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Monday, Nov. 04, 1940

BALKAN THEATRE: Shots at Corizza

The Italian Minister to Greece gave a party in Athens one evening last week.

Though relations between his country and Greece have been strained ever since a mysterious submarine sank the old Greek minelaying cruiser Helle during a religious festival last August, he invited members of the Greek Government. The party was in honor of the son of the late great Italian composer, Giacomo Puccini, whose opera *Madame Butterfly* was being performed in Athens.

Ominous to Greek ears was another Italian sound-effect they heard that evening — from Mussolini's news agency, Stefani: news that there had been a "border incident" that day near the Corizza Pass on the Greek-Albanian border, and a bomb incident at Porto Edda (named for Il Duce's daughter). The Italians, of course, blamed Greek "armed bands" and agents. Denial of the affairs by the Greeks went unheard, their offers of discussion were turned down. Within a few hours Mussolini and Hitler had one more conference, at Florence (see p. 28), and Italy's war machine in Albania began to roll. Greece was soon officially charged not only with local violence but with plotting to give Great Britain the use of sea and air bases for operations against Italy. At 3 a.m. on Oct. 28 the Puccini-loving Italian Minister handed to Greek Premier General John Metaxas a three-hour ultimatum demanding surrender of Greek territorial integrity. Metaxas refused it and addressed his people:

"Greeks! We shall now prove whether we are worthy of our ancestors and of the liberty which our forefathers secured for us.

"Fight for the fatherland, your wives, your children and sacred traditions.

"Now, above all, the fight!"

It was Monday, the day on which: the Russo-German pact was announced; Italy entered the war; France laid down her arms; the Italian conquest of British Somaliland was completed.

With a population of 7,100,000, Greece has 140,000 active soldiers, 600,000 reserves, equipment for only 150,000 in the field at one time. Before coffee time on Oct. 28 the streets of Athens rattled and rumbled with trucks and busses rushing hastily mobilized men northward toward the Pindus Mountains.

Greece has a Metaxas Line, strong along the Bulgarian frontier, more sketchy along the Albanian, where it was not needed until Italy blitzkrieged that little kingdom on Good Friday, 1939. Greece has some 435 pieces of field artillery of all types, including mountain guns. With these, and other ill-assorted German and French rifles and machine guns, she set out to try to stem the advance of at least 200,000 well-equipped, motorized Italians, including one division of specialized Alpini, whose first course would be down rugged mountain troughs. Two main immediate pushes seemed to be on the cards: one starting near the southern extremity of the Greek-Albanian border, toward the immediate objective of Ioannina, the other at the northern end of the frontier, near Yugoslavia, with Salonika the ultimate goal.

Greece has about 100 fighting airplanes, mostly obsolescent. Over Athens that first morning roared six waves of Italian bombers. They spared the capital but bombed its airport at Tatoï, its port of Peiraeus. They also bombed the Corinth airport, the harbor of Patras. The Greek Navy—one old cruiser, twelve destroyers, six submarines—assembled at Salonika and watched for attackers. From the mountains came word that the Italian legions had reached the Greek pillboxes. Another war of pygmy versus juggernaut was well begun.

But the pygmy had friends. From Crete and Corfu came word that units of the British Fleet had raced in with landing parties. The Corfu landing followed a sharp sea engagement with the Italians.

On a little isle near Corfu is a military airport, which the British seized. From Turkey came word that Britain's Chief of Staff of the forces in the Middle East, Major General Arthur Francis Smith, was conferring with the Turkish General Staff.

The pygmy also had its nerve about it. The British news agency Reuters reported from Athens that Greek troops had sliced through Italian positions at one point and driven eight miles into Albania. But at other points the Italians did the slicing.

Italy's logical military objectives are in order: Salonika, Athens, Corinth, Crete, to push the British out of the Aegean. If Turkey should give trouble, Italy's partner Germany lurked on Turkey's right flank across Bulgaria in Rumania. Thus the firing in the Pindus Mountains signaled a winter Axis drive of major proportions, aimed ultimately at the Suez Canal.

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