



The First Victory: Greece in the Second World War

Reviewed by Dr. Alexandros K. Kyrou

George C. Blytas, *The First Victory: Greece in the Second World War*. River Vale, NJ; Washington, D.C.: Cosmos Publishing Co., Inc.; the American Hellenic Institute Foundation, 2009. ISBN 978-1-932455-19-9. Maps. Figures. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xxiii, 574. \$44.95 hardcover.

The first aggression in 20th century history perpetrated by a fascist state was carried out against Greece, twelve years before the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, sixteen years before the German invasion of Poland. In August 1923, ten months after coming to power in Rome, Mussolini used the pretext of a manufactured crisis along the Greek-Albanian border to bombard and occupy the island of Corfu. After killing at least fifteen Greek civilians—the world's first victims of fascist war making—the Italian forces withdrew from Corfu a month after the start of their occupation. Although world opinion and Greek diplomatic magnanimity forced the Italian withdrawal and prevented Mussolini from annexing Corfu, the Italian leader's actions revealed fascism's menacing character, an ominous threat to international stability and peace that would be ignored by the Western powers until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Much as the Corfu Crisis of 1923 has been largely overlooked in most histories of fascist aggression, the first defeat suffered by fascist forces in Europe has been one of the most ignored events of World War II. Ironically, the first defeat of fascism, like the first fascist aggression, involved Greece. Nineteen months before the Axis setback at El Alamein, twenty-six months before the German disaster at Stalingrad, Greece inflicted an astonishing defeat against Mussolini's fascist empire, a humiliation from which the world's first fascist leader and first fascist state would not recover.

Dr. Alexandros K. Kyrou, an American Hellenic Institute Fellow, is Associate Professor of History at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts, where he teaches on the Balkans, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire.

The Greco-Italian War of 1940-1941 would have significant strategic implications for the course of the wider, gargantuan conflict throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. Yet, the rout of Italy's army by the Greeks in late 1940 marked more than the first Allied military victory of the war in continental Europe. For the Allied war effort, the outcome of the Greek campaign constituted an important moral triumph which would have enormous ideological consequences for the global battle of ideas between democracy, on the one hand, and the anti-democratic forces of fascism and totalitarianism, on the other.

History Versus Historiography

The most extensive, recent study which aims to overcome the relative dearth of attention in the English-language literature on Greece's seminal role in the struggle against the Axis is found in the volume, *The First Victory: Greece in the Second World War*, by George C. Blytas. This massive tome, divided into two chronological and corresponding thematic parts, presents a sweeping narrative of Greece's wartime experience. While the book's second part—comprising eight chapters devoted to the already extensively studied events involving the Axis occupation of Greece, resistance, liberation and postwar political crisis—are highly informative, the publication's unique worth stems from its exceptional sixteen-chapter treatment comprising the book's first part, "The Battle of Greece." In this section, the author succeeds in presenting a thorough and richly documented history of Greece's military role in the Second World War, from the country's defense against the Italian invasion in the fall of 1940 to the German conquest of Greece in the spring of 1941.

The importance of this publication is reflected in the author's incomparably detailed narrative and analysis of the fighting during the first phase of Greece's involvement in the Second World War, the Greco-Italian War of 1940-1941, known in Greek historiography as the Albanian War. Writing as a passionate lay historian, while adhering successfully to the methods of the rigorous professional scholar-researcher, Blytas has produced a monumental work that constitutes an important contribution to the literature on both wartime Greece and, more generally, the Second World War in Europe.

Blytas' book should also be appreciated as a thoughtful corrective to a common historiographical prejudice, and hence interpretive deficiency, which permeates the Western literature on World War II. The English-language writing on the war, dominated largely by British authors and uncritically reproduced by American scholars, has led to a popular, distorted view of World War II. Inasmuch as most such works have tended to elevate Britain's role in the conflict

by marginalizing the importance of other actors, the contributions of smaller Allied co-belligerents have been largely ignored. In this sense, the historical importance of no other Allied country has been perhaps as willfully ignored than Greece.

