

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 334

“Οχι”

### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Italy's invasion of Greece was a failure, and soon the Greeks were on the offensive in Greece, the British were on the offensive in Egypt, and it was no longer possible to maintain the polite fiction that the Axis was a partnership of equals.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 336. Όχι.

The last time we talked about the nation of Greece was back in episode 196, and the last thing I told you was that in 1922, military supporters of Greek Liberal political leader Eleftherios Venizelos overthrew the government in Athens, following the disastrous end of the Greek military campaign in Anatolia. King Constantine and the Royal Family were exiled, and the Second Hellenic Republic declared.

But Greece's National Schism, between monarchists and republicans, still divided Greek society. I told you about the 1923 Corfu Crisis, when Mussolini's Italy seized the Greek island of Corfu, in episode 254. Italy was forced to withdraw, leaving Benito Mussolini with a simmering grudge against Greece.

The Corfu Crisis was sparked by a border confrontation between Greece and Albania. The fact was that by 1923, Greece's economy was wrecked following years of war that also poisoned Greece's relations with its neighbors. It was time for Greece to give up its expansionary ambitions, the *Megali Idea*. The country simply didn't have the resources to keep pushing.

The war against Turkey had accomplished nothing other than to drive a large number of ethnic Greeks out of Turkish territory and into Greece, increasing the population of the small country by 25%. These refugees tended to be republican and fed up with the endless wars. Soon many of them would become Communists.

In 1925, a coup installed a military dictator. In 1926, a countercoup restored the Republic. In 1928, Venizelos returned from his self-imposed exile and his Liberal Party won a solid majority in the Greek parliament. He became prime minister for the fifth time, and the next four years would be relatively stable politically. His government worked hard to end Greece's diplomatic isolation. They would succeed in normalizing relations with Italy and Yugoslavia; Bulgaria and Albania, not so much, but Venizelos was able to work out a rapprochement with Turkey. In 1930, Venizelos traveled to Ankara to sign a treaty of friendship with Atatürk, a development which was hailed internationally, but those refugees back home took a dimmer view of the agreement.

The Greek economy was mostly agricultural, and so the Great Depression, with its collapsing commodity prices, hit Greece hard. In 1932, Greece defaulted on its national debt, and in the election that same year, Venizelos' Liberal Party was ousted from power by the monarchist People's Party, and in 1935, King George II returned to claim the crown of a restored kingdom. In the 1936 election, Venizelos' Liberal Party won the most seats, but not a majority. The Communists held the balance of power in the new parliament between the Liberals and a monarchist coalition.

Greece went through a few prime ministers while the deadlock in parliament was worked out. This was just the time when Comintern had decreed that Communist parties in other countries should make anti-fascist political alliances with other parties of the left. Per the new policy, the Greek Communists and the Liberal Party entered into negotiations.

To the right-wing monarchist parties, the only thing worse than seeing the hated republican Liberals take power once again was to see them take power in coalition with Communists. The King felt the same way and appointed military man Ioannis Metaxas prime minister. This triggered a wave of strikes and protests by leftists, and on August 4, Metaxas declared a state of emergency. Strikes were banned, political parties outlawed, and Metaxas turned Greece into a totalitarian state.

He looked to Mussolini's Italy for his model and introduced the Roman salute and other fascist symbols. He took the title *Archegos*, which means roughly the same thing as *Führer* or *Duce* or *Caudillo*. There was a round of book burnings, harsh suppression of Communists, political opponents forced to drink castor oil, you know, the usual fascist stuff. What was different about Metaxas' regime was that he headed no political party. In fact, he embraced opposition to political parties as part of his program, so it wasn't a classic fascist government, but something pretty close.

In foreign affairs, the Fourth of August Regime, as it was often called, recalling the 1923 Corfu Crisis, correctly regarded Italy as the gravest security threat to Greece and sought closer ties to France and Britain. Recall that in April 1939, those countries publicly guaranteed Greece's borders along with Poland's and Romania's, and although Metaxas kept Greece neutral when the

war began, the fact that it held that Franco-British guarantee made Berlin and Rome view the country as sympathetic to the Allies.

