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A Case Study of Military-Diplomatic Command: 1940-1941 Graeco-German War

Robin Higham

The Commander in Chief of the British forces in the Eastern Mediterranean—up until shortly after the loss of Greece and Crete in the late spring of 1941—was the imperturbable, one-eyed General Sir Archibald Wavell, a man of many talents including being a poetry editor. Talent was an essential for the job, as Wavell was not only called upon to run campaigns in such widely scattered places as East Africa, the Western Desert, and Greece, but he was also the satrap of all the Middle East under British control. Besides, he had to conduct a separate campaign against the irrepressible Prime Minister, Winston Churchill—always ready to urge him to some madcap scheme such as the seizure of Pantelleria or Sicily or the Dodecanese, for which he had not the forces.

The Italian attack on Greece on 28 October 1940 opened a whole new Pandora's box for Wavell, then preparing an underdog's offensive against the Italian Army which had invaded Egypt. London ordered that air support be given immediately to the only ally fighting the Axis on the mainland of Europe and insisted on honoring the 1939 Guarantee Treaty, which should have been declared null and void by the fall of France, the other signatory. After all, it had scarcely been envisaged that England would have to honor the treaty with the Mediterranean closed and the French knocked out of the war. Added to the diplomatic pressures were those of the royal connections—the Duke of Kent, King George VI's brother, was married to Princess Marina of Greece—and the even older classical and Byronic attachments which permeated the education of British officers and gentlemen.

The result was that in very short order half of Wavell's very meager air force in the Middle East was on its way to Greece. But only support troops were sent with it because at first no others could be spared. Actually, apart from a horrendous language barrier, another reason for not going so soon became obvious—the British had neither weapons nor knowledge to pass on to an

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army which was engaged in mountain warfare and to have attempted to do so would have been to have insulted a courageous small force which was halting and then repelling the Italians. What the Greeks really needed were the sorts of things the British were least in a position to supply—French and Polish metric-sized weapons and ammunition, motor vehicles, and British coal for the railways.[1] Otherwise, economically, financially, and militarily, Greece was—in the period before World War II—very much oriented towards the Continent. And its war with Italy, which had seized Albania in 1939, took on the trappings of a limited war within an unlimited war.

The tugs between emotion and reality were very much evident in watching the Greek High Command through British and American eyes during the period of 28 October 1940 to 26 April 1941.[2] Up until his death at the end of January 1941 the President of the Council in Athens, General Ioannis Metaxas, managed to keep control over the situation. Besides having an appreciation of Greece's weaknesses, his training in Berlin provided him with insights into German military power and its familiarity with the Balkans. His implacable hatred for the Italians made him determined to beat them, but he fully recognized that if the Germans came in, Greece had to surrender. Moreover, by the time of his death it was becoming obvious that the British could not provide the aid the Greeks needed and that this failure, when combined with winter weather and the weakness of the Greek economy, would see the Greeks run out of fighting strength in the spring. After all, Metaxas was first of all a Greek. He kept his lines of communication to both Cairo and Berlin open. This was a necessity, for until the Germans actually attacked on 6 April 1941 the German embassy in Athens was that of a neutral. For Metaxas, for his king, Giorgios II, and for his Chief of Staff, General Alexandre Papagos, the war against the Italians was to the death. For the British, on the other hand, it was only a limited sideshow—at the most to keep a toehold on the mainland of Europe.

Wavell was sensitive to the delicacy of the position. He consulted London as to whether or not it would be proper for him to visit Athens and was advised against it until January. Instead, a Military Mission was sent under the Greek speaking Rear Admiral Charles Turle. But the Mission was separate from the British Air Forces Greece under Air Vice Marshal J. H. D'Albiac, an airman who refused except under duress to use his aircraft for tactical support of the Greek Army. Turle, D'Albiac, and Major General T. G. G. Heywood formed an uneasy quadrumvirate with the British Minister in Athens, Sir Michael Palairet, whose constant emotional appeals upset even the Foreign Office staff in London. Yet in general, the Military Mission kept Cairo well informed of the war on the Albanian and Athenian fronts.

