

7

SECURING THE EASTERN SPRINGBOARD

'Crossroads of Europe' is a catchphrase designation for the Balkans, conveying little more than unfamiliarity with the region by those who use it. The Balkans, spined and herringboned by some of the highest mountains on the continent, offer few highways, and none deserving to be called a path of conquest. No single power, not even the Roman Empire at its height, has dominated the whole region: cautious generals have consistently declined to campaign there if they could. It has been a graveyard of military operations ever since the Emperor Valens succumbed to the Goths at Adrianople in 378.

Yet, though the Balkans do not offer easy passage to conquerors, it is the fate of the peoples who inhabit them to be campaigned over. For, precisely because the region is a jumble of mountain chains and blind valleys, where even the rivers must negotiate defiles and gorges impassable by man or beast, it marks a natural barrier between European and Asian empires. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Islam was on the march, the Balkans were the battleground where Turk fought Habsburg. In the nineteenth, when Turkey had fallen sick, they offered the fronts on which her enemies – Austria, Russia and their satellites – drove the Ottomans back upon their Anatolian fastnesses. And possession of the coasts of the Balkans and their archipelagos – the Ionian islands, the Dodecanese, the Cyclades – have been contested by power-seekers even longer and more consistently; for, as Sicily does in miniature, and Malta on yet a smaller scale, the Balkans dominate the sea-passages and seas by which they are washed. Venice, greatest of Italian city-states, made herself mistress of the Adriatic by control not of her own lagoon but of the fortress harbours which run the length of the Adriatic's Balkan shore – Zara, Cattaro, Valona – and the Ionian islands at its mouth. In her heyday, Venice also extended powerful tentacles

into the eastern Mediterranean by her occupation of the Greek Peloponnese and its satellite islands of Naxos, Crete and Cyprus. The Turks, whatever the ebb and flow of their military fortunes, always assured themselves of an ultimate base of Balkan power by clinging to possession of the Bosphorus, channel of communication between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. In the face of bribes, threats and direct attack – by the Russians in the nineteenth century, the emergent Balkan states in the early twentieth, the British and French in the First World War – Turkey clung limpet-like to Istanbul (the Constantinople and Byzantium of old) in the sure knowledge that it was control of the ‘the Straits’ which in European eyes made her a power to be reckoned with and not, as she would become if she relinquished it, merely a Levantine appendage.

Because the Balkans form both a land barrier and a maritime base, or cluster of bases, at the point where Asia meets Europe and the Mediterranean the Black Sea, the strategy of any commander drawn into the area will tend to be both ‘continental’ and ‘maritime’, and the one will run at cross-purposes with the other. This, as Professor Martin van Creveld, the closest student of German war-making in the months between the fall of France and the inception of Barbarossa, has pointed out, is precisely the complication into which Hitler fell at the end of 1940. His Balkan policy thitherto had been to allow Italy to play the great power in its relations with the maritime and historically ‘Italian’ sphere of influence – Albania, Greece, Yugoslavia – while drawing the inland zone – Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania – into Germany’s. Hungary and Romania had fallen willingly under his sway, signing the Tripartite Pact and allowing German troops to be stationed on their territory; Bulgaria had proved more resistant, but for reasons of understandable caution, not hostility. Yugoslavia had successfully trodden a middle path, insisting on its neutrality but averting a breach with the Axis. Then Britain’s persistence in belligerence had upset his Balkan scheme. Having failed in his efforts to beat down her air defences in the Battle of Britain, as a preliminary to an invasion in which he did not fully believe, Hitler subsequently acquiesced in the Italian attack on Greece (of which he was probably forewarned at his meeting with Mussolini at the Brenner Pass on 4 October), because Britain, whose sole remaining continental ally was Greece, thereby came under increased strategic pressure from another direction. He had calculated that the offensive should diminish Britain’s capacity to prosecute its war in Egypt with the Italian Libyan army, and thereby strengthen the ‘pincers’ he was seeking to construct by drawing Spain and Vichy France into his anti-British alliance.

This complex, but also tentative, strategic design was compromised by the humiliating failure of the Italian offensive. Before the invasion of 28 October, Hitler was considering the dispatch of a German intervention force to North Africa and had actually sent a senior officer (Ritter von Thoma, whom the British would later know well as an opponent) to study the problem of deploying an ‘Afrikakorps’. Once the miscarriage of Mussolini’s invasion of Greece became apparent, however, Hitler felt constrained to rescue his ally – who had anyhow refused the help of an Afrikakorps – from humiliation,

even though direct German intervention against Greece, which required the acquisition of bases in Bulgaria, would alarm the Russians at precisely the moment he was keenest to allay their anxieties (or even, had Molotov brought assurance of acquiescence in German continental hegemony to Berlin on 12 November, agree binding non-aggression terms with them). Mussolini's Greek adventure thus had the direct effect of driving Hitler into heightening his war effort against Britain, though in her Mediterranean empire rather than against her coasts; it also had the indirect effect of committing him to a seizure of territory – useful but not essential to the launching of Barbarossa – which made any agreement of 'spheres of influence' between him and Stalin impossible. In that respect the Greek campaign was to be decisive in determining the future course of the Second World War.

— Mussolini's Greek venture —

Mussolini's venture into Greece was an operation Hitler was justified in believing ought to have succeeded. The Greek army was greatly outnumbered and was obliged to divide its forces so as to defend Thrace – the coastal strip at the head of the Aegean – against Bulgaria. On paper it should have been overwhelmed in the opening stage of the invasion; but Italy's forces were also divided, by the garrisoning of Ethiopia and Libya, and it could therefore deploy only a fraction of its much larger army on the Albanian-Greek frontier. The Italian army of 1940 was not, moreover, what it had been in 1915. Then, committed to war on a single, equally mountainous front against Austria, it had fought courageously in one offensive after another, and not without effect. By October 1917 its efforts had impelled the Austrians to appeal for help to the Germans lest its twelfth offensive on the Isonzo succeed in breaking through. Under Mussolini, however, Italian formations had been reduced in size in order to increase their number, a typical demagogic act of window-dressing. The divisions which Mussolini launched into Greece on 28 October 1940 were therefore weaker in all arms, but particularly in infantry, than their Greek equivalents; they were also weaker in motivation. Mussolini's reasons for seeking war with Greece went no further than a desire to emulate his German ally's triumphs, settle trifling old scores with Greece, reassert Italy's interest in the Balkans (he was piqued that Romania, an Italian client, had accepted German protection for its Ploesti oilfields earlier in October) and secure bases from which his British enemy's eastern Mediterranean outposts might be attacked. None of these reasons counted for much with his soldiers. They began their assault through the Epirus mountains without enthusiasm; even the Alpini regiments, Italy's best troops, appeared in poor heart. Their Greek opponents, by contrast, defended with a will. General John Metaxas, head of government, was enabled early in the campaign to transfer forces from Thrace to the Albanian front, thanks to Turkey's warning to the Bulgarians that its thirty-seven divisions concentrated in Turkey-in-Europe would be used if Bulgaria tried to profit from Greece's difficulty. In the meantime the Greeks allowed the Italian attackers to wear themselves out in frontal attacks on their mountain positions.



Benito Mussolini inspects the Monterosa Division of troops, who remained loyal to him after his overthrow in July 1943. Second from the right is Marshal Graziani, who had led the Italian army to defeat in Libya.

When their own reinforcements arrived, they counter-attacked, on 14 November, and drove the invaders back in confusion. Mussolini summoned reserves from all over Italy, some of which were flown to Albania in German aircraft, but by 30 November the Greeks opposed fifteen of his divisions with eleven of their own, his whole invading force had been thrown back inside Albania and the Greek counter-offensive was still gathering strength.

Hitler, who had already ordered OKW on 4 November to prepare an operational plan for a German offensive against Greece, was by then committed to its launching. For all the diplomatic difficulties it would cause – affront to Yugoslavia, Greece's neutralist neighbour, anxiety to Turkey, which was even more strongly determined to remain neutral, alarm to Bulgaria, which shrank from offending Russia by granting Germany the bases the Greek operation required – and for all the military difficulties the operation entailed, particularly those of committing mechanised formations to the least 'tankable' terrain in Europe, he now saw no means of avoiding the initiative, except at the price of conceding his British enemies strategic and propaganda advantages he could not allow

them. Mussolini, for better or worse – and Hitler was never to waver in his loyalty to the founder of fascism – was seen by the world as his political confederate as well as military ally. Hitler was determined to rescue him from humiliation at the hands of the Greeks, all the more so because he rightly held the Greeks in high esteem as soldiers; he was also determined to deny the British long-term possession of bases on Greek soil, from which they could menace his extraction of Balkan resources – foodstuffs, ores, above all oil – essential to his war effort.

