

What caused the Battle of Crete? [Edited text]

Although each of the regional wars of World War 2 began for a different reason, it is generally agreed that the main reason World War 2 was because of Axis aggression. In Europe, the cause of World War 2 could be traced 20 years prior. At the end of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles failed as a way to maintain peace as it seemingly served the agenda of depriving Germany of its status as a sovereign nation. Such deprivation along with hyperinflation and global economic depression set up the grounds for the rise of the Nazi Party. Prompt action against Germany might have removed Adolf Hitler from power, hence to possibly lessen the scale of the War. Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. Almost immediately he began secretly building up Germany's army and weapons. In 1934 he increased the size of the army, began building warships and created a German air force. Although Britain and France were aware of Hitler's actions, they were also concerned about the rise of Communism and believed that a stronger Germany might help to prevent the spread of Communism to Western society.

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Strategic advantages of Crete

Crete had great strategic importance in the Mediterranean. The harbour at Suda Bay was the largest in the Mediterranean Sea and was an ideal base for naval operations. After Hitler agreed to the invasion of Crete knowing it would not disturb his plans to take Eastern Europe, it was named operation merkur (operation mercury). Taking Crete would be a great strategic plan for the Germans as they could use it to attack British shipping, disrupt the British use of the Suez and as a stopping point for the soldiers to stop when heading to Northern Africa. By gaining jurisdiction of the island, the Germans would gain advantages in their attempt to succeed in World War 2. Crete was also a valuable position for Britain. It would give them greater control of the Mediterranean and ensure their control of the northern end of the Suez Canal. The British bombers could also use the airfields to attack oil plants at Ploesti in Romania.

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What events occurred?

On the 20th of May 1941 the Germans launched their attack on Crete. Not long after 3 am, when most men were beginning to eat their breakfast gliders began to appear in the sky releasing German paratroops into the sky. The New Zealand soldiers were dazed and bewildered as the sky filled with an array of various coloured parachutes. "I cried like a child, really frightened, then got stuck into the enemy" - Pte Walter Gibbons, 23rd battalion, reaction to the invasion. Soldiers began to take down the German paratroops using machine guns and rifles. Many of the Germans died before they reached the ground whilst others were struck once on the ground trying to release themselves from their parachutes. Paratroops that landed to the south and east were faced with New Zealand units. Some parachute battalion had two-thirds of its men killed ...

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On the 27th May the naval evacuation to Sfakia began. A new line of defence was established consisting of soldiers from the 5th and 19th brigade and was named 42nd street. The soldiers were exhausted from nearly a week of close to constant movement and fighting. When the Germans appeared the defenders launched an unplanned counter-attack. Led by

the Maori battalion, they fought so fiercely that Germans pulled back. **By stalling the German advance it gave the soldiers time to begin the evacuation process.** Freyberg received the last authorisation from Cairo, Egypt to evacuate Creforce. The battle for Crete was now over and the evacuation was beginning. Creforce began their evacuation over the white mountains of Sfakia. A mistake made by German general Julius Ringel allowed Creforce to continue with their evacuation. He believed they were retreating eastward when in actual fact Creforce were heading south. A lack of water and limited food caused some soldiers to collapse on the side of the road. During the day most sought shelter under the olive trees. Once the navy had arrived the evacuation of soldiers began. Fighting troops were taken first with the wounded and those who had fought the longest. **The successful evacuation of many soldiers was taken by many back home, and by some historians since, as a kind of victory for the New Zealanders but the reality was that they had failed to prevent the German takeover of Crete ...**

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Many valiant soldiers were taken prisoner of war and kept in appalling conditions and held captive for many years until they were released. The cost for these men would have been time taken from them that they will never be able to get back. **Their loved ones were left for years not knowing whether they would ever return home. This would have caused severe mental stress on both the soldier and their family.**

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Ever since the war historians have argued over who was to blame for the New Zealanders' failure. Some blame General Freyberg for giving the wrong orders. Some blame Brigadier Hargest for not organising New Zealand defences better at Maleme airport when the German paratroops began to land ...

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Why is the battle for Crete still significant to New Zealanders today?

As Britain was New Zealand's mother land, it seemed only right at the time for them to fight alongside them. But their involvement was not only for the sentimental attachment to Britain, but due to the fact that if Hitler gained control over Europe it would eventually spread to here and in order to stop that they needed to fight. If New Zealand had not fought with determination and alongside Britain, we may have lost World War 2 and our world would be far different to what it is today.

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The battle for Crete changed the way in which women of the time operated. As a large number of men from New Zealand went away to war women had to take over the role of the men until they returned. Jobs such as farming were left to the women to tend to. This caused the women to become more powerful emotionally and self-sufficient. From then future generations of New Zealand women have been more powerful and successful which could be a result of how women took on the role of men during that time.

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The great kiwis who fought in the battle of Crete showed extraordinary bravery and gives the future generation's patriotism as these men fought for us and we are known globally as being valiant. It gives us great pride when saying we are kiwis because of these men who risked their lives. These men are commemorated by us all on ANZAC day to show our gratitude and respect to those who both fought and returned home and those who fell. As a result of the battle for Crete New Zealand has also developed great bonds with Crete.

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The Battle of Crete depicts the extraordinary bravery of those who conquered and those who fell. More than 2000 kiwis were taken prisoner and 671 died during battle. The valiant men of New Zealand are not only acknowledged here but across the globe, bringing great pride to our country which will never be forgotten, thus causing the battle for Crete to remain today and for many years to come a significant event for New Zealand.

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