THE BALKANS
1940–41 (2)
Hitler’s Blitzkrieg against Yugoslavia and Greece
ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

From the German point of view, the 1941 Balkan campaign was accidental. In July 1940, Hitler had suggested the seizure of Cyprus and Crete to the Italians, but, facing their lack of interest, the matter was dropped until after the Italian attack against Greece on 28 October 1940.

In its immediate aftermath, on 4 November 1940, Hitler ordered plans to be developed in conjunction with Bulgaria for the seizure of the Salonika area, mostly to deprive Britain of the possibility of attacking the Romanian oilfields from the air. This aim was sanctioned in Führer Directive No. 18 of 12 November 1940, its content being discussed in the following days. When meeting the Italian foreign minister Count Galeazzo Ciano on the 18th, Hitler made it clear that any German intervention against Greece would not be possible before spring, and, given Italy’s insistence on an intervention, he suggested an alternative: exploiting Yugoslavia’s keen interest in maintaining its communication links to the port of Salonika, which required an agreement between Italy and Yugoslavia.

The Italian reluctance towards such an agreement and the uncertain political situation in the Balkans led to a change of plan. The attack against Greece became part of Germany’s Mediterranean strategy, which now required the seizure of the whole country, including Athens. Orders had already been given to that effect on 19 November 1940 by the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKH – High Command), later sanctioned on 13 December 1940 with Führer Directive No. 21 on Operation Marita (the codename for the invasion).

The operation presented several issues. Poor communications and the seasonal weather suggested that the attack could not take place before March 1941, via Bulgaria. Greece was to be seized in three to four weeks, the necessary forces (including 12.Armee and Panzergruppe 1) having being sent to Romania already. The build-up was to be completed by late January 1941.

Meanwhile, a political offensive was initiated. Between 20 and 23 November 1940, Hungary and Romania joined the Axis alliance (formally the ‘Tripartite Pact’ between Germany, Italy and Japan). Bulgaria’s reluctance was eventually overcome, and it secretly joined the alliance on 13 January 1941. Around the same time, Germany informed Greece of proposals for a negotiated peace with Italy, which would also require the removal of any British forces from the country. Whether this was just an expedient move to buy time or a serious proposal aimed at avoiding an unnecessary war is hard to say. In the end, Italy’s stubbornness prevented...
any possible agreement. Mussolini made it clear that peace was not possible until after Greek forces had been defeated in battle.

On 1 March 1941, Bulgaria’s decision to join the Axis was made public, just as German troops were crossing the Danube. On the 18th, Yugoslavia announced its decision to join the Axis alliance, a decision reached after months of negotiations and a meeting between Hitler and Yugoslavia’s Prince Regent Paul on 4 March. Paul’s reluctance towards a military alliance with Germany was set aside, and on 25 March 1941 Yugoslavia formally joined the Axis. During the night of 26/27 March, a military coup in Yugoslavia led to the dismissal of the government, Prince Regent Paul’s replacement with 17-year-old King Peter II, and to the informal withdrawal of Yugoslavia from the Axis alliance.

A raging Hitler ordered plans to be prepared immediately for the annihilation of Yugoslavia as a state, issuing Führer Directive No. 25 on 27 March. The plans were prepared in just two days, so quickly that no codename was ever given to the operation (it remained known as Operation 25). The attack on Yugoslavia and Greece was set to start on 6 April 1941 with an air offensive, followed two days later by Panzergruppe 1’s attack against southern Yugoslavia. This would be followed by a main attack in the north on 10 April.

This necessitated a delay to the attack on Greece, even though it paved the way for the decisive move against the Florina Gap, the area in Yugoslav/Greek Macedonia linking Albania and Thrace. The Germans were well aware that speed was even more of the essence, given the area that had to be seized and the size of the forces involved.
CHRONOLOGY

1940

28 October   Italy attacks Greece.

3 November   First RAF units arrive in Greece.

23 November  Romania joins the Tripartite Pact.

5 December   The German Army staff submits the plans for an attack on Greece to Hitler.

9 December   Start of Operation Compass in North Africa; Italian forces there collapse.

13 December  Hitler issues Führer Directive No. 20 for Operation Marita.

1941

11 January  Hitler issues Führer Directive No. 22 for the deployment of a German Army corps in Albania.

13–17 January Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore and the GOC Middle East General Archibald Wavell arrive in Athens to meet the Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas and the Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant-General Alexandros Papagos.

