

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 343

“The Balkan Detour”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Italy's position in the war with Greece was precarious, and Yugoslavia was cozying up to Germany's enemies, so Adolf Hitler ordered the Wehrmacht into the Balkans, even at the cost of postponing Operation Barbarossa.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 343. The Balkan Detour.

As I promised last time, I'm going to talk about the German invasions in the Balkans today, but before I get into that, let's take a look at the other topic I dangled in front of you in last week's episode, the April 1, 1941 coup in Iraq.

All the way back in episode 192, I told you that in 1932, Iraq won full independence from Britain, or so it was called, and became a member of the League of Nations, but this independence agreement also allowed the British military basing rights in the country.

The Iraqi King, Faisal I, had been installed on his throne by the British when Iraq was a British Mandate, and he continued to reign as King after Iraqi independence.

In August 1933, less than a year after Iraq became independent, an irregular force of Kurds in the northern part of the country massacred thousands of ethnic Assyrians in and around the town of Simele in northern Iraq. These Assyrians were refugees from the Ottoman atrocities of the First World War, resettled in Iraq by the British. This turned the Assyrians into staunch supporters of British rule, to the point of massacring anti-British Kurds during the uprising against British rule in the early Twenties. Now that the British were no longer in charge, the Kurds took their revenge.

As a side note, a 33-year-old Polish lawyer named Rafał Lemkin had taken an interest in the history of persecution and massacre of minority groups, including the then-recent mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. In an era when there were those willing to argue that the internal affairs of a nation were no one else's business, Lemkin

argued the contrary, declaring, “Sovereignty cannot be conceived as the right to kill millions of innocent people.”

Shortly after the massacre of Assyrians in Iraq, Lemkin made a presentation to the Legal Council of the League of Nations in Madrid, and made a case for what he called the crime of “barbarity” as a violation of international law and argued that it could and should be prosecuted and punished by the international community. Ten years later, Lemkin would coin a new word to label the crime he was describing. That word was *genocide*.

Alas, in Iraq, the killers of the Assyrians were hailed as national heroes. Crown Prince Ghazi traveled to Mosul to award colors to the irregulars who participated in the massacres. The British government, on the other hand, was appalled and sent its High Commissioner to Baghdad to meet with King Faisal and demand the perpetrators be punished. King Faisal was in poor health at the time, and the circumstances in which he found himself no doubt put him under further strain. He died suddenly in early September of a heart attack at the age of 48, although Iraqi politics being what they were, rumors flew that the King had been assassinated.

Faisal was succeeded by his only son, the 21-year-old Crown Prince Ghazi, the same fellow who’d just been handing out ribbons to the killers. Bakr Sidqi al-Askari, the military officer who led the attacks on the Assyrians, received a promotion.

In 1935 and 1936, General Bakr Sidqi put down Iraqi Shiite uprisings against Iraq’s predominantly Sunni government. Later in 1936, Bakr Sidqi led a military coup against King Ghazi’s government. The King supported, or at least acquiesced, in the coup, which marked the end of constitutional government in Iraq, such as it was. Henceforth, the military would play a major role in the governance of Iraq, though Bakr Sidqi’s personal triumph was short lived. He was himself murdered in 1937, just a year later.

In 1938, King Ghazi was caught up in a scandal when it became known he was having an affair with one of his servants, a young Afro-Iraqi man. The relationship came to light after this young man was found dead of gunshot wounds in the Palace. The official verdict was that he had shot himself accidentally, but his death was widely believed to have been orchestrated by the Queen. The King apparently thought so too, and became worried about his own safety.

The King died a year later, in 1939, at the age of 27, in an automobile accident widely believed to have been arranged by the prime minister, Nuri al-Said. Whether the prime minister had a hand in the King’s death or not, he certainly benefited from it, as it left the King’s only son, three-year-old Faisal II, as the new Iraqi King. Naturally, a regent had to be appointed, the new King’s maternal uncle, who was it seemed easily influenced by the prime minister.

