TIME IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CNN

Monday, Mar. 24, 1941

World War: BALKAN THEATRE: Toward the Unwelcome

(See Cover)

In its trance of anxiety before the campaigns of spring and summer, the whole world—both its camps—wondered last week where the war would be won.

Would it be won when fanatical young men leaped from machines of invasion onto the beaches of Britain?

Would it be won on the open seas?

Would it be won in the stratosphere and just under the overcast and skimming along over the hedges?

Would it be won in the Balkans?

Of all these quite credible possibilities, only one answer was moderately certain last week: the war would not be won in the Balkans, although it might be decided there.

The enemies—shadowboxing, feinting, faking as hard as they could—could not forget, as they stumbled closer every day to a Balkan struggle, this terrible danger: If the Balkans became a major theatre of fighting, the war might very easily be lost in the Balkans.

For Germany, a setback in the Balkans would be more than Germany's first outright military defeat in World War II. It would be the turning point of the war.

For Britain, a decisive defeat at Salonika (or anywhere else in the Balkans) would be more than another Narvik or another Dunkirk. It would mean the destruction of Britain's only existing victorious army; the closing of Europe's back door; the focusing of the entire war upon the British Isles—where, in the last analysis, World War II must be decided.

For both sides, the risk was appalling. And yet last week all the signs, all the hints which broke the fetters of censorship, seemed to suggest that the risks might be hazarded. Without either side wanting it, the battle seemed on its way to jointure.

Power in Extremity. In Belgrade, key to the whole Balkan tangle for the moment, there was a strange gaiety last week. The most reliable index of Yugoslavia's enthusiasm is the amount of glass that gets broken. In Belgrade champagne bottles, having uttered their pops and spilled their bubbles, smashed against walls. Glasses, having been touched in toast, crashed into fireplaces. Siphon bottles, mirrors, windows were broken in greatest good humor.

In the cafés Tipperary—a controversial song in the Balkans these days—and Oj Srbjo, a Serbian battle song, sounded and resounded until dawn. The crowds danced the wild Serbian kolo until they were exhausted. Even the mothers and fathers of young men who had just gone off to military stations joined in the shouting.

No one seemed to know exactly what the celebrations were about. Yugoslavia certainly had no reason to be explosively cheerful: Nazi pressure was putting its last exquisitely painful touches on the Yugoslav body politic.

Probably the celebrants were happy because they suddenly realized Yugoslavia's fleeting power. For a giddy moment, Yugoslavia was the most powerful nation in Europe. For an hour, Yugoslavia was stopping Hitler. The Yugoslavs realized that until Hitler was sure of them, he preferred to undertake no new adventure in the Balkans. He could scarcely afford to attack Greece from Bulgaria alone—through what the Yugoslavs could make a deathtrap, the Struma River Valley. He would have to be sure first of the Yugoslav flank; he would like to have Yugoslavia's broader, safer Vardar Valley.

In their temporary arrogance, the Yugoslavs began to think they might even be able to keep Hitler from getting the Vardar Valley. Were not the Serbs good, hard fighters? Their officers were a bit old, yes; their traditions were a touch on the Imperial Russian side, granted; their equipment was not exactly overwhelming, to be sure. But they had mountains, they had as much nerve as the Greeks, and their bowels were full of a dislike of the Germans and an implacable loathing of the Italians.

And so, when the nation's leaders, who fortnight ago seemed all sewed up by the Nazis, showed signs of stiffening, if only for a historic instant, the people were hysterically happy. The stiffening was obtuse: it evidenced itself in rumors and unconfirmed statements—that Yugoslavia would accept nothing more than a non-aggression pact; that when trim, elegant German Minister to Belgrade Victor von Heeren strongly urged adherence to the Axis pact, and offered a plane to carry Premier Dragisha Cvetkovitch and Foreign Minister Aleksandar Cincar-Markovitch to Berlin to sign, those gentlemen let it be known they liked to travel

by train; that the first full-dress meeting of the Yugoslav Crown Council since 1934 was called to discuss the angry anti-Nazi rumblings of the Serbian, Croatian, and Slovene clans, parties, secret societies and just plain rugged individualists; that when Adolf Hitler got impatient and began to wave an angry finger at the dotted line, Dragisha Cvetkovitch's physicians decided his health would not stand a trip to Berlin, and put him to bed.