British national pride cherishes the myth that “Britain stood alone” defiantly and heroically against fascism from the fall of France in June 1940 to the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union a year later. This fallacy is compounded by the fiction that the British army’s victories in 1941 in Ethiopia and North Africa represented the first Allied victories against the Axis.

Moreover, to the extent that the major extant literature acknowledges Greece’s role in the war, the relevance of Greece’s role is largely reduced to drawing British involvement in the Balkans, and supposedly preventing the British from securing a decisive, early victory against the Italians in North Africa. In short, most histories of World War II address Greece as merely a peripheral theatre of operation for a failed, minor British campaign, culminating in an interesting, but tangential, German airborne assault against Crete. In short, the substance and analysis of Greece’s participation in the war is largely ignored and the importance of the Greek victory against fascist Italy is either omitted or trivialized in most such works.

The above widely recycled renditions, in fact, conflict with the actual historical record. First, the rhetoric of “Britain standing alone” against fascism ignores the many Commonwealth nations, Czechs, Free French, Poles, and others who fought alongside the British after the fall of France. This approach omits Greece—whose armed forces resisted aggression longer than any Allied country eventually conquered by the Axis—a country which fought tenaciously during seven of the twelve months that Britain supposedly stood alone.

Furthermore, the Greek army’s daring reversal of the Italian invasion proved to be not only the first Allied victory of the war, well ahead of Britain’s first cautious counteroffensives against the Italians in Ethiopia and North Africa, but colossal in its symbolic and ideological importance.

Finally, rather coming to terms with and analyzing the incompetence of British military leadership, which produced an uninterrupted string of Allied disasters during the first two years of the war, most historians have been content to repeat the hollow apologia of the British command in the Middle East, which deflected its failings in North Africa by attributing them to the dispatch of resources to Greece.

Unencumbered by the historiographical dogma and the traditional Anglo-centric perspective that has impeded the development of a more thorough understanding of Greece's participation in the war, George C. Blytas' work is invaluable for its ability to distinguish accurate and reliable historical data from uncritical narrative to produce a remarkably insightful account and rigorous interpretation of Greece's seminal role in World War II.

The Italian Invasion

Greece was forced to enter World War II on October 28, 1940, when an Italian army launched a cross-border invasion from positions in Albania—Mussolini chose the date to commemorate the eighteenth anniversary of his ascendancy to power as Italy's prime minister. Three hours before the invasion began, Greece's head of state, Ioannis Metaxas, was given an ultimatum by Italy's ambassador in Athens to surrender Greece to Italian occupation. Metaxas' immediate and resolute rejection of Mussolini's ultimatum inspired the Greek people, who were already outraged by months of Italian provocations, to popularly express their will to resist in one word: *Ochi!* (No!). The Metaxas government's immediate order for military mobilization was met by an instantaneous wave of patriotic fervor and unprecedented national unity, as Greeks, regardless of past opposition to or support for the Metaxas regime, rushed forward to defend their country against fascist aggression.

The Italian invasion of Greece was motivated by strategic, political, and ideological objectives. Conquest of Greece was crucial to Mussolini's goal of establishing Italian hegemony in the Mediterranean and the building of a fascist, revived Roman Empire. Irritated by Berlin's lack of consultation with Rome before precipitating war against Poland in 1939 and invading France in 1940, as well as harboring envy of the Germans' astonishing military successes, Mussolini sought to match Hitler through a victorious, unilateral, and unwarned campaign against Greece. Moreover, the anticipated defeat and subjugation of the Greeks was intended to demonstrate to the world the primacy of Italian fascism and the superiority of the Italian nation.

The Italian invasion plan envisioned a decisive defeat of the Greek army to be completed within two to three weeks. Greece would be invaded and occupied in three stages, or phases. The first phase of operations would eliminate Greek border defenses and secure the seizure of Epirus and the Ionian Islands. The second phase, fueled by the arrival of a large wave of reinforcements from Italy, would produce the destruction of the remaining Greek field forces in a thrust across Western Macedonia, culminating in the capture of Thessaloniki.

The final phase of the invasion would involve the rapid, smooth occupation of the rest of Greek territory, to be crowned by a triumphal march of Italian troops into Athens.