Meanwhile, during this same period of 1936-39, there was also turmoil in Palestine, and I want to talk about that for a moment because it connects with this story. We’ve already seen how the Nazis increasingly strove to make life in Germany unbearable for Jewish Germans, in an effort to

force them to leave the country. But though Germany and some other countries, like Poland, were trying to force their Jewish citizens out, there were few places willing to accept Jewish immigrants; certainly not the United States, which had enacted strict immigration quotas in 1924.

The obvious solution that came to the minds of many was Palestine, which the British had designated as a homeland for the Jewish people in the Balfour Declaration of 1918. But all was not well in Palestine. Ever since the Balfour Declaration, the Jewish and Arab communities of Palestine had gotten involved in an escalating cycle of inter-communal violence.

The Twenties were a bad time for farmers everywhere, and Palestine was no exception. Agricultural commodity prices collapsed, and the Great Depression made circumstances even worse. The economic collapse forced many Arabs to sell their land to the more prosperous Jewish community, which created an underclass of poor, landless Arabs living in shantytowns on the outskirts of Palestinian cities.

In 1930, a Jihadist militia called the Black Hand was formed by Arabs intent on taking up arms against both the Jewish community and the British. The Jewish community had already formed its own defensive militia, called the Haganah, which is the Hebrew word for defense, back in 1920. The Haganah was initially small and poorly armed and organized, but as Palestinian opposition to the Jewish community grew, so did the Haganah. In 1931, a more radical group, known as Irgun, broke away from Haganah. Irgun stood for the proposition that a campaign of violence against both the Arabs and the British was the only path to a Jewish state.

Also in 1931, a general strike in Iraq helped force the issue of Iraqi independence. In 1936, protests and political pressure in Syria and Lebanon led to an agreement with the French giving those two countries autonomy immediately and full independence in three years.

Now I know you're probably thinking, "Well, Mark, you must have forgotten to tell us how Syria and Lebanon became independent, sovereign states in 1939." No, they didn't. The French National Assembly never got around to ratifying those treaties and the French military never withdrew from Syrian or Lebanese territory. Then France fell in 1940, leaving the status of these two countries very much up in the air.

Even so, the success of political agitation in forcing the issue of independence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon did not go unnoticed by Arabs in Palestine, and beyond that, increased political freedom for Arabs in those neighboring countries inevitably created space for citizens of those nations to provide political and financial support to their Arab cousins in Palestine.

Jewish immigration to Palestine increased in the Thirties as a direct result of rising anti-Semitism in Europe, which further provoked Palestinian Arabs. In October 1935, a shipment of smuggled rifles, machine guns, and ammunition intended for the Haganah was discovered at the port of Jaffah. This discovery raised Arab outrage to the boiling point. Those of you who remember our episodes on Ireland will likely find that much of this story sounds familiar.

The months that followed saw another cycle of killings. In April 1936, Palestinian Arabs called their own general strike, inspired by the successful general strike in Iraq. Later came a call for Arabs to stop paying taxes to the British administration, this move likely inspired by the campaigns of Indian nationalists. The Arab side called for an end to Jewish immigration and to land transfers from Arabs to Jews. These protests led to British crackdowns, which led to violence, which led to harsher British crackdowns, and to the British arming Haganah and other Jewish militias to assist them in repressing the Palestinian Arab uprising.

By 1938, the British government in Palestine was losing its grip on the country. British government commissions in 1936 and 1938 proposed solutions that involved partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. These various proposals were all rejected by the Arab side, as they would have put the most valuable land in Palestine into the Jewish state, and some of these plans included the forced transfer of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs out of the proposed Jewish state. Even many figures in British government were put off by that idea.

By this point, some 5,000 Arabs and hundreds of Jewish people had died in these conflicts, as well as over 200 members of British security forces. Meanwhile in Europe, tensions between Britain and Germany were rising, beginning with the Sudetenland crisis that same year. This made it more important than ever to the British to resolve the conflict in Palestine. In February 1939, a conference was held in London, in which the British negotiated separately with representatives of both communities. After these discussions, the Chamberlain government issued a white paper laying out its program for the future of Palestine.