Thus far the Greeks had been careful not to grant the British anything more than short-range tactical facilities. The bases the RAF had set up since 3 November were located in the Peloponnese, on the Gulf of Corinth and near Athens, from which its aircraft could just support the battlefield in Albania. Greece had resisted requests for larger bases near Salonika which would have brought the Ploesti oilfields in Romania within range of its bombers. Hitler had good reason to fear the worst, therefore, from a consolidation of the Greek victory over Mussolini. South-eastern Europe provided half of Germany's cereal and livestock requirements. Greece, with Yugoslavia, was the source of 45 per cent of the bauxite (aluminium ore) used by German industry, while Yugoslavia supplied 90 per cent of its tin, 40 per cent of its lead and 10 per cent of its copper. Romania and, to a marginal extent, Hungary provided the only supply of oil which lay within the radius of German strategic control; the rest came from Russia under the terms of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. If those oilfields, and the railways which carried ores and agricultural produce out of the Balkans to Germany, were brought under British bomber attack, his ability to prosecute the war would be seriously compromised. Moreover, he recognised the depth and antiquity of Britain's penetration of the Mediterranean strategic zone. British admirals and generals had campaigned in the eastern Mediterranean for 150 years; Nelson's reputation had been made by his victory at the Nile in 1798. The British had ruled the Ionian islands from 1809 to 1863, had possessed Malta since 1800, Cyprus since 1878, and maintained a fleet and an army in Egypt since 1882. In 1915 a British army had almost captured the Black Sea straits and between 1916 and 1918 sustained an offensive front against Bulgaria on Greek soil (the Salonika campaign). Moreover, the intimacy of their relationship with the Greeks was assured by their title as 'lovers of liberty', won by the help the British had given them in their war of independence against Turkey in the 1820s. Byron's reputation as a romantic hero in both countries was a touchstone of their peoples' common antipathy to tyranny.

However, Britain's tentacles reached further than that. Although she had fought Turkey in the First World War and established a homeland for the Jews in Palestine after 1918 in the teeth of Muslim antipathy, she was also a historic protector of the Turks against Russia, in which cause she had fought the Crimean War of 1854–6, and a sponsor of Islamic nationalism by her foundation of the states of Iraq and Trans-Jordan. Her reputation as an exponent of self-determination for small nationalities also stood high in central and south-eastern Europe, where Yugoslavia in particular owed her existence partly to British

support for the cause of Slav independence at the post-1918 peace conferences. Britain's only clear-cut enmity in the Balkans was with Bulgaria, her opponent in the First World War, and that was offset by King Boris's concern to placate Russia, which he could not afford to offend unless assured of full-blooded German support.

The ambiguity of a Balkan entanglement – which automatically involves an intrusive land power not only in the conflict between central Europe's vital interests and those of Russia but at the same time in the maritime complexities of Mediterranean politics – therefore worked to divert and fragment Hitler's strategic purpose in the winter and spring of 1940–1. His overriding aim – to attack and destroy Russia's fighting power in an early *Blitzkrieg* campaign – was fixed by December 1940; his desire to rescue his toppling Italian ally from public humiliation and to circumscribe the activity of his irrepressible British enemy before he embarked on the Russian war – both in some sense residues of his vacillation of the autumn – drew him into a series of initiatives, some calculated, some adventitious, which were to end in his fighting a larger Balkan–Mediterranean campaign than he had ever intended when he first contemplated venturing southward.

— 'Fox killed in the open' —

In early January 1941, when he met with his commanders at the Berghof (7–9 January) and exposed to them the Barbarossa strategy in its entirety, the southern difficulty seemed to centre less on the Greeks than on the British. Though planning for Operation Marita (the invasion of the Balkans) was in full flow, he was still not contemplating the outright occupation of Greece. A mere seizure of bases in Greece from which the *Luftwaffe* might dominate the eastern Mediterranean seemed an adequate strategic solution of the situation in that sector. He was even optimistic that the Greeks, whose promised defeat by Mussolini in a spring offensive he was treating with sceptical (and as it turned out justified) caution, might bring the Italians to accept a bilateral peace treaty. The British, on the other hand, were demonstrating a determination to persist in defiance of Axis military superiority. Not only had they deployed air units to mainland Greece, and troops to Crete and some of the Aegean islands; they had also inflicted direct defeats on the Italians. On the night of 11–12 November a Royal Navy task force, centred on the aircraft carrier *Illustrious*, surprised the Italian fleet in its Taranto base in the heel of Italy and sank three battleships at their moorings by aerial torpedo attack. This success, following earlier surface engagements in July, confirmed the Royal Navy's dominance over the Italian fleet, despite the latter's superiority of numbers in the inland sea. Worse was to follow: on 9 December the British army in Egypt, commanded by General Sir Archibald Wavell, launched a counter-offensive against the Italian army which Marshal Rodolfo Graziani had led sixty miles inside the frontier from Libya in September. Conceived as a 'five-day raid', it achieved such success that Wavell decided to sustain his advance. In three days Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connor, his tactical commander, had captured 38,000 Italians, for a total



Italian prisoners taken at Sidi Rezegh, November 1941, when Auchinleck's desert counter-offensive caught Rommel by surprise. The British took 36,500 prisoners, the great majority of them Italian.

loss of 624 British and Indians killed and wounded, overrun a large fortified enemy position and found nothing beyond it to bar his advance into Libya. At Bardia, the first town inside the Italian colony, General 'Electric Whiskers' Bergonzoli signalled to Mussolini in the aftermath of the British counter-attack, 'We are in Bardia and here we stay'; but by 5 January Bardia had fallen to the Army of the Nile, as the 4th Indian and 7th Armoured Divisions had been grandiloquently designated by Churchill, and their spearheads were pressing on along the coast road towards the port of Tobruk. On 21 January Tobruk fell yielding another 25,000 prisoners; the port was to provide O'Connor's army with logistical support for its continued advance. O'Connor now divided his forces: the remnants of the Italian invaders of Egypt were falling back on Tripoli, capital of Libya, along the Mediterranean coast road which veered north around the bulge of Cyrenaica; a direct route through the desert offered the prospect of cutting them off by a fast mobile thrust. O'Connor accordingly launched the 7th Armoured Division into the desert behind them and on 5 February it arrived out of the sands ahead of the fleeing Italians at Beda Fomm. 'Fox killed in the open,' O'Connor signalled in clear – to pique Mussolini – to Wavell; the hunting metaphor described a victory which brought the British 130,000 prisoners in the course of an advance of 400 miles in two months.

Churchill exulted in Wavell's triumph. 'We are delighted that you have got this prize,' he wrote to Wavell. But the victory, though spectacular, was not really one of modern warfare. The Army of the Nile was little more than the sort of colonial 'movable column' with which the British Empire's native enemies had been defeated in the campaigns of the nineteenth century. Its success was due not to its superiority over the Italian troops, who had fought bravely in defence, but to the incompetence of their leadership and, as in Greece, the attenuation of their means of making war, the result of Mussolini's appetite for campaigning over a wider front than Italy's resources could support.

Hitler's efforts to check a British offensive had earlier been frustrated by Mussolini's reluctance to accept help; now he would not brook refusal. 'The crazy feature is', he complained to his staff, 'that on the one hand the Italians are shrieking for help and cannot find drastic enough language to describe their poor guns and equipment, but on the other hand they are so jealous and childish they won't stand for being helped by German soldiers.' On 3 February, rather than Manstein, he chose Rommel to lead an Afrikakorps willy-nilly to Graziani's assistance, because of his proven ability to inspire soldiers; on 12 February the vanguards of the Afrikakorps, to consist of the 15th Panzer and 5th Light Divisions, began to arrive at Tripoli; by 21 February Rommel had his forces in position to begin preparing a counter-offensive.

Nevertheless Hitler's determination to restore Axis prestige and consolidate Germany's strategic position in the Balkans could not wait on a future desert victory. The British were profiting from their superiority in arms in the one strategic region where they still enjoyed freedom of action to puncture the imperial pretensions of Mussolini in humiliating detail. On 9 February their Mediterranean fleet had appeared off the Italian port of Genoa, and bombarded the harbour without suffering riposte; it was a foretaste of the defeat they were to inflict on the Italian fleet at the Battle of Cape Matapan (Tainaron) in Greek waters on 28 March. In East Africa, where Italian forces had seized undefended British Somaliland in August 1940 and made incursions into the Sudan and Kenya, the British counter-attacked. A British force based in the Sudan had entered northern Ethiopia and the colony of Eritrea, Italy's oldest possession in East Africa, on 19 January; and on 11 February another British army, based in Kenya, began an offensive into southern Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. British Somaliland was retaken without a fight on 16 March. Worse was to follow. During February the British had been in continuous conclave with the Greek government on the nature of the assistance it would be willing to accept as a guarantee against German intervention. Metaxas, the Greek dictator, had died on 19 January; General Alexandros Papagos, the army commander-in-chief, was less cautious in negotiating measures which might provoke Germany to action. A figure of four British divisions was eventually agreed as an acceptable contribution to reinforce the eighteen Greek divisions deployed on the northern frontier. Their advance guards – withdrawn from the desert army, which was thereby dangerously depleted – began to disembark on 4 March. It was the start of an ill-fated venture.

This initiative made up Hitler's mind. Bulgaria, which on 17 February had secured a non-aggression pact with Turkey (overawed by Germany's military might in a way Greece was not), acceded to the Tripartite Pact on 1 March. As a result the Wehrmacht's 'army of observation' in Romania, which by 15 February had reached a strength of seven divisions, was free to begin bridging the Danube into Bulgaria and construct its attack positions for Operation Marita. In view of Britain's deployment of the four divisions to Greece, Hitler now decided that Marita's objects would not be limited to securing a strategic position in Greece from which the Luftwaffe might dominate the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean; they were to comprehend the occupation of Greece outright.

He was not prepared to risk the reopening of another 'Salonika front' from which Britain (with France) had harried Germany's southern flank of operations in 1916-18. Here, as so often elsewhere in his conduct of the Second World War, Hitler's strategic calculations were influenced by his experience and memories of the First, in which he had fought as a common soldier. Then the British had profited from their maritime mobility to sustain campaigns which diverted Germany's armies from their war-winning task in the great theatres; he was not prepared to concede them the opportunity a second time.