Placed under the command of General Sebastiano Visconti Prasca, the more than 100,000-man Italian invasion force consisted of one armored, one alpine, and four infantry divisions, plus ancillary armored, artillery, blackshirt, cavalry, and infantry units, as well as six Albanian battalions, all of which were supported by roughly 500 artillery pieces, 460 planes, and almost 200 tanks. In order to quickly reinforce and nearly double the initial invasion force, six additional divisions were earmarked for rapid deployment from Italy within two weeks of the commencement of hostilities.

Facing this formidable concentration of men and material, the Greek forces positioned in the first line of defense along the frontier with Albania, amounted to only 10,000 troops, a figure which would increase to barely 35,000 troops during the first week of fighting. The Greek army lacked any tanks, and the entire air force counted fewer than 80 planes.

Given the enormous disparity of forces in Italy's favor, as well as the factor of a surprise attack, the Italian military command was predictably optimistic about the outcome of their forthcoming campaign. Mussolini had every reason to expect success. He was not alone. In fact, once news of the Italian invasion broke, the international media and the world community universally anticipated a quick defeat and occupation of Greece by fascist Italy, a large, powerful country with a significant industrial arsenal, a colonial empire, and a population seven times larger than its prey.

World opinion had been justified in expecting that Greece would be quickly vanquished and occupied. The poorly armed, antiquated Greek army was greatly outnumbered. Conversely, the modern and well-equipped Italian military enjoyed comparatively limitless reserves of manpower and material, as well as total air superiority and the initiative of the offensive. Yet, the Greeks would overcome these staggering disadvantages by effective concentration of force, tactical deftness, and the intangible of extraordinary will—in short, with stubborn determination the Greeks outmaneuvered and outfought the Italians.

During the first few days of the attack, the massed Italian forces in Epirus moved forward but were slowed by the Greeks' screening units. On November 1, the Italians collided into the Greeks' main line of defense, running from Igoumenitsa along the Ionian coast, to the border towns of Kalpaki and Konitsa in the center, north through the Pindus Mountains, and descending west of Kastoria and Florina. Backed by intensive bombing sorties, the primary thrust of

the Italian offensive was directed toward the city of Ioannina through the vital crossroads near Kalpaki.

In support of the main push towards Ioannina, a deep flanking maneuver to the north and east of the Kalpaki sector was spearheaded by the elite alpine Julia Division. The powerful, well-equipped Julia Division was tasked with securing control of the Pindus Range and capturing the strategic town of Metsovo, thereby isolating Greek forces in Epirus from those in Macedonia and Thessaly, cutting off their supply and retreat route, and encircling them for annihilation.

The Greek Victory

To Mussolini's horror, and the world's astonishment, the Italian invasion was halted and beaten back by the Greeks. After almost a week of repeated, frenzied Italian attempts to break through the Greek lines, "by 8 November, before the mobilization was complete, the Greeks had won the battle of Kalpaki, the first [Allied] land victory of World War II. In that battle, two Greek regiments had mauled and defeated two Italian divisions, one of them armored" (p. 89). At the same time, the Julia Division was destroyed. The Julia Division's advance across the Pindus Range was harassed by constant, daring attacks from Greek cavalry, which outmaneuvered the Italian unit, forced it to fall back towards Albania, and crushed it in a series of bold engagements.

Indeed, "the battle for Pindus decimated Julia and her satellite units: more than 600 troops were killed, 2,000 were wounded and 5,000 were captured. The Albanian units were dispersed, Julia was reduced to 40 percent of its initial size, and Ioannina was safe. The battle of Pindus was the second major Greek victory, and like the victory at Kalpaki, it also occurred before the mobilization of the Greek army was complete, and before most of the Greek army had reached the front" (p. 98).

The defeat of the Italian invasion force and the steady arrival of reserves enabled the Greek army's commander-in-chief, General Alexandros Papagos, to launch a counteroffensive along the entire front on November 14. The main push of the Greek assault came from five divisions, which Papagos had concentrated near Kastoria in Western Macedonia, along a sector of the front where the Italians, waiting for the first phase of the anticipated victory in Epirus before starting the planned second phase of the invasion, had remained largely inactive.