The paper noted that the Jewish population of Palestine had risen from 60,000 to 450,000 since the British took over administration of the country. Therefore, it said, the Balfour Declaration promise to provide a national home for the Jewish people had been met. It argued that the Declaration did not and could not mean that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish state against the will of its Arab population. The paper therefore proposed a ten-year transition period to an independent Palestine in 1948, a Palestine where the Arab and Jewish communities would share control. In the interim, Jewish immigration to Palestine would be limited to a total of 75,000 over the next five years, after which no further Jewish immigration would be permitted without Palestinian Arab consent.

More moderate Arab groups approved of the white paper, but it was rejected by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. More about him in a minute. The League of Nations Mandates Commission held that the white paper was a violation of the terms of the British Mandate, while Zionists in Palestine and elsewhere rejected it as a breach of the promise made in the Balfour Declaration. Irgun began planning a bombing campaign against Arabs and the British administration as a means of forcing the creation of a Jewish state.

Then the war broke out, and here we are again. The British administration in Palestine cut off Jewish immigration altogether, but otherwise discussion of the future of Palestine was set aside.

[music: Ahmed Abdul Qadir al-Musili, “Lil ’Ashiqi fi-l Hawa Dala’il”]

The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem was a clerical post created by the British and had been held since 1921 by Amin al-Husseini. The Grand Mufti was responsible for the administration of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and became something of a spiritual and secular leader for Muslims in Palestine. He raised funds from other Muslim countries for the renovation of the Temple Mount, which had been neglected and fallen into disrepair under Ottoman rule.

Al-Husseini became a key leader of the anti-British and anti-Zionist among Palestinians. In contrast to Arab nationalists, al-Husseini put an Islamic spin on Palestinian aspirations to independence, arguing that Muslims should be governing Palestine for the sake of insuring Muslim control of the holy Temple Mount.

When the Palestinian uprising of 1936 began, the Grand Mufti was one of its key leaders. The British tried to arrest him in 1937, but he took sanctuary on the Temple Mount and later fled to Lebanon. When the British government’s white paper was issued in 1939, the Grand Mufti was one of its most vocal opponents. This was partly self-serving; al-Husseini considered himself the leader of the Palestinian nationalist movement and regarded rival leaders as traitors to the cause. From his exile in Lebanon he announced bounties for murdering Jewish people in Palestine as well as for murdering his own political opponents.

When the Second World War began, the French pressed al-Husseini for a statement of support for the Allies. Instead, he fled to Iraq, where he was welcomed as an Arab hero. Iraq’s treaty arrangement with the UK required it to declare war on Germans as well, but the government in Baghdad declined to do so, although it did sever diplomatic relations with Germany.

When Italy entered the war in June 1940, the government of Iraq would not even go that far. The Italian Embassy in Baghdad remained open and campaigned publicly for Iraq to take an anti-British, pro-Axis stance on the war. The Grand Mufti joined in these calls for Iraq to support the Axis.

There was already a strong anti-British sentiment in Iraq, especially in the Army. Iraqis were sympathetic to the Palestinian Arabs and resented the limitations the British had imposed on Iraqi sovereignty, notably those basing rights for the British military on Iraqi soil. By 1937, Britain had withdrawn all its ground forces from Iraq, but the RAF still held two airbases: Shaibah, outside Basra, and Habbaniya, between Fallujah and Ramadi. These bases were used for training and as stopover points for airplanes traveling between Egypt and India.

This brings us back to April 1, 1941, when a group of four Iraqi Army colonels, known as the “Golden Square,” overthrew not the monarchy—remember that the King is only five years old at this moment—but the government and the regent, replacing them with pro-Axis figures, who assembled what they called the “National Defense Government.”

This was happening at the same time Erwin Rommel was leading an offensive in Libya that was throwing British-led forces back to Egypt. The Golden Square and the new Iraqi government believed that Britain's position in the Middle East was crumbling and that the British would have no choice but to accede to Iraqi demands.

