

[Back to Article](#)[Click to Print](#)

Monday, Mar. 10, 1941

World War: BALKAN THEATRE: Spring is Here

The long awaited Armageddon in southeastern Europe approached so fast last week that all but the troops involved were left behind the rush of events. It was spring—the season of German invasions of Austria, Czecho-Slovakia, Denmark and Norway. One day the only Nazis in Bulgaria were a few scattered thousands in mufti. Next day Bulgarian Premier Professor Bogdan Filoff had signed with the Axis in Vienna and Bulgarian roads were jammed with mechanized Nazi columns. Within 48 hours the grey-green uniformed vanguard had rumbled 175 miles to villages in the Struma Valley a few miles from the mountainous Greek frontier which is only 55 miles from Salonika. If in the next few days or weeks this force was met by the British and the Turks—the British would be daring indeed to risk another lonely Narvik—the campaign for control of the Eastern Mediterranean would begin. This struggle would perhaps be no less crucial in world history than the looming attack on the British Isles.

In the face of this imminence, the fact that Bulgaria had been conquered seemed only a passing incident. The fact that it was the twelfth nation to be overrun seemed an almost tediously insignificant statistic.

The conquest was as efficiently formulaic as most of Adolf Hitler's. With 600,000 Nazi troops across the northern border in Rumania, Bulgaria was hardly in position to say NO. But there were the usual diplomatic mummeries until Premier Filoff flew to Vienna, entered the florid Belvedere Palace, and took the pen offered him by German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop under the eyes of Adolf Hitler himself. Then the Bulgarian Government's explanation—"the pressure of events"—seemed positively eloquent.

Previously the Nazis, guarding against R. A. F. bombing, had removed their Danube pontoon bridges by day, replaced them by night, transported huge quantities of materiel onto Bulgarian soil. Telephone communication to Sofia was cut except for Government business. There were widespread arrests of "men with British interests." Agents were buying millions of Bulgarian levas (1¢) for the Nazi quartermaster corps. On the day the pact was signed Hitler's forces crossed the Danube by pontoon, ferry and train. The occupation was advertised to the Bulgarian public, thousands of whom are violently anti-Nazi and pro-Russian, by squadrons of Nazi bombers and fighters roaring low over Sofia's roofs. Except for their ear-splitting drone the city was quiet, and along the sunny boulevards many shopkeepers unfurled the swastika. As the Nazi columns rolled into his capital, Boris of Bulgaria remained immured in his yellow palace and thought nervous thoughts. As the shrewder Balkan politicians remarked, it was all a foregone conclusion.

What was far from foregone, as the Nazis speeded toward Greece, was the conclusion of the approaching major crisis. Outstanding questions were whether and how Turkey would aid Britain, what Russia's role would be.

Last week British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden flew from Egypt to Turkey, where he had been hailed by the press as "that brilliant man who read Persian poetry at the age of 17—something we Turks cannot even do." With him was General Sir John Greer Dill, Britain's Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and presently British Ambassador to Russia Sir Stafford Cripps arrived by plane from Moscow.

The Eden-Dill-Cripps visit to Ankara was apparently quite successful. Earlier in the week German Ambassador to Turkey Franz von Papen had practiced the standard Hitlerian strategy of showing Turkish officials a cinema of Germany's western conquests. Anthony Eden countered by exhibiting films of Britain's Libyan victories. Final upshot was that the Anglo-Turkish alliance was strongly reaffirmed. Turkey rushed additional troops to the Bulgarian border, and closed the Dardanelles to all but ships with special permits and Turkish naval pilots. Turkey "nullified" her two-week old non-aggression pact with Bulgaria, and many observers thought the Soviet Government rebuked the whole Axis with a statement that Russia was "not in a position to support Bulgaria in carrying out her present policy."

But whether Turkey would fight side by side with Britain remained to be seen. And how Soviet Russia felt about the Nazi threat to Russia's one waterway to the Mediterranean—the Dardanelles—was a secret that remained in the head of Joseph Stalin. A great and foreboding moment in World War II had arrived—and the imponderables were correspondingly great.

[Click to Print](#)**Find this article at:**<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,790021,00.html>