

The battle of the fortresses (6th - 9th April 1941)



When we talk about the Battle of the Fortresses, we mean the four days of tough, unequal and epic fighting during the period 6th - 9th April 1941 that took place at the Fortresses, from the highlands of Mt. Kerkini (Beles) up to the Nestos River along the borders, in order to repulse the German assaults during the Second World War. There were 21 Fortresses spread along the border between Greece and Bulgaria that comprised the Fortress site known as the “Metaxa Line” that had been designed and built by Greek hands. This was considered to be better than the “Maginot Line and equal to the “Siegfried Line”. These fortresses were Papadopoula (Popotlivitsa), Ochyro (Istibey), Spani Petra (Kelkagia), Stirigma (Arpalouki) and Paliouriones, Roubel Karatas, Kali, Persek, Babazora, Malianga, Perithori, Partalouska, Dasavli, Lisse, Pyramoides, Kastilo, Agios Nikolaos, Bartiseva, Echinis and Nymfea. Each one has its own story while the brave resistance of its defenders includes heroism and bravery, and ending in glory and admiration.

The Hellenic Army had been fighting with unprecedented heroism and success along the Albanian border against the Italians since 28th October 1940. In November 1940 Hitler decided to attack Greece and on 18th December he issued his orders for “Operation Brabarovsa”, which concerned the full assault against Russia after occupying Greece. In March 1941 Bulgaria joined the Axis, which then comprised Germany, Italy and Japan, with the tempting promise that the complete Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace territories would be ceded to it. On 2nd March 1941 the German Field Army began entering Bulgarian territory and on 9th March the advance guard of the leading Divisions had reached the Greco-Bulgarian border. The total German forces that were launched against Greece were: 3 Armoured Divisions, 2 Mountain, 4 Field and 1 Reserve, 2 independent reinforced select Regiments and 3 Army Corp Headquarters with the relevant Logistics Administrative Units. As for the Air Force, 650 airplanes were made available (bombers, stukas, reconnaissance, etc).

Greece was able to deploy 5 Divisions, 2 of which were the “dregs’ from former border sectors” (as per Katherioti), 1 with overaged persons and 2 with persons inexperienced in warfare. Specifically, the combative forces in the Fortresses were: 329 officers and 9,740

soldiers (totaling 10,069). However the force that was in place on 6th April 1941 was only 5,630 men; i.e. approximately 62% of the combative force. Consequently, if we add the ultra modern equipment of the Germans to their arithmetic superiority, their supremacy then translates into absolute supremacy.

At 05:15 hours on Sunday 6th April and without observing the usual diplomatic custom of sending an ultimatum and giving a deadline for a reply, German forces simultaneously invaded Greek sovereign land and Southern Yugoslavia ("Operation MARITA").



The main attempt by the Germans was targeted at the fortresses at Kerkini and Angistrou, and especially Roubel Fortress, while further east the German assaults at the Nevrokopi plateau and in Western Thrace were less intensive. The ensuing battle did not allow the German forces to break through the fortified positions. However, the rapid collapse of the Yugoslavian resistance on the first day, especially in the region of the Axios River valley, and the absence of available forces to cover the left flanks of the fortified positions permitted the 2nd Armoured Division to invade Greek sovereign land between the Stroumnitsa River valley and the Axios River valley. The majority of the fortresses that remained inexpugnable finally surrendered on 10th April after the signing of the relevant Protocol (9th April 1941).

