Monday, Apr. 21, 1941

World War: BALKAN THEATER: Weakness Defies Strength

(See Cover) Through the slow winter months Britain and her friends had nursed their little hope, and watched it grow. They had made much of Adolf Hitler's big mistake—not invading Britain straightway after Dunkirk. They had seen the R.A.F. stand up to the Luftwaffe. They had relished the Greeks' brave stand against bad Italian timing. They had let themselves enjoy, and enjoy again, like lingering bouquets of taste, triumphs in Libya and on the Mediterranean. They had heard noises of the U.S. stirring in its sleep. They even began to talk of a turning point.

Last week, in a matter of days, not months, in a campaign of hours, not weeks, they saw their hope badly shaken. A few days of war in the Balkans and in Libya, though they were days in which small forces forged huge swords out of nothing but courage, were nevertheless days in which the gains of long, hard months were suddenly — incredibly suddenly — threatened.

More than ever, Nazi speed was the shocking thing. This time it was more shocking than in previous campaigns be cause the terrain had been advertised as more or less Blitzproof. And despite this supposed handicap, the Nazis went breathtakingly fast.

In 1939 the Germans cleaned up Poland in 27 days. Last year Denmark and Central Norway fell in 23 days, the Low Countries and France in 38 days. When this spring's battle was joined, everyone thought that Belgrade, lying in an open plain, would fall. But not even the gloomiest super-realists believed that Nish and Skoplje and the whole strategic Vardar Valley — places protected by formidable hills — would lie under Nazi treads in two days ; or that the fall of Salonika would be accomplished in three ; or that the Serbian hills could be traversed and Albania reached in six. The speed of the Nazi recapture of eastern Libya was even more terrifying (see p. 32}.

Divisions to Divide. The fundamental rule of German strategy, whether in war, politics, mass psychology or terrorization, is to break the opposition into weak frag ments. In war especially, the Nazi technique is to divide and then subdivide, to cut and recut. until the enemy's communi cations, leadership, force and plan are hopelessly decimated and disorganized.

This rule rigidly defined the Nazis' plan of action in the Balkans: cut Yugoslavia from Greece, pro-Nazi Croatia from anti-Nazi Serbia, pregnable Thrace from defensible central Greece, the tough Greeks from the tough British.

In drawing up their plans, the Germans had first to compute the odds. In Yugoslavia they saw facing them some 16 fairly well trained infantry divisions, three moun tain divisions, two cavalry divisions, 16 frontier battalions, plus a few thousand relatively green reservists; an Air Force of perhaps 900 planes, but without reserve strength; an aggressive leader in the per son of General Dusan Simovitch, who had built the best air force in the Balkans virtually singlehanded — altogether a potentially formidable but completely un tried force of about 650,000 men. They counted a Greek force of at most 15 divisions totaling at most 300,000. Of these, over half had their hands full in Albania ; a division or two manned the defenses of Thrace and perhaps three were available to help the British; the rest were reserves.

They reckoned that the British had been able to land at most four divisions, at most 100,000 men — tough, tan, eager, hap py, seasoned Australians, New Zealanders and Britons, spoiling to avenge Dunkirk.

If all these enemies could get together, they would constitute an army of about 1,300,000: an army greater in numbers al though weaker in air strength, training and mechanization than the German force in the Balkans. Therefore the strategy of division was especially imperative. First and most urgent division: Yugoslavs from Greeks and British.

Yugoslavia: First Phase. As the battle opened, by far the heaviest German onslaughts came from Bulgaria, into southeastern Yugoslavia, through four passes (see map, p. 31). These spearheads were assigned to push across Yugoslavia and meet the Italians erupting from Albania.

Ironically, the Yugoslavs, who had not had staff talks with the British and had not even had time to dispose their troops, had stationed just one division of supposedly pro-German Croat reservists in the mountains facing Bulgaria.

The Croats did the best they could, but all kinds of terror came out to meet them.

Men on motorcycles bumped along the donkey paths beside each boulder-strewn rivulet bed, and from the sidecars bullets streamed mechanically. Behind them came curious little tanks which could climb any of the treeless slopes: tiny affairs, looking like hybrids between U.S. Army "Blitzbuggies" and Brengun carriers, clanking along on their treads at 25 m.p.h.

(but able to let down rubber-tired wheels and do 50 on roads), belching fire from both their 47-mm. cannon and 20-mm. machine guns.

Behind them came heavier tanks and trucks full of shock troops and busses full of engineers and men with artillery on muleback and just plain infantry. Wherever the Croats knotted together, men dressed in asbestos floated by parachute from the sky, and held nozzles which threw terrifying flames.

The Croats fell back; the Nazis poured through into the Vardar Valley. One spearhead turned down the Vardar towards Salonika, while others pressed on toward Albania.