Breaking through the Italians' forward defenses, and after a large scale, week-long battle against eight Italian divisions, on November 21, the Greeks captured Koritsa, Albania's then largest city. Koritsa thus became the first Axis-

occupied city to be liberated by Allied forces during World War II, an event which, much to Mussolini's humiliation, drew extensive international media attention.

The Greek victory at the Battle of Koritsa, which nearly ruptured the Italian front, had the effect of forcing the Italians to begin a headlong retreat deep into Albania. By November 22, the last Italian troops had been swept from Greek territory. During the next six weeks the Greek counteroffensive pressed steadily deeper into Albania, producing an uninterrupted stream of victories as one Italian defense line after another, and after one town after another, fell to the Greek army.

By the close of 1940, virtually all of southern Albania, including predominantly Greek-populated Northern Epirus, had been liberated. Although the Greeks continued to make local gains by capturing strategic points along the newly established front in January and February 1941, the onset of extremely harsh winter conditions and logistical limitations had forced General Papagos to halt the general advance at the close of December 1940. In desperation, Mussolini had by that time changed his commanding generals in Albania twice and had poured enormous numbers of troops into the country, all with no effect. The front may have stabilized, but the Italians could not reverse their staggering defeat.

In response to the Italian disaster, Hitler ordered the German General Staff to prepare for an invasion of Greece. Although Hitler did not want to go to war against Greece, he saw no means of avoiding such action. Larger strategic interests demanded that Greece be neutralized. Hitler concluded that the success of his impending invasion of the Soviet Union would be jeopardized if the Axis Powers' southern flank in the Balkans was not secure, a view cemented by the arrival in Greece of a token British expeditionary force in March 1941. Thus, in April 1941, the Germans invaded and overran Greece, beginning the ordeal of occupation and resistance which concludes *The First Victory: Greece in the Second World War*.

Even in the midst of defeat and conquest by the Germans, the Greek victory against the Italians continued to resonate among both Allied and Axis camps. Mussolini attempted one last time to salvage Italian fascist pride by launching a "Spring Offensive" aimed at defeating the Greek army in Albania ahead of the impending German invasion of Greece. After months of rebuilding and reinforcing the Italian forces in Albania, thereby amassing a vast army of almost 600,000 troops (the largest single field army the Italians would deploy on any front during World War II), on March 9, Mussolini launched a carefully

prepared offensive against the Greek forces, which numbered fewer than 300,000 troops. With the support of massive aerial bombing and sustained artillery barrages, tremendous waves of ground assaults were thrown against the Greek lines.

Despite suffering enormous casualties, the Italian attackers did not gain an inch of territory and the vaunted “Spring Offensive” ended in total failure by March 25, fittingly, the Greeks’ Independence Day. Mussolini, who had arrived in Albania to observe in person the opening of the offensive, left Albania in disgust. Adding to Mussolini’s humiliation, following the Germans’ invasion of Greece, Greek forces surrendered to the Germans but refused to capitulate to the Italians. In fact, impressed by the demonstrated bravery and tenaciousness of the Greeks in their fighting against German forces, Hitler half sympathizing with the Greeks, momentarily gave consideration to concluding a separate peace with Athens and to leaving the Italian forces in Albania to fight the Greeks alone even after the German invasion of Greece.

The Strategic Consequences of Victory

The Greek victory over Italy had significant consequences for the course of the Second World War, especially in ways rarely acknowledged or understood by most historians. Indeed, the standard narratives on Greece have tended to promote more misunderstanding than accurate awareness of the country’s role in the larger conflict. For example, according to a narrative intended to mitigate the failure of their Greek campaign, several British apologists posited that London’s decision to deploy 60,000 British and Commonwealth troops in Greece in March 1941 was determinant in producing the postponement of the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union by six weeks, a delay that proved fatal for the Germans because it stopped them from reaching Moscow before the arrival of the dreaded Russian winter. This argument was happily repeated by several German generals who found in the British narrative a convenient rationale to absolve themselves of responsibility for their own military failures in Russia and to deny the Soviets any credit for their successes.

