages agreement» of October 1944. But those were matters in which I was not needed to play any role myself. Allowing or not allowing the Germans to escape unmolested from Greece was a matter in which I could not be entirely excluded from playing any part. Churchill could not rely on

13. John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy*, VI (London, HMSO, 1956), p. 45.

me to ensure that Operation Noah's Ark was a total failure unless I was instructed to do so. I was not so instructed, and it was not a total failure.

What I have described so far coincides with the assessment made at the time by Neubacher, the German Special Plenipotentiary in South-East Europe. In a telegram from Belgrade dated 14th September, addressed to Ribbentrop, the German Foreign Minister, Neubacher reported that the British «are doing practically nothing so far to impede the transit of our forces by sea and air from the islands to the mainland, but are mobilising the Red Bands against our routes of withdrawal from the mainland»¹⁴. He went on to infer that the British wanted to retain the German forces on the mainland to maintain order until their own forces could arrive and take over the responsibility. That was a reasonable inference, and so far as some of the British authorities were concerned, a correct one. But the Germans had no intention of surrendering in Greece. That result could only have been achieved if they were forced to surrender by superior British (or allied) land forces. The force available for Noah's Ark was insufficient to achieve that result.

Here we encounter another paradox, however. The forces available for Noah's Ark were not the only British or allied forces available for Greece. Independently of Noah's Ark, there was also a small British force under General Scobie. Much of it was never intended to engage in hostile operations, but to prepare the groundwork for relief and rehabilitation of the country. But there was also available in Italy for operations in Greece a miscellany of combat units: elements of two infantry divisions, the Parachute Regiment, the Special Boat Section, the RAF Regiment (a land force), and perhaps others. These were experienced and well-equipped troops. But their impact was minimal. Without exception, whether air-borne or sea-borne, they landed in Greece only in the wake of the retreating Germans. Practically none of them made any contact with the Germans, apart from one unit which allowed me to guide it north to Macedonia by a route which I thought the Germans would not expect to be used.

These dilatory proceedings could again be attributed to secret agreement or tacit understandings, but I think a simpler explanation is to be found in lack of determination and lack of co-ordination between two different headquarters. During September 1944 operations

14. Baerentzen, p. 61.

in Greece were partially transferred from GHQ of the Middle East Command in Cairo to the Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ) of the Central Mediterranean Command in Caserta, under General Wilson¹⁵. Crete, the Dodecanese and other Aegean islands remained under the command of Cairo, and the SOE headquarters in Cairo retained control of Noah's Ark. But all other operations in Greece came under General Wilson. It is interesting that the date of this transfer of control was 15th September. That date was roughly the middle of Noah's Ark; it also coincided with the last phase of the German withdrawal from the islands to the mainland, and the beginning of the evacuation of the mainland. (A minor consequence of the transfer was that all the members of my Mission qualified for two different campaign medals while still remaining in Greece).

The major significance of the transfer was that Greece passed from the control of a headquarters which had no other operational responsibilities to one which was intensely preoccupied with two more serious campaigns, in Italy and southern France. To Brigadier Barker-Benfield, the Commander of SOE in Cairo, the Noah's Ark operation was of the highest importance. He perhaps really believed that the German retreat could be cut off on the Greek mainland. He had been closely involved in the various attempts to induce the Germans to surrender on the spot. He had paid a brief visit to ELAS GHQ, where he had formed an exaggerated notion of the capabilities of the guerrillas to operate as a regular army. At one time he tried to send an order to Zervas, through Barnes, to launch an all-out direct assault on Ioannina while the town was still in German hands. (Barnes quite rightly refused to pass on the order as being beyond the capacity of guerrillas). For Barker-Benfield in fact success in enforcing a German surrender on the Greek mainland was the first and only priority.

But it was not so for General Wilson at Caserta. In his eyes Greece ranked well below the Italian and French campaigns, and even Yugoslavia. In his autobiography he wrote that: «With the limited forces likely to be available a seriously opposed landing could not be attempted and the most that could be undertaken was to harass the retreating Germans and endeavour to cut off their retreat to the north»¹⁶. That disposes of any idea of «tacit connivance», unless Wilson was lying. But the fact is that he showed no great determination in pursuing even

15. Field-Marshal Lord Wilson, *Eight Years Overseas* (London 1950), p. 232.

16. Wilson, p. 230.

the limited objective stated. He wrote further that his object was «to avoid disclosing the weakness of the forces at my disposal and by a good bit of bluffing to induce the German Commander to surrender to supposedly superior forces». In fact his bluffing continued even into his narrative of events, for he spoke of his forces having «seized» various places in Greece from which the Germans had in every case already departed¹⁷.