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When ordered by Churchill, Wavell and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, the AOCinC Middle East, went to Athens in mid-January 1941 to offer military aid to the Greeks. Longmore did not have to say much, for the Greeks were already aware both of his limited resources and of their own shortcomings in all-weather airfields. Wavell briefed Metaxas on his limited resources, which were not much at all, and certainly not enough to make the canny Greek leader wish to accept them and bring the Germans in against Greece. He and Wavell saw eye to eye. At the same time, they and Longmore were in the process of fending off a scheme emanating in London which would have converted the limited RAF effort—in support of the Albanian front and in defense of Athens—into an offensive against the German-controlled Rumanian oilfields at Ploesti.[3]

In the meantime, shortly after the Graeco-Italian War broke out, the British had taken over the defense of Crete to allow the Greek battalions to be transferred to the mainland. Although Crete was a pivotal bastion for the right wing of the British position in the Eastern Mediterranean, somehow, its place was never fixed in British grand strategy. During the six months it was garrisoned by British and Commonwealth troops, it had six commanding officers and little progress was made in putting its defenses in order—in building airfields or in making Suda Bay a secure naval refueling base. Yet Crete lay at the crossroads of the routes from Egypt to Greece and from Italy to the Dodecanese. Along either of these axes or at the ends of any of them fighting might break out. What delayed it was the weather in the Balkans and the successful British offensive begun in the Western Desert on 9 December 1940. But, the Germans were not ignoring the area. They had already conducted extensive photo reconnaissance of the Athens area on 13 July 1940 and followed it with another equally high-flying survey on 19 January 1941, just after Wavell departed from his meeting with Metaxas.[4]

At that time the Greeks were preparing a major offensive which they hoped would tumble the Italians back into Albania and stabilize the front there. London was resigned to allowing Wavell to continue his offensive in the desert and leaving the Balkans quiescent until the spring. There was talk of taking the Dodecanese,[5] but Turkey had refused to move, and so it looked like most of the action would take place on Downing Street for some time to come as Britain had no power to strike anywhere else. Then on 29 January the President of the Council, Metaxas, died and a most interesting period began. It can be described as a Greek tragedy in which a Graeco-German War, already foreordained, became inevitable.

From at least the First World War, the British and the French had attempted to create a Balkan *entente* or *bloc.* The Greeks had also tried unsuccessfully to cement such a group together, but always found the Yugoslavs unwilling to make a commitment. Both they and the Bulgars

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coveted Salonika as their natural outlet to the Aegean-Mediterranean basin. Conversely, the Greeks appeared to have the best rapport with their erstwhile enemies the Turks. In 1939 the British and the French extended guarantees to both Greece and Turkey, but the United Kingdom's problem after the fall of France in June 1940 was how to implement them. Both the Greeks and the Turks needed military aid, of which in the face of invasion, Britain had none to spare. Nevertheless, Churchill made offers of ten RAF squadrons and other material, ordering Wavell to supply them from his stocks. These stocks were similar to the four-division reserve which the CinC had been ordered to create in the Nile Delta in January 1941—an idea on paper which London then assumed existed and could be deployed to support policy. Wavell, in fact, often found himself in the position of Sir Herbert Richmond's eighteenth-century admirals, ordered to use military forces as an instrument of policy; only unlike his naval predecessors, he did not enjoy the material support they usually did.

In the meantime, on 13 December 1940 Hitler decided on Operation Marita to tidy up his Balkan flank before the offensive against Russia. London knew about it and a scheme was proposed to Middle East Command, without betraying the ULTRA source, that bombers based in Greece should attack the Ploesti oilfields. It was eventually abandoned as impracticable given the equipment available. Up to 29 January 1941 all these efforts had come to nought because Metaxas had doughtily and sensibly refused to endanger Greece by challenging the Germans. He had recognized that if the Germans attacked, Greece would have to surrender.

Early in February events started on a tragic path. The new civilian President of the Council, Alexandre Koryzis, was unaware of Metaxas' rejection of British aid on 18 January 1941, but, when he had read of it, asked for a reexamination of its contents and assumptions. The British Minister, Palairet, and London, promptly assumed that this was a request for help, especially since London wished to get further involved. Churchill at once decided to send his heir, Anthony Eden, now the Foreign Secretary and formerly Secretary of State for War, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill, to the Middle East with *carte blanche* to act as they thought best—never dreaming that they would in fact go ahead and sign an alliance without referring it back to London for approval. In the meantime, Wavell, that master of deception long familiar with the leakiness of Cairo security, had been hearing from many intelligence sources that the Germans were massing to attack Greece and could be expected in Athens before the end of March. Faced with pressure from London for action to save the noble Greeks and from the Western Desert to go on to Tripoli, a gamble that would clear North Africa and allow a linkup with the French in Tunisia, Wavell appears to have devised his own deception recognizing, in his own phrase, that "war is an option of difficulties."

