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BALKAN THEATRE: Children of Socrates

Snow sifted last week through the mountain peaks and troughs of perpendicular little Albania. It laid a white blanket over thousands of stiff dead Italian soldiers on bleak slopes and in forested ravines from Porto Edda, where many of them had landed, northeastward to Lake Ochrida and the east-west gorges of the Shkumin River, where Italian commanders strove to make a stand against the relentless, amazing Greeks. Most Italians abhor cold as they do the sharp Greek bayonet, which Rome last week plaintively called a "barbaric and inhuman" weapon.

To Albania, to improve the shattered discipline of the routed, retreating Blackshirts, hurried fierce, sporting Achille Starace, former Secretary of the Fascist Party, now chief of the Fascist Militia. Mussolini's mouthpiece, Giovanni Ansaldo, took pains to announce over the radio: "We must win the war in the Mediterranean with our own Army, quite alone." Crown Prince Umberto himself condoned with the families of the first victims of the Greeks.

The red-faced Italian High Command tried again to laugh off continued Greek advances. The enemy, it was said, was merely capitalizing on a "strategic retreat" by an expeditionary force that had had the bad luck to run into dirty weather. To prove that everything was going "according to prearranged plan," General Ubaldo Soddu, who was rushed out last month to replace Commanding General Sebastiano Visconti Prasca, was upped last week from corps commander to Army commander and confirmed in his post.

His most vital problem was one of logistics—getting hundreds of trucks full of food and ammunition daily over hundreds of miles of tortuous mountain roads to supply the over-extended forces. Next he had to bring over from Italy whole new armies to replace the beaten Ninth Army in the north and the newly arrived but already disorganized Eleventh Army in the south. Meantime, Greek and British bombers hammered at the landing places, rendered Valona and Durazzo "almost useless" in the wake of the new arrivals, threatened to cut off their supplies and redouble General Soddu's problem. British ships came up and shelled Porto Edda. Daily Allied airmen, through fair weather and foul, bombed and strafed the crawling lines of Italian supply trucks, against which Albanians also sniped and sent down rock falls.

On to Argirocastro. Territorially the war progressed little during the week, and only the Greeks moved forward. They clinched their hold on Pogradec in the northeast, thus consolidating their capture of Corizza last fortnight, and giving them a north anchor for the lateral road paralleling the Greek border clear down to the southern Albanian coast. Up & down this road Greek Generalissimo Papagos could swiftly shift his strength in or out of any of the mountain troughs, slanting northwest-southeast, through which the scattered Italian Eleventh Army last week fought rear-guard actions in its withdrawal up to the line from Valona to Elbasan. Next major Greek objective was the Italians' southwestern base, Argirocastro, defended by an Italian "battalion of death" fresh from Modena. The Greeks, attacking before dawn after nocturnal artillery barrages, smashed their way by grenade and bayonet up the eastern wall of Argirocastro's valley. This week, on the central front, the Greeks claimed the capture of 5,000 prisoners in a major rout.

High Fliers. Italy's erratic Air Force, so noticeably deficient in the campaign's first month, made a great show of trying to support its ground troops last week. One day at least 300 planes were at work. They heavily bombed Florina, the northern Greek base back in the Pindus Mountains whence most anti-aircraft defense guns had been moved forward with the Army. But over the actual fighting fronts and Greek supply lines, the Italian fliers stayed at least 10,000 feet up, to avoid hitting mountain peaks or being hit by Allied A.A. fire. Two miles is no height for nervous bombers to hit machine-gun or artillery emplacements, or vehicles moving on narrow, winding roads.

Unless Germany should suddenly throw in some effective air power, Italy's payoff in Albania, now that snow was falling, looked at best like a stalemate for some months, a lasting disgrace and a drain on the entire Italian military establishment. If, operating from their new strongholds in Crete, British naval power could gain mastery of the Adriatic, past minefields and submarines, the entire Italian expedition, including last week's reinforcements, might be annihilated, or forced to execute a sorry withdrawal like the British from Norway.

"Children of Socrates." Bravely over the sandbagged Parthenon last week, as November ended and bitter winter began, flew the blue & white flag of Greece. And bravely through the world, Minister of National Security Constantine Maniadakis, right bower of Premier General John Metaxas, appealed for aid in the struggle to come. Said he: "We address ourselves particularly to the great, strong, liberal union of the United States of America. We pay no attention to the enemy's material strength, and neither do we dare pay attention regarding the intentions of other probable enemies [Germany] . . . the children of Socrates, Plato and Aristophanes are prepared for any ordeal . . . to die rather than submit."

In London, Secretary of State for India Leopold Stennett Amery put the brightest of all faces on the historic stand of Greece. Said he: "If we can enable Greece to hold her own until we have disposed of the Italians in Egypt, we shall have secured for our armies a foothold from which we might threaten the flank of any German attack on Turkey.

"From that foothold we might eventually, with our own armies and new allies whom our growing strength will gather, deal a mortal thrust at the German dragon, not against the scaly armor of the Siegfried Line, but against his soft underside."

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