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## World War: Lowlands of 1941

(See Cover)

Separated from The Netherlands by the breadth of Europe, by an even broader gulf of culture and blood. Bulgaria was last week forced to face a grim and startling fact: in the strategy of World War II, Bulgaria is The Netherlands of 1941.

Now, as a year ago, the Nazis hope to win the war by knocking Britain out. But Britain is difficult to reach. A year ago, leaving that difficult project in abeyance, the Nazis chose the main Allied Armies as their major objective. Those Armies were in France and the easiest military way to reach them was through The Netherlands and Belgium.

This year, the main Allied Armies are in the eastern Mediterranean: the Greeks in Albania, the British and Anzacs in Libya. And the easiest way for the Nazis to get into the area where the Allied arms are now rampant—the only way to get there by land—is through Bulgaria and its neighbor Yugoslavia. So 1941 finds Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in much the same predicament as Belgium and The Netherlands in the first weeks of 1940.

Twice—in November 1939, and in January a year ago—the war of nerves in the Lowlands focused into specific scares. Imminent attack was rumored. Concentrations were observed across the border, deadlines were whispered about. Last week Bulgaria was in the same spot strategically and nervously.

More Than Ulcers. At 6:05 one evening last week, Bulgaria's Premier Professor Bogdan Filoff arrived back in Sofia after five days in Vienna. To newspapermen he said curtly: "Reports circulated in America concerning my visit to Germany are not true." He had really been to see his doctor, nothing more.

But though it was late in the day, he went straight to his office. Next day he drove 43 miles to the piney winter resort of Tcham Koria and told King Boris all about his trip to see his doctor. Next day he and the King talked again. That night he called the Cabinet together in Sofia for an unusual night session, and told them about his health trip.

Something more crucial than Bogdan Filoff's stomach ulcers was discussed in those feverish sessions. That something could only have been one thing: whether or not to grant Germany troop transit through Bulgaria or at least use of air bases in Bulgaria, so that the big end of the Rome-Berlin Axis could get the little end out of its Grecian swivet. The Bulgars' decision might make no immediate difference whatsoever: the Germans could undoubtedly penetrate Bulgaria whether the Bulgars wished it or not. But the ramifications of the decision might have heavy bearing on the outcome of the whole war. On the weary spine of Boris III, who never wanted to be king in the first place, rested a backbreaking, heartbreaking weight.

Pan-European. Boris of the Bulgars is an amiable man. He is a peace lover who likes to mount butterflies' wings and study delicate mountain petals, to step on automotive accelerators and pull locomotive throttles—to work at nature and play at science. At 18 he graduated from the Sofia Military Academy, and he fought in both Balkan Wars and in World War I. But he prefers his pastimes of peacetime: traveling about his countryside incognito, walking around the streets of Sofia in sloppy civilian clothes, tinkering with machines, exercising his proud borzois, chatting with peasants. He gives the impression of wishing he weren't King. He has said: "It would not frighten me if I were to lose my throne. If that were to happen, I would go right to America and get a job as a mechanic." Now that the strategy of war has put Bulgaria on the spot, Boris, man of peace, is the focus of manifold pressures. He rules over a nation of Slavs. His blood is mostly French. His relatives belong to the royal families of Britain, Belgium, Portugal, Rumania. His wife is a daughter of the King of Italy. He is of the Greek Orthodox faith. Tsar Nicholas II of Russia was his godfather. For 22 years his father, ex-King Ferdinand, has been a refugee in Germany.

Besides these personal ties of Boris, Bulgaria has long been the closest European friend of Russia, has long been the route of Germany's hoped-for expansion into the Near East. Recently someone is said to have asked the King what Bulgaria's foreign policy was. Boris answered: "My ministers are pro-German, my wife is pro-Italian, my people are pro-Russian — I am the only neutral in the country." Boris was not just making a phrase.

His people have bonds of speech, culture, tradition, blood and sentiment with Russia, and they will never forget that it was Russia which delivered them from the Turkish yoke, and created the short-lived Big Bulgaria of 1878. But Boris' ministers — especially Premier Bogdan Filoff and the man who controls Bulgaria's police, Minister of Interior Peter Gabrovsky — think that realism demands that Bulgaria play the Nazi game, even if it means a humiliation like Rumania's. Naturally, Queen Ioanna thinks Bulgaria should put one foot in the Italian boot even if it means the other foot goes into the grave. Only Boris has the very simple aim: Bulgaria for the Bulgars—if possible. But Boris may have to face the fact that in 1941 it is not possible. Shortly after he visited Berlin in November, Hermann Göring very pointedly remarked to a Bulgarian correspondent: "Your king is entirely too neutral to suit us. Anyway, there is no place for kings in the new European order."

The Threat. Last week it appeared that Germany's patience with Italy's bungles had just about sapped away. The Berlin correspondent of the Belgrade Politka wrote: "The impression is that Berlin no longer considers the Italo-Greek conflict as a mere local incident, but one that is daily becoming more disagreeable."