The situation was tense. Churchill's government refused to recognize the National Defense Government, while the British Middle East Command had its hands full with Libya and Italian-controlled Ethiopia, and soon it would have its hands full in Greece too, so the British sent a division of Indian soldiers to Basra to secure the port and insure an uninterrupted flow of oil. Britain had the right to do this under the basing agreement with Iraq, the one that Iraqi nationalists so resented. British-controlled Basra could then also be used to bring additional forces to Iraq if needed. Additional Royal Navy ships were sent into the Persian Gulf, including the aircraft carrier H.M.S. *Hermes*.

Tensions rose over the month of April, as the government in Baghdad demanded the force in Basra be removed, while the British refused even to discuss their military deployments with a government they didn't recognize. British civilians were encouraged to leave Iraq. Finally, on April 30, the RAF base at Habbaniya received a warning from the British Embassy in Baghdad that Iraqi Army units had left the city, headed west, presumably toward the air base.

About 9,000 Iraqi soldiers surrounded the base and placed artillery and anti-aircraft guns on high ground nearby. An Iraqi representative told the RAF commander that this was a training exercise, but demanded that the base suspend all flights immediately. The RAF commander replied that any Iraqi interference in the operation of the air base would be considered an act of war.

Two days later, after negotiations failed, the RAF attacked the Iraqi units surrounding the base. The British gave no prior warning. The Iraqi forces were caught by surprise and unprepared, as their commanders were convinced the British would have no choice but to surrender the base. Churchill ordered small forces from Palestine and Transjordan to move into Iraq and reinforce the RAF. A few days later, and after further air attacks, the Iraqis withdrew.

Once the Iraqis and the British began firing on each other, the German Foreign Office sent a diplomatic mission to Baghdad to coordinate support for the Iraqis. In Paris, French Navy commander Admiral François Darlan negotiated an agreement with Germany, under which Germany would reduce the occupation payments France was required to make under the armistice and return some French prisoners-of-war, in exchange for which France would agree to allow the Germans use of its military bases in Syria.

The French also released machine guns, rifles, and ammunition stockpiled in Syria to the Iraqis. The Germans and the Italians sent a handful of fighter planes and bombers to Iraq to aid the government; this was only possible because the French in Syria permitted the Germans use of their air bases.

German bombers attacked the RAF base, which led to aerial combat between RAF fighters and German and Italian and occasionally French aircraft over Iraq and Syria. But the Germans and Italians chose not to further reinforce their air units in Iraq, choosing instead to concentrate on the imminent air assault on Crete. More about that later in the episode.

On May 18, the advancing British force from Transjordan and Palestine reached the RAF base at Habbaniya, by which time the Iraqis had already withdrawn. The British ground force pressed on eastward and took the city of Fallujah. After a week to rest and reorganize, and with the RAF now in control of the air, the British began to advance on Baghdad.

The Iraqis overestimated the size of the British force and believed the fall of Baghdad was imminent. Rioting broke out in the city as most of the National Defense Government fled to sanctuary in neutral Iran. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem followed them.

By June 2, 1941, the former Iraqi government and regent were back in place.

[music: Sasa Mazinjanin, "Igre iz Bele krajine"]

The Axis invasion of Yugoslavia began with a massive bombing raid on Belgrade. By now, heavy bombing of enemy cities was becoming standard procedure for the Wehrmacht, as least in cases of enemies that lacked the ability to bomb back. An estimated 4,000 civilians were killed.

I have to concede, though, that the bombing of Belgrade had a military purpose. Belgrade was the headquarters of the Yugoslav military command. The commanders themselves mostly escaped the bombing, but it thoroughly disrupted communications and left the Yugoslav Army paralyzed at a crucial moment.

Destruction of the enemy air force on the ground was becoming another hallmark of German invasions, and Yugoslavia was no exception. Yugoslavia had a relatively modern air force, but its crews were inexperienced and Yugoslav airfields were of poor quality. Soon the Yugoslav Air Force was no more.

German units in Bulgaria advanced westward into southern Yugoslavia, quickly capturing the key cities of Skopje and Niš and slamming the door on the British and the Greeks, who were contemplating an advance into the mountains of southern Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia was facing German invasions from Bulgaria and from Austria, as well as an Italian invasion of Slovenia from northeast Italy and a Hungarian invasion aimed at reclaiming formerly Hungarian lands that had been awarded to Yugoslavia after the last war.