During the spring of 1941 he was, indeed, attempting to play their own game back at them. His failure to persuade Franco and to pressure Pétain – who had dismissed the pro-German Laval from his government on 13 December – to join the anti-British alliance had closed the western Mediterranean to him as a forum of opportunity. In the eastern Mediterranean and its hinterland, however, he detected openings for the same sort of subsidiary campaigning and subversion as Germany, with and through its then Turkish ally, had conducted against British interests in 1915-18. For example, he had hopes of persuading the French administration of Syria and Lebanon to accept German military assistance, and so eventually the basing there of Luftwaffe units with which the Suez Canal and the oilfields of Iraq might be brought under attack. In Iraq itself, a former British mandate, the nationalist party was pro-German; his contacts with it were indirect, passing through the Mufti of Jerusalem, leader of another anti-British Arab party, but he could calculate on its dissidence to complicate Britain's efforts to sustain control of the Middle East. Indeed, throughout the region Churchill's difficulties resembled Mussolini's in his African empire – those of straining to make over-stretched resources meet over-large responsibilities.

The threat that German interference in the Levant and Iraq offered to the British bulked so large in their assessment of risk in the spring of 1941 that it would prompt them to take possession of both areas later in the year. For Hitler, by contrast, any advantage he might win in either was likely to prove ephemeral and therefore did not merit any major investment of force. That was not the case with Greece, where Britain's involvement had produced a direct and provocative challenge to his military control of the continent and, though they did not guess it, threatened the unhampered development of his campaign against Russia. It had in consequence to be crushed outright; he could not, for example,

count upon any eventual success from Rommel's counter-offensive in Libya (to be delivered in late March) which might oblige the British to re-embark the divisions they had just deployed from Egypt to the Greek mainland, even if that were its probable result. Operation Marita had to produce a direct and clear-cut victory.

During the first weeks of March he was working to complete the preliminaries essential to its launching, the last of which required concessions by Yugoslavia. For military reasons, which OKH had made clear to him in relentless detail, neither Albania nor Bulgaria provided suitable terrain or adequate logistical bases from which the Marita forces could operate. Albania was crowded with beaten Italian troops and could be reinforced only from the sea or by air. Bulgaria's roads, bridges and railways were few and primitive. The Wehrmacht therefore needed to deploy troops along the southern Yugoslav railway system in order to open a third front at Monastir and on the Vardar river – traditional invasion routes – if the Greek army and its British confederates were to be overwhelmed with dispatch.

— Yugoslav resistance —

German pressure on Yugoslavia to accede to the Tripartite Pact, as Romania, Hungary and now Bulgaria had done, had been unrelenting since the previous October. With great courage the Yugoslavs had resisted. In their negotiations with Berlin they insisted that the Balkans would be best designated a neutral zone in the ongoing European war; in private, Prince Paul, the regent, an Anglophile who had been educated at Oxford and said he 'felt like an Englishman', did not conceal his sympathies for Britain's cause. Moreover, as the husband of a Greek princess, he had no desire to co-operate in the defeat of his southern neighbour. During the winter and spring of 1940–1, as Hungary, Romania and finally Bulgaria began to fill with German troops, his ground for resisting German pressure shrank under his feet. His government nevertheless contested every demand that the Germans thrust upon them; eventually, on 17 March, in return for what must almost certainly have been a worthless assurance that Yugoslav territory would not be used for military movements, it terminated diplomatic resistance and agreed to join the pact. The signatures were entered at Vienna on 25 March.

Hitler exulted in the result – but too soon; incautiously as a former citizen of the Habsburg Empire with which the Serbs had played such havoc, he had failed to allow for the impetuosity of the Serb character. On the night of 26–27 March a group of Serb officers, led by the air force general Bora Mirković, denounced the treaty, seized the capital, Belgrade, next day, obliged Paul to resign as regent and then had the uncrowned king Peter, installed as monarch. Paul, who might have rallied support among the kingdom's Croat population, which differed automatically with the Serbs in politics and was heavily penetrated by pro-Axis sympathies, accepted the coup as a *fait accompli* and went into exile. A government was set up under the leadership of the air force chief of

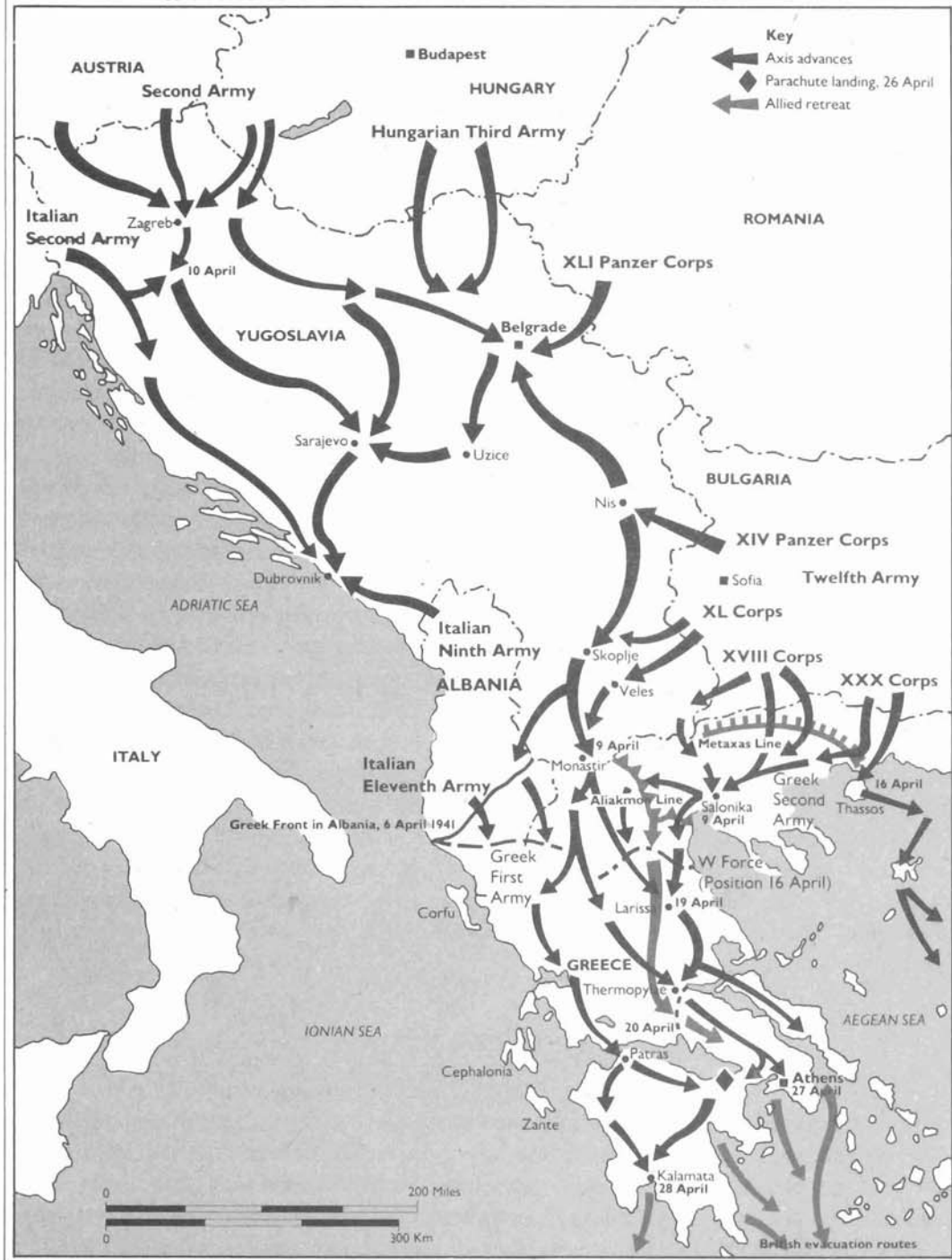
staff, General Dušan Simović, who later headed the Yugoslav government in exile.

The Mirković coup still appears in retrospect one of the most unrealistic, if romantic, acts of defiance in modern European history. Not only did it threaten to divide a precariously unified country; it was also bound to provoke the Germans to hostile reaction, against which the Serbs could call on no external assistance whatsoever to support them. They were surrounded by states that were wholly inert, like Albania, or as threatened as themselves, like Greece, or actively hostile, like Italy, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, with all of which they had bitter and long-standing territorial disputes. If Croatia, which would shortly take its own independence under Italian tutelage, is added to the roll of the Serbs' enemies, the behaviour of General Mirković and his fellow conspirators of 27 March appears the collective equivalent of Gavrilo Princip's firebrand assault on the Austro-Hungarian monarchy personified by Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. It ensured the extinction of the Serb national cause as if by reflex; it would also doom Serbia, as in 1914, to invasion, defeat and occupation and with it the peoples of Yugoslavia, of whom the Serbs had assumed the leadership in 1918, to an agony of protracted civil and guerrilla warfare for the next four years. Of none of this do Mirković, Simović or any of the other Serb patriots – reserve officers, cultural stalwarts and the like – who staged the 27 March coup seem to have taken the least reckoning. There is no doubt that they had been encouraged in their foolhardiness by the British and the Americans. Colonel William 'Wild Bill' Donovan, future head of the Office of Strategic Services and in 1941 President Roosevelt's personal emissary to Belgrade, had arrived in the capital on 23 January bearing an exhortation about the preservation of national honour; Winston Churchill was meanwhile pressing his ambassador to 'pester, nag and bite' the Yugoslav government to stay outside the Tripartite Pact. But Western warnings and encouragement were ultimately beside the point. The 27 March coup was an autonomous Serb initiative, to be seen with hindsight as the last outright expression of sovereign defiance made by any of the small peoples who lie between the millstones of German and Russian power since Poland's rejection of Hitler's ultimatum in August 1939 and their subjection to Stalinism.