And that brings me around to where we left off last time, with Mussolini pressing his Army to invade Greece on October 28, 1940, with barely two weeks to prepare. The original date was October 26, precisely two weeks after German troops entered Romania, but in the end, the Italian military got an extra two days.

As fate would have it, Athens on the night of October 25, 1940 saw the premiere of the Greek National Opera's production of *Madama Butterfly*, composed by Giacomo Puccini in 1904; ironically, an opera about a troubled relationship between a Japanese and an American, he said forshadowingly. After the performance, the company was invited to a late-night reception at the Italian embassy in Athens, where the guest of honor would be none other than Antonio Puccini, the son of the composer, who had died in 1924.

The reception was in progress when the Italian ambassador, Emanuele Grazzi, was handed a packet containing an ultimatum addressed to the Greek government and instructions on exactly when to deliver it. Two days later, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the embassy celebrated the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Rome. Later that night, or more accurately, early the following morning, at 3:00 AM, the ambassador delivered the ultimatum to Metaxas. The Italian government accused the Greek government of allowing the Royal Navy the use of Greek ports and territorial waters, and of supporting acts of terrorism in Albania. The Italian government therefore demanded that Greece allow the Italian military to occupy strategic positions in Greece—which strategic positions was left unexplained—or else Italy would declare war. The Italian government demanded a reply by 6:00, just three hours later.

Those Fascists don't take any chances, do they? Metaxas' reply was, in some versions of the story, "*C'est la guerre*," a French expression that went international during the First World War. In other words, Metaxas was saying, "Well, it's war then." Another version of the story, the version firmly believed by all patriotic Greeks, has him replying with a firm "ὄχι," which is *no* in Greek.

The Italian Army didn't even wait until the ultimatum expired before moving into northwestern Greece from southern Albania. The commander of the Army in Albania was the 57-year-old Sabastiano Visconti Prasca. When this offensive was being "planned"—if that is the right word—Visconti Prasca had been one of the loudest voices arguing that the handful of Italian divisions already in Albania would be all that was required to deal with the Greeks. He ordered his army to advance through the mountains along the border in three columns and link up again on the other side.

And pity poor Antonio Puccini, who hadn't yet left Greece when the war broke out and was interned as an enemy alien.

For the first few days, the offensive seemed to be succeeding, but that was only because the Greeks hadn't fully deployed yet. They proved clever in concealing artillery guns and then opening fire unexpectedly on those Italian columns. Bad weather prevented the Italians from taking advantage of their air superiority.

The Italian offensive in Greece suffered from the same problem as the Italian offensive in Egypt: logistics. The struggle to get supplies to the front line was at least as big a hindrance as was the enemy army. The two Albanian ports closest to the fighting, Durres and Vlore, or Durazzo and Valona, to use their Italian names, could only offload about 1,250 tons of cargo per day, not enough to supply the six divisions fighting, let alone the additional divisions it soon became clear would be needed. There were no railroads, so once the supplies were on the dock, they had to be loaded onto trucks and driven hundreds of kilometers along unpaved mountain roads that soon clogged with troops and supplies trying to get to the front.

Within days, the Italian offensive ground to a halt. The ever-optimistic Visconti Prasca told Rome that all he needed was a few more trucks and supplies, and things would get moving again. A nervous Mussolini sent another general to Albania to assess the situation and report back. He reported that Visconti Prasca had no idea what he was doing.

The Greeks counterattacked along the Italian left flank, the inland edge of the line, the place that was hardest for the supply trucks to reach. An Albanian battalion broke and ran under a Greek attack; when an Italian unit was sent to block their flight, the Albanians opened fire on the Italians.

On November 3, the Army chiefs back in Rome concluded that the Italian left flank was in danger of collapsing under the Greek offensive. More troops were sent to Albania. Mussolini wanted to land a unit along the Ionian coast behind Greek lines, but the Navy reported that between the bad weather and the British, they couldn't guarantee the supply line.

