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World War: BALKAN THEATRE: Hornets in the Hills

In August 1939 the Poles were hailed as men with iron bones, comrades of hardship, terrific fighters. In September they were crushed. In May 1940, the French Army was said to be the best in Europe. In June it was crushed. Last week the Yugoslavs came in for their share of praise. If the praise was more justified this time than before, then perhaps the war had reached a turning point, for the most important military question in Europe last week was: How much fight can the Yugoslavs put up?

On one point there was no dispute. The Serbs have fighting courage, not just ordinary courage like Englishmen or Germans, but fanatical courage that awes everyone who has to do with them. Two tales told last week exemplify it: >In 1912 a Serbian komitaji (guerrilla), having been captured by the Turks, was sentenced to death. Before the firing squad the Turkish commander cynically asked him: "Have you ever been in a worse predicament?" He replied: "Twice—on two occasions friends came to my house and I had no bread to offer them." > A Serbian general ordered a colonel to lead his troops across some impossibly wild hills near the Drina River. The colonel protested that his men would starve. The General said "Eat wolves." The colonel and his men went, ate wolves, fought the enemy.

But courage cannot stop tanks. Another big factor in putting up a fight is military know-how. In 1914 the Serbs, though outnumbered in population twelve-to-one, in military strength at least three-to-two, repelled three separate Austrian offensives. When they were finally broken by Field Marshal August von Mackensen's heavy Austrian-German-Bulgarian drive in the autumn of 1915, they were riddled by typhus and so short of munitions that their northern Army ran out of cartridges during the retreat. The retreat was no rout. It was a desperate withdrawal across Albania, in which a few thousand men held Babuna Pass for several days against 35,000 Bulgarian attackers, in which King Peter I, old and sick, escaped through snow and mountains in an oxcart, and from which 125,000 out of 385,000 managed to get to Corfu, where they threw off the typhus, pulled themselves together, and promptly went off to Salonika to fight some more.

A third factor in fighting ability is simple physical strength. Altogether Yugoslavia can muster about 30 trained divisions totaling perhaps 650,000 troops, fierce men all. These men have plenty of rifles, a considerable number of machine guns, field and pack artillery. They are beautifully equipped, in short, to be hornets in the Serbian hills, to carry on the sort of warfare in which the Greeks had given the Axis its first trimming.

If the Germans choose to attack in the flat reaches of northern Yugoslavia the Yugoslavs will have a hard time. This would be a Blitz campaign through Blitz country, and to resist it the Yugoslavs would need modern weapons of the best, tanks, anti-tank guns and a crack Air Force. That they have aggressive Air Force personnel was indicated by the fact that last week's coup was engineered by the Air Force. Not only did Air Force Chief General Dusan Simovitch take over the Government: his blue-uniformed fliers personally commanded the tanks which supported his revolt. In an air corps general's uniform King Peter II took his regal oath.

But Yugoslavia has only about 600 planes—and all of them were sold or bartered by Britain, France, Germany and Italy at a time when none of those nations could afford to get rid of first-line machines. Yugoslavia has perhaps 100 tanks and only about a score of anti-aircraft batteries. Worst of all, she is facing the crack Army of Europe, an Army of veterans with all the modern tools of war, an Army far bigger than her own.

Since the Germans cannot be counted on to make mistakes such as the Italians made fighting against the Greeks, the Yugoslavs may do brilliantly and still be beaten. The Germans ought to be able to overrun northwestern Yugoslavia coming down in a drive that will outflank and take the great Yugoslavian loop of the Danube Drives were to be expected down the river itself from Mohacs and Subotica in Hungary, and perhaps also from Rumania through the Iron Gate, or from Bulgaria driving towards Nish from Sofia.

One or several of these attacks may drive the Yugoslavs from the northern plains into the southern mountains, but there the Yugoslav lack of equipment will be a less serious disadvantage, and they might prolong their resistance a long time, especially if they fall back toward the Greek frontier, whence they can draw reinforcements and supplies. To do that, however, they must guard well their eastern frontier. Directly over the mountains from Sofia to Skoplje run a number of mountain trails. If the Germans can drive across the mountains they can cut off the Yugoslavs from their allies.

The immediate military importance of the Yugoslav overturn is that Germany can hardly attack Greece with ease or comfort without having Yugoslavia secure. If Germany has to conquer Yugoslavia first, she will have at best an ugly little campaign to fight, and afterwards nasty guerrilla warfare that will cost both time and men.