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## BALKAN THEATRE: Murk

Rain and terrain are wonderful allies. Bad weather and forests helped Finland. Good weather and open country betrayed Poland, the Lowlands, France. Through such mountains and such torrents as northwestern Greece possessed, last week there could be no such thing as Blitzkrieg.

High winds blew sleet and straight-driving rains over the whole war area. These stopped machinery but not mules and men. The rains of Greece make even peaceful travel slow. When he went through Epirus in 1809, Byron wrote his mother: "Our journey was much prolonged by the torrents that had fallen from the mountains and intersected the roads." Successful conquest of these mountainous, slippery areas would have to be brought about on general principles of caution and surprise which have held ever since Hannibal crossed the Alps. Even against an inept enemy, the Italians probably could accomplish this conquest only after weeks, possibly months. The brave Greeks were far from inept.

They fought with elemental fierceness. The lair was threatened. They captured heights by making draft animals of themselves. Even the women dragged cannon behind them. In charges the hairy evzones came screaming, their white skirts flapping like osprey wings. There was no thought—as there often was among the Italians—for personal safety. One young Greek aviator, out of ammunition, flew his plane smack into an Italian plane.

Command of this fury was in the hands of a strangely mild aristocrat. General Alexander Papagos, whose thin face and batwing ears bear a striking resemblance to those of Spain's ex-King Alfonso, inherited from one of Greece's first families a gentle education and gentler manners. But he seemed to give his troops both courage and the initiative of which upsets are made.

The history of 1940 has taught, among other melancholy lessons, that valor plus vigor do not equal victory. While they took heart at apparent successes, responsible Greeks thought that if their country was to survive despite the odds, it would owe its survival to British assistance and to Italian asininity. And responsible neutral observers could not see how either could be great enough to give Greece anything but a reprieve.

Britain's help began to take on clearer form last week. It was clear that Britons had landed at Crete, and some other Greek islands. In London a £5,000,000 loan to Greece was announced. The R. A. F. was really active. Gloster Gladiator fighters patrolled over Greek cities, and bombers hit at Naples, Brindisi, Taranto and Albanian bases. The first British casualty was announced: an R. A. F. gunner, wounded in the head by what was described as a "stray bullet" from an Italian plane. British naval vessels arrived in Athens from Alexandria, carrying a few troops. Very useful in surprising and checking the Italians was a set of light anti-tank guns flown in apparently from Palestine. The British were happy to give all this, since it fitted like a helping hand into the glove of British grand strategy.

Italy's military bumbles are classic. The heroes of Caporetto and of Guadalajara showed in Greece that they had not changed. They simply did not understand the arts of war, much less the politics of war. They knew that Greece was about to have three months of poor weather, and yet they attacked with tanks and planes. Daily they undertook small attacks which they should have known must fail. At one point Italians shelled their own retreating columns. They badly underestimated the Greek will to resistance, and seemed almost positive that Greece would pull a Denmark or a Rumania. A captured Italian officer, Lieut. Quarantino Marco of Parma, was quoted as saying:

"We had no idea war was coming. . . . On the dawn of Oct. 28 we were packed into a sector opposite Fiorina. Our colonel assured us ... that Metaxas [Premier of Greece] had told [Foreign Minister Count] Ciano that the Italian Army had received permission to cross Greece and Yugoslavia. He said Greece and Yugoslavia had joined the Axis and that Greece would never oppose our might." So when the lieutenant's regiment marched up to the Greek border, it was cut to pieces.

In Rome there was puzzlement at the checks which the Army suffered. The populace wanted successes. Even the Army was a little puzzled. Chief of the General Staff Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who saved Marshal De Bono's bacon in Ethiopia, visited Albania to look things over, and this week General Ubaldo Soddu, Vice Chief of the General Staff, was put in command of operations. Reinforcements were rushed into Albania and a large-scale attack predicted when the weather cleared.

Three Sectors. Italian bumbles gave Greece occasion to claim great victories. With the cutting rain hampering iron and steel, soft Italian flesh exposed itself. Although reports fortnight ago of the Greek counterinvasion of Albania, at the northern extremity of the front, were grossly exaggerated, the Greeks had at least temporary successes near Corizza.

In the Corizza sector the Italians apparently opened their invasion with a forked drive, one prong heading for Fiorina, the other for Kastoria. The Greeks hid away in forests and mountains, let them through with comparatively mild resistance. When the advance column of Italians had passed, the Greeks filtered through and fought their way to heights from which they could shell the town with 6-inch howitzers (actually they could almost shell the town from Greek territory). Thus they threatened the Italian rear and automatically stopped the supplyless forked drive. For two or three days the Greeks enjoyed their advantage. But late in the week the Italians attacked them with dive bombers, and their position seemed less enviable. Early this week rain kept Italian planes

on the ground.

In the central sector the Italians drove a wedge into Greece which was eventually intended to turn southward and meet a second, coastal wedge, surrounding Yanina (Ioannina). The central finger bored up the precipitous Aaos River valley, reaching its metal claw deeper into Greece than Yanina is. To get this far the Italians must have cracked at least part of the Metaxas Line—concrete trenches, artillery emplacements, rock-hewn machine-gun nests built last year and this under British supervision. The mechanized Italian "Centaur Division" took part in the Aaos drive. At week's end, by which time the Italians were approaching the headwaters of the Aaos, the Greeks claimed the greatest victory of the war. Some 15,000 Italians were said to be surrounded and on the point of capture.

Into the craggy, roadless fastnesses of the Pindus Mountains the Italians were reported to have sent tanks and other mechanized equipment. The Greeks used horse cavalry, played hide & seek with the invaders in territory their troopers knew like the backs of their hands. The Italians, they reported, were mousetrapped and divided into small units, became easy prey of Greek mountain infantry.

On the Adriatic coastal plain, the Italians succeeded in driving a bridgehead across the Kalamas River, and in sending patrols several miles beyond the river. But this week the Greeks, greatly aided by the rain, claimed to have succeeded in pushing the enemy back to the bridgehead.

These successes heartened the Greeks, but it was hard to see how they could last. The long-range odds were too great. Reporting of the war was weird. Whether for reasons of propoganda or because of overanxious sympathy, Greek advantages were overstated. Successive Greek "victories," when traced on the map, sometimes turned out to be steady Italian advances. A mysterious bombing by Italian-type planes of Bitolj, Yugoslavia, which caused a stir of feeling and was followed by the resignation of the Yugoslavs' anti-Italian Defense Minister, General Milan Neditch, may have been a punishment for grotesquely pro-Greek accounts of the war emanating from Belgrade. Qualities of fantasy crept into the dispatches. The Italians were said to be deserting in droves, drowning themselves in flooded gorges, perishing of cold and hunger, suffering from the forays of wolves.

Through the murk of biased reporting on both sides, just one fact shone bright as an ancient Greek fire beacon. Adolf Hitler has an unearthly way, not only of beating his enemies, but of getting his allies into embarrassing wars which make his own successes seem greater. Winter in Finland and the rainy season in Greece were two good examples.

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