Dusan Simovitch knew that his battle —as long as it was organized warfare, not just guerrilla fighting—would be won or lost by aircraft. As far back as 1937 he wrote: "If we wish to preserve the political independence of our dear Fatherland, which was created with the blood of the best and most worthy sons of our nation ... it is essential that we should have a strong and powerful and independently organized modern aviation." He was not always popular with the politicians but being tall, handsome, grey-haired, brown-eyed, particularly gallant and unusually slim for a middle-aged Serb, was always popular with the ladies. But he made himself indulge in politics for the sake of building an adequate Air Force. He was just beginning to get results when war came to his land.

Last week, in a few hours, he saw the bloom blown off his creation by the Luftwaffe's evil heat. In the first day of fighting the Germans claimed 89 enemy planes: 54 ruined on the ground, 35 shot down.

Each day thereafter they claimed bags of over 15. General Simovitch's 21 airfields were pocked, his hangars burned, his fuel dumps blasted.

According to New York Times Correspondent Cyrus L. Sulzberger, German bombing did just what it was intended to do: snarl communications and service. Wrote Sulzberger, after a spectacular three-day flight from Belgrade to Greece, of the scene after the first raids on Skoplje:

"Their bombing had been exceedingly accurate, although most of the bombs were of small caliber. Therefore, the damage was not permanently serious, but of a nature to disrupt all regular services. The power station was out of order. There was neither electric light nor telephone. The radio station had ceased functioning.

Army headquarters was knocked about and had been transferred. Telephone cables lay twisted in the road. Glass was piled everywhere and occasional craters testified to the effect of the bombing." With such damage from the air, and without any properly organized resistance in all of southern Yugoslavia, there was little that could be done to stop the in credibly daring German cross-country dash. Certainly the Yugoslav attack on northern Albania, capturing 100 men in about the time that the Nazis were taking 100,000 in Thrace and Yugoslavia was not the answer. At noon on the sixth day, German motorcycle patrols met the van guard of a pompous Italian parade (the Arezzo and Florence Divisions of regulars, a regiment of Bersaglieri, a legion of Blackshirts) which had succeeded in push ing about six miles out of Albania against little resistance except an unseasonal snow storm.

Greece: First Phase. Before they manned their guns on the Thracian front, the devout Greek soldiers asked for the last sacrament. They were not only resigned to death; many expected it. Then they went into the forts which, arranged in depth, were called the Metaxas Line.

The late, tough-minded General John Metaxas would have been proud of the use they made of his bastions.

The first Nazi blow was struck at about the same time as the main attacks were biting into southeastern Yugoslavia, in Rupel Pass. There the Greeks fought hard, using the same tactics of cross fire as had proved so deadly against the Italians in the Pindus Mountains. But the fight was vain: the Nazi break-through in the Vardar Valley, and the prong which had then turned eastward towards Salonika, threatened the troops' rear. It became necessary to abandon Salonika.

Nevertheless the Greeks in Thrace, who had death on their minds, fought on, both in Rupel Pass and farther east. In many forts they fought until every man was wiped out. In Fort Perithori, they abandoned the upper works, retired underground, and conked Nazis one by one as they tried to enter. Altogether the Nazis claimed 80,000 Greeks in Thrace; possibly there were not more than 30,000. As they were gradually cleaned out, the Metaxas Line took its place in the rank of sad, futile names: Maginot Line, Mannerheim Line, Albert Canal, Carol's Line.

The British tried to rationalize the loss of Salonika, calling the town a military nonentity, pointing to the fact that its fall had been so certainly expected that for three whole weeks tankers had hauled gasoline away, and since then sailing vessels and steamers had taken out all kinds of stores, and the wounded and helpless had been evacuated. This was true, for the British who until three weeks ago had little hope of Yugoslavia's fighting had disposed their limited forces further west in the obvious expectation that it would be foolish to try to hold Salonika. Yet the British themselves once called the town, not carelessly, "the gateway of two continents." Possession of the port gave the Nazis their first outlet on the Mediterranean. They could use it to grim effect as a base for planes and submarines.

In these early stages of fighting the British were not engaged at all. Dienst ans Deutschland sneered: "German quarters consider the supposition not unfounded that the English leadership at the present initiatory stages ... is taking the precaution of not losing contact with a suitable harbor for retreat." The supposition was correct. In the face of German superiority in strength, the British leadership—in the person of Lieut. General Sir Henry Maitland ("Jumbo") Wilson, General WavelPs right-hand man in the winter campaign in Africa—was not so foolish as to be inveigled into the error of Flanders: being drawn into hostile territory only to have communications cut to the rear.