German circles warn Greece to think well and take a lesson from the fate of Finland."

Germany may prefer not to have a major front in the Balkans—one which might repeat the patterns of 1918. British and Greek successes in the Mediterranean area threaten to swell the Greek conflict into such a front. The threat, it is true, was last week not immediate, since General Sir Archibald Wavell's continued advance into Libya (see p. 25) seemed to indicate Britain was committed to destroying Italy's Libyan Army, to the exclusion of new business for some time to come. Neither was the threat too serious: the Salonika campaign by which the Allies conquered the Balkans in 1917-18 required no less than 28 divisions—far more troops than Britain and Greece could marshal just now.

Nevertheless the threat existed. If the British ever established an expeditionary force securely in Salonika, the threat would become imminent. Last week Hitler began to try to eliminate the threat in its infancy (see p. 25).

But a cardinal point in modern German military theory is that allies should fight separately. The Nazis say that instructors, technicians, advisers of a superior ally (which always happens to be Germany) may assist an inferior, but major campaigns should never be undertaken jointly.

Therefore, if another route were open by which Germany might strike Greece alone, it would be logical to expect the Nazis to take it. That route exists, a much shorter, more convenient route than through the Brenner and via Italy. It lies across Yugoslavia and Bulgaria to Salonika.

There were plenty of indications last week that the German Army was preparing to take this short way. Some 30 divisions were gathered in Hungary and Rumania, and more were on their way. Last week 700 huge pontoons, capable of supporting large tanks and trucks, were reported being moved up to the Danube. Rumanians were ordered to have gasoline depots well dispersed and fully equipped by the first of February.

Balkan rumors set a deadline for the German attack. Some rumors even had German troops already in Bulgaria, in mufti.

But the deadline passed. A deep blanket of snow made communications by rail and wire uncertain and made a war by mechanized forces almost impossible. As Italy found in Greece, it does not pay to fight Balkan troops under conditions which give an advantage to old-fashioned armies on foot. Moreover, the Danube was frozen—not heavily enough to bear mechanized forces, too heavily to tolerate pontoon bridges. And there are only three permanent bridges over the Danube. Unless the British appeared in Greece in force, there was no need for haste. But the main reason why such a push could well be postponed until springtime was that political bridges had not yet been finished.

Friend or Foe? The biggest unfinished span was, as always, the Soviet connection. Obviously, Russia would not particularly care to have her little friend in the Balkans pass like Rumania into German hands. One day last week an unknown young Russian diplomat, Alexander Mihailovich Alexandrov, said to have been chief of the Balkan Division of the Foreign Commissariat, turned up in Sofia as Counselor of Legation, reportedly charged with giving Boris moral support in refusing German demands. Another day Tass, the official news agency, issued a gruff statement: "If German troops really are present in Bulgaria and if the further dispatch of German troops to Bulgaria really is taking place, then all this occurred and is occurring without the knowledge and consent of the U. S. S. R."

Germany obviously could not afford to antagonize Russia and thus confirm rather than confine the war's second front. Such an alienation would almost certainly bring Turkey into the fight. But it was equally clear that Russia did not dare fight Germany. It was reported: 1) that Adolf Hitler had offered Joseph Stalin all of Finland and more of Rumania in exchange for a free hand against Greece and Turkey; 2) that he had offered Boris more of the Dobruja in return for permitting German troops the use of Bulgaria as a corridor to the eastern Mediterranean.

But with a little more time Adolf Hitler would surely find means to bluff or persuade Stalin and either satisfy or scare Boris III. Boris ought to scare, for his chance of getting adequate aid from either Greece, Turkey or Britain for defense of his country is not bright.

Until Hitler could make his preparations for taking Bulgaria without a fight, his advance army of psychological sappers continued busily undermining, camouflaging, sending up trial rumors and tentative untruths, paving the way for a Blitzkrieg in the spring just as they did in the Lowlands in 1940. Such a welter of conflicting reports was abroad in the Balkans last week that the Nazis were actually surprised. "It's a splendid fog," said a happy Berlin spokesman, "and others made it for us."

"Only for Bulgaria." At week's end, the worried conferences which Bogdan Filoff had had with his King and his Cabinet bore fruit. He went to Russe, on the Danube, just opposite the spot where the Germans were supposed to be most heavily concentrated. There he made a speech in which he voiced the sentiments of Boris:

"People should bear in mind that we are today witnessing one of the greatest cataclysms that history has ever known. . . .

"We should not be influenced by our feelings or sympathies or desires. We must remain, before everything else, Bulgarians, and work only for Bulgaria, to be ready to make sacrifices only for Bulgarian interests and never for foreign ones. . . .

"I must warn you that today war and peace do not depend on small nations like Bulgaria. She is so small that she cannot dictate whether there shall be war or peace. We have therefore to be ready for any eventuality. . . ."

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