

Greek Armed Forces 1940-41

[January 2, 2018](#) [Air Forces](#), [Allies](#), [Armed Forces](#), [Armies](#), [Navies](#)



Strength and organization of the Armed Forces of Greece 1940-41.



Soldiers of the Greek Army (from left to right): Sergeant (1940), Lieutenant (1941), Lieutenant-Colonel (1941), Evzone Private (1941)

From 1938 until the German invasion, Greece was a constitutional monarchy under King George II, but the actual power was in the hands of her right-wing dictator-President General Metaxas.

The Greek armed forces, like most of those of the smaller nations, suffered from a shortage of modern [weapons](#) and motor transport. However, **the mountainous frontier with Albania was ideal for defensive fighting, and the natural sturdiness of her soldiers** proved too much for the Italian forces which invaded on [28 October 1940](#).

The initially outnumbered Greek forces were able not only to contain the Italian attack, but force the invaders back into Albania, where, with the

British aid in men and material, they were able to hold them until the Germans invaded from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria on 6 April 1941. This attack, by the best army in Europe, overwhelmed the Greek defences, and despite bitter resistance the Germans forced the Greek Army in eastern Macedonia to capitulate and the Allies to retreat. On 20 April the Greek Epirus Army surrendered and on 22 April the Allies began their evacuation of Greece.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Greek Armed Forces was General Papagos and the control of the Army was exercised by a General Headquarters and five Army Corps areas.

In 1940, just before the Italian attack, Greece mobilised her armed forces.

The field army was organised in two Army Groups, six general headquarters, six infantry and nine mountain divisions, four mountain brigades and one cavalry division.

At the outbreak of war the Army numbered 430,000 men, but losses were heavy and some 60,000 men were killed, wounded or missing after the winter fighting.

Greek Army

Divisions of the Greek Army

	Mountain Division	<u>Infantry</u> Division	Motorized Division	Cavalry Division
Total units	14	5 + 1 brigade	1	1
Infantry regiments	3 (each with 1,100 men and 58 officers, armed with Mannlicher M1903/14 rifles)	3 (each with 1,100 men and 58 officers, armed with Mannlicher M1903/14 rifles)	3 (theoretically – in March 41 total only 2,000 men)	2 cavalry (+ 1 motorized in progress of formation)
Total men	12,000	12,000	c. 12,000 (theoretically – in March 41 only 2,000 conscripted garage workers)	?

Machine guns	264 (216 light Hotchkiss 8mm, 48 heavy St Etienne M07)	264 (216 light Hotchkiss 8mm, 48 heavy St Etienne M07)	c. 264 (on paper)	c. 144
Mortars	24 (81mm)	24 (81mm)	24 (theoretically)	c. 24
Howitzers and Fieldguns	36 (16 x 75mm mountain guns, 8 x 105mm guns, 12 x 65mm mountain guns)	48 (36 x 75mm-M1897 field guns, 12 x 65mm mountain guns)	c. 36-48 (on paper)	4 (75mm mountain guns)
Tanks	–	–	24 light Italian CV33 and Dutch tankettes and a few Bren Gun Carriers	4 squadrons of armoured cars

The crack infantry of the Greek Army were the Evzones. Originally formed as light infantry during the war for independence at the beginning of the 19th century, these highlanders became part of the regular army in 1833. In 1940 they served in light regiments and in the Royal Guard. In addition to the line infantry and mountain regiments there were a number of battalions and companies for island and land frontier defence, as well as a number of mobile and static machine gun units.

In March 1941, total strength was 540,000 men, but this included 50,000 recruits with only one month's training. The German invasion cost the Greeks 15,700 battle casualties; about 220,000 Greek soldiers were taken prisoner, but released soon after.

The army corps each consisted of two to four infantry or mountain divisions. I, II, III, IV Corps were each supported by a heavy artillery regiment of 7 batteries (8 x 85mm, 8 x 105mm and 12 x 155mm guns) while V Corps had 4 x 85mm guns, 4 x 105mm guns and 4 static six-inch guns. Each corps also had its own anti-aircraft support of 88mm, 37mm and 20mm guns.

Since the artillery was equipped with either French, German or Czech guns

Britain was unable to supply ammunition, and stocks in America were soon ex-hausted, so all the British could do was supply the Greeks with Italian material captured in Libya.

When the British landed in Greece in March 1941 they were dismayed to find that many divisions existed in name only. One division of recently assembled troops had a strength of just six battalions, and its transport was limited to the commander's motor car and five trucks.

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Greek Air Force

The Greek Air Ministry was responsible for the air services maintained by the Greek Army and Navy. There was no independent Air Force as such. The Army air service was small with just 250 officers and 3,000 men. Many of the pilots had undergone their training in England, and although outnumbered first by the Italians and then by the Germans, the air service put up a stubborn resistance in the campaigns of 1940-41.



This PLZ P24 F fighter of the Royal Greek Air Force has made an emergency landing after a dogfight with a [Me 109](#) in April, 1941.

In 1940 the combined strength of the Army and Navy air services was as follows:

- **44 fighters** (including Polish PZL 24s, Gloster Gladiators and a few [Hawker Hurricanes](#));
- **46 bombers** and reconnaissance planes;
- 16 general purpose aircraft;
- 20 flying boats (Fairey IIIs and German Do 22s).

When the Germans invaded **in April 1941 only 41 combat aircraft**

were still operational.

The Army air service was organised in three flying regiments each of two squadrons, based on rather primitive airfields in Athens, Candia, Drama, Joannina, Larissa, Salonica, Tanagra and Thebes.

It's primary role was to provide air support for ground operations, but by January 1941 casualties and lack of spares had practically grounded it, and so the Greek command had to appeal to the RAF to switch its emphasis from bombing Italian lines of communication to providing air support to ground forces.

Greek Navy

The executive commander of the Navy was the Chief of the Admiralty, Admiral A. Sakellariou. Under him were 6,300 regular naval officers and men and 11,000 reservists and the following vessels:

- 2 old battleships (armoured cruisers) built in 1905/06;
- 2 old light cruisers;
- 4 old destroyers;
- 4 Hydra Class (Italian) destroyers;
- 13 old torpedo boats;
- 2 motor torpedo-boats (MTBs);
- 6 submarines.



The pre-Dreadnought battleship Kilgis (ex USS Mississippi) was sold together with her sister ship Lemnos (ex USS Idaho) by the US government in 1914 to Greece. Both were sunk by German [Ju 87](#) dive-bombers in the port of Piraeus on 23 April, 1941.

The Greek Navy suffered its first loss on [15 August 1940](#), before the opening of hostilities, when the minelaying cruiser *Helli* was alleged to have been sunk by an [Italian submarine](#).

On the outbreak of the war two months later the Navy's first task was to ensure the safe passage of thousands of Army reservists recalled to the

colours from the numerous Greek isles. At the same time the Navy patrolled the coast of Albania and provided artillery support.

German entry into the Greco-Italian war was heralded by aerial attacks which destroyed a number of Greek warships. On 21 April 1941 the Greek government decided to evacuate the mainland, and the port of Salamis was blown up as the last ship carrying Allied troops left.

29 warships and auxiliary vessels were sunk – a very high proportion of the pre-war Navy.

