



Monday, Mar. 17, 1941

THE BALKANS: Yugoslavia Next?

Fortnight ago Anthony Eden drove along the streets of ancient Athens where British and Greek flags fluttered in the sun. The Government wined and dined the British Foreign Secretary, showed him the classic sights, finally led him up the battered Acropolis whence he surveyed the glinting blue Aegean. Before his big Short Sunderland flying boat took off for British Egyptian headquarters, he received from Athens' Military Governor Kostas Kotzias a gift of two handsome pistols from the 1821-29 Greek War of Independence, a lustrous Byzantine icon, an album of photographs of Greece, and rich Dodecanese Island embroideries for Mrs. Eden. It had been such a reception as in peace times might have been accorded a distinguished English poet, and went down very well with a scholar who had taken honors in Oriental languages at Oxford 18 years ago.

But the times were not peaceful and neither Anthony Eden nor his Greek hosts were in a very poetical frame of mind. Adolf Hitler's great southeastern push had already shoved some 150,000 Nazi troops and 1,700 bombers down through Bulgaria to the very edges of Greece and Turkey, only 60 miles from Salonika and only 100 miles from the Dardanelles. Greece and Turkey had rushed troops to their Bulgarian borders (Greece an estimated force of 90,000). Anthony Eden had flown from Turkey to Greece to learn, among other things, whether that heroic nation would defy the oncoming Nazis as it had defied the stumble-footed Italians. Before leaving Athens the Foreign Secretary had got enough assurances so that he could say that Greece would receive Britain's "unflinching aid."

But even the strongest assurances of Greek resolution could scarcely have been more than a partial relief to Anthony Eden's—and Britain's—Balkan anxiety. For last week another potential bar to Adolf Hitler's southeastern drive—Yugoslavia—seemed likely to prove just about as flimsy as Bulgaria proved a fortnight ago.

Down Goes Paul. If Hitler attacked Greece only from Bulgaria, through the Struma River Valley, he would undoubtedly find it hard going. The frontier is only 25 miles wide, the terrain is barren, forbidding, and 90,000 or more Greeks could put up stiff resistance against the heaviest odds. But if the Nazis also attacked through Yugoslavia's Vardar River Valley, west of the Struma, leading directly to Salonika, they could strike the Struma's defenders from the rear and probably crush any forces that Greece would be able to muster.

Yugoslavia's sleekly handsome Regent, Prince Paul, is related to British royalty, was an Oxford classmate of the Duke of Windsor, has always been pro-British. Thousands of Yugoslavs, including many Government and military officials, are fervently anti-Nazi. Yugoslavia can field 950,000 men in her defense (and last week had called up 700,000).

But Yugoslavia's Army is a rabbit-shooting outfit compared with the Hitler juggernaut, and Yugoslavia is surrounded by hordes of Nazis in Germany, Rumania and Bulgaria.

A month ago Yugoslav Premier Dragisha Cvetkovitch and Foreign Minister Aleksandar Cincar-Markovitch had conversations with Adolf Hitler in Berchtesgaden. Last week it was repeatedly reported and denied (by interested parties) that Prince Paul himself had spent part of the week in the same place. Britain also was making representations to Yugoslavia, but the British Ministry was suddenly alarmed to learn that although Bulgaria had signed the Axis pact only the week before, Boris of Bulgaria had actually agreed to the Axis demands last November. Britain promptly told her subjects to leave Yugoslavia.

Refugee colonists—Czechs, Poles, Belgians, Dutch, Rumanians, Jews, "De Gaullists"—were already clearing out as fast as they could get visas. Yugoslav oppositionists handed Prince Paul a memorandum complaining that the people were being told nothing. Presently police raided the headquarters of the oppositionist Democratic Party, seized its manifestoes and its leader, Milan Grol. It all had the familiar odor of the Hitler approach. At week's end it was reported that Yugoslavia had arranged a "compromise" with Adolf—Yugoslavia would be "nonaggressive" and would allow the Nazis to move down the Vardar Valley toward Greece. Next it was reported that Germany demanded full adherence to the Axis.

Meanwhile what Germany called her "security" Army kept growing in Bulgaria. Field kitchens, supply trucks, oil-tank cars and uniformed war correspondents followed the mechanized fighting forces. In both Bulgaria and Rumania air bases were being multiplied, often with conscripted Jewish labor. Bulgaria's surgeons, doctors and druggists were mobilized for medical service. In command of the Nazis' Balkan operation was Field Marshal Siegmund List, veteran of the invasion of Poland.

Close beside him was General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, tactician of the Norway campaign, whose specialty is the mountain warfare that would be required on the Greek borders.

As Germany moved to the Southeast, her diplomats kept ahead of her armies. They were active among all her potential enemies—Russia, Turkey, Greece itself. The Nazis had no idea of wasting ammunition where it was not necessary. Russia moved extra troops to her Turkish and Rumanian frontiers, but gave no signs of other than watchful opportunism. Indeed it was reported that she was about to sign an "amity" pact with Yugoslavia, which could not hurt Russia and would be a shrewd appeasement of Yugoslavia's Soviet-favoring oppositionists.

Turkey's defensive bristling was not accompanied by any public statements that she would be willing to help the Greeks or British. Only Greece spoke out strongly. Through George A. Vlachos, Greece's leading editorialist, the Greek Government cried: "Our Army will fight on, if necessary, in Thrace as it has in Epirus, and Greece will show the world how to die as she has shown it how to fight!" But widespread Balkan reports had it that the Nazi diplomats were especially hard at work in Greece, persuading her that it was unnecessary to die. They wanted Greece, it was said, to make an "honorable" peace with Italy and allow Germany to consolidate a Salonika Front before the British could do so. Or else. . . .

As for Britain and Anthony Eden's "unflinching aid" to Greece, it was announced in London that Italian military equipment captured in Libya was being rushed to Greece, but the whereabouts of Britain's Army of the Nile was still unknown.

 Click to Print

Find this article at:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,765273,00.html>