It was to be punished with vehemence and without delay. Hitler judged that the Serbs' defiance simplified his strategic options in the approach to Marita. Diplomatically it put Yugoslavia in the wrong; for all the popular enthusiasm displayed for the coup – crowds cheering the Allied cause in Belgrade, whose streets were bedecked with British and French flags – the new government could with some reason be denounced as illegitimate. Militarily, it provided OKH with a solution of its logistic difficulties: the Yugoslav railway system, inherited from the Habsburg Empire, connected with those of Austria, Hungary, Romania and Greece (as Bulgaria's did not), and thereby provided the Wehrmacht with a direct approach to its chosen battlefront in Macedonia. Hitler did not

Hitlers' Balkan campaign of 1941, a whirlwind affair which accomplished all its objectives in less than a month of fighting.

INVASION OF YUGOSLAVIA AND GREECE



pause to seize the advantage he had been offered. 'I have decided to destroy Yugoslavia,' he told Goering, Brauchitsch and Ribbentrop, summoned post-haste to the Chancellery on 26 March. 'How much military force do you need? How much time?' The answers to these questions already lay in the files of contingency plans in army and Luftwaffe headquarters. In early afternoon he met the Hungarian minister to offer him a port on the Adriatic for his country's part in the coming campaign, and then the Bulgarian minister, to promise him the Greek province of Macedonia. 'The eternal uncertainty is over,' he told him, 'the tornado is going to burst upon Yugoslavia with breathtaking suddenness.' Next day in more pensive mood he told the Hungarian minister (whose head of state, Admiral Horthy, had decided to decline the bribe of an Adriatic port), 'Now that I reflect on all this, I cannot help believing in a Higher Justice. I am awestruck at the powers of Providence.'

The Yugoslav conspirators persisted in blissful ignorance of the opportunity Hitler felt they had offered him. They believed that they could placate Germany by declining to accept a British mission and that their coup could not be regarded as a repudiation of Yugoslav accession to the Tripartite Pact because the signature had never been ratified. In fact the terms stipulated that ratification was assured by signature, while in Hitler's eyes the coup put them in the enemy camp in any case. On the day of the coup itself he issued Führer Directive No. 25: 'The military revolt in Yugoslavia has changed the political position in the Balkans. Yugoslavia, even if it makes initial professions of loyalty, must be regarded as an enemy and beaten down as quickly as possible. . . . Internal tensions in Yugoslavia will be encouraged by giving political assurances to the Croats. . . . It is my intention to break into Yugoslavia [from north and south] and to deal an annihilating blow to the Yugoslav forces.'

Halder had directed OKH's planning staff to prepare plans for such an offensive the previous October. The forces positioned for Marita easily sufficed for an invasion of Yugoslavia as well: the Second Army, stationed in Austria, would simply advance directly on Belgrade, while the Twelfth, positioned to attack Greece through Bulgaria, would now move into southern Yugoslavia before doing so; an Italian army would also attack from Italy towards Zagreb, capital city of the Croats, who were Italy's clients, while the Hungarian Third Army would seize the trans-Danubian province of Vojvodina, where Hungary claimed rights.

— Yugoslavia's fate —

The Yugoslav army, a million strong, was organised into twenty-eight infantry and three cavalry divisions; but it contained only two battalions of 100 tanks, and those antiquated. The whole army belonged, indeed, to the era of the Balkan wars of 1911-12 rather than to the modern world – its movements depended on the mobilisation of 900,000 horses, oxen and mules – and, moreover, it was not mobilised. Its General Staff – which General Sir John Dill, the Chief of the (British) Imperial General Staff, visited secretly immediately after

the coup on 1 April – behaved, by his report, ‘as if it had months in which to make decisions and more months in which to put them into effect’. Though its deputy chief conferred with Papagos, the Greek commander, in Athens on 3–4 April, it refused to coordinate a joint strategy of concentrating its forces in the south to support the Greeks (and the British contingent arriving to join them) but insisted on lining the whole frontier (with Italy, Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, a sector 1000 miles long) against the threat of invasion – as the Russians were also currently doing in their border zone.

‘He who defends everything’, in Frederick the Great’s chilling military aphorism, ‘defends nothing.’ The attempt to defend everything was the mistake the Poles had made in 1939, though with some excuse, since the economically valuable parts of their country lay in frontier regions. It was also the mistake towards which the Greeks were tending, divided as they were by their urge to protect the exposed salient of Thrace as well as the traditional invasion routes in Macedonia. But no country has perhaps ever as irrationally dispersed its forces as the Yugoslavs did in April 1941, seeking to defend with ancient rifles and mule-borne mountain artillery one of the longest land frontiers in Europe against Panzer divisions and 2000 modern aircraft.

The Yugoslav air force, which had masterminded the coup of 27 March, was overwhelmed in the opening hours of the German attack on 6 April; of its 450 aircraft 200 were obsolete and most were destroyed outright in an initial air offensive which also caused 3000 civilian deaths by a terror raid on Belgrade. The German army’s plan, with which those of the Italian Second and Hungarian Third Armies were integrated, nullified Yugoslav strategy from the start. It turned on throwing armoured columns down the valleys of the rivers – the Danube, the Sava, the Drava, the Morava – which penetrate the mountain chains on which the Yugoslavs had counted to protect their country’s heartland; the columns would then turn to converge and so envelop the Yugoslav formations they had outflanked. It proved brilliantly successful. As the official Yugoslav history of the war subsequently conceded:

Three initial attacks determined the fate of the Yugoslav army, on April 6 in Macedonia, April 8 in Serbia, and April 10 in Croatia. On all three occasions the Hitlerites breached the frontier defences, pushed deep into the interior and dislodged the Yugoslav defences from their moorings. After the breakthrough of the frontier defences, the Yugoslav troops were soon outmanoeuvred, broken up, surrounded, without contact with each other, without supplies, without leadership.

What the official history seeks to conceal is the active responsibility of much of the ‘Yugoslav leadership’ for the débâcle. Yugoslavia – originally, by the designation of the Allied peace treaties with Austria and Hungary in 1919, ‘the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes’ – was in no sense a nationally unified state. It had inherited all the ten-

dencies that had racked the Habsburg monarchy's Slav dominions before 1914 and sought to check them merely by imposing Serb dominance over those minorities which had always preferred Vienna to Belgrade. The invasion of 6 April was seized by the Croat and Slovene nationalists as an opportunity for secession; on 10 April the Croatian Ustashi, a group of extreme right-wing nationalists, proclaimed an independent state, and on 11 April the Slovenes did likewise: both would shortly accept Axis tutelage. Some of the Croat formations of the Yugoslav army mutinied and went over to the enemy in the opening stages of the campaign; the chief of staff of the (Croatian) First Army Group actually conspired with the Ustashi leadership in opening talks with the Germans on 10 April. These were the preliminaries of a collaboration which were to result in the cruellest of all the internecine wars that would torment occupied Europe during the Hitler years. Nevertheless, Yugoslavia's Serb majority cannot escape its share of responsibility for the suddenness of their country's defeat. All but one of the army's divisions was under Serb command, and most of those divisional generals surrendered to the panic which the rapidity of the Wehrmacht's onslaught induced. So feeble was the army's resistance that the German invaders suffered only 151 fatal casualties in the course of the campaign; the XLI Panzer Corps lost a single soldier dead, though it was in the forefront of the advance to Belgrade. The only senior Serbian officer who resisted the disabling spirit of collapse was Draza Mihailović, deputy chief of staff of the Second Army, who took to the hills at the signing of the armistice with Germany on 17 April. There, with a band of fifty faithfuls, he founded the nucleus of the Chetnik movement, which consisted of Serbian freedom-fighters loyal to the crown. Until Tito's communist Partisans emerged as a major force in 1942, the Chetniks sustained the principal guerrilla resistance against the regimes of occupation – German, Italian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, puppet Croatian – imposed on Yugoslavia.

In Greece, which the Germans also invaded on 6 April, the Wehrmacht met stiffer resistance. The Greek army was already mobilised, had fought a successful offensive against the Italians and was commanded by generals whose campaigning experience stretched back to the Graeco-Turkish war of 1919–22. Moreover, it was supported by a British expeditionary force of three divisions which had brought with it modern tanks and aircraft. Hitler regarded the Greek soldiers as the valorous descendants of Alexander's hoplites and the Theban Sacred Band – a unique mitigation of his disdain for non-Teutons – and he so admired the bravery they had shown in their war with Mussolini that he instructed OKW, before the campaign began, to release from captivity all Greeks taken prisoner as soon as an armistice should be signed.

Neither Greek valour nor British arms would avail to postpone an armistice. The Greek plan was flawed, and neither advice nor deployments from Britain could avoid defeat. Papagos, the Greek commander, insisted on keeping four of his eighteen divisions on the Metaxas Line, along the Bulgarian frontier, and disposed three with the British formations – the 6th Australian and 1st New Zealand Divisions, with the 1st British Armoured Brigade – a hundred miles to the rear on the Aliakhmon Line hinged on Mount Olympus.

