



Monday, Apr. 28, 1941

World War: BALKAN THEATER: Happy Birthday

The railway car, resting on a siding under the shadow of a Balkan mountain on whose crest anti-aircraft units kept constant vigil, was set as usual for Adolf Hitler's morning conference with his advisers. Assembled in the car were all the biggest of the big: Göring, Goebbels, Ribbentrop, Keitel, Brauchitsch, Raeder, Himmler, Hess (see cut). They were gathered together to congratulate Adolf Hitler on his 52nd birthday.

The celebration, said the official news agency D.N.B., was one of "soldierly simplicity," including a brass band, a review of honor troops, toasts in champagne, a wooden platform for speechmaking, an international broadcast, armfuls of flowers, and certain other super-soldierly amenities. Each of the Nazi bosses drank a tasteful toast to the birthday man. Keitel: "Big and gigantic successes. . . ." Goring: "You, my Führer. . . ." Hess: "God protect our Führer."

Just what deity Rudolf Hess, whose job it is to protect his Führer, referred to was not specified. It could scarcely have been the God of the Orthodox Eastern Church, which was next day to celebrate its Easter, symbolic of rebirth, expressing faith in life, not an occasion of death.* It was probably not one of the deities once thought to be resident on Mt. Olympus, on whose summit German troops had planted the swastika just a few hours earlier—for the Gods of Olympus were fundamental to the ancient civilization which had invented democracy, the very thing Adolf Hitler had set out on his wars to extirpate.

Adolf Hitler, with soldierly simplicity, accepted the good wishes of his good friends, stared for a moment at the maps of slaughter spread out on the car's table, asked for the latest military reports, and retired to peruse them. They were almost universally favorable to his cause.

The Yugoslavs were out of the war. They had capitulated after just twelve days of resistance. The Axis deathblows had been delivered by German forces which crushed the Third Yugoslav Army at Kachanik Pass, and by Italians who poured down the Adriatic Coast.

In Greece the Allied lines had been repeatedly pushed back. The Germans believed the heaviest battles of the campaign were over. At some points Adolf Hitler's infantry troops had attacked in old-fashioned, 1918-style, suicidal mass, but at a price. According to Greek accounts "Adolf Hitler's Own" SS (Elite Guard), magnificent hand-picked lads of 19 and 20, bore the brunt of the slaughter.

A New Zealand officer, a former dairy farmer from Auckland, told how he and his comrades butchered a gang of Germans trying to cross a stream in one of the Olympic passes: "We sank one boat after another. After two hours the river was teeming with half-sunken boats drifting downstream, and with splashing, drowning men. Some of the boats were littered with dead and wounded men. We got sick of killing them. It was mass slaughter." Parachutists in grey shorts and heavy grey jackets, armed with submachine guns, floated to the aid of the men in the river. "Our position appeared to be in danger until my captain drew a bead on the leader in short pants with an anti-tank machine gun. The German was a six-footer. The blast got him squarely in the chest. He disintegrated from the waist up. His followers, seeing what had happened to him, hurled their grenades and withdrew."

But eventually weight told. The same British, Australian and New Zealand troops, five divisions at most, fought day after day, while the Germans rotated 40 divisions, constantly feeding fresh troops into the battle.

Ahead of the lines the Air Force did its work with the steady efficiency of a stone-crusher. Village after village was pulverized. Larissa was pasted until it looked like Louvain in World War I. More than 1,500 Nazi planes were in action in the Balkans.

The British tried to hold successive lines, each hinged on mountains and dominating passes. The first line ran from Mt. Olympus to Corizza in Albania. Against this line the Germans threw heavy attacks aimed at Larissa and Kalabaka, both crucial railway towns, on lines leading to southern Greece. The Italians put on a drive from Albania. On the right, near Olympus, the British at first held firm; it was on this front, at Sarandaporo Pass, that bloodshed was worst. But in the center the defenses were pushed back, and in Albania the Greeks lost Corizza.

From then on it was just a matter of steady advance in the face of stubborn and well-coordinated rear-guard actions. The British-Greek line, which held together well, fell back to shield Larissa and Yanina in the Pindus Mountains, then back to the narrowing of the peninsula between Lamia and Arta. Early this week the Germans had reached Thermopylae, 100 miles from Athens, and were still going strong; and the British and Greeks had not much left to be glad for except that they had killed a lot of Germans and some time.

Having spotted numerous British transports, and proceeding to bomb many of them in Peiraeus and off Chalchis, the Germans accused the British of planning another Dunkirk. "Pay close attention to your ports," they urged the Greeks, "because when British transports come for a second time—empty—it is high time to capitulate." This week the Germans claimed they had bombed and sunk five British transports which were trying to evacuate troops.

Meanwhile the British Government warned: "In view of the German threat to bomb Athens and Cairo, His Majesty's Government wish it to be understood that if either of these two cities is molested, they will commence a systematic bombing of Rome. Once it has begun it will continue as convenient till the end of the

war. The greatest care will be taken not to bomb the Vatican City." Benito ("War Is the Normal State of the People") Mussolini was again on a spot.

Thus did Adolf Hitler celebrate. At least one of his birthday tributes, a couplet, composed by Britain's wit, A. P. Herbert, was not such good news:

Napoleon died at fifty-two

And, Adolf Hitler, so may you.

* Greek and Yugoslav Orthodox Easter fell one week later than Roman Catholic and Protestant Easter this year.

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