Thus when on 19 February Eden and Dill arrived finally in Cairo after a much delayed journey, Wavell already had plans in motion for the Greek expeditionary force to start sailing at the beginning of March. Its dispatch was to be on a leisurely schedule owing to a shortage of shipping; so, it would be between three and six months before even half of the paper 126,000-man force with 20 to 23 RAF squadrons would be in Greece, even if the Germans did not block the Suez Canal, which they had already started to do by aerial mining in January. Metaxas might well have smiled from his grave and repeated what he had said at their January meeting—it was the action of a commander in chief. Wavell was, in other words, obeying his political orders with minimum damage to his own military position.

Eden arrived in Cairo full of enthusiasm to create a Balkan bloc, determined to bring in his fellow Etonian Prince Paul of Yugoslavia; while at the same time, ignoring the political and strategic realities which the ruler in Belgrade faced. Eden was convinced that all the Greeks needed was a little stiffening to be able to resist a German attack from Bulgaria, if only the Turks, too, would join in.[6] On the 22nd Eden, Dill, Wavell and company left for Athens. They stopped in the desert to tell Jumbo Wilson that if the Greeks agreed, he had been selected for command of the combined forces in Hellas, and flew on to the secret meeting at the Tatoi Palace, a Gothic country house outside Athens. There, after prolonged discussions well into the night, the small Greek team—heavily dependent upon its Chief of Staff, General Papagos's, expertise—finally agreed that depending upon the reply from the Yugoslavs, the Greeks would withdraw their forces from the Metaxas line, a fortified zone in Macedonia, and join the British on the Aliakmon line, a grease-pencilled mark on a map. But whether or not the Greeks would move, clearly depended upon whether or not the Yugoslavs joined the bloc and protected the Monastir Gap, thus giving the new alliance a fighting chance even though it had less than half the strength Metaxas had reckoned satisfactory. Eden then left for Ankara.

There the Foreign Secretary was unsuccessful with the Turks. More importantly, it was in the Turkish capital that the Yugoslav ambassador reported that his government would not join the proposed bloc. Eden flew into a tantrum and neglected to report the news to Athens. Thus Papagos took no action to move his troops from Macedonia to the Aliakmon line, for which the British blamed him. The Greek Chief of Staff was down to his last reserves, his offensive in Albania was petering out, his forces were almost out of ammunition and supplies, and the Greek economy was exhausted. He did not wish his weak troops to be caught in the flank as they moved across the Macedonia plains nor did he wish to leave the Greek population there undefended. Nevertheless, he was then cajoled and browbeaten by Sir John Dill into creating paper divisions to man the Aliakmon and help prepare positions for the British Commonwealth forces about to arrive. And so it was agreed. The Greeks would resist the inevitable German attack launched from the lands of their old enemy Bulgaria.

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Nevertheless, there was an attempt to play the fiction out that Greece and Germany were still not at war. Though British troops were inspected by the German military attaché as they marched past the German Legation on their way to the station in Athens, General Wilson was kept in mufti in the British Legation and not allowed to go to his headquarters in the Hotel Acropole until shortly before the Germans attacked on 6 April.

In the meantime Wavell's timetable was attenuated by the further mining of the Suez Canal and his deception was endangered by late snows which blocked the Bulgarian passes for a month longer than usual. Yet in spite of these setbacks, London was so upset at Eden's arrangements that it never insisted until too late on seeing a comparative schedule of estimated German and Anglo-Greek arrivals on the Aliakmon line. Having failed with the exception of setting up the Anglo-Greek alliance, Eden and Dill finally started home in late March, only to be sent back to Athens from Malta when the Yugoslav coup occurred. Prince Paul was expelled, but the new military government soon had to face the same realities and their actions in the end only accelerated the German attack as they made Hitler more determined than ever to clean up the Balkans and rid himself of the mess Mussolini had made on his flank before the Nazis attacked the USSR. In spite of meetings between Dill and Papagos and the Yugoslav staff, no plans were made, and the Germans quickly divided and conquered. Eden and Dill went home. Wavell lost Greece, Crete, and all that he had gained in Cyrenaica. The Navy saved the troops, but all the equipment was left behind.