As German soldiers advancing south from Austria approached Zagreb on April 10, Croatian soldiers in the Yugoslav Army mutinied against their mostly-Serb officers and proclaimed loyalty to independent Croatia. Two days later Belgrade, caught between Germans advancing south from Croatia and Germans advancing north from Niš, surrendered.

The King and the government fled the country for Britain and on April 14, the Yugoslav high command asked the Germans for their terms. The Germans demanded unconditional surrender. The Yugoslavs agreed, and on April 17, an armistice was signed, just 11 days after the invasion began. Once again, the Wehrmacht had invaded and conquered a European nation in the blink of an eye. A mere 151 Germans were killed in the entire campaign.

Portions of Yugoslavia were annexed by Germany, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Albania. Independent Croatian and Montenegrin states were set up as protectorates of Germany and Italy. This new Croatia would include Bosnia and Herzegovina within its borders. Serbia proper would be occupied by the German Army. Adolf Hitler blamed the Serbs for the First World War and was determined to treat Serbia and the Serbian people harshly.

And what about Greece? The Luftwaffe began bombing targets in Greece on the same day that the invasion of Yugoslavia began, April 6. A German panzer corps based in Bulgaria crossed into the southeastern corner of Yugoslavia, then turned south into Greece, wedging its way into the gap between the Greek Metaxas Line to the east, which had been meant to defend an invasion from Bulgaria, and British and Greek defenders to the west. The panzers reached the Greek port city of Thessalonica, Greece's second largest city, in three days, isolating northeastern Greece, including the Metaxas Line, and taking 60,000 Greek soldiers prisoner.

With the surrender of Yugoslavia, British defenders in north central Greece were now under pressure from attacks originating in Yugoslav territory to the north and in Thessalonica to the east. The British began a fighting withdrawal, taking advantage of the mountainous terrain to slow the German advance. Retreating British soldiers were confronted by Greek civilians who, far from resenting their departure, handed them flowers and told them to come back soon.

British brigades—mostly New Zealander and Australian units—were tasked with holding mountain passes against the German advance. These units fought bravely and in many cases inflicted heavy losses on the Germans before abandoning their positions. The British planned to make their stand at Thermopylae, site of the famous battle in 480 BC, in which a small Greek force commanded by Leonidas I, King of Sparta, frustrated a much larger Persian invasion force. Might history repeat itself? British commanders believed they could hold Thermopylae until at least early May, provided the western Greek Army could protect their left flank.

Yeah, about that Greek Army, designated the Epirus Army Section. This force of 14 divisions was the force that had frustrated the Italian invasion of Greece last fall, then turned the tables and invaded southern Albania, humiliating the Italian military in general and *il Duce* in particular. They had defied the Fascists and amazed the world, albeit at great cost, but now they were finally ordered to retreat on April 12.

Unfortunately, the order to retreat should have been given sooner, but Army commanders in Athens resisted the idea of giving up their hard-won territory. These Greek soldiers had been fighting in the mountains for months, and it was feared that an order to retreat would break their

morale and turn the retreat into a chaotic rout. And when word came that Belgrade had fallen and the Yugoslavs were asking for surrender terms, morale did indeed plummet. Greek soldiers began abandoning their positions.

On April 18, with the defense of Greece collapsing, the Greek prime minister, Alexandros Koryzsis, killed himself. The following day, the British Middle East commander, General Archibald Wavell flew to Athens to evaluate the situation. After hearing reports from commanders on the scene, on April 20, Wavell ordered an evacuation of British forces from Greece.

That same day, Greek commanders of the Epirus Army, recognizing they were now trapped between Italians to the north and Germans to the south, chose to surrender, despite orders to the contrary from Athens. The Greeks couldn't bear the thought of surrendering to the Italians, so they contacted a German general to offer him their surrender. The Germans accepted the offer, though when Mussolini found out, he made a personal appeal to Adolf Hitler to allow the Italians to participate in taking the Greek surrender. The Epirus Army surrendered on April 23; they were not taken prisoner, but allowed simply to demobilize and go home.