He counted on the Yugoslavs to protect the left flank of both positions and had even arranged a scheme with the Yugoslavs to react to an Axis attack by opening an offensive into Albania against the Italians – who on 20 March had once again tried and failed to revive their own Balkan offensive – with the bulk of the Greek army, fourteen divisions. Professor Martin van Creveld describes the dispositions – without exaggeration – as ‘suicidal’. The defending forces were aligned in three separate positions which depended on their security on a fourth, entirely extraneous Yugoslav force protecting their flanks. ‘Should the Germans’, van Creveld observes, ‘succeed in breaking [the Yugoslavs] rapid and total disaster was inevitable. Yugoslavia and Greece would be cut off from each other, the Metaxas and Aliakhmon lines outflanked, and the Greek army in Albania attacked from the rear. After that it would be a small matter to mop up the rest of the Allied and Yugoslav forces separately.’

— Collapse in Greece —

The course of the campaign developed exactly as thus predicated. In two days of fighting, 6–7 April, the Germans broke the resistance of the Yugoslavs in Macedonia and forced the Greek defenders of the Metaxas Line, who had stoutly resisted frontal assault, to surrender on 9 April. They were thus freed to turn the left flank of the Aliakhmon Line, defended by New Zealanders, and press on down the ancient invasion route which leads from the Vardar Valley in Macedonia into central Greece. A detached force meanwhile unhinged the main body of the Greek army which in Albania was confronting the Italians, who were thus granted the opportunity to begin the decisive advance they had been unable to win by their own efforts in six months of fighting.

General George Tsolakoglu, commanding the Greek First Army on the Albanian front, was so determined, however, to deny the Italians the satisfaction of a victory they had not earned that, once the hopelessness of his position became apparent to him, he opened quite unauthorised parley with the commander of the German SS division opposite him, Sepp Dietrich, to arrange a surrender to the Germans alone. It took a personal representation from Mussolini to Hitler to bring about an armistice in which Italy was included on 23 April.

Elsewhere the Graeco-British front was collapsing concertina-like as one position after another was outflanked by the invaders. The Greek Prime Minister, Alexander Koryzsis, committed suicide on 18 April, leaving the rest of the Greek government unable to agree with General Sir Henry Wilson, commanding the British expeditionary force, how best to sustain resistance. In fact the British had been in full retreat from the Aliakhmon Line since 16 April. Though they lacked the numbers and equipment to resist the Germans, they had the motorised transport in which to withdraw; the Greek army, like the Yugoslav, belonged to an earlier age of warfare and 20,000 of its soldiers fell into German hands in the wake of the British retreat.

The British made a stand at Thermopylae, where the Spartans had fallen defying the Persians 2500 years before, but were quickly hustled southward by German tanks. That day and every day they were harried by the Luftwaffe, which, by the report of the Times correspondent, was 'bombing every nook and cranny, hamlet, village and town in its path'. It had destroyed Piraeus, the port of Athens, on the first day of the war with Greece, so that the fugitives had to head for the Peloponnese to find harbours for their return flight to Crete and Egypt. A German parachute drop on the Isthmus of Corinth on 26 April was timed just too late to cut them off. By then the British – most of them Australians and New Zealanders forming the Anzac Corps, whose predecessor had established the Antipodean military legend at Gallipoli only twenty-six years earlier – had passed through Athens and reached haven. Retreating though they were, 'no one who passed through the city', wrote a Royal Artilleryman, Lieutenant-Colonel R. P. Waller, would ever forget the warmth of the Athenians' farewell. 'We were nearly the last British troops they would see and the Germans might be on our heels; yet cheering, clapping crowds lined the streets and pressed about our cars, so as to almost hold us up. Girls and men leapt on the running boards to kiss or shake hands with the grimy, weary gunners. They threw flowers to us and ran beside us crying, "Come back – You must come back again – Goodbye – Good luck".'

It would be three and a half years before British soldiers returned to Athens, then to participate in a grim and bloody civil war between the parties of left and right which had learned the politics of violence as guerrilla fighters against the German occupation. In April 1941, sunny and flower-scented in the memory of the soldiers who were leaving Greece with the taste of defeat in their teeth, that cold and bitter December would have seemed an unimaginable legacy of the whirlwind campaign they had fought against the Germans. The three British divisions which together with the six Greek divisions spared from the Albanian front had battled against eighteen of the enemy had, rightly, the sensation of having fought the good fight. The Greek campaign had been an old-fashioned gentlemen's war, with honour given and accepted by brave adversaries on each side. In the aftermath, historians would measure its significance in terms of the delay Marita had or had not imposed on the unleashing of Barbarossa, an exercise ultimately to be judged profitless, since it was the Russian weather, not the contingencies of subsidiary campaigns, which determined Barbarossa's launch date. The combatants had not felt they were participating in wider events. The Greeks, with British help, had fought to defend their homeland from conquest. The Germans had battled to overcome them and had triumphed, but in token of respect to the courage of the enemy had insisted that the Greek officers should keep their swords. That was to be almost the last gesture of chivalry between warriors in a war imminently fated to descend into barbarism.

Victorious German infantrymen prepare to raise the Swastika over the Acropolis in Athens, 27 April 1941. The Greek campaign had lasted only three weeks.



8

— AIRBORNE BATTLE —

CRETE

The Balkan campaign, save for its brevity, had been a conventional operation of war in every respect. Even the breakneck speed of the German advance, now that *Blitzkrieg* in Poland and France had accustomed the world to the Wehrmacht's methods, seemed rather a revelation of the developing pattern of modern warfare than a further instalment of the military revolution that Hitler's generals had instituted. Indeed, it had been less revolutionary than the victory of 1940. The sheer disparity in quality between the Wehrmacht and its Balkan opponents, who had furthermore brought defeat upon themselves by the perverse ineptitude of their defensive arrangements, was all the explanation necessary for the catastrophe which had overcome them.

The Balkan campaign might have ended on that note, with the hoisting of the swastika flag over the Acropolis in Athens on 27 April as a fitting symbol of a triumph of the strong over the weak. But it did not: even as the cost of the campaign was counted – 12,000 British casualties (of whom 9000 were prisoners), uncounted Yugoslav and Greek dead, against a mere 5000 German killed, wounded or missing – and its spoils were divided – Yugoslav Bosnia, Dalmatia and Montenegro given to Italy, South Serbia and Greek Thrace to Bulgaria, the Vojvodina to Hungary, Croatia to the puppet Croatians of the Ustashi movement – Hitler was lending an ear to those in his circle who argued that the Balkan campaign was incomplete and urged that Germany's victory should be crowned by a descent upon Crete by the one largely untried instrument of *Blitzkrieg*, Germany's airborne army.

Germany was not the first advanced state to have created an airborne force. That cachet belonged to Italy, where the idea of strategic bombing had also been born. As early as 1927 the Italians had experimented with the delivery of infantrymen directly to the battlefield by parachute. The technique had then been taken up by the Red Army, which by 1936 had sufficiently perfected it to demonstrate at large-scale manoeuvres held in the presence of Western military observers the dropping of an entire regiment of parachutists

and the subsequent airlanding of a whole brigade; this spectacular operation was made possible by the Red Air Force's development of transport aircraft large enough to hold complete units of fully equipped soldiers.

The Red Army's primacy in airborne tactics was to be severely retarded, however, by Stalin's great military purge of 1937–8, of which forward-looking officers were the principal victims. Its airborne units survived, and were to mount a number of operations in the Second World War, notably on the river Dnieper in the autumn of 1943, but they were never accorded the independent and decisive role their advocates had hoped for them. In Germany, however, the concept of airborne operations was taken up enthusiastically by the Wehrmacht's new generation of military pioneers. As in France, where military parachute training was deemed an airforce activity, it was the Luftwaffe which was constituted the directing authority. In 1938 General Kurt Student, a flying veteran of the First World War, was appointed Inspector of Parachute Troops and shortly afterwards was given command of the first parachute division, designated 7 Flieger. It was this division which provided the units used in Norway and Holland in 1940. By 1941 its associated units, constituting Student's XI Air Corps, stood ready to extend the German conquest of the Balkans deeper into the Mediterranean area.

Hitler's closest military advisers, the operations officers of OKW, were anxious that XI Air Corps should be used to capture Malta. When asked to advise whether Crete or Malta was the more important objective in the Mediterranean, 'All officers of the Section,' General Walter Warlimont recalled, 'whether from the Army, Navy or Air Force, voted unanimously for the capture of Malta, since this seemed to be the only way to secure permanently the sea route to North Africa.' Keitel and Jodl, their chiefs, accepted their conclusions; but when on 15 April they confronted Student with this opinion he overcame them. He had already decided that Malta was too strongly garrisoned and defended to yield to an airborne assault. Crete, on the other hand, with its 'sausage-like form and single main road', offered an ideal target to his parachutists; moreover, he argued, they would be able to reach out towards the other Mediterranean islands required by German strategymakers – not only Malta but also Cyprus – and thereby consolidate an impregnable land-sea position intermediate between Fortress Europe and Britain's increasingly tenuous foothold in the Middle East.