Interestingly, the British master narrative was eventually adopted and modified by Greek writers, who presented Greece’s admirable victory as a case of a small state exercising an asymmetrical effect on Great Power geopolitics and military actions in the international system. Greece’s victory against Italy in 1940 was thus explained as the catalyst that set into motion the sequence of events which produced the Axis failure against the Soviet Union, and hence made

possible the Allied victory in Europe, a view widely popularized in Greece and the Greek diaspora.

The proposition that the Greek army's victory against Italy in the mountains of Epirus and southern Albania determined the outcome of the gargantuan struggle between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union deserves serious historical attention. Nonetheless, the conjecture that were it not for merely poor timing and bad weather the Germans would have crushed the Soviet colossus in a single, swift campaign is as fatuous as it is simplistic. Rather, the Germans lost their war against the Soviet Union for the same reasons the Italians lost their war against Greece—the fascist racism of the Germans and Italians caused them to underestimate the ability of their enemies, and this outlook led them to plan unrealistically and inadequately for the determined resistance they believed a supposedly inferior people, such as the Slavs and Greeks, were incapable of mounting. In this sense, the Greco-Italian War was important not because it determined the outcome of the German-Soviet conflict, but because it was the forerunner, one with remarkable parallels, to the latter, larger conflict.

The conventional narrative has obfuscated historians' understanding of the significance of the Greco-Italian War in two respects: the strategic consequences of the Greeks' success for the Mediterranean theatre of war; and the ideological consequences associated with the triumph of democratic ideas over the supposed superiority of fascism. The preoccupation with linking Germany's defeat in the Soviet Union to the Greek victory in Albania has been counterproductive to a rigorous understanding of the real impact of the Greco-Italian War on the strategic contours of the larger war. To be precise, although it is doubtful that the Greek victory in Albania was important to the ultimate outcome of the German-Soviet conflict, it was crucial to the survival of the British war effort in the Mediterranean. In short, the Greek victory against Italy contributed decisively to the failure of the Axis to vanquish Britain, not the Soviet Union.

In this sense, the Greeks' victory in Albania was of particular importance because it diverted crucial Italian, land, air, and sea forces at a time when they were desperately needed in North Africa to defeat the British forces in Egypt. From October to May 1941, the Italians dispatched five times as many troops and supplies to Albania as they did to North Africa. Albania had the first call on armor, motor transports, artillery, and aircraft. As a result of the Greek crisis, the Albanian front monopolized the attention of the Italian High Command and

remained Rome's all-consuming concern at the expense of other operations, especially those in North Africa.

Had Rome defeated and occupied Greece, and not been tied down fighting a desperate defensive war in Albania, the Italians would have been able to concentrate an enormous, mobile, and far more lethal force in Libya with which the Axis might well have taken El Alamein and successfully advanced to the Suez in 1941, rather than failing to do so in 1942. In short, the Greeks' victory against the Italians in 1940 probably saved the not yet firmly organized, poorly led, and still underperforming British forces in Egypt from defeat, a development which would have had disastrous consequences for Britain's position in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Furthermore, it is clear that Italy's failure in Greece persuaded Franco to remain neutral in the European conflict. Conversely, had the Italians defeated the Greeks, Spain would have likely entered the war on the side of Hitler and Mussolini, Franco's fascist partners. With Spain as a member of the Axis camp, Gibraltar would have been easily overrun and the British presence in the Western Mediterranean would have been wiped out. Such simultaneous strategic losses for the British at the opposite ends of the Mediterranean—Gibraltar and Suez—would have been catastrophic for Britain and its ability to continue the war against the Axis.

The Ideological Consequences of Victory

Fascist thinking led the Italians to assume that the Greeks would be easily defeated. Once the Greek army devastated the fascist invasion force, it caused not only panic but an existential crisis within the Italian state, military, and society writ large. Mussolini was stunned and bewildered by the seemingly incomprehensible developments in Greece and Albania. He had carefully and deliberately singled out Greece as a much weaker country, and he believed the Greeks to be racially inferior to the Italians and therefore incapable of resistance. Indeed, shortly before the outbreak of hostilities, Mussolini was so confident of an effortless victory that he remarked, "If anyone makes any difficulties about beating the Greeks I shall resign from being an Italian."