Belgrade's gaiety was not likely to last long. There were similar hitches and delays before Bulgaria signed into the Axis. But there was one factor which might keep Yugoslavia happy, might even keep Yugoslavia out of the Axis, for a while anyhow. It certainly contributed to the false happiness of Belgrade last week. It was the persistent report that Britain, though conscious of the terrible risk of a Balkan battle, was landing in Greece in force.

"Next Big Offensive." The first word, early in the week, was that 40 British transports had arrived at Peiraeus, the port of Athens, and were unloading troops; that other transports were due at Salonika—only 60 miles from the nearest Germans in Bulgaria. Then came a far more solid hint. The Greeks announced that their destroyer Psara had sunk an Italian submarine as it attempted to attack a convoy on its way through the Aegean Sea: the convoy was presumablv British.

At week's end Belgrade heard a detailed story: the British were rushing 300,000 men to Greece; 100,000 had already debarked, equipped with tanks, flame throwers, artillery and all the paraphernalia of attack. A "neutral diplomat" swore that he had, with his own neutral eyes, seen British soldiers step down gangplanks on to Greek soil and march off singing to their billets. The British were said to have landed matériel for five divisions.

Other sources dropped other hints. The Aeroplane, Britain's outspoken aviation journal, which has been right more than wrong, said: "The military initiative seized by the British in the Mediterranean has not been exhausted. The British would be foolish if their bombers allowed men and machines to be assembled upon the Greek frontier without let or hindrance." In Cairo the British censor passed dispatches revealing that the Imperial Army of the Nile had been reinforced "beyond comparison" by troops both from the dominions and from the British Isles, and that this army was now ready for the "next big offensive."

It was not yet certain where the British would try to establish themselves, if at all. It has generally been surmised that they would choose Salonika, for the Chalcidice Peninsula, on which Salonika lies, is like a medieval castle with a moat around it. A mountain massif surrounded on three sides by a sea and on the fourth by a marshy valley, it is naturally defensible.

Last Big Offensive? Benito Mussolini has frequently promised, in his most bullish idiom, that with spring the Italians would hear happy news from the Albanian front. The test of spring's arrival in Albania is not leaf and blossom; it is the emergence, from under its winter blanket of snow, of the tremendous word DUX (for Il Duce), cut in the sheer rock of one of the hills near Tirana. Last week the big letters showed themselves to Albanians. So did the big Dux himself.

Premier Mussolini went to the front for the pleasure of ordering the spring attacks in person. Unfortunately for his pleasure, the shrewd Greeks pressed his trigger finger for him by attacking on their own.

When the Italian offensive got under way, it ran head-on into a fierce Greek offensive. The Italian attack was in the fanciest panoply—dressed up, for instance, with an account of how a certain Commander "C" (Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano), leading a squadron of "hawk" bombers as it encountered some British Glosters, "rushed to the plane's turret," personally manned a machine gun, and shot down one of the enemy.*

The Dux set a deadline, by which time his generals were ordered to give him good news. But rhetoric and heroics were not enough. In five days, the Greeks claimed 3,000 prisoners. At week's end Athens announced that in a fortnight Greek and British aviators had shot down 123 Italian planes and had "thrown out of action" nearly 50,000 men. If this was indeed Benito Mussolini's much-vaunted spring offensive, and if the Greek claims were no more exaggerated than they had been in the earlier phases of the war, then this might prove to be Benito Mussolini's last big offensive. From here on, Rome began to realize, any victories the hither end of the Axis might win would be entirely thanks to the yon end.

Serious Nazis. The martial end of the Axis was last week very much aware of the three ill winds in the Balkans: Yugoslavia's stubbornness, the alleged British landings, the continued Greek successes. That Germany took these things seriously was self-evident from the number, quality and leadership of the Nazi forces.

In Bulgaria, poised at the dangerous Struma River pass into Greece, and near by in reserve, were some 500,000 German troops. Also in Bulgaria was one of Germany's six air fleets, about 1,700 operating planes. In every detail this was an army equipped for the job at hand. It had heavy clothing for mountain operations, lighter for warmer work nearer sea level. In deference to the wretched roads it was light on heaviest artillery, biggest tanks and trucks, was long on mortars, pack artillery, cavalry, motorcycles, little, short-wheel-based, high-slung trucks. It was provided with portable chlorinating plants —as one preventive against the soldiers' scourge, amoebic dysentery. Its aircraft were not the hottest ships, but the high fliers, the slow landers. There was an unusually high percentage of engineer formations within the divisions.

