



Monday, Mar. 31, 1941

YUGOSLAVIA: Hitler at the Frontier

There is a Serbian proverb, from the time of the Turks, which says that when Serbia is threatened the peasants pick up their guns and sing. Serbia's peasants marched and sang last week. So did the peasants of Bosnia, of Macedonia and of Montenegro. At Kragujevac in Old Serbia they marched round & round the village singing Oi Serbio! At Skoplje in South Serbia they sang Macedonian revolutionary songs. At Berane in Montenegro they sang battle songs from the days of the Turkish-Montenegrin wars. At Banja Luka in Bosnia they sang Be Ready, Komitadjis —and 30,000 of them waited at the railroad station for Branko Chubrilovitch, who resigned as Minister of Agriculture in protest against capitulation to Germany, and carried him through the streets on their shoulders. Everywhere they sang the new song:

Listen, girl I love,

Hitler has come to our frontier,

But the Serbs are ready with their guns

To see how many ribs the Germans have.

Their leaders were made of softer stuff. To them liberty was less precious than that ephemeral thing called unity—the artificial union of diverse Slavic tribes into the post-World War I state called Yugoslavia. Although all the other artificially-created post-war States had disappeared or been dismembered in two short years—Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, Rumania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania—Yugoslavia's leaders still hoped somehow to hold their own state together—and to keep their jobs. They were thinking not only of the tough, freedom-loving, German-hating Serbs, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Bosnians, but also of the Croats, the Slovenes and the Slavonians, those northern minorities which found the rule of Yugoslavia as oppressive as that of Austria-Hungary. If Yugoslavia refused to join Adolf Hitler's Axis, those provinces would be quickly lost, perhaps never to be regained.

Hitler in a Hurry. Spring was about to burst upon Europe. Peace must be brought to the Balkans so that Adolf Hitler could devote his best energies to Britain. If Yugoslavia would not join the Axis outright, Hitler would be reasonable. He would settle for partial adherence, with the right to use Yugoslav railways for "supply trains"; then, having cracked the shell of resistance, he could enforce his full demands later on. This sort of reasonableness fooled nobody, least of all Yugoslavia's leaders, but they thought it was better than war against the German machines. Better to be a Sweden than a Poland.

Thursday night Regent Prince Paul called a meeting of his Cabinet, the first in nearly five months, to announce the terms of Germany's virtual ultimatum. Yugoslavia's handsome, youthful Regent is personally friendly toward Great Britain, but he is not made of the same tough stuff as was his late cousin, King Alexander, and unlike Alexander he has tried hard to placate the autonomy-minded Croats. Against the virtual certainty of losing Croatia and its neighbors if the German demands were resisted, Prince Paul advised their acceptance. His Premier, Dragisha Cvetkovitch, and Foreign Minister Aleksandar Cincar-Markovitch agreed. So, naturally, did the Croatian Vice Premier, Vladimir Matchek, and Father Fran Kulovetch, the Slovene leader. The Minister of War, General Petar Pesitch, was doubtful.

Three Ministers were flatly opposed. They were Minister of Agriculture Chubrilovitch, Minister of Justice Mihajlo Konstantinovitch and Minister of Social Welfare Srdjan Budisavljevitch. All were members of the Serbian minority party and Dr. Chubrilovitch's brother was put to death by the Austrians for taking part in the assassination at Sarajevo. All three resigned from the Cabinet.

Four Days, Four Nights. Prince Paul worked day & night from Thursday until Monday to reorganize his Cabinet. A special train with steam up waited in Belgrade's railroad station to take Ministers Cvetkovitch and Cincar-Markovitch to Vienna to sign on Hitler's dotted line. During those four days & nights much happened. British and Greek diplomats worked feverishly in Belgrade to swing the Yugoslav Government to their side. The British made it clear that if Britain won the war with Yugoslavia on the German side, Yugoslavia's dream of a pan-Slavic State in the Balkans would be ended. The Greeks made it equally clear that even permission to the Germans to send supply trains through Yugoslavia would be regarded as a "hostile act."

The Church swung into action. Bishop Nicholai of Belgrade preached a sermon against capitulation. Patriarch Gavrilo Dozitch of the Serbian Orthodox Church went to the White Palace to warn Prince Paul against giving the Germans power over the Church. Bishop Valerian Pribichevitch, brother of the late great Patriot Svetozar Pribichevitch, telegraphed his resignation to the Regent; it would become effective when Yugoslavia signed with Germany.

The Army was mobilized, 1,000,000 strong, and most of the Army was ready to fight for independence. General Dusan Simovitch, Chief of the Air Force, was one of these. But War Minister Pesitch was old and frightened; he would not give the order. On whether the Army obeyed its leaders, or revolted under its younger officers, depended the fate of the last and hardest neutral nut that Hitler has tried to crack with his pincers.

In a Belgrade high school pupils set up a picture of Hitler and pelted it with chalk. This was part of a demonstration for the 13-year-old son of Justice Minister Konstantinovitch, one of the three Ministers who resigned from the Cabinet. But while the schoolboys were carrying young Konstantinovitch around the classroom on their shoulders, his father withdrew his resignation and joined the Government majority.

This was the signal that ministerial resistance was at an end. Prince Paul had his pro-Axis Cabinet and fresh jets of steam shot up from the special train as it chuffed out of Belgrade's station on a clear track for Vienna. Yugoslavia had fallen to the Axis—but not all Yugoslavs.

The Yugoslav Army was sleeping in its boots and side arms. Pamphlets strewn in the streets of Belgrade threatened assassination for the men who had capitulated.

In villages from the Danube to the Adriatic peasants still marched, some with guns. They thought the Army was with them and they sang:

The British are sending the navy;

Roosevelt is sending the planes;

And we, the battalions!

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