That same day, April 23, the British began withdrawing from their position at Thermopylae, leaving one Australian and one New Zealander brigade to hold the passes, which they did for two days. The British then attempted to put up one final defensive line to protect Athens, but German motorized units were able to bypass them and enter the Greek capital on April 27, where they captured large quantities of ammunition, fuel, and supplies.

One German unit ascended to the Acropolis to raise the German flag over the ancient Athenian citadel. It is said that a teenaged Greek soldier named Konstantinos Koukidis lowered the Greek flag when ordered to by the Germans, but rather than surrender it to them, he wrapped himself in it and jumped off the Acropolis, to his death, and became a national hero. (There is some question as to whether this story is true or just a legend, but don't tell any Greeks I said that.)

The British pulled back to the Peloponnesian Peninsula and conducted a hasty withdrawal. British bombers flew to Greece empty and returned filled with soldiers, while military and civilian shipping evacuated others by sea. Most of the 58,000 British (mostly Australian and New Zealander) soldiers were evacuated, although 14,000 were left behind to be taken prisoner by the Germans. Twenty-six of the evacuation ships, mostly Greek, were sunk by the Luftwaffe.

About half of the evacuated soldiers were taken to the Greek island of Crete, as were the Greek King George II and his government. The Greek Navy fought on, while the Axis divided mainland Greece into German, Italian, and Bulgarian occupation zones.

Yeah, and what about the island of Crete?

Well, the German and Italian militaries were already planning for an invasion of the British-controlled island of Malta, codenamed Operation Hercules. Hercules would have involved dropping German and Italian airborne units onto Malta, followed by an Italian amphibious invasion. Malta provided a useful base for British air and submarine attacks on Italian convoys traveling between Italy and Libya; capturing it would allow for easier supply of Axis forces in North Africa.

But in fact, British forces in Malta were seldom more than a nuisance, while Hitler was still concerned about the possibility of British bombers on Crete attacking those crucial oil fields in Romania, and beyond that, German control of Crete could put German bombers within range to attack the British in Alexandria or the Suez Canal.

Hitler decided that the seizure of Malta could wait. Crete was more important. Even before the German campaign to occupy mainland Greece had concluded, the Luftwaffe command was already considering the prospects of seizing Crete by an airborne invasion.

The person who had created Germany's airborne forces, or Fallschirmjäger, and now commanded them, was Luftwaffe General Kurt Student. Student's airborne units had proved their worth in last year's Western offensive; the invasion of Crete presented an opportunity to show what a large-scale airborne assault could really do. Hermann Göring and the Luftwaffe command saw an air assault of Crete as an opportunity to bolster the Luftwaffe's reputation after its failure in last year's Battle of Britain.

On April 21, Göring and Student met with Hitler to present Student's plan. Phase one would be an airborne invasion to secure the island; phase two would be an air assault from Crete into Egypt, dropping paratroops behind British lines in coordination with an Axis offensive from Libya led by Erwin Rommel. Hitler was skeptical. He foresaw heavy casualties among the airborne troops, but when he received assurances that this assault would not delay the upcoming invasion of the Soviet Union, he approved it. The assault on Crete was codenamed Operation Mercury.

What the Germans did not know was that Ultra, the British program to crack Germany's Enigma code machines was by this time, beginning to pay off. British intelligence was fully aware of the coming assault. They even knew which airfields on Crete would be the invaders' first targets. The Germans needed to secure these airfields in order to fly in reinforcements, as they had in Norway; unfortunately, no one on the Allied side thought to damage the airfields and render them unusable.

General Wavell put General Bernard Freyberg in command of British forces on Crete. Freyberg was the British-born commander of the New Zealand Second Division, and in that capacity he and his New Zealanders had played an important role in delaying the German advance into Greece. Now he was to defend Crete against what he was advised would be an air assault of one paratroop division, about six thousand soldiers, possibly in conjunction with landings by sea.