In the whole of almost twenty years, nothing did more harm inside and outside Italy to Mussolini's reputation and the ideology of fascism than the Greek victory in Albania. Military morale and Italian public confidence in Mussolini's regime hit bottom, and the debacle in Greece disoriented and demoralized the fascist party. In fact, it was the defeat at the hands of the Greeks that effectively lost fascism the overwhelming popular support it had enjoyed

among Italians before October 1940. Furthermore, Mussolini's international prestige and clout were completely destroyed. Ultimately, Mussolini's position even within the Axis camp was marred and belittled as a result of the Italian defeat in Greece. Mussolini, in short, could no longer cling to his early conviction that he was the greatest of the fascist dictators, the leader of the more dynamic movement with a right to equal consultation, if not actual leadership of the Axis. Instead, from the Greek debacle onwards, Mussolini was forced to become more and more dependent on Germany, while German regard for Italian interests declined correspondingly. Indeed, whereas Mussolini's recognition and importance as a major world leader were never in doubt before 1940, the Greek fiasco transformed Mussolini and fascist Italy into an international laughing stock.

In retrospect, the most important consequences of the Greek victory against Italy extended beyond the military sphere to the arena of ideas. Greece's victory ended the myth of Axis invincibility and, even more importantly, it revealed the falsehood and futility of fascism. Any illusion that fascism heralded a New Order, a greater civilization based on an altogether new hierarchical idea of man, society, and nation was shattered by the Greeks' superiority in battle against the larger fascist, supposedly racially superior, invader—the victory of a veritable David against a modern-day Goliath. Consequently, the Greeks' military victory was also a moral and ideological victory for the Allies and democracy because it affirmed the noble principle that all nations, no matter how small or lacking they may be in might, which abide by the rule of law, have a right to exist and to be free to determine their own destinies in peace.

Greece's defeat of fascist Italy was a defeat of the brutal idea that only powerful nations have a right to a future and that the future should be determined by force. Many historians emphasize that the lack of sufficient preparedness doomed the Italian invasion of Greece to failure. Such historians miss the point—they do not grasp the fact that the cause of a lack of sufficient preparedness in Rome for war was fascism itself, which, as much as the Italian army, was demolished by the Greeks on the battlefields of Epirus. Rome's fascists had been confident that Italian genius and energy were bound to bring success against the inferior Greeks, and this would be true even if the Greeks were a hundred times more numerous and well-armed. Italians could rest assured that they would be victorious because they were more intelligent, cultured, robust, and braver than other nations. Therefore, true to the logic of its racist nationalism, Italy welcomed the war against Greece and judgment by battle as an entirely proper test by which the superior quality of the Italian nation and fascism could be demonstrated. Italy *and* fascism failed this test.

The author's citation of a November 1940 *New York Times* commentary reveals a remarkable early awareness of the gravity of the Greeks' first victory: "Within a short month the small Greek Nation dispelled the evil nightmare that cast its shadow over the spirit of the democratic world everywhere.... It will be the glory of contemporary Greece that it destroyed the legend of the invincible Axis and gave to all free people proof of the value of democracy" (p. 112).

George C. Blytas' *The First Victory: Greece in the Second World War* succeeds in reminding us that Greece's triumph against fascism was, like so many other Greek achievements before it, a victory for the world. This lesson is strikingly prescient for our times. Indeed, a careful reading of the Greco-Italian War may offer valuable insights for our current global reality, where calculations about war and peace cannot rely on strategic factors alone, but must be weighed against the power of ideas as a force for human behavior and historical change.

The AHIF Policy Journal | copyright © 2011 American Hellenic Institute Foundation, Inc.

All rights reserved. All articles appearing in the AHIF Policy Journal are the copyright of the Journal. The online edition is free to individuals and institutions. Copies of the individual articles are strictly prohibited. Reproduction, storage or transmission of this work in any form or by any means beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law is unlawful without prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) and other organizations authorized by the publisher to administer reprographic reproduction rights. Distribution of the published articles for research or educational purposes is possible, but requires the formal authorization of the Journal editor and the authors. Commercial use of the AHIF Policy Journal or the articles contained herein is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the Managing Editor at AHIFPolicyJournal@aheworld.org. AHIF 1220 16th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036 ~ www.aheworld.org