Goering, who saw in Student's plan an opportunity to rehabilitate the reputation of the Luftwaffe after its failure to overcome the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain, warmly endorsed his subordinate's conception and on 21 April presented it to Hitler. Since the capture of Crete had not figured in his original plans, Hitler was initially resistant but eventually agreed to lend it his support and on 25 April issued Führer Directive No. 28, codenamed *Mercur* (Mercury) for the Crete operation. Student, who was to remain the driving force of the operation throughout its inception and course, at once arranged for 7th Airborne Division to be brought to Greece from its training centre at Brunswick; he also persuaded OKH to let him use one of the divisions earmarked to garrison Greece, the

elite 5th Mountain, and to lend him some of the light tanks from the 5th Panzer, which were not needed for Barbarossa. The mountain division was to provide a follow-up force, transported in local craft under Italian naval protection. The airborne division, consisting of three parachute and one airlanding regiment, was to storm the island by direct assault, flying in a fleet of 600 Junkers 52 aircraft, some of which would also tow eighty gliders carrying light tanks and the manpower of the 7th Division's spearhead, I Battalion of the 1st Assault Regiment. An air force of 280 bombers, 150 Stukas and 200 fighters would cover and support the operation. In all, 22,000 soldiers were to be committed; command of the whole campaign was to be under General Alexander Löhner's Fourth Air Fleet.

Student's plan was straightforward. He intended to use each of his three parachute regiments against the three towns on the north coast of the island, from west to east Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion, where airstrips were located. Once captured, these would be used for the landing of heavy equipment and as bases to 'roll up' the British defences along the single road which ran along the island's 170-mile length. At Maleme, which he had decided should be his *Schwerpunkt*, he intended to commit the 1st Assault Regiment, which would crashland in gliders directly on to the airfield. Although he expected to be outnumbered by the defenders, he was sure that surprise, the high quality of his troops and the air superiority assured by the Luftwaffe's overwhelming strength would subdue them in a few days of brutal action.

His judgement that his force was superior in quality to the British garrison was correct. Major-General Bernard Freyberg, its commander, was a fire-eater, a legendary hero of the First World War in which he had won the VC commanding a battalion of the Royal Naval Division on the Somme, after an equally gallant – and romantic – passage of arms at Gallipoli. There he had been among the party which had buried the poet Rupert Brooke on the island of Skyros and later, on lone reconnaissance, he had swum the Hellespont, as Leander had done in legend and Lord Byron in reality a hundred years before him. Winston Churchill had christened him 'the Salamander' in tribute to his fire-resisting qualities.

Few of Freyberg's troops on Crete in the summer of 1941, however, matched his robustness. One brigade of regular British infantry had been brought direct from Egypt to garrison the island and was what the Germans called *kampffähig* – 'combat fit'. The rest were fugitives from the Greek fiasco. Two brigades of the 2nd New Zealand Division – with which Freyberg, who had spent his youth in New Zealand, had a special affinity – were intact and also one Australian brigade. The rest of the 40,000 troops on the island were remnants, disorganised and many of them disheartened. All, moreover, lacked essential equipment. 'Crete', wrote the New Zealander Charles Upham (who was to end the war as a double VC), 'was a pauper's campaign, mortars without base plates, Vickers guns without tripods.' A handful of tanks and a regiment's worth of artillery had been brought to the island; but the defenders lacked most essential heavy equipment and, above all, aircraft. On 1 May there were only seventeen Hurricanes and obsolete biplane Gladiators on Crete,

and all were to be withdrawn before the Germans arrived. Worst of all, the British defenders could not count on local assistance. Since the 5th Cretan Division had been mobilised for war against the Italians and had been captured on the mainland, the only Cretan soldiers left on the island were recruits and reservists, with one rifle between six and five rounds per rifle.

— The role of Ultra —

Crete nevertheless might and perhaps ought to have been held; for, unbeknown to the Germans, their intentions were betrayed to the British well before the first parachutists had emplaned. The whole logic of an airborne operation was thereby compromised from the start. Like the proponents of armoured warfare and strategic bombing, the military parachutist pioneers had conceived their operational theory in reaction to the trench warfare they had witnessed in the First World War. It was the self-betrayal of the effort needed to mount a trench-breaking offensive which had affronted them: the laborious assembly of men and material, the ponderous and protracted process of preliminary bombardment, the agonised inching forward across no-man's land through barbed-wire barriers and earthwork zones. The bombing enthusiasts had reacted to that spectacle with the argument that high explosive was better delivered against the centres of production from which the enemy's artillery and machine-gun defences were supplied. The apostles of armoured warfare had argued – and in 1939–40 demonstrated – that deep defences were best overcome by launching against them a weapon impervious to the firepower the defenders deployed. The military parachutists proposed an intermediate but even more arresting alternative: to overarch ground defences by airpower which would deliver aggressive infantrymen at the soft spots immediately behind the enemy's front, his headquarters, communication centres and supply points. It was a brilliantly daring leap of strategic imagination; but its success rested on the precondition that the enemy remain unaware of the stroke poised against him – otherwise the parachutists committed to deliver it would suffer the same (if not worse) fate as the infantrymen of the trenches going over the top against the enemy alerted by the preliminary bombardment. Their helplessness during descent, the necessary lightness of the equipment they would use to fight if they survived, doomed them to undergo appalling losses against defenders who had been warned of their approach.

The British defenders of Crete had been warned. Ultra, the intelligence source derived from the interception and decryption of enemy ciphers by the Government Code and Cipher School at Bletchley, had hitherto yielded little information of value to the conduct of ground operations between the British and the Germans. Until the end of the campaign in France, Bletchley had had great difficulty in breaking the cipher 'keys' used on the German Enigma ciphering machine through which the different Wehrmacht headquarters communicated. The difficulties were in part intrinsic – the Enigma machine

was designed to confront an eavesdropper with several million possible solutions to an intercept – and in part those of any experimental enterprise: Bletchley was accumulating procedures which hastened the process of breaking but had not yet systematised them. There was another difficulty: Bletchley's success depended chiefly upon the exploitation of mistakes made by German Enigma machine operators in encipherment procedure. German army and navy operators, perhaps because they were drawn from old-established signals services, made few mistakes. It was the younger Luftwaffe which provided Bletchley's listeners with the bulk of their opportunities; but, though 'breaks' into the Luftwaffe key considerably assisted the Air Defence of Great Britain to resist and deflect bombing attacks during the winter blitz of 1940–1, they were of less use in opposing the Germans in the Battle of the Atlantic or in the ground campaigns in Greece and North Africa.

Crete, however, was to be a Luftwaffe campaign. Thus the vulnerability of its 'Red' key, as Bletchley denominated it, to British decryption on a regular, day-to-day basis and in 'real time' – at a speed, that is, equivalent to that at which German recipients of Enigma messages deciphered them themselves – was to compromise the security of the parachute operation from the outset. On 26 April, for example, the day after Hitler issued his *Merkur* directive, two intercepted 'Red' messages were found to refer to Crete: the Fourth Air Fleet mentioned the selection of bases for 'Operation Crete', while its subordinate VIII Air Corps asked for maps and photographs of the island. Thereafter the warnings accumulated almost daily. On 6 May Ultra revealed that German headquarters expected preparations to be completed by 17 May and outlined the exact stages and targets of the German attack. On 15 May it detected that D-Day had been postponed from 17 May to 19 May. And on 19 May it warned that 20 May was to be the new attack date and that the German parachute commanders were to assemble immediately with maps and photographs of Maleme, Retimo and Heraklion. All this information, disguised as intelligence collected by a British agent in Athens, was transmitted in 'real time' to Freyberg, who thus, on the morning of 20 May, knew exactly when, where and in what strength Student's parachutists and glider infantry were going to land.

Between foreknowledge and forestalment, however, there always yawns the gap of capability. That predicament was Freyberg's. Against an attacking force whose defining characteristics were mobility and flexibility he opposed a defending force almost totally bereft of the means of movement. Its units were in the right place, but, should one be driven from any of the vital airstrips, it could not be replaced; the Germans would be enabled to land reinforcements and heavy equipment and the battle for the island would probably be lost in consequence.

Defending Maleme airstrip were the 21st, 22nd and 23rd New Zealand Battalions. New Zealanders were to be reckoned by Rommel, on his experience in the desert campaign, the best soldiers he met in the Second World War: resilient, hardy, self-confident, they had little opinion of any soldiers but themselves. When on the early

morning of 20 May they brushed themselves clean of the dust thrown up by the Luftwaffe's preparatory bombardment and cocked their weapons to resist the parachute assault they knew must follow, they harboured no sense of the harshness of the battle to come. Lieutenant W. B. Thomas of the 23rd Battalion found his first sight of the German parachutists 'unreal, difficult to comprehend as anything at all dangerous':

Seen against the deep blue of the early morning Cretan sky, through a frame of grey-green olive branches, they looked like little jerking dolls whose billowy frocks of green, yellow, red and white had somehow blown up and become entangled in the wires that controlled them. . . . I struggled to grasp the meaning behind this colourful fantasy, to realise that those beautiful kicking dolls meant the repetition of all the horrors we had known so recently in Greece.

Lieutenant Thomas's sense of unreality was understandable. He was witnessing the first purposeful parachute operation in history. The Germans' earlier jumps, in Norway and Holland, had been small-scale, lightly opposed and strongly supported by conventional ground forces. The *Sprung nach Kreta* was a true leap into the unknown, the pitting of pioneers in a military revolution against forces they could overcome only by their own unaided effort. Student's men were in a sense primitives: the British and American equivalents, already training for future parachute operations of their own, would regard their equipment and technique with horrified incredulity. The Germans had no control over their descent; they jumped from their Junkers 52s, in groups of twelve, their parachutes opened by static line, but were then suspended by a single strap attached to the harness in the middle of the back. Slipstream and wind carried them indeed 'like dolls' to their landing, from the shock of which their padding, helmets and rubber boots were supposed to protect them. Those not injured by the impact – and jump injuries were numerous – then collected their weapons from parachuted containers, assembled in squads and moved to the assault. The glider infantry of the 1st Assault Regiment, crashlanded in groups of fifteen, reinforced them with heavier equipment.