Everything now had to go to the Greek front. Plans to land Italian units on the island of Corfu were abandoned, and the offensive into Egypt was postponed. No doubt Marshal Graziani heaved a sigh of relief, but the bad news for him was that he wouldn't be getting any new troops or equipment either.

On November 7, Mussolini ordered the army in Greece to halt the offensive until more troops and equipment arrived. On November 13, Visconti Prasca was relieved of his command. Between those two events, the Italian military suffered another setback, from an unexpected direction.

[music: Vivaldi, *Concerto in F major*, "Autumn."]

The Italian Navy was undoubtedly the strongest of Italy's three military services. The main battlefleet was based at the port of Taranto, and it included no less than six battleships. They

were smaller than the battleships of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, but there were more of them. Their commander was the 51-year-old Admiral Inigo Campioni.

Campioni had wisely concluded that sailing out and challenging the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet in one all-out battle would be unwise. He settled on a fleet-in-being strategy. As long as the Italian fleet at Taranto was ready for action, the British would have to move cautiously and wouldn't dare divide their fleet. In the five months since Italy declared war, the British attempted to harry Italian supply shipments to Libya and the Italians attempted to harry British supply shipments to Malta. Both sides succeeded on some occasions, failed on others.

On November 11, the fleet received orders to prepare for a mission to bombard the Greek island of Crete. That night, the air raid sirens went off. It was a false alarm. An hour later, they went off again. This time, the danger was very real.

Twenty-one Fairley Swordfish torpedo bombers, launched from the British aircraft carrier *Illustrious*, attacked the Italian fleet in the harbor at Taranto.

Let me take a minute to explain this. A torpedo bomber is a naval warfare aircraft that does what it sounds like. It carries a single torpedo, approaches an enemy warship from the side at low altitude and drops the torpedo into the water. The torpedo then propels itself into the hull of the enemy ship, if everything goes according to plan. Introduced in 1934, the aging Swordfish was still the Royal Navy's front-line torpedo bomber; it was a biplane.

Conventional thinking held that an aerial torpedo attack against harboring ships was impossible. That's because when the bomber drops the torpedo, it will fall nose first into the water, diving as deep as twenty meters before it rights itself and proceeds to the target. The harbor at Taranto was only twelve meters deep. Drop a torpedo there, and all it will do is bury itself in the mud.

But the British developed a way to prevent this. The nose of the torpedo was attached to a wire wound on a spool on the airplane. When the torpedo was released, the drag from the unwinding wire held the torpedo's nose up, so it landed in the water with a belly-flop rather than a swan dive. The heavier impact absorbed more of the torpedo's momentum, and it didn't sink as far.

This attack, codenamed Operation Judgment, was something of a crap shoot for the British. They expected to lose half their bombers; they could only hope the result would be worth the sacrifice.

Operation Judgment succeeded beyond all expectations. The British lost only two aircraft, and succeeded in damaging six Italian warships: two destroyers, one heavy cruiser, and most important, three of Italy's six battleships: *Littorio*, *Caio Duilio*, and *Conte di Cavour*. British torpedoes blew holes in the hulls of all three battleships; their crews ran them aground to save them from sinking. *Littorio* and *Caio Duilio* would be repaired and returned to service in mid-

1941; *Conte di Cavour* was more seriously damaged and was still undergoing repairs when Italy surrendered in 1943.

The Italian defenders have to take a share of the blame for this embarrassing outcome. The Italian fleet was not adequately protected with torpedo nets, standard practice for warships in port, because torpedo netting was just one of the many military necessities the Italians were short of in 1940. And although the attack came at night, no one switched on the searchlights, which were controlled not by the Navy but by a separate Anti-Aircraft Command. Admiral Campioni indignantly pointed out afterward that his fleet's anti-aircraft defenses were useless against airplanes they could not see.

The Royal Navy thought they had dealt the Italians a devastating blow, but even with only three operational battleships, the Italians were able to chase away a British supply convoy bound for Malta less than two weeks later, and naval supremacy in the Central Mediterranean would remain up for grabs for at least two more years.

Still, as Admiral Andrew Cunningham, commander of the Mediterranean Fleet noted afterward, the attack offered an important lesson: that in 1940, it was no longer guns, but aircraft, that represented a modern navy's most powerful weapon, and its gravest threat.

The Battle of Taranto attracted the attention of the Japanese assistant naval attaché in Berlin, who flew to Taranto shortly after the attack to investigate what had happened. A few months later, a delegation of Japanese naval officers visited the site and conferred with Italian naval leaders. If a mere 21 bombers could do this much damage to a fleet in harbor, imagine what a hundred could do. The Japanese were certainly imagining it.

On November 18, Mussolini spoke before a gathering of regional Fascist Party leaders in Rome, and painted them a picture of the war that was at complete odds with reality. In speaking of the disaster at Taranto, he boasted of the number of British planes shot down. (Remember, the number was two.) As for Greece, well, the invasion of Greece was a regrettable necessity, due to the seething hatred the Greeks felt for Italians. Why they resented Italy so was hard to fathom, but documents captured by the Germans during the fall of France proved conclusively that the Greeks were in league with the British and the French and posed a serious danger to Italy.

The war against Greece wasn't going to be easy, owing to the rugged terrain. There would be no German-style blitzkrieg in these conditions, but Italy was determined to eliminate the Greek threat, no matter how long it might take.

Never mind that a German-style blitzkrieg was exactly what he and his generals had planned for.

That same day, foreign minister Ciano was in Berlin, meeting with Adolf Hitler. Hitler chastised Ciano, telling him that the Italian attack on Greece had disrupted Germany's delicate diplomacy with Bulgaria, the Soviet Union, and France. Hitler pledged to send German Army units to assist

against Greece, but not before next spring, and reminded Ciano that the highest priority until then was denying the British access to the Mediterranean. That meant coaxing Spain into the war as well as the Italian Army in Egypt advancing at least as far as Mersa Matruh. From there, the Luftwaffe could bomb British bases in Egypt and drop mines into the Suez Canal, denying it to their mutual enemy.

By this time, the Greeks had gone on the offensive and were pushing the Italians back into Albania. Mussolini and other Fascist leaders began pinning the blame for the failure in Greece on Marshal Badoglio, who, you'll recall, had been the one high-ranking Italian soldier who had expressed doubts about the operation. After he was publicly attacked in Fascist newspapers, Badoglio submitted his resignation.

Mussolini ordered a remobilization of Italian Army units that had demobilized, but they would not be ready until spring. In the meantime, Italian operations in Egypt and Albania were draining the Army's scant reserves of supplies and equipment. Units based in Italy were stripped of weapons and equipment, even uniforms, to supply the soldiers abroad. The Greek front now lay fifty kilometers into Albanian territory; the only good news here was that the onset of winter had forced the Greeks to suspend their offensive.

You might think things couldn't possibly get any worse for Italy, but they could and they did.

[music: Vivaldi, *Concerto in F major*, "Autumn."]

In Egypt, Rodolfo Graziani was doing what he always did: sending messages to Rome detailing all the additional supplies and equipment his army would need before a renewed offensive farther into Egypt would be possible. Italian military intelligence estimated that Graziani's army was outnumbered by the British. This was not so. Actually the Italians had the numerical advantage over the entire British Middle East Command, and outnumbered the British in western Egypt by something like six to one, but Graziani didn't know it. Or refused to believe it.

The Middle East Command was led by General Archibald Wavell, who was building up supply stores in Mersa Matruh for an attack intended to drive the Italians out of their fortified position at Sidi Barrani, codenamed Operation Compass. Knowing that Cairo was riddled with Italian spies, some of whom served in King Farouk's household, Wavell made a show of taking his family on an outing on the eve of the offensive.

The defenders of Mersa Matruh consisted of a British armored division and an Indian infantry division, plus a handful of smaller formations. The British were armed with Matilda tanks, which were slow and had a small gun for their size, but were so heavily armored they were all but invulnerable to Italian anti-tank weapons. On December 9, they moved against the Italians, achieving complete surprise. The Indians attacked the town directly, while armored units circled around to block their retreat.

The Italians were routed. Whole units were destroyed; some 38,000 Italian soldiers were taken prisoner, so many the British struggled to cope with their numbers. British casualties were light. The Western Desert Force would also have to wait because their Indian division was being transferred to the Ethiopian front, to be replaced by an Australian division.

Rodolfo Graziani sent a cable to Rome advising Mussolini that his retreating army would be abandoning most of Libya and he would limit himself to defending Tripoli. This was all he could do until such time as Rome sent him the men and equipment necessary to fight this war properly.

Mussolini sent a reply in which he told Graziani that he already had everything he needed to stop the British offensive and demanded Graziani make his stand at Bardia, just inside the Libyan border. Bardia, and Tobruk, and if necessary Benghazi were to be defended at all costs. Mussolini did not take the obvious step of relieving Graziani and replacing him; he may have felt it was too soon to take such a drastic step after he had already dismissed his other field marshal, Pietro Badoglio.

The arrival of Hurricane fighters from Britain secured the skies, and on January 3, 1941, the British attacked Bardia, supported by the guns of the Mediterranean Fleet. Bardia fell in three days, delivering another 45,000 Italian prisoners to the astonished Australians, at the cost of 130 killed on their side.

Meanwhile, the British armored division sped ahead in the hope of encircling and cutting off Tobruk, the most important port in the region. By January 7, British armor had surrounded Tobruk, which was defended by no more than 22,000 Italians. Graziani warned the Italian commander on the scene that he could not expect reinforcements or relief.

The British armor was exhausted and in need of resupply, so they waited until the Australians finished securing Bardia and were available to assault Tobruk. In the wee hours of January 21, Royal Navy gunboats opened fire on Tobruk. RAF Wellington bombers attacked the Italian defensive positions. At dawn came the assault. The next day, the Italians force in Tobruk surrendered. Some accounts of the battle describe the Australians marching into the newly captured city while singing "Waltzing Matilda."

The road west was open, but then came some bad news. The Churchill government was offering British assistance to the Greeks, which would come from British forces in Egypt. Happily for the Western Desert Force, Metaxas turned down the offer. He believed that allowing British soldiers onto Greek territory would invite an attack from the Germans, which would overwhelm the Greek and British defenders. He wanted a minimum of nine British Army divisions. Anything less than that, he reckoned, would make Greece less safe, not more, but the British did not have nine divisions to spare.

Now that redeployment to Greece was off the table, British commanders in Egypt decided on a rapid, two-pronged attack intended to isolate Benghazi, the most important port in eastern Libya.



Most of the Western Desert Force would advance along the region's semicircular coastal road, which runs around the Jebel Akhdar highlands. At the same time, a small force in light vehicles would make a straight-line dash south of the Jebel Akhdar to block the road behind Benghazi, cutting off supply and retreat. This was accomplished on February 5, with the British force barely holding off a desperate attack by Italians trying to recapture the road.

On February 7, Benghazi surrendered. The British took another 25,000 prisoners, again with minimal losses. When a commander on the scene was asked over the radio how many prisoners had been taken, he coolly replied, "Oh, several acres, I would think."

But here the British advance had to halt. London had gotten wind of a German plan, Operation Marita, to attack Greece in support of the Italians. Units were to be reassigned to the defense of Greece.

The British advance had probably reached its limit anyway. It was now the British side which had to deal with supply lines that ran for hundreds of kilometers over desert roads. The Royal Navy could help escort supplies shipped by sea to Tobruk and Benghazi, but these ports were limited in capacity, and it would take time.

The great irony here is that Mussolini ordered the attack on Greece in order to demonstrate to Adolf Hitler that Italy had its own war goals and the means to achieve them. What he actually demonstrated was that his mouth was writing checks the Italian military couldn't cash.

I said earlier that the Second World War might be thought of as five separate conflicts that merged into one global war. This moment marks the conclusion of one of those conflicts. The separate Italian war for Mediterranean hegemony has ended in an embarrassing failure. From now on, Italy and Germany are fighting the same war.

