



Monday, Dec. 02, 1940

BALKAN THEATRE: Zeto Hellas

The sound of distant church bells pealed for half an hour one day last week over the brown hills of Greece—by state decree. In Athens, traffic cops stopped cars to tell drivers what had happened. Newsboys shouted it, innkeepers told their guests. A commemorative postage stamp was ordered. Greek and British flags broke out everywhere and men in British uniforms were carried aloft by cheering, singing Greeks. In the northwest, on the other side of the tumbled Pindus Mountains—a place almost as hard to reach from Athens as the other side of the Rockies is from Washington, D. C.—the little catamount Greek Army, supported by the R. A. F., had finally taken Corizza, advance base for Italy's "invasion" of Greece and the third largest town in Albania (pop. 26,000).

For a week confused dispatches had reported the city falling, then not falling, then falling some more. At last, Premier General John Metaxas appeared on the steps of the Army Headquarters building and officially announced the news that drove Athens wild. From London, Prime Minister Churchill, ever apt, saluted: "This recalls the classic age. Zēto Hellas (Life to Greece)."

Corizza is the crossroads through which Italy, unless she violates Yugoslav neutrality and goes around by the Monastir Gap (Bitolj), must pass to strike at Salonika. It is also a gateway to Ioannina (Yanina) and the long rough road to Athens. Pounding and pushing the Italians out of Corizza was a feat of which the strategic importance overshadowed even the valor of the men who did it. The town stands at an elevation of 2,500 ft. on the western scarp of the Morava heights. Its defense against assault from the west and north, whence Italy must try to come back or lose what remains of her sorry face, is made easy by artillery planted on Morava and on Mount Ivan.

Corizza possesses two of Albania's best military air bases (others are at Tirana, Valona, Durazzo, all near the coast). Not only by heroic uphill fighting but even more by knowing from lifelong habit how to get around in the hills, the evzone ("well-girt") highland Greek regiments—Balkan counterparts of Scotland's kilted "Ladies from Hell"—took these commanding positions one by one from the Italians, clambering over the top of the mountains with bayonets and hand grenades, later laboriously hauling up mountain guns.

Involved in the fall of Corizza were six Italian divisions, about 72,000 men. Their mechanization was their undoing in the narrow, muddy mountain passes where they stuck out Italy's neck into Greece. Like the riflemen behind trees who played hob with the British regulars in 1776, the Greek mountaineers from their hilltops demoralized an army which had been told that the Greeks would be pushovers, in fact would probably welcome Fascism with open arms. When Mussolini spoke, promising that Greece's back would be broken (TIME, Nov. 25), the Greeks continued pressing, working with geography instead of against it. Frantically, the Italians called on their Air Force to strafe and disperse the attackers, and for a day or two there was carnage around Corizza. Then the R. A. F. arrived to bolster the gallant but rickety Greek Air Force. In a few hours, Spitfires and Hurricanes smacked down so many Italians that toward the end of the battle not a Fascist wing dared come across that sky.

With painful talk about "moving on schedule to other positions," the Italians evacuated the city, leaving behind warehouses full of equipment. Perhaps by the standards of modern warfare the booty was not great, but to the Greeks, accustomed to eating bean soup and black bread and carrying hand-me-down arms, it was immense. This plunder was, after the strategic factors and the enormous boost to Greek and British morale, the third most important thing about the fall of Corizza. It was said to comprise enough small arms and ammunition to outfit two Greek divisions, more heavy artillery than the entire Greek Army had when the war began. There were 80 field pieces, 55 anti-aircraft guns, numerous machine guns. There were 20 tanks, 250 trucks and other autos, 1,500 motorcycles and bicycles, 10,000 blankets, several thousand tons of wheat. Fortunately for the Greeks, the Italian ammunition fitted their rifles.

Straightway the exultant Greeks hopped into captured tanks to chase the retreating Italians up the road to Pogradec, where Italian General Ubaldo Soddu, after cashiering some 50 senior officers, tried to form a secondary defense line. Another Greek pursuit column harried the Italian retreat toward Moskopole ("Perfumed City"). Greek and British warplanes bombed and machine-gunned long columns of dejected Blackshirts and Alpini, whose welfare was further menaced by mutinous Albanian battalions in their very midst, by Albanian snipers, knife-men, rock-rollers and bridge-blasters in the gorges and ravines along the way.

The miserable Italians dared not light camp fires at night; some subsisted on raw mule meat. They took refuge as they went in churches and mosques, using them as makeshift forts. Neutral military observers said that if only Britain could send enough planes, the Italian Armies might be swept into the Adriatic before Rome could get set for a new offensive. Fascist reinforcements moving up to Pogradec met their pell-melling comrades on the road out of there, turned and fled with them as Pogradec fell. The same thing happened at Moskopole and it looked as though the first stand General Soddu could make would be on a line from Elbasan on the Shkumin River, which cuts Albania in two roughly equal parts, down the Devoll River to Valona. The way things were going last week, the southern part of Albania would soon be mostly Greek, which in fact it is culturally and racially. At glad Corizza, Major Charissiades, heading the new town council, welcomed the Greeks as liberators. Greek flags were brought out of hiding and pictures of Italian King Vittorio Emanuele were burned in the public squares.

In southernmost Albania, also, the tide of battle was at flood for Greece. One Greek column, piercing through from Konitza, swept up the road from Leskovik

toward Corizza, mopping up. Another pressed west along the Voiussa River, aiming at Tepeleni. Two other columns swept down the Dhrino Valley toward Argirocastro ("Silver Fort") and over the mountains toward Porto Edda. One more Greek column pushed up across the Kalamas River out of Epirus, driving the last invader from Greek soil and threatening to wipe him out of southern Albania as well. With the Italians in retreat everywhere, the ultimate object of all the Greek columns was to cut off their foe from his ports of escape.

So stood Italy's deplorable Balkan adventure last week, and the Greek Army joined the Finnish on a history page reserved for little fellows who knew how to fight for home and honor. But the first round seldom decides a prize fight, and beneath little Greece's jubilation lay some grim facts. Greece faced woeful shortages of almost everything that it takes to fight a war. She lacked meat, wheat, oil, coal, sugar. Her chief sources of income—shipping and tourists—were no more. Her best customer of wine, olive oil and tobacco was Germany. Only Turkey and Great Britain can help her, and the latter has its hands full helping itself.

Last week a steady stream of war matériel was flowing, much of it by air, from British bases in the lower Middle East to new ones in Greece. Some said many Australian and New Zealand troops were going, too, though Britain denied this, saying her only ground troops in Greece were military police and air-base guards. But besides military help, Greece was going to need food, fuel, money. Over her loomed not only the shadow of Germany on the northeast but cold and hunger at home.

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