Unfortunately, General Freyberg seems to have focused most of his attention on the “landings by sea” part, which was the least plausible element of the attack he was to prepare for. The Royal Navy’s Mediterranean Fleet was close enough to Crete to make an Axis naval assault on the island unlikely in the extreme. Even later, when additional intelligence was brought to Freyberg, now predicting two paratroop divisions would land, about 12,000 soldiers, he remained convinced that the real danger was along the coastline.

That coastline was a problem. Most of Crete’s ports and airfields were on the northern coast of the island, closer and more vulnerable to attack from the north, whether it came by air or by sea.

For their part, German intelligence was way off the mark. The Germans believed there were fewer than 5,000 British soldiers on the island, about a quarter of the actual number. German commanders told their paratroops that the native Cretans would welcome them as liberators. Where they got that idea was anyone’s guess.

On the morning of May 20, at 8:00 AM, General Freyberg was eating breakfast when he was told that a large number of Junkers 52 transports were approaching. Freyberg replied, “They’re dead on time,” and continued his meal, which was either an amazing display of unruffled confidence or the mark of a commander who has seriously underestimated what he is up against. No doubt both thoughts were going through the minds of others in the room.

The German air landings were intended to take three key airfields on the island. The first, Rhethymnon, in north central Crete, was guarded by two Australian battalions. The Australian commander had deployed his troops on high ground to either side of the airfield. When the transports arrived, the Australians shot down seven of them, disrupting the drop. Some German paratroopers landed on rocky cliffs and broke bones. Others landed in the sea and drowned, tangled in their own parachutes. Those who landed at the airfield were driven away by Australian counterattacks.

The second was outside Herakleion, Crete’s largest city, a port on eastern side of the island. Here the Germans’ poor intelligence information really hurt them, as the area contained ten times the expected number of defenders. Two German battalions, including one that landed directly on the airfield, had their drops disrupted by anti-aircraft fire, then found themselves under heavy attack as soon as they landed. A third battalion did better; it managed to fight its way into the town of Herakleion, but was unable to hold it.

By nightfall, it was clear to General Student back in Athens that the assault on Crete was headed for disaster. Two of the three targeted airfields remained firmly in Allied hands and out of German reach. The paratroopers had suffered losses of thousands killed or wounded; it was all the survivors could do to hunker down and defend themselves against Allied attacks. In the hot climate of Crete, water was in short supply and the Germans, who were wearing uniforms intended for the weather in northern Europe, were suffering from dehydration. Armed Cretans across the island spent the night hunting for German stragglers.

Convoys of German soldiers from Greece, in captured Greek ships escorted by Italian naval vessels, closed on the island. But the British had expected this; Royal Navy forces circled around both ends of Crete that night. They attacked and disrupted the German attempt to reinforce Crete by sea, but when daylight came, the British ships took heavy losses from German dive bombers, with two destroyers sunk and several larger ships damaged.

I said that two of the three airfields were out of German reach. The situation was a little different at the third airfield, near the town of Maleme, near the western end of Crete. Here only a single battalion of New Zealanders were guarding the airfield against a larger German paratroop force. The New Zealanders called for reinforcements, but were told none were available. When the commander warned that without reinforcement, they would have to abandon the airfield, his superior replied, "If you must, you must." By nightfall, that airfield was in German hands.

In the small hours of the following morning, the German commanders in Athens were on the verge of aborting Operation Mercury. Only Kurt Student was unwilling. He ordered one of his pilots to make a test landing on the airfield at Maleme at dawn. The pilot flew to Maleme, landed, took off again, and returned to Student with his report. His plane had drawn no enemy fire.

That was all Student needed to hear. He ordered all of his remaining paratroop units dropped at that airfield as soon as possible. Junkers 52 transports flew in with supplies and ammunition and reinforcements from the German Fifth Mountain Division. Freyberg ordered a counterattack against the Germans on the western end of the island to begin at 1:00 the following morning. But the Australian and New Zealander forces assigned could not reach the airfield until dawn, by which time the Germans had Me 109 fighters in the air over the airfield, which strafed the attackers.