29 January  Greek Prime Minister Metaxas dies; new government led by Alexandros Koryzis.

8 February  Koryzis asks for British help.

22 February Lieutenant-General Sir Maitland Wilson takes command of Operation Lustre.

22–23 February British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, Chief of Imperial General Staff Sir John Dill and General Wavell meet King George II, Prime Minister Koryzis and Lieutenant-General Papagos in Athens.

1 March   German troops start flowing into Bulgaria, which has joined the Tripartite Pact.

2–4 March  Lieutenant-General Wilson arrives in Athens; new round of negotiations between British commanders and Greek political leaders and commanders.

7 March   First batch of British and ANZAC troops from Operation Lustre arrive at port of Piraeus, near Athens.

9–26 March  Italian Spring Offensive in Albania.

20 March   Deployment of Greek and British/ANZAC troops on the Aliakmon Line.

25 March   Yugoslavia joins the Tripartite Pact.

26–27 March  Coup d’état in Yugoslavia; new government led by General Dušan Simović, Chief of the General Staff of the Royal Yugoslav Army.
27 March  Hitler issues Führer Directive No. 25 for the attack on Yugoslavia.

28–29 March  Naval Battle of Cape Matapan.

29 March  The German military leaders hold a conference in Vienna to discuss the attack plans against Yugoslavia and Greece. German–Italian meeting to discuss the attack plan against Yugoslavia.

1 April  General Erwin Rommel starts his advance into Cyrenaica. British Chief of Imperial General Staff Sir John Dill travels to Belgrade to develop a concerted plan of action.

3 April  Lieutenant-generals Papagos and Wilson, British Air Vice Marshal John H. D’Albiac and the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Royal Yugoslav Army General Radivoje Janković meet near Florina, Greece.

4 April  Lieutenant-General Wilson formally takes command of ‘W’ Force.

6 April  Germany attacks Yugoslavia and Greece. Bombing of Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital.

12 April  German capture of Belgrade.

17 April  Yugoslavia surrenders. Churchill authorizes the withdrawal of ‘W’ Force from Greece.

18 April  British/ANZAC forces withdraw to the Thermopylae Line. Greek Prime Minister Koryzis commits suicide.

20 April  Lieutenant-General Georgios Tsolakoglou surrenders the Greek Epirus Field Army Section (EFAS).

22 April  Start of the evacuation of British/ANZAC forces from Greece.

23 April  Greek King George II and his government flee to Egypt.

26 April  German airborne assault on the Corinth Canal bridge.

27 April  German troops enter Athens.

29 April  End of the Allied evacuation and of the Greek campaign.

22 May  German airborne assault on Crete.
The main burden of the war against Yugoslavia fell upon 2.Armee, led by Generaloberst Freiherr Maximilian von Weichs. Born into an aristocratic family, von Weichs joined the army in 1900 at the age of 19. He fought on the Western Front and in the Balkans in 1914 before becoming a staff officer in 1915. He joined the Reichswehr after the war, and in 1935 was given command of 1.Panzer-Division. Promoted full general in 1936, he was given a corps command before taking over 2.Armee in October 1939. Promoted Generaloberst in July 1940 at the end of the campaign in the West, he led the army in the 1941 Balkan campaign before taking up command of the Heeresgruppe (Army Group) B on the Eastern Front in July 1942. On 1 February 1943, he was promoted Generalfeldmarschall and, after being put in reserve in July, in August he was appointed Commander-in-Chief South-East and commander of Heeresgruppe F, a position he held until March 1945. Once again moved to the reserve in March 1945, von Weichs was arrested at the end of the war but was not tried for his alleged role in war crimes. Released in 1948, he died in 1954.

Panzerguppe 1 provided the armoured support to the invasion of Yugoslavia. Its commander was Generaloberst Paul Ewald von Kleist who, like von Weichs, came from a noble family and joined the army in 1900 aged 19. He fought in World War I as a cavalry officer on the Eastern Front before becoming a staff officer. In 1920, von Kleist joined the Reichswehr and rose to become a Generalmajor in 1932 before retiring in 1938 for political reasons. Recalled to duty in 1939, he was given command of XXII.Armee-Korps (mot.) (equivalent to a Panzer-Korps) during the invasion of Poland, before taking over the newly formed Panzergruppe Kleist in May 1940. At the conclusion of the campaign in the West in July 1940, von Kleist was promoted to full General, and his command was reorganized as Panzergruppe 1 (later Panzer-Armee) in November 1940. He took command of Heeresgruppe A in November 1942, and was promoted Generalfeldmarschall on 1 January 1943. Von Kleist was replaced as commander
of Heeresgruppe A in March 1944 by General Ferdinand Schörner. Having retired from active duty, von Kleist was arrested following the 20 July 1944 plot against Hitler, eventually being released without trial given the lack of evidence. Von Kleist was arrested by the Americans in April 1945, who handed him over to Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavs then extradited him to the Soviet Union, where he was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment. He died in 1954.

