

Italy to Albania, 05-04-1939

Italy had been planning to annex Albania for at least a year. In private Italy's Leader Mussolini called Albania 'an Italian Province without a Prefect'.¹ Italy's Foreign Minister Ciano had suggested the annexation of Albania to Mussolini in 1938 on the basis of the country's agricultural and mineral (oil) resources as well as for its military-strategic valuable position, both as a naval outlet on the Adriatic Coast and as a bridgehead to launch military operations into Greece, Yugoslavia and Macedonia.² On 20 March, shortly after the developments in Czechoslovakia (see ultimata Germany to Czechoslovakia, 15-3-1939 and Hungary to Czechoslovakia, 14-3-1939), Adolf Hitler told Benito Mussolini that he could do as he pleased in the Mediterranean.³ The government of Italy presented the Albanian government with a proposal outlining the *de facto* establishment of an Italian protectorate over Albania. A first list of demands communicated on 25 March was rejected by the Albanian King Zog. The Italian government then rephrased and slightly moderated its proposal which it sent to the king on 1 April, this time including a warning about the potential consequences in case of refusal and a deadline for compliance.⁴ The demands included the appointment of Italian representatives in Albanian ministries with the rank of minister; equal civil and political rights for Italians in Albania; Italian control over key naval ports and airports and roads in case Albanian sovereignty was threatened; the stationing of Italian forces on Albanian territory; and the upgrading of the countries' respective legations to the status of embassies. Refusal to comply would trigger domestic unrest on 6 April, so it was threatened, and the invasion of Italian forces on 7 April.⁵ 20,000 Italian forces were assembled at Brindisi and Bari ready to be dispatched to Albania.⁶ The Albanian king, however, refused to give in. From that time onwards he no longer tried to keep the Italian coercive overtures a secret. After first ordering the mobilisation of Albanian armed forces, King Zog put forth a series of counter proposals to the Italians.⁷ He also informed foreign governments of the extent of Italy's demands – no longer downplaying the amount of pressure Albania was facing.⁸ He visited the British and French representatives and called on Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Romania – members of the Balkan Pact – 'to make a collective statement with the view of stopping the contemplated Italian action'.⁹ None of them responded except for the government of Yugoslavia which merely told the king not to worry. In Tirana, people took to the streets proclaiming their support for Albania and for King Zog.¹⁰ When the king asked for a deferment of another day, the Italian representative Jacomoni repeated the ultimatum on the morning of 5 April this time demanding compliance by 6 April at noon. Italy then started repatriating Italian nationals. Upon his request the king was granted an additional six hours by the Italian Representative Jacomoni when they met on the morning of 6 April and the deadline was pushed back to 6 p.m. A last minute appeal by the Albanian representative in Berlin to the German

¹ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 149.

² Arnold Toynbee and Veronica M. Toynbee, eds., *The Eve of War 1939: Survey of International Affairs 1939-46*, 1958, 234–35.

³ Jason Tomes, *King Zog: Self-Made Monarch of Albania* (The History Press, 2011), no pp.

⁴ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 237.

⁵ Bernd Jürgen Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939-1945* (Purdue University Press, 1999), 17–19. Tomes, *King Zog*, no pp.

⁶ Tomes, *King Zog*, no pp.

⁷ Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939-1945*, 19.

⁸ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 237. Tomes, *King Zog*, no pp.

⁹ Tomes, *King Zog*, no pp.

¹⁰ Tomes, no pp.

government failed.¹¹ The Italian government considered the ultimatum to be rejected on 6 April when Mussolini refused to entertain final hour proposals made by King Zog.¹² That same day, Italian forces arrived off the Adriatic coast and Italian aircraft engaged in a show of force above Tirana and other large cities. The king asked for a truce during the night offering a military agreement. The offer was refused and Italian forces invaded key strategic Albanian port cities proclaiming to restore 'peace, order and justice' on the morning of 7 April.¹³ They encountered resistance only at Durazzo.¹⁴ Here two Albanian battalions held out for 36 hours and caused more than 200 Italian casualties.¹⁵ When Italian forces proceeded to Tirana in the early hours of 8 April, King Zog took refuge in Greece.¹⁶ International support for Albania during the crisis was little more than lukewarm, certainly where it applied to material assistance. The government of Great Britain condemned Italian actions and extended conditional guarantees to Greece and Romania, but it did not revoke the agreement it had signed with Italy the year earlier. Italian's foreign minister observed in his diary that 'it is clear above all that the British protests are more for domestic consumption than anything else.'¹⁷ The French government took Italy's actions more seriously and after Italy's attack started preparing for a possible war in the Mediterranean, dispatching naval forces to the region.¹⁸ It also extended guarantees to Greece and Romania. In the days immediately following the invasion, the secretary general of the League of Nations refused to consider the Albanian appeal on procedural grounds, only referring it to the Assembly in May, when the annexation of Albania had been practically completed.¹⁹ Once in Tirana, the Italian government established a governing committee of Albanians keeping up a semblance of Albanian sovereignty. That same week, on 12 April, the Albanian committee proposed the union of Albania and Italy under the king of Italy. Italy accepted the proposal on 15 April.²⁰ Over the next few months the Albanian economy and political system were effectively subsumed by Italy.²¹ Italy started preparing Albanian territory to be used as possible bridgehead for the invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia.²² In the short conflict, both countries suffered no more than a few hundred casualties.²³

¹¹ Tomes, no pp.

¹² Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 238. Galeazzo Cani, '1947 - Galeazzo Ciano - Diary of Events on Albania', in *Texts and Documents of Albanian History*, 5 April 1939, accessed 30 December 2014, http://www.albanianhistory.net/texts20_3/AH1947.html. Tajar Zavalani, 'The Tragedy of Good Friday, 1939', 1961, http://www.albanianhistory.net/texts20_3/AH1961.html.

¹³ Thorne, *The Approach of War*, 109.

¹⁴ David T. Zabecki, *World War II in Europe: An Encyclopedia* (Taylor & Francis, 1999), 1353.

¹⁵ Clodfelter, *Warfare And Armed Conflicts*, 373.

¹⁶ Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939-1945*, 21–25; Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 238.

¹⁷ Cani, '1947 - Galeazzo Ciano - Diary of Events on Albania', 10 April 1939.

¹⁸ Reynolds Mathewson Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 116. See also S. A. H., 'The Invasion of Albania and After', *Bulletin of International News* 16, no. 8 (22 April 1939): 3–8.

¹⁹ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 254.

²⁰ Toynbee and Toynbee, 240–41.

²¹ Toynbee and Toynbee, 240–41.

²² Toynbee and Toynbee, 256.

²³ Clodfelter, *Warfare And Armed Conflicts*, 373.