On the 26th, Freyberg told Wavell that Crete was lost and ordered his troops to cross the rugged terrain to the south side of the island, where they could be evacuated to Egypt, much to the dismay of the Australian and British units who had successfully defended Rethymnos and Herakleion and until then had believed the Battle of Crete was won. The Royal Navy was able to evacuate 18,000 soldiers from the island; about 9,000 were taken prisoner by the Germans. The German military occupation of Crete would be particularly brutal to the islanders, in reprisal for their spirited defense of their homes.

But the Germans paid a heavy price. Six thousand killed or wounded out of 12,000 in Kurt Student's elite airborne force; about 150 transports destroyed and an equal number damaged, along with 60 fighters and bombers shot down. These losses were far heavier than those the Germans had suffered in taking Yugoslavia and mainland Greece combined. You have to think these soldiers and planes could have been put to better use in the coming invasion of the Soviet Union. The losses were so heavy that Hitler and the Wehrmacht swore off large-scale airborne

operations for the rest of the war. Ironically, the lesson the Allies took from the Battle of Crete was to beef up their own airborne units.

The German government and military might have been mourning in private, but they were crowing about their great victory in public. Typical. The fall of Crete did come as a surprise to most of the world. Not many observers would have guessed that the Germans could capture an island the size of Crete against so large a defending force and with the Royal Navy so close at hand. Joseph Goebbels boasted that the German capture of Crete was proof that no island was safe from the Wehrmacht, clearly a reference to Great Britain. How plausible this threat was is less clear.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Morgan for his kind donation, and thank you to Paige for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Morgan and Paige 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 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 recently 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.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*. Operation Barbarossa is just around the corner, but first I want to take a look at the situation in the United States, as President Roosevelt tests the limits of how far America can go to aid the British while remaining officially neutral. America First, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Earlier I suggested an analogy between British intervention in Greece in 1941 and the Gallipoli campaign of 1915. They do have a few things in common, notably that Winston Churchill was behind both actions and the brunt of the fighting was borne by Australians.

They are clearly not comparable in terms of casualties. British and Commonwealth forces suffered about a thousand dead, another thousand wounded, and fourteen thousand taken

prisoner, which is bad but pales in comparison to the 57,000 soldiers of British and Commonwealth forces killed at Gallipoli.

But like Gallipoli, the British intervention in Greece drew criticism as strategically unwise. Drawing units away from North Africa even as British forces there were taking half of Libya may have set the stage for the British collapse and withdrawal on that front. The argument in favor of the intervention was that Britain needed to stand by small nations bullied by the Axis, to demonstrate that British pledges of support to small countries actually meant something, and to prove Britain was fully committed to the fight against the Axis. Obviously, these are not military reasons, but political reasons. Critics of the intervention called them sentimental reasons.

Defenders of the British intervention in Greece also cite the delay in the commencement of Operation Barbarossa for more than five weeks. If the Germans had had five more weeks of good weather in Russia, might they have been able to capture Leningrad and Moscow and finish off the Red Army before winter set in? Adolf Hitler himself expressed that view.

On the other hand, Hitler was not an impartial observer. The invasion of the Soviet Union was his brainchild, so naturally he'd want to blame its failure on something or someone else. Even absent the Balkan campaign, it is not clear the Wehrmacht could have been ready to begin the invasion by the May 15 start date. There were last-minute logistical problems, and the spring of 1941 was unusually wet in the East, with rivers overflowing their banks, which might have forced a delay anyway.

In any case, the British did not know about Operation Barbarossa at the time of the intervention in Greece, so delaying the invasion could hardly be counted as a British objective.

Arguably too, the Balkan campaign may have actually helped the Germans achieve surprise at the beginning of the invasion. The fighting in the Balkans provided an explanation for the deployment of large forces to the East and gave it gave Stalin the impression that Germany's next moves would be toward the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Suez Canal, rather than toward the Soviet Union. So did the coup in Iraq.

Overall, the historical consensus seems to be that the Balkan campaign had little effect on the success of Operation Barbarossa, but if you don't like that conclusion, there's plenty of room to argue otherwise.

[music: Closing War Theme]