Student's theory of airborne assault took no account of Cretan terrain or New Zealand tenacity. The harsh and broken ground around Maleme injured many of his parachutists as they landed and pulverised a high proportion of the gliders; the New Zealanders dealt pitilessly with the survivors. They shot the enemy in the air: 'You'd see one go limp and kind of straighten up with a jerk and then go limp again, and you knew he "was done for".' They shot them as they landed, so that next day a visiting staff officer to 23rd Battalion found 'bodies everywhere, every ten–twelve yards. One stepped over them as one went through the olive groves.' Sixty New Zealanders released from a field punishment centre in Maleme, where they were serving time for minor military offences, killed 110 Germans in the first hour of the assault.

The losses suffered by the German parachute battalions around Maleme in the first



Junkers 52 aircraft drop paratroopers over Crete, 20 May 1941. Heavy German casualties sustained in Crete led Hitler to suspend further major airborne operations.

hours of 20 May were truly appalling. One company of III Battalion, 1st Assault Regiment, lost 112 killed out of 126; 400 of the battalion's 600 men were dead before the day was out. Only a hundred men of the glider-borne I Battalion survived its landing unwounded; II Battalion also suffered heavily. IV Battalion, led by Captain Walter Gericke (who would survive to command the West German army's parachute division as a NATO general), alone preserved the bulk of its strength. It and the survivors of the other three struggled throughout the day of 20 May to assemble their remaining strength, fight off the remorseless New Zealanders and move towards their objective, the Maleme airstrip. They made no progress; in the 21st New Zealand Battalion's area the paratroopers who fell in the streets of the village of Modhion were attacked 'by the entire population of the district, including women and children, using any weapon, flintlock rifles captured from the Turks a hundred years ago, axes and even spades.' They helped to add to the 1st Assault Regiment's casualties, which by the end of the day included two battalion commanders killed and two wounded, together with the regimental commander. The 1st Assault Regiment, which regarded itself as the Wehrmacht's elite, had by nightfall suffered much – perhaps 50 per cent losses – and achieved nothing.

Its sister regiments, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Parachute, directed against Heraklion, Retimo

and Suda respectively, all on the north coast, also suffered heavily on 20 May. In one or two places, airborne assault achieved its intended surprise: near Suda, Crete's main port, ten glider infantrymen who landed close to an artillery regiment killed 180 gunners who lacked small arms to defend themselves. Elsewhere, though, it was generally the Germans who were slaughtered. The 3rd Parachute Regiment, landing just east of the 1st Assault Regiment around Canea and Suda, arrived directionless; their commander, Süssmann (who also commanded the division), had died in a glider crash on take-off. Its I Battalion, led by Baron von der Heydte, an untypical parachutist by reason both of his undisguisedly aristocratic disdain for Nazism and of his marked intellectuality – he was to write a remarkable memoir of the Cretan campaign and end his career as a professor of economics – got down relatively unscathed. Its III Battalion, however, was almost wiped out during the day's fighting, justifiably in the view of the New Zealanders, whose senior medical officer had been shot, with many of his patients, by members of this battalion during their initial assault. Its II Battalion attacked a feature defended by the New Zealand Division's logistic troops; Company Sergeant-Major Neuhoff describes the results of his encounter with the petrol company of its Composite Battalion: 'We advanced to attack the hill . . . we proceeded, without opposition, about half way up . . . suddenly we ran into heavy and very accurate rifle and machine-gun fire. The enemy had held their fire with great discipline and allowed us to approach well within effective range before opening up. Our casualties were extremely heavy, and we were forced to retire leaving many dead behind us.' Yet their opponents, as the New Zealand official history records, were 'for the most part drivers and technicians and so ill-trained for infantry fighting'.

Student, who had not yet left his rear headquarters in the Hotel Grande Bretagne in Athens, remained all day in ignorance of the fate his cherished division had suffered. Far into the night of 20/21 May he sat at his map table, as von der Heydte recalled, 'waiting and waiting for the news which would bring him confirmation that he had been right in proposing the attack on the island to Goering a month previously. Everything had seemed so simple in prospect, so feasible and so certain. He had thought that he had taken every possibility into consideration – and then everything had turned out contrary to plans and expectations.' The truth – as I. M. D. Stewart, the medical officer of the 1st Welch Regiment, a veteran and the most meticulous historian of the campaign, later recorded – was that he had 'dissipated' his airborne division 'in scattered attacks about the island':

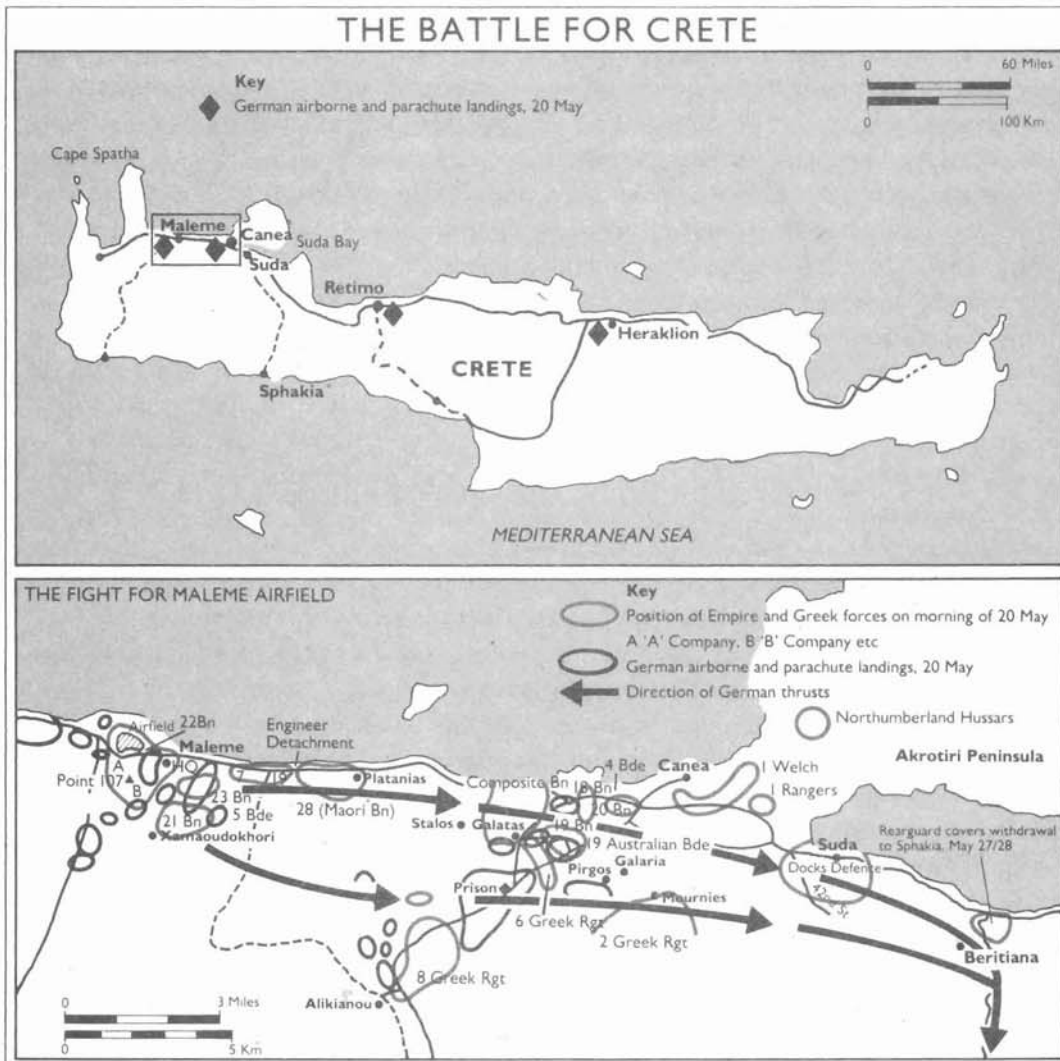
Thousands of its young men now lay dead in the olive groves and among the buttercups and the barley. His glider troops and four of his parachute battalions . . . had been shattered, reduced within the space of fifteen minutes to a few dozen fugitive survivors. Other battalions had suffered little less severely. Yet he still had not captured an airfield. Now he had left only his tiny airlanding reserve. If these few hundred men should fail on the morrow [21 May] the only possible relief for the Division would have to come by sea.

On the evening of the first day of the first great parachute operation in history, therefore, the advantage appeared to have passed decisively to the opposition – an ill-organised force of under-equipped troops almost bereft of air cover and supporting arms. Yet, despite all the agony Student's men had suffered and all the mistakes he had made, on 21 May he would succeed in recovering the initiative and turning the battle to his advantage. How so? The explanation, one of Freyberg's staff officers was to reflect ruefully in the aftermath, was the absence of 'a hundred extra wireless sets'; for the defenders had failed to recognise the extent of their own success and had failed to report it to Freyberg's headquarters, which in turn had failed to radio the orders to recoup and regroup. Next morning Winston Churchill reported to the House of Commons that the 'most stern and resolute resistance' would be offered to the enemy. Meanwhile Freyberg lacked that clear picture of his battle which would allow him to react as commander. He communicated with the New Zealanders defending the Maleme airfield – Student's *Schwerpunkt* – through the headquarters of 5 Brigade; the brigade in turn communicated indirectly with its battalion commanders; and Lieutenant-Colonel L. W. Andrews, the commander of the crucial battalion, 22nd, mistakenly believed that his brigade commander planned to support him. A brave man – he had won the Victoria Cross in the First World War – he decided on the evening of 20 May, after an initial counter-attack supported by two of the only six heavy tanks on Crete had failed, to regroup on high ground overlooking the airfield for a concerted push the next day, and this regrouping inadvertently conceded the vital spot to the Germans and so rescued them from the inevitability of disaster.

