

Robert St Johns: Invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece 1941

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Review

The book „Invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece 1941“ appeared originally under the title „From the land of silent people“ in 1942. It is the personal story of Robert St. Johns, who worked as a correspondent for Associated Press in Southern Europe.

At the beginning of 1941 St. Johns was stationed in the Yugoslav-capital Belgrade. Together with other correspondents from various news agencies and newspapers he experienced the air-attack and the following invasion of Yugoslavia by the Axis powers.

Before the invasion, the political situation in Yugoslavia had been very unstable. The Axis powers exerted a lot of pressure on the Cvetkovic-government to join the so-called tripartite agreement under their leadership. Warned by Italy 's invasion into Albania in 1939, Cvetovic granted partial political autonomy to the Croats the same year. On March 28, 1941, after massive threats by Hitler and Mussolini, Cvetkovic acceded to the tripartite agreement, which stipulated mutual assistance of all signatory countries in case of war and resulted in Yugoslavia losing its former neutrality.

Only two days later a group of Serbian air force officers under the leadership of General Simovich overthrew the government and took over power. As a consequence Hitler decided to combine the attack planned on Greece with the occupation of Yugoslavia.

The story of Robert St. Johns begins with a description of the atmosphere in Belgrade after Cvetkovich had acceded to the tripartite agreement and Simovich's subsequent Putsch. The author gives an impressive account of the imminent attack by the Axis powers and the massive air strike on Belgrade on April 6, 1941. Unprotected by the Yugoslav army and its air force, Belgrade is largely destroyed and approximately 17'000 persons – mostly civilians - lose their lives. The Simovich government reacts by evacuating its government and military forces to Uzice and later on to Sarajevo with the intention to organize the resistance against the Axis overwhelming military predominance. Together with all other foreign correspondents and journalists St. Johns follows this clear out movement of the Yugoslav forces. During this evacuation St. Johns becomes a witness of the weak military leadership and their lack of a coherent strategy. He describes how the population is demoralized by the ongoing bombardments of the Axis and how the Simovich government loses its credibility and political cohesion. It capitulates on April 17, 1941 and its leaders flee to Egypt into Exile.

Left on their own and in order not to fall into the hands of the advancing Axis troops, the group of correspondents decides to flee on a small boat along the Adriatic coast to Greece, hoping for protection by a contingent of British troops, which the Greek government had called for support in 1940.

When reaching Corfu, however, they realize that their adventurous flight and their hope for protection in Greece had been in vain as the axis is heavily bombarding Greek towns in order to prepare the subsequent invasion of airborne troops.

The British troops stationed in Greece are suffering heavy losses – Robert St. Johns estimates 20'000 casualties out of 40'000 soldiers. The British therefore decide to evacuate their troops from the Greek mainland to Crete and afterwards to Egypt. Robert St. Johns succeeds to get a

space on an evacuating ship of the British navy to reach Crete and from there to safety in Egypt.