But the best indication of the seriousness with which the Nazis took the Balkan threat was the name of the man who was in charge of operations there: Field Marshal Siegmund Wilhelm Walther List. In the column of experience, this man had chalked up as high and as good a score as any other German general in World War II.

Marshal List is not stamped with the Prussian die. He is a Swabian, and men from Swabia do not bark, but drawl. They are tough and brooding, like their Black Forest. Ponderous, awkward, slow, Marshal List cares not a fig for appearances, for his motto is: "More to be than seem." He has an unmilitary softness—loves art, dotes on tourism, reads with a catholicism which takes in Goethe and Black Beauty, the only English work he remembers reading. At 61 he is nearly bald, and has a grey mustache. His only harsh features are his eyes, which have the fixed metallic stare and his mouth, which has a cut look like that of a shark. He is unpolitical, and once at a party laughed heartily when he heard a guest refer to Hitler as a "sheared lackey." But Field Marshal List's informality goes only as deep as his taut skin.

He has few peers for keenness. List means cunning, and he is. His qualification for the Balkan assignment was very specific: Balkan means mountain, and he

knows mountains. His parts in the Polish and Western campaigns were, in a warfare of sudden mechanized thrusts, extremely difficult and brilliant.

In Poland he commanded the Fourteenth Army, which in three main spearheads dashed from Slovakia's mountains into southern Poland. His greatest feats were forcing Jablunka Pass, swinging his right wing through the Beskid Mountains, where communications were abominable, taking Przemyśl in three days, and dashing ultimately to Lwów. He used his pioneer and engineer troops with special skill, and was outstandingly daring in his use of the push-around-it-and-capture-it-later tactic.

In the Western campaign he commanded the crucial Twelfth Army breakthrough at Sedan. The French, who thought that the Ardennes Mountains and the Maginot Line, together with the Meuse and the Aisne Rivers, would be insurance enough in the Sedan sector, rushed their best troops farther west and north, left Sedan in the hands of demoralized Parisians under incompetent General André Corap. General List and his seasoned mountain troops, skilled now in the use of pontoons and mechanized equipment, overwhelmed Corap's inadequate tank force and 30 planes. After the breach had been forced, General List lost no time in dispatching Tank Expert General Heinz Guderian toward the coast, while he and his hill-climbers struck at the heart of France, and then lapped back on the useless Maginot Line.

The only mountain campaign in which List did not participate was Norway. To supply this deficiency, his right-hand man last week was Colonel General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, who commanded that exploit. Stubby, blue-eyed General von Falkenhorst is an expert in supply, prime problem in mountainous country, and is said to be an "enthusiastic" motorcyclist.

"From Now On." The decision to undertake the Norwegian campaign, Adolf Hitler told an assemblage of field marshals, generals, admirals and Party leaders in Berlin's Arsenal Museum at week's end, was "probably the most important decision of the war." In the context of the week's Balkan news, this was a significant phrase. The Germans claim they suspected British plans to encircle them via Scandinavia, and therefore decided to occupy Norway. Last week the Germans could not help seeing the possibility that the British might encircle them via the Balkans. Therefore a very important decision was called for in the Balkans.

Adolf Hitler was not specific as to whether the decision had been taken. But as fresh Italian disasters at the hands of the Greeks were reported, as more British were reported landing in Greece, he referred meaningly to the unhappy Italians:

"We think also of the Italian soldiers, who as allies also must give up their lives in distant parts of the world. . . .

"Behind us lies a winter of work. What remained to be improved has been done. The German Army is now the strongest military instrument in our history. In the months of this winter our allies bore the brunt of the whole power of the British attack, but from now on, German forces again will resume their share of this load."

* Commander C's wife and Benito Mussolini's favorite child, Countess Edda Ciano, who gave her name to Porto Edda (now in the hands of the Greeks), last week barely escaped with her life at another Albanian port, Valona. The Italians claimed that she was serving as a volunteer nurse aboard the hospital ship Po when a British plane torpedoed and sank it. She was said to have been one of the last to leave the ship.

* General of Infantry Eduard Dietl, who drove the British from Narvik.