Yugoslavia: Second Phase. "Germany's early successes cannot discourage us. Though the present situation is difficult, I believe the justice of our cause, the very of our Army, and the help of our powerful allies will assure us victory. . . . . Our troops are concentrating on main battle lines to check the enemy's advance." Thus spoke General Dusan Simovitch— a man not given to loud and hollow talk ¶over the Yugoslav radio in the evening the sixth day of fighting. Germany's early successes had been undeniably brilliant. Before the Yugoslavs had even been able to take battle stations, the Nazis had virtually completed the first phase of Blitzkrieg—the wild, daring dash for centers of communication and command. And they had done this just as fast as if the terrain were flat as Denmark. But Dusan Simovitch had been in tight spots before.

An extraordinary tradition in the Serb Army is for cadets to shut themselves in their messroom, turn out the lights, draw revolvers, and shoot it out. Dusan Simovitch, who passed this test of courage with flying colors, must have felt in much the same position last week. Now he hoped— as did the Greeks and British to the east—to prove that the point at which Blitzkrieg can fail in mountainous country is the second phase: consolidation.

In their second try, the Yugoslavs wrote off the northern provinces, including the capital. There they met the several advancing columns, including Italian and Hungarian drives, with nothing more than rear-guard actions. They were not impressed when the Germans, having bombed Belgrade to ashes and dust, occupied the capital with ceremony.

The Yugoslav Army, though cut in places, was still in being. German claims that it was annihilated were not supported by German claims of prisoners: only 40,000. And so the Yugoslavs, in divided units operating as colossal guerrilla parties, using the French tactics of artillery preparation and assault which Dusan Simovitch learned at St. Cyr, the elite French war college, began to counterattack in exactly the opposite direction from their pre-battle expectation. Their major effort was southward, into the Serbian hills. They counterattacked near Kragujevac, General Simovitch's birthplace — traditional home of the Obrenovitch dynasty. Their strongest push was into a rugged defile known as Kachanik Pass. There they claimed to have destroyed 90 German tanks, to have taken great toll of man power, to have checked the German drive.

In the hills Serbia's famous Komitaji (guerrillas) went into action.

Greece: Second Phase. In Blitzkrieg, columns which meet resistance turn aside, seeking weakness. More or less stopped at Kachanik Pass, some Germans turned southward to join others who were al ready assaulting the junction of Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece. Here they looked for an opportunity to drive a wedge be tween the main Greek force in Albania and the main British force, established in a circling line from Mount Olympus to Fiorina and Lake Ochrida.

The Nazis took Monastir Gap from its few Yugoslav defenders and drove about 25 miles into Greece. In the opening engagements that then occurred the Greeks and British came back at them with fury, and with daring to match daring. In the flat plains between Monastir (Bitolj) and Fiorina, British engaged Germans in the first mechanized encounter since Dunkirk.

The Germans withdrew, at least temporarily. One British advance patrol behind the German spearhead caught a Nazi infantry unit in busses, and annihilated it.

The Germans soon pulled in their horns while their patrols prodded for vulnerable spots, and the Luftwaffe went to work on the Allies' communications. The chief British-Greek ports of supply were Peirae-us, the port of Athens, and Volos, the port for Larissa. Both are inadequate. In the basin of Peiraeus, ships have to be parked by hawser, like so many cars in a tiny square. And these inadequate roadsteads were connected with the front by just one single-track railroad, by just one good road.

In wave after wave — sometimes 16 waves in quick succession — the Nazis went for the ports. This week they claimed that dive-bombers had sunk 30,000 tons of British transports in Peiraeus. They went for freight trains hauling heavy tanks, heavy trucks with enormous anti aircraft trailers, radio cars, searchlight trailers, troop-carrying busses. They went, carelessly, for hospital units. They went, in blissful ignorance, for lorries carrying the harmless stuff which could only be going to a British force in the midst of a desperate stand: tins of Australian beef, cases of toothpicks, cartons of boot polish.

The Outlook. These efforts showed that the Germans were preparing for an attack on the line from the coast of Albania to Fiorina, to the Aegean near Mount Olympus—the line on which the Greeks and British had prepared to make their major stand. The Greeks surged down from Salonika on the eastern end of the line, and this week the British announced that they had been obliged to retreat—but not without inflicting heavy casualties.

The Greeks, observing that the enemy was concentrating supplies in the Monastir sector, announced that their troops were "impatiently awaiting the first opportunity of getting at the Germans." Grimly the Yugoslavs pointed out: "It is one thing to conquer the Komitajis' territory; it is another thing to conquer the Komitaji." This week was Orthodox Holy Week, and devout men like General Simovitch (who was not too devout, however, to divorce his first wife and marry one of the handsomest women in Yugoslavia) threw a religious fervor into their fighting.

Yet fervor is not a substitute for strength. Cut off from reinforcement from his allies, cut off from any supplies—ammunition, guns and tanks—cut off in fact from any aid except such little air support as the British could send from Greece's small waterlogged airfields, General Simovitch might well have regarded his military position as nearly hopeless. But it is a Serbian feeling that men die in fighting, but nations die only in yielding.

Find this article at:
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,772676,00.html