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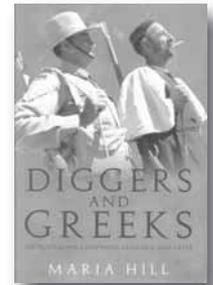
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## **BOOK REVIEW**

# ***Diggers and Greeks: the Australian campaigns in Greece and Crete***

by Maria Hill

University of New South Wales Press Ltd: Sydney; 2010; 479 pp.; ISBN 978-1-74223-014-6;  
RRP \$59.95 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 587 HILL 2010



*Diggers and Greeks* is an account of the delaying defence fought against the German invasion of Greece by British Commonwealth and Greek forces in April 1941 and their unsuccessful attempt to defend Crete the following month. It focuses primarily on the contribution of 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division. While this story has been told by others, this book makes a unique contribution by examining the relationships that Australian soldiers formed with the Greek civilian population.

Dr Maria Hill, an Australian military historian of Greek descent, is well-placed to study these relationships as well as the operational aspects of the campaigns; and the book is underpinned by detailed sociological research which she undertook in both Greece and Australia.

When I first visited Greece in 1990, I was shocked and surprised by the unwillingness of my Greek guide to talk about World War II. Hill explains that post-war Greek government policy was denial of both World War II and the subsequent civil war: "the war has been a taboo topic in Greece" (p. 17). Hill helps to break the taboos by laying out the dirty political laundry that existed in Greece in 1941.

Hill has unearthed some interesting facets of the Greek character that influenced the outcome of the campaigns. For example, following a coup in 1936, Metaxas purged 25 per cent of the Greek officer corps based on political allegiance not competency. This sowed the seed for the failure of the Greek Army when attacked by the Germans five years later. Indeed, the career of the Greek commander-in-chief in 1941, General Papagos, was a recurring cycle of dismissal from and reappointment to the Greek Army.

Hill contrasts differing Greek attitudes to potential enemies. The Greek Army was effective in fighting Italians in Greece and Albania; and it was prepared to fight the Bulgarians from the fixed defences of the Metaxas Line in eastern Macedonia; but it was unwilling to fight the Germans on Greek soil.

In the lead-up to war, the large expenditure on fixed defences showed that the Greeks were preparing to fight the last war not the next. Papagos failed to appreciate that World War II was being fought as a war of manoeuvre. Fixed defences, such as the Maginot Line, were being out-flanked or enveloped from the air. He left first-grade Greek divisions along the Metaxas Line where they were subject to defeat in detail. Their re-deployment to the centre of the Aliakmon Line would have provided a much stronger defensive position. Instead, he deployed third-grade Greek divisions on the

flanks of allied divisions on the Aliakmon.

Similarly, Greek foreign policy was based on an unrealistic expectation that Yugoslavia would fight any German invasion and hence prevent German passage into central northern Greece through the Monastir and Vevi Gaps. This assumed that a country that vacillated wildly and frequently from a pro-German to an anti-German stance, would be capable of uniting its people and deny German access to Greece. In the event, Yugoslavia adopted an 'open gate' defence when the Germans came and the main German invasion of Greece was on the Monastir-Vevi axis.

Hill presents her message in thematic chapters rather than chronologically. While this suits her primary purpose, it may confuse many readers and seems also to have confused Hill on occasion. Hill provides varying points of view on certain actions in different chapters, but does not relate the differing information or reach a conclusion as to what actually occurred. For example, she notes that the Dodecanese Regiment at Vevi, instead of thinning out over three days as ordered, disappeared overnight (p. 96). She later records that rumours spread by fifth columnists succeeded in panicking the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion at Vevi (p. 171). Was the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion forced out because its right flank had been exposed by the premature withdrawal of the Dodecanese Regiment, or was it panicked by the rumours? Or was the 2/8<sup>th</sup> forced out by the superior firepower of the German Sturmgeschütz IIIs assaulting up the ridge into its defended localities?

The main disappointment with the book, however, is the quality and accuracy of the information portrayed by the maps and diagrams. A reader of military history uses maps to see the dispositions of opposing forces and to understand the manoeuvres described in the text. A well-marked map is worth several pages of text.

The book, which is fully referenced, is well-written and is a good source of background information on the campaigns. It provides 'a warts and all' description of individuals, units and politicians, which may cause resentment among some readers, as the reputations of some individuals and units have been tarnished by these revelations. For someone about to start a study of the campaigns, one of the other popular books should be read before *Diggers and Greeks*. At the strategic level the book is good, but at the operational and tactical levels it is very general. I hope that the planned revised edition of the book will correct the many annoying errors that mar this first edition.

**John Hitchen**