FIFTY YEARS LATER:

IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE BATTLE OF CRETE

1941-1991

By G.C. Kiriakopoulos

Nowhere in the history of the Second World War was the terrible tragedy of human conflict seen more clearly than in the fierce campaign that took place in May 1941 for the possession of the beautiful island of Crete.

For ten dramatic and bitterly fought days, Crete served as the battleground between the invaders of Nazi Germany, who came to seize this historic land of Minos and to conquer its historically unconquerable people. In the course of that ten-day battle, Crete became a bloody battlefield in the struggle between the elite of the invading army — the German paratrooper, and the freedom-loving, high-spirited Cretan people, striving tenaciously to remain free, as they fought side-by-side with their gallant allies of the British Commonwealth.

With axes, with shovels, and with their bare hands, the courageous inhabitants of Crete fought the invader in an effort to stave off the yoke of oppression. Their allies, the New Zealand, Australian and British regiments, scribed their most impressive pages in the history of their units during that battle, pages that were written in blood. It was, however, a futile effort for the defenders of Crete, no matter how bravely or how heroically they had fought. Out-numbered and out-maneuvered, the gallant Commonwealth troops and the heroic Cretan population fell in defeat before the conquering hordes of Adolf Hitler's legions.

The story of the battle for the island of Crete was one of great significance in the ultimate outcome of the Second World War. The stubborn resistance to the invader rendered by the Cretan population and the Commonwealth troops not only destroyed Hitler's elite paratroop units but also delayed the German military time-table in their planned invasion of Russia. The German campaign in Greece and in Crete eventually proved to be the turning point of the war. Some historians have referred to the battle for Crete as the Thermopylae of the Second World War. Let us briefly examine this analogy.

Herodotus tells us in his History of the Persian Wars that King Xerxes of Persia invaded the Grecian peninsula in 480 B.C. with a vast army. Most of the Greek city-states put aside their political differences and banded together to fight the Persian invader.

The Greek armies attempted to defend Thessaly at the site of Mount Olympus. Defeated, they withdrew southward, leaving only a small army to block the Persian advance. This army decided to fight at a narrow pass between the mountains and the sea, a position that offered some possibility for success. This mountain pass was called Thermopylae.

The whole civilized world has read of the heroic defense that King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, together with their allies, made at Thermopylae. The defenders fought valiantly until they were betrayed, whereupon they were overcome by the Persian hordes. Leonidas and his Spartans sacrificed themselves in order to delay the Persians.

After Thermopylae, the Persians swept onward. They sacked Athens and

King George II with some of the Platoon of New Zealanders who escorted him from Crete. Imperial War Museum London. (From the book "Crete 1941 Eyewitnessed" by Costas N. Hadjipateras and Maria S. Fafalios.)
eventually reached Salamis, where the Athenian fleet was waiting for them. In the sea battle that followed, the Persian fleet was virtually destroyed. Unable to sustain his army, Xerxes was forced to return to Persia, thus saving Western civilization from Asiatic conquest. Xerxes had won the battle of Thermopylae, but the delay had lost him the war at Salamis.

During the early years of World War II, Adolf Hitler had no plans to invade Greece. However, the failure of his ally, the Fascist dictator of Italy Benito Mussolini, to conquer Greece necessitated that Hitler come to Mussolini's assistance, and in so doing put off his initial plan to invade Russia. With Greece conquered, Hitler was persuaded to seize Crete in order to protect the oil fields of Romania from Crete-based aerial bombardment.

This campaign in Greece and later in Crete forced Hitler to postpone the invasion of Russia from the spring of April 1941 to early summer of June 1941. It was a delay which represented a period of time that Hitler would have needed to bring Russia to her knees before the onset of winter 1941.

At first the German armies rolled victoriously across the Russian plains, reaching Moscow by late autumn of 1941. Although Hitler's armies were within sight of the onion-shaped towers of the Kremlin, they never captured Moscow. Nor did Hitler have the elite paratroopers to drop behind the Russian defense-line in Moscow, for these paratroopers had been totally destroyed in Crete! Then the Russian winter struck with all its ferocity, bringing Hitler's war machine to a standstill.

Stalemated at Moscow, Hitler ordered his armies southward to attack Stalingrad. What happened at Stalingrad is history. One million Germans were lost in the military debacle that followed. It was the farthest point of the German advance — and the turning point of the war. After Stalingrad the German armies were to travel a downhill road to ultimate defeat.

Like Xerxes in 480 B.C., whose delay at the battle of Thermopylae granted the Athenian fleet time to gather and defeat him at Salamis, Adolf Hitler in 1941 was so delayed in Greece and in Crete that he was forced to fight a winter campaign in Russia. Hitler had won his “battle of Thermopylae” in Crete, but it was a pyrric victory. The delay lost him the war in Russia.

Lord Avon, better known as Anthony Eden the foreign minister in Winston Churchill's war cabinet, has written in his memoirs that “...the German army lost the war at the gates of Moscow!”

If the events that occurred at Moscow and culminated at the debacle of Stalingrad marked the beginning of the end for Adolf Hitler, then the events that took place on Crete in May 1941, marked the end of the beginning — fifty years ago.

German Ju52 transport planes dropping parachutists over Crete.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G.C. Kiriakopoulos is a professor at Columbia University. He is a veteran of the Second World War and has written many articles about that conflict. His first book, TEN DAYS TO DESTINY - THE BATTLE FOR CRETE has been acclaimed internationally as the most authentic documentation of that battle to date by the men who had fought in that battle. In the process of writing TEN DAYS TO DESTINY and his second book, THE GUNS OF DEFIANCE, he has traveled over 100,000 miles to England, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Greece and Crete.

Sketch by Alex. Droudakis, Chania.