The British performance was restricted by the conditions prevailing in the Middle East theater at the time, and by the fact that Wavell realistically regarded aid to Greece as participation in a limited war.

The reasons for the sorry performance of the British in their attempts to aid Greece in 1940-1941 were related to their lack of knowledge of the area—political, diplomatic, military, geographic, economic, social, and psychological—their failure to develop a grand strategy for the war and failure to provide for adequate logistics.

The British had mixed views of the Greeks as descendants of the noble classical people, while at the same time viewing them as Balkan peasants. Politically and diplomatically, London took the view that it knew what was best for the Greeks regardless of the actual circumstances. Yet London was ignorant of Balkan political realities and geography. Militarily the Greeks needed weapons and equipment which the British could not supply. That is unless they captured large quantities of comparible Italian material, and even then they could not transport it because of a shortage of ships and a peacetime accounting mentality. The Greek Army and Air Force were at least as professional as the British of the day, but many Brirish officers did not think so. The Greek economy was very weak and essentially oriented to

the Danubian axis except for coal, which came from Britain. But the coal ships were stuck on the south side of the Suez Canal. Metaxas was correct when he asked for material, not men, and a few airplanes in exchange for Crete.

The British failed to grasp the importance of Crete as a bastion and a base from which the eastern Mediterranean could be secured and as part of the pincer with which to snip off the Dodecanese. The Italian attack on Greece provided the opportunity of securing it, but lack of a grand strategy and adequate means lost the island six months later.

Lastly, Wavell, though much overworked and short of staff, as army and theater commander, grasped that to satisfy Churchill and the spies in Cairo, he had to send a token force to Greece. He gambled that Metaxas would live and hold the Greek front from absorbing too much, that the Bulgarian snows would melt, and that the Germans would reach Athens before but a few of his precious reserves had debarked in Hellas. As the best senior British commander of the day, he knew the limitations of his forces. He also knew that the Greeks could not survive—the Military Mission had told him that. And if they could not beat the Italians in a *limited* war, they had no hope against the Germans in an *unlimited* one. Thus from his point of view, he had to keep the Greek involvement limited so he could win the total war.[7] And that was really as humane a view for the Greeks as Metaxas had had.

Notes

This study is based upon my *Diary of a Disaster*, to be published by the University Press of Kentucky, 1985. It made use of extensive published sources and of the documentation available from British sources, the Greek White Papers including that published in 1980 on the coming of the Graeco-German War, and upon the *U.S. Foreign Relations* series and supplementary papers from the National Archives. In addition to the British Cabinet minutes and the series *Cabinet Telegrams: Middle East* and the official histories by Playfair *et al*, *The Mediterranean and The Middle East*, Roskill's *The War at Sea*, and the medical series, extensive use was made of the Foreign Office papers and of the reports from the British Military Mission in Athens and of the documents of various Army and RAF units in the Public Record Office. Some of the most helpful of the official histories are those of the Australians and of the New Zealanders who were much involved at the operational, but not at the diplomatic level.

1. The Ptolemais coalfields just north of Kozani were not discovered until after World War II. Until that time the very inadequate Greek railway system depended upon British coal. Once Italy entered the war, colliers had to quadruple the length of their route by sailing all the way around Africa.

2. Since the members of the Military Mission spoke Greek, they enjoyed unusually close rapport with the Greek High Command including the King and thus tended to short-circuit Sir Michael Palairet, the Minister. The English-speaking community was a tight one and now in addition to the *Foreign Relations* series, this is revealed in John Iatrides edition of *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

3. "The Ploesti Ploy—British considerations and the idea of bombing the Roumanian oilfields, 1940-1941." To appear in a Rumanian publication in 1984.

4. Thanks to Colonel Roy M. Stanley II, USAF, these negatives are now in the National Archives Cartographic Section together with the German interpretation of the prints.

5. Interestingly in spite of several abortive British attempts, the Axis retained control of the Dodecanese Islands until the surrender in May 1945.

6. Official diaries were kept of both Eden's and Dill's journeys, but they do not always agree. The more reliable is Brigadier Mallaby's which was kept meticulously as they went along, while Pierson Dixon made Eden's up every few days, and on the occasion of the return to Athens, for instance, it is quite demonstrably wrong as to times and places.

7. For a new analysis of Wavell's role, see my article "British Intervention in Greece 1940-1941: the anatomy of a grand deception," *Balkan Studies*, 23.1, 1982, pp. 101-126.