One could not help feeling at the time that there was a lack of co-ordination between the small but determined units infiltrated for Noah's Ark and the slower-moving units which followed them a few weeks later; but it was not apparent at the time that this was partly because they came under different headquarters separated by several hundred miles. General Wilson himself seems to have been unaware of this lack of co-ordination, for he described a conference at Caserta on 26th September with Zervas and Saraphis, the C-in-C of ELAS, at which he gave them «the task of harassing the German withdrawal»¹⁸. Apparently neither of them pointed out to him that they had already been engaged on it for more than a month.

So we find that operations in Greece during the crucial weeks were in effect divided between a Brigadier in Cairo who believed that it was possible to force the Germans to surrender on the Greek mainland, but had not sufficient forces to achieve his objective, and a General in Caserta who had a larger force available but used it with excessive caution and lack of determination. Thus the Germans escaped, but not by deliberate connivance. There remains the unexplained mystery of the unimpeded escape from the islands to the mainland. Is it possible, in the light of what happened on the mainland, to find a logical explanation of that mysterious passivity?

I believe that a logical account can be constructed, though I confess that I have not much confidence in it. The British found it much more difficult than they expected to impede the withdrawal of the Germans from the islands. Some of the difficulties were described long afterwards by Albert Speer, in an interview with Baerentzen, and by General Korte, the Luftwaffe Commander of the operation¹⁹. The latter scotched the theory of «tacit connivance» by saying that «the British did everything they could to prevent it». But once it was clear that

17. Wilson, p. 232.

18. Wilson, p. 233.

19. Baerentzen, pp. 55-56.

it could not be wholly prevented, there was a case for arguing that it was preferable to let the Germans evacuate the islands with a view to forcing their collective surrender on the mainland, rather than fighting to capture the islands one by one. It might have seemed a reasonable plan in the circumstances, although in practice a failure. But the reason why I have not much confidence in any such theory is that war is not a logical business. A great deal happens in warfare which is quite unplanned and even inexplicable in retrospect.

There is an interesting analogy with another episode in the Mediterranean war, in which the roles were reversed, and so were the spheres of operation between land and sea. It occurred during the battle of Crete in 1941. After the British headquarters had decided to abandon the island, we had to retreat overland to the south coast, rather as the Germans had to make their escape across the Aegean three years later. During our retreat to Khora Sphakion, the Cretan Dunkirk, many of us had the impression that the Germans' efforts to cut off our escape overland were remarkably lacking in determination.

The novelist Evelyn Waugh, who was also there, recorded this impression in the second novel of his trilogy, *Sword of Honour*. In *Officers and Gentlemen* he hinted at a possible explanation²⁰. One of his characters remarked: «I don't get the impression that the Germans are anxious to attack». Another replied: «I think they want to escort us quietly into the ships. Then they can sink us at their leisure from the air. A much tidier way of doing things». *Mutatis mutandis*, that explanation is similar to the one I have explored but rejected in the case of the German retreat in 1944. I suppose that a theory of «tacit connivance» could equally well be advanced. But personally I believe the explanation really lay in circumstances: a combination of muddle and confusion, faulty intelligence, lack of co-ordination between different arms, difficulties of terrain, and shortage of resources on the ground and in the air.

Similarly I think it doubtful that a wholly logical explanation will be found for the «passivity» observed during the German withdrawal from the islands. It seems to me that those who attribute it to conspiracy or connivance have failed to address themselves to one crucial question: if their theory were correct, how was it possible to conceal the real intention from those who were required unconsciously to carry it out? These included a considerable number of officers, some

20. Evelyn Waugh, *Sword of Honour* (Final version, London 1965), p. 497.

of whom, such as General Wilson, Brigadier Barker-Benfield and myself, were led to believe that the intention was totally different. It is possible that research in the naval and RAF documents in the Public Record Office will reveal something significant about the orders sent to the British forces in the Aegean. But until that is done, it does not seem to me possible to conclude anything more definite than that the theory of «tacit connivance» aimed at establishing a German front against the Red Army is untenable. To some this will seem a disappointingly un-Churchiavellian conclusion. But, believe it or not, Churchill was really a very simple man.