The Italian military's new chief of staff, the 60-year-old General Ugo Cavallero felt the same way. Cavallero told Mussolini and the military command that the concept of Germany and Italy fighting separate, parallel wars was a luxury Italy could no longer afford. Italy and Germany had to pool their resources and plan their military moves jointly.

The German military believed the same thing, although they were naturally disappointed in Italy's performance in battle. Italy must now work with Germany, although the Italians should not expect to be treated as an equal partner. Not after their failures in Greece and Libya. Adolf Hitler complained that the Italians behaved like children. They asked for arms and supplies but refused offers of German military units because they were unwilling to share their victories.

On January 20, 1941, as Tobruk was falling, Benito Mussolini and Galeazzo Ciano took the train to Salzburg to eat a heaping platter of crow. Hitler was still focused on trying to persuade Franco to enter the war, but something had to be done about the Italians. He was initially reluctant to send German troops to Albania, out of fear it would provoke a British response, but agreed

Albania must not be allowed to fall. He offered the Italians a German mountain division to help hold the line until March, when Germany would be ready to execute Operation Marita.

As for Libya, Hitler believed that what the Italians needed was not so much armored units as anti-tank units to resist British armor, but he agreed to send a German light division to Naples to be transported to Libya and assist in its defense. Luftwaffe squadrons would be sent to Sicily and Southern Italy to defend against Royal Navy incursions into Italian waters. These would help maintain the balance until two of Italy's battleships returned to the seas next summer.

Two weeks later, following the fall of Tobruk and the continued British advance, Hitler decided to send a panzer division to Libya along with some supporting formations and a general officer who would take command of a new corps that would lead both German and Italian units on the North African front. This new corps would be designated Deutsches Afrika Korps, or DAK; in English, the German Africa Corps. Hitler chose Erwin Rommel to command the new corps; he had been impressed by Rommel's leadership during the offensive against France.

By mid-February, Rommel would be in Tripoli. He rejected the Italian plan to withdraw all the way to Tripoli and ordered a new defense, at the town of Sirte, which lies about halfway between Benghazi and Tripoli.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Richard and George for their kind donations, and thank you to Valencia for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and George and Valencia help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I'm pleased to be able to tell you that a short story of mine appears in the just-released fantasy anthology, *Artifice and Craft*. It's a collection of stories about magical artifacts. It is available as an ebook or a paperback at Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Kobo.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn away from the front lines in Africa and Greece for a while to spend some time on the technological side of the war. When the war began, the British were researching several technologies that promised to revolutionize warfare, radar, sonar, and the potential atomic bomb,

to name just three of them. But suddenly Britain found itself alone in the war and pummeled by the Luftwaffe. British factories were churning out equipment for the Army, Navy, and Air Force as fast as they could, and there was no room for these newfangled ideas. What was the solution? The Tizard Mission, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I can't finish today without taking note of the death of Neville Chamberlain. In July 1940, just two months after he resigned as prime minister, Chamberlain sought medical treatment for intense abdominal pain, which was determined to be colorectal cancer, too far advanced for any treatment known in 1940.

In September, he resigned from the Cabinet. He passed away on November 9, 1940, at the age of 71. For a final assessment of the man, I will defer to Mr. Churchill:

*It fell to Neville Chamberlain in one of the supreme crises of the world to be contradicted by events, to be disappointed in his hopes, and to be deceived and cheated by a wicked man. But what were these hopes in which he was disappointed? What were these wishes in which he was frustrated? What was that faith that was abused? They were surely among the most noble and benevolent instincts of the human heart—the love of peace, the toil for peace, the strife for peace, the pursuit of peace, even at great peril, and certainly to the utter disdain of popularity or clamour. Whatever else history may or may not say about these terrible, tremendous years, we can be sure that Neville Chamberlain acted with perfect sincerity according to his lights and strove to the utmost of his capacity and authority, which were powerful, to save the world from the awful, devastating struggle in which we are now engaged. This alone will stand him in good stead as far as what is called the verdict of history is concerned.*

*Herr Hitler protests with frantic words and gestures that he has only desired peace. What do these ravings and outpourings count before the silence of Neville Chamberlain's tomb?*

[music: Closing War Theme]