While Andrews took the wrong decision for good reasons, Student was arriving at the right decision for bad reasons: he had no ground for thinking that fresh troops would fare any better at Maleme than those already dead. Indeed, the universal military maxim, 'never reinforce failure', should have warned him against committing his reserve at that point. He nevertheless decided to do so. On the afternoon of 21 May his last two companies of parachutists fell among the New Zealand division's Maori battalion and were slaughtered – 'not cricket, I know,' wrote one of their officers, 'but there it is.' At the same time Student's airlanding reserve, the spearhead of 100th Mountain Rifle Regiment of the 5th Mountain Division, began to crashland in Junkers 52s on the Maleme airstrip from which Andrews had withdrawn his defending 22nd Battalion the previous evening. 'Machine-gun bullets tear through the right wing,' wrote a war correspondent aboard. 'The pilot grits his teeth. Cost what it may he has to get down. Suddenly there leaps up below us a vineyard. We strike the ground. Then one wing grinds into the sand and tears the back of the machine half round to the left. Men, packs, boxes, ammunition are flung forward . . . we lose the power over our own bodies. At last we come to a standstill, the machine standing half on its head.'

Nearly forty Junkers 52s succeeded in landing on the Maleme airstrip in this way, bringing 650 men of II Battalion, 100th Mountain Rifle Regiment. The mountain riflemen, like Student's parachutists, also regarded themselves as an elite, and with justification.

CRETE



Crete, the scene of another Allied evacuation, in May 1941, after a bitter fight. Allied airborne planners drew many important lessons from Crete.

While the New Zealanders struggled to come to terms with the new threat, the mountaineers were moving to consolidate the German position at Maleme airfield, with the intention of extending their foothold next day.

Some of the mountaineers' reinforcements were meanwhile approaching Crete by ship. They were to suffer an unhappy fate; but so too were the ships of the Royal Navy which intercepted them. The Alexandria squadron easily overcame the Italian escort to the

fleet of caiques and barges carrying the remainder of 100th Mountain Rifle Regiment towards Crete, causing 300 of them to be drowned; but during 22 May the Luftwaffe inflicted a far more grievous penalty on the British ships and crews. The battleship *Warspite* was damaged, the cruisers *Gloucester* and *Fiji* sunk, together with the destroyers *Kashmir* and *Kelly* – the latter commanded by the future Earl Mountbatten of Burma. This was not the end of the navy's losses; before 2 June it also lost the cruisers *Juno* and *Calcutta* and the destroyers *Imperial* and *Greyhound*, which were sunk, and suffered damage to the battleship *Valiant*, the aircraft carrier *Formidable*, the cruisers *Perth*, *Orion*, *Ajax* and *Naiad* and the destroyers *Kelvin*, *Napier* and *Hereward*. When the tally was taken, the Battle of Crete, though less shocking in its effect on British morale than the future loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* was to prove, was reckoned the costliest of any British naval engagement of the Second World War.

— Student gains the upper hand —

Ashore, meanwhile, the battle had begun to run irreversibly the Germans' way. The New Zealand counter-attack to recapture Maleme airfield failed in the early hours of 22 May; throughout the day Student, with brutal recklessness, directed a stream of Junkers 52s at the airfield. Those that crashed on impact, as many did, were pushed off the runway for the next arrival. Meanwhile the Luftwaffe operated overland in overwhelming strength, shooting and bombing anything that moved. 'It is a most strange and grim battle that is being fought,' Churchill told the Commons that afternoon. 'Our side have no air . . . and the other side have very little or no tanks. Neither side has any means of retreat.' The truth was that the British had no tanks that counted and no means of moving, while the Germans were accumulating growing numbers of fresh, first-class soldiers to manoeuvre against the defenders.

Freyberg now decided to withdraw eastward and regroup for a counter-attack. However, this regrouping was composed not of a single unit but of the bulk of his best troops, the New Zealanders and the regular British battalions. The withdrawal conceded yet more vital ground to the parachutists and mountain riflemen around Maleme, who were growing steadily in numbers. On 24 May they were repulsed from the village of Galatas, then took it, then lost it again to the New Zealand counter-attack Freyberg had planned as his decisive riposte; but it could not reach as far as Maleme, into which the Germans had now crowded almost the whole of the mountain division. When the Germans resumed their attack the British were driven relentlessly eastward, abandoning one position after another.

On 26 May, Freyberg told Wavell, commanding in the Middle East, that the loss of Crete could only be a matter of time. Next day Wavell decided on evacuation before the dominance of the Luftwaffe made that impossible. The garrison of Heraklion, against which the parachutists had made no impression, was taken off on the night of 28 May. The

garrison of Retimo, which had also resisted all attacks, could not be reached by the navy and had to be abandoned. During 28–31 May the main force left its positions east of Maleme and began a long and agonising trek southwards across the mountains to the little port of Sphakia on the south coast. It was a shaming culmination to a benighted battle. The minority of troops which actually fought kept together as best they could; those who had left Greece disorganised now lost all semblance of unity. 'Never shall I forget the disorganisation and almost complete lack of control of the masses on the move,' wrote Freyberg, 'as we made our way slowly through the endless stream of trudging men.' When he and the rest of his broken army reached Sphakia they sheltered under the cliffs waiting for the navy to rescue them under cover of darkness. The navy suffered heavily in the attempt but by 1 June had succeeded in taking off 18,000 troops; 12,000 remained to fall prisoner to the Germans and nearly 2000 had been killed in the fighting.

These figures confirmed, if the evidence were needed, that Crete had been a catastrophe. It had entailed the loss of two formed divisions of troops, New Zealand, Australian and British, urgently needed to fight the burgeoning war in the desert against Rommel's expeditionary force. It had also added unnecessarily to the roll of humiliation which Hitler had inflicted on the British Empire, most of all because both he and his enemies knew by what a narrow margin his parachutists had been rescued from defeat. Had Maleme not been abandoned on the second day, had Freyberg's counter-attack been launched two days earlier, the parachutists would have been destroyed in their foothold, the island saved and the first definitive check to Hitler's campaign of conquest imposed in a blaze of spectacular publicity. As it was, the German war machine had been seen once again to triumph, in a new and revolutionary form, in the very centre of Britain's traditional strategic zone, and against a principal instrument of its overseas power, the Mediterranean Fleet.

Yet, not only with hindsight, Crete could also be seen as a highly ambiguous victory. 'Hitler', Student recorded, was 'most displeased with the whole affair.' On 20 July he told his parachute general, 'Crete proves that the days of the paratroopers are over. The paratroop weapon depends upon surprise – the surprise factor has now gone.' He had refused to allow the German propaganda machine to publicise the operation while it was in progress and he now set his face against mounting operations of the same type in the future. Crete had killed 4000 German soldiers, most from the 7th Parachute Division; nearly half the 1st Assault Regiment had died in action. Gericke, who had come across the dropping zone of its III Battalion on 23 May, was appalled by the evidence of what had befallen it. 'Frightful was the sight that met our eyes. . . . Dead parachutists, still in their full equipment, hung suspended from the branches [of the olive trees] swinging gently in the light breeze – everywhere were the dead. Those who had succeeded in getting free from their harness had been shot down within a few strides and slain by the Cretan volunteers. From these corpses could be seen all too clearly what had happened within the first few minutes of the battle of Crete.' Not only the men but the whole structure of the airborne

force had suffered disastrously; 220 out of 600 transport aircraft had been destroyed, a material loss quite disproportionate to the material advantage gained. The seizure of Crete had not been and would not prove essential to German strategy; a successful attempt on Malta, desired by OKW, would by contrast have justified any loss suffered by its mounting. The occupation of Crete, moreover, would involve the Germans in a bitter anti-partisan campaign, their conduct of which would blacken their name and lay the foundations of a bitter hatred of them not erased in the island to this day.

The British and Americans, both energetically raising parachute divisions, drew from Crete a conclusion different from Hitler's: that it was that particular form rather than the underlying principle of airborne operations which had proved unsound. In their great descents on Sicily, Normandy and Holland, they would eschew Student's practice of launching parachutists directly on to an enemy position in favour of landing at a distance from the objective and then concentrating against it. In Sicily and Normandy they would also risk large-scale airborne offensives only in co-ordination with a major amphibious assault from the sea, thus distracting the enemy from a concerted response against the fragile military instruments of parachute and glider. In Sicily and Normandy this careful reinsurance was to justify itself. In Holland, in September 1944, when they abandoned caution and essayed a Crete-style assault of their own, the disaster which overtook Montgomery's parachutists was to prove even more complete than that suffered by Student's. In the broad if not the narrow sense, therefore, Hitler's appreciation of Operation Merkur was correct: parachuting to war is essentially a dicing with death, in which the odds are loaded against the soldier who entrusts his life to silk and static line. There is a possibility that a combination of luck and judgement will deposit him and his comrades beyond the jaws of danger, enable them to assemble and allow formed airborne units to go forward to battle; but the probability is otherwise. Of the four great parachute endeavours of the Second World War, two – Sicily and Normandy – managed to evade the probabilities, two – Crete and Arnhem – did not. The demise of independent parachute forces since 1945 is the inevitable outcome of that unfavourable reckoning.