

GREECE AND ITS NEIGHBOURS ON THE EVE OF THE GERMAN
INVASION OF THE BALKANS, 1941

The Balkan nations' position in relation to the belligerent powers was directly linked with the particular development of the Greek-British cooperation on the eve of the German invasion of the Balkan Peninsula¹. This basic observation, however, should not lead us to look for a specific interstate formation or a common policy on a peripheral basis. The conclusion of the four-power Balkan Pact, in February 1934, had virtually confirmed the lack of the preconditions that would have made possible a regional pact along the lines of Locarno; its application would show the inability of the four powers to form even a simple multilateral bloc². The outbreak of the war would strengthen the centrifugal trends and intensify the tendencies of the Balkan states toward a self-sufficient policy in relation to their nearest neighbours. From this point of view, the armed conflict on the Greek-Italian front at first seemed to conform with Yugoslavia's, Bulgaria's, and Turkey's common desire to avoid any involvement in the war. Their position, however, should not be examined in isolation from external factors, because at any moment the bitter conflict between Germany and Britain would have spilled into the Balkan Peninsula. In that case, even if they opted not to join one side or the other, the warring powers would not hesitate, since they had the strength to do so, to force them into the war. The day after the Italian offensive, the German ambassador to Belgrade had no compunction in admitting quite baldly to his Greek counterpart that "in the present struggle for survival between the Axis powers and England, small nations cannot be taken into consideration as long as they act as obstacles"³.

1. For a general review of Greek-British relations between 1935 and 1941, see J. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941*, Oxford, 1977.

2. On the Balkan Pact and its impact upon interstate relations in the Peninsula, see C. Svolopoulos, "Le Problème de la sécurité dans le Sud-Est européen de l'entre-deux-guerres: A la recherche des origines du Pacte balkanique de 1934", *Balkