

= Operation Retribution (1941) =

Operation Retribution (German : Unternehmen Strafgericht) also known as Operation Punishment , was the codename used for the April 1941 German bombing of Belgrade , the capital of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia , in the first days of the German @-@ led Axis invasion of Yugoslavia . The operation commenced on 6 April and concluded on 7 or 8 April , resulting in the paralysis of Yugoslav civilian and military command and control , widespread destruction largely in the centre of the city , and significant civilian casualties . The bombing of Belgrade was preceded by the commencement of the ground invasion a few hours earlier , and also coincided with air attacks on a large number of Royal Yugoslav Air Force airfields and other strategic targets across Yugoslavia . The invasion resulted in the surrender of Yugoslav forces on 17 April .

= = Background = =

After the 1938 Anschluss (union) of Germany with Austria , Yugoslavia shared a border with the Third Reich and came under increasing pressure as her neighbours fell into line with the Axis powers . In April 1939 , Yugoslavia gained a second frontier with the Kingdom of Italy when that country invaded Albania . Between September and November 1940 , Hungary joined the Tripartite Pact , Italy invaded Greece , and Romania also joined the Pact . From that time , Yugoslavia was almost surrounded by Axis powers or their client states , and her neutral stance toward the war was under tremendous pressure . On 14 February 1941 , Adolf Hitler invited the Yugoslav Prime Minister Dragi?a Cvetkovi? and his foreign minister Aleksandar Cincar @-@ Markovi? to Berchtesgaden and requested that Yugoslavia also join the Pact . Two weeks later , Bulgaria joined the Pact . The next day , German troops entered Bulgaria from Romania , closing the ring around Yugoslavia .

Further pressure was applied by Hitler on 4 March 1941 , when the Yugoslav Regent , Prince Paul , visited Berchtesgaden , but Prince Paul delayed a decision . On 6 March , the Royal Yugoslav Air Force (Serbo @-@ Croatian : Vazduhoplovstvo Vojske Kraljevine Jugoslavije , VVKJ) was secretly mobilised , and on the following day , British troops began landing in Greece to bolster the defences of their Balkan ally against the Italians . The VVKJ began dispersing to auxiliary airfields on 12 March , and this dispersal was completed by 20 March . Hitler , wanting to secure the southern flank of his impending invasion of the Soviet Union , demanded that Yugoslavia sign the Pact , and the Yugoslav government eventually complied on 25 March 1941 . Two days later a military coup d'état was carried out by a group of VVKJ and Yugoslav Royal Guard officers , led by VVKJ commander Brigadier General Borivoje Mirkovi? . Prince Paul was deposed and replaced by the 17 @-@ year @-@ old King Peter II who was declared to be of age .

On the same day as the Yugoslav coup d'état , Hitler issued Directive 25 , which stated that the coup had changed the political situation in the Balkans . He ordered that " even if Yugoslavia at first should give declarations of loyalty , she must be considered as a foe and therefore must be destroyed as quickly as possible . " After the coup , German reconnaissance aircraft frequently violated Yugoslav airspace , and VVKJ fighter aircraft were on constant alert . The German incursions showed that the Yugoslav ground observation post network and supporting radio communications were inadequate .

= = Bombing = =

Hitler decided that Belgrade would be bombed in " retribution " for the coup against the government that had signed the Pact . In order to carry out Hitler 's orders , on 27 and 28 March 1941 Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring transferred about 500 fighter and bomber aircraft from France and northern Germany . The commander of Luftflotte IV , Generaloberst (General) Alexander Löhr , allocated these aircraft to attack the Yugoslav capital in waves by day and night . Löhr issued his orders for the bombing on 31 March , but the decision to bomb Belgrade was not confirmed by Hitler until 5 April . Although Hitler ordered the general destruction of Belgrade , Löhr replaced these general directions with specific military objectives at the last minute . On 3 April , Major Vladimir

Kren of the VVKJ defected to the Germans , flying a Potez 25 aircraft to Graz in the Third Reich , and handing over the locations of many of the dispersal airfields as well as codes used by the VVKJ , which had to be quickly changed . On the afternoon of 5 May , a British colonel visited Mirkovi? at the VVKJ base at Zemun and confirmed that the attack on Belgrade would commence at 06 : 30 the following morning .

= = = 6 April = = =

The German ground forces crossed the border at 05 : 15 on 6 April , and the Reich Minister of Propaganda Reichsleiter Joseph Goebbels announced the declaration of war at 06 : 00 . Yugoslav anti @-@ aircraft defences caused a false alarm when they reported the approach of an air raid from the direction of Romania at 03 : 00 , but listening posts on the Romanian border had actually heard the aircraft engines of the Romanian @-@ based Fliegerführer Arad warming up well before they took off . The VVKJ 's 51st Fighter Group at Zemun had been alerted before dawn , and when reports began to be received about Luftwaffe attacks on VVKJ airfields , the first patrol was sent into the air . At first , no aircraft could be seen approaching Belgrade .

The first wave closed on Belgrade at 06 : 45 , and consisted of 74 Junkers Ju 87 Stuka divebombers and 160 Heinkel He 111 medium bombers and Dornier Do 17 light bombers between 8 @,@ 000 ? 10 @,@ 000 feet (2 @,@ 400 ? 3 @,@ 000 m) . They were escorted by Messerschmitt Bf 110 heavy fighters at 11 @,@ 000 ? 12 @,@ 000 feet (3 @,@ 400 ? 3 @,@ 700 m) and 100 Messerschmitt Bf 109E fighters at 15 @,@ 000 feet (4 @,@ 600 m) . The whole of the Yugoslav 6th Fighter Brigade , consisting of the 51st Fighter Group at Zemun and the 32nd Fighter Group at Prnjavor , totalling 29 Messerschmitt Bf 109Es and 5 Rogo?arski IK @-@ 3s , were scrambled to intercept the Germans . The Yugoslavs were quickly engaged by escorting Messerschmitt Bf 109Es from Jagdgeschwader 77 (JG 77) . Just as the first wave was departing , Hawker Hurricane Mk1s of the 52nd Group of the 2nd Fighter Brigade based at Kni? arrived over Belgrade and engaged some divebombers , claiming one Stuka shot down . During the first attack , the Yugoslavs claimed fifteen German aircraft shot down , lost five of their own , with more than six badly damaged . The pilots of JG 77 claimed ten Yugoslav machines shot down and another six destroyed on the ground . On his return to base , the commander of the 51st Fighter Group was relieved of his command for failure to take action .

The second wave arrived over Belgrade about 10 : 00 , consisting of 57 Junkers Ju 87 divebombers and 30 Messerschmitt Bf 109E fighters . They were met by 15 of the remaining fighters from the 6th Fighter Brigade . This time the Yugoslavs claimed two divebombers forced down , and one Bf 109E shot down . A patrol of Bf 109Es from the Yugoslav 31st Fighter Group based at Kragujevac , acting without orders of their group commander , followed the Germans as they returned to their bases and claimed two divebombers shot down for the loss of both Yugoslav aircraft .

Two further attacks were made on Belgrade by the Germans on the first day of the invasion . The third wave struck at 14 : 00 , consisting of 94 twin @-@ engined bombers flying from airfields near Vienna , escorted by 60 fighters . This attack was confronted by eighteen fighters of the 6th Fighter Regiment , who claimed four German aircraft shot down . The fourth attack of the day approached Belgrade at 16 : 00 , comprising 97 divebombers and 60 fighters .

The German groups attacking Belgrade claimed a total of nineteen Yugoslav Bf 109E fighters and four unidentified aircraft destroyed on 6 April . Actual Yugoslav aircraft losses on the first day were ten shot down and fifteen damaged . The Yugoslavs claimed they had shot down twenty @-@ two German aircraft and forced two more to land . The Germans lost significantly less aircraft than claimed by the Yugoslavs , a total of twelve aircraft ; two Do 17Z light bombers , five Bf 110 heavy fighters , four Ju 87 divebombers , and one Bf 109E fighter . One Luftwaffe pilot who claimed his first victory over Belgrade on 6 April was Oberleutnant Gerhard Koall of JG 54 , who went on to be credited with 37 victories and was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross in 1944 .

= = = 7 April = = =

In total , bombers and dive @-@ bombers dropped 215 ? 360 long tons (241 ? 403 short tons) of bombs and incendiaries on the capital .

The weak Royal Yugoslav Air Force and inadequate anti @-@ aircraft defences of Belgrade briefly attempted to meet the overwhelming Luftwaffe assault , but were eliminated as threats during the first wave of the attack . Sources vary regarding the success achieved by the defenders . A US Army study first published in 1953 states that the Luftwaffe lost two fighter aircraft , and shot down 20 Yugoslav aircraft and destroyed 44 on the ground , whereas other sources state that the Yugoslavs shot down 40 German aircraft over the two @-@ day air battle . Dive @-@ bombers in subsequent waves were able to operate at rooftop altitude .

According to historian Stevan K. Pavlowitch , the bombing of Belgrade lasted for three days . Other sources state the air battle over Belgrade lasted just two days owing to poor flying weather on 8 April . The most important cultural institution that was destroyed was the National Library of Serbia , which was hit by bombs and gutted by fire . Hundreds of thousands of volumes , rare books , maps , and medieval manuscripts were destroyed . Also hit was the Belgrade Zoo , which housed a number of animals . " Out of the nightmare of smoke and fire , " wrote Winston Churchill , " came the maddened animals released from their shattered cages . "

= = British retaliation = =

No. 37 Squadron of the Royal Air Force conducted two bombing raids on Sofia , the capital of Bulgaria , in retaliation for the bombing of Belgrade . Operating Vickers Wellington bombers flying from an airfield in Greece , the squadron conducted raids on 6 ? 7 April and 12 ? 13 April , dropping a total of 30 long tons (34 short tons) of high @-@ explosive bombs on railway targets and nearby residential areas . These raids were carried out despite the fact that Britain was not at war with Bulgaria until 12 December 1941 .

= = Aftermath = =

The bombing of Belgrade paralysed communications between the Yugoslav military and its headquarters , and contributed decisively to the rapid collapse of Yugoslav resistance .

Civilian casualties were significant , but sources vary widely from 1 @,@ 500 to 17 @,@ 000 killed . According to the journalist William Stevenson , around 24 @,@ 000 corpses were recovered from the ruins , and many were never found . The official casualty figure released soon after the bombing was 2 @,@ 271 killed . Other sources mention 5 @,@ 000 ? 10 @,@ 000 fatalities , with later Yugoslav estimates ranging even higher . In contrast , Professor Jozo Tomasevich writes that the higher estimates were downgraded following " careful postwar investigations " , and indicates that a figure between 3 @,@ 000 and 4 @,@ 000 is more realistic .

Following the Yugoslav capitulation , Luftwaffe engineers conducted a bomb damage assessment in Belgrade . The report stated that 218 @.@ 5 metric tons (215 @.@ 0 long tons ; 240 @.@ 9 short tons) of bombs were dropped , with 10 ? 14 percent being incendiaries . It listed all the targets of the bombing , which included : the royal palace , the war ministry , military headquarters , the central post office , the telegraph office , passenger and goods railway stations , power stations and barracks . It also mentioned that seven aerial mines were dropped , and that areas in the centre and northwest of the city had been destroyed , comprising 20 ? 25 percent of its total area . Some aspects of the bombing remain unexplained , particularly the use of the aerial mines . In contrast , Pavlowitch states that almost 50 percent of housing in Belgrade was destroyed . After the invasion , the Germans forced 3 @,@ 500 ? 4 @,@ 000 Jews to collect rubble that was caused by the bombing .

Löhr was captured by the Yugoslav Partisans on 9 May 1945 , escaped , and was recaptured on 13 May . He was intensively interrogated , after which he was tried before a Yugoslav military court on a number of war crimes charges , one of which related to his command of Luftflotte IV during Operation Retribution . He was convicted , sentenced to death and executed .

=== Books ===

=== Journals ===

=== Papers ===