General Vittorio Ambrosio was the commander of the Italian Second Army, which attacked Yugoslavia from the west. A cavalry officer who joined the army in 1898 aged 19, Ambrosio fought in the Italian war against Turkey in 1911–12 and served during World War I as a staff officer. Promoted brigadier-general in 1926, he was in charge of the Cavalry School before taking over command of a cavalry division in 1932. Promoted full general in 1938, he was given command of the Second Army deployed on Italy’s eastern border, facing Yugoslavia. In January 1942, Ambrosio was appointed Chief of Army Staff, then Chief of General Staff in February 1943 when Mussolini chose him to replace General Ugo Cavallero. Ambrosio retired from active duty in July 1944. He died in 1958.

Lieutenant-General Elemér Gorondy-Novák, born 1885, served with the Hungarian Red Army after the end of World War I before joining Miklós Horthy’s conservative National Army. A general since 1934, Gorondy-Novák commanded the 2nd Cavalry Brigade before being promoted lieutenant-general in 1938 and taking over the duties of Inspector of Cavalry. In March 1940, he was appointed to command the Hungarian Third Army. After the war with Yugoslavia, Gorondy-
Novák was promoted full general in May 1941, and then retired from active duty in February 1942. Briefly active as a royal councillor, in 1945 Gorondy-Novák fled to Argentina, where he died in 1954.

The task of invading Greece was assigned to 12.Armee under Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm List. He joined the army in 1898 aged 18, fought during World War I as a staff officer and then joined the post-war Reichswehr in 1927. In charge of the army training detachment from 1927, List was promoted Generalmajor in 1930, and took over command of the Infantry School at Dresden. Following the 1938 German annexation of Austria, List was given command of the army in the area, with the task of integrating it into the Wehrmacht. Promoted full General in 1939, List commanded 14.Arme and 12.Arme in the campaigns against Poland and France, at the end of which he was promoted Generalfeldmarschall. In 1941, List negotiated with the Bulgarian government the entry of German troops into the country for Operation Marita. After commanding the German occupation forces in the Balkans as Commander-in-Chief South-East, in October 1941 List was put into the reserve before being recalled in July 1942 to take command of Heeresgruppe A to lead the offensive into the Caucasus. Removed from command in September that year, List retired from active duty. Sentenced to life imprisonment in 1948 for his role in the anti-partisan reprisals in Yugoslavia, List was released in 1952 on grounds of ill health. He died in 1971.

List’s Italian counterpart was the Italian General Ugo Cavallero, a brilliant organizer who spent most of his career working for private industries. Appointed Chief of General Staff by Mussolini in December 1940, Cavallero was actively involved in commanding Italian forces in Albania from that date, and eventually took over from General Ubaldolo Soddu on 30 December 1940. Promoted field marshal in July 1942, in January 1943 he was removed and replaced by General Ambrosio as Chief of General Staff. Cavallero died in unclear circumstances on 14 September 1943.

The main command involved in the invasion of Greece was XVIII. Gebirgs-Korps, commanded by Generalleutnant Franz Böhme. Born in 1885 in Austria, Böhme fought in World War I as a staff officer, and then in 1920 joined the Austrian Army. Appointed Chief of Army Staff on 2 March 1938, following the Anschluss Böhme joined the Wehrmacht and led 32.Infanterie-Division during the Polish and French campaigns. Commander of XVIII. Gebirgs-Korps from 15 June 1940 to 10 December 1943, Böhme briefly commanded 2.Panzer-Arme between June and July 1944, and was then given command of 20.Arme in Norway in January 1945. He committed suicide on 29 May 1947 while in Allied captivity.

Three names stand out amongst those who served under Böhme’s command during Operation Marita. Generalmajor Rudolf Veiel, a German cavalry officer veteran of World War I, had commanded 2.Panzer-Division since February 1938, holding this until February 1942 when he took over command of XXXXVIII.Arme-Korps on the Eastern Front. Promoted General der Panzertruppe in April 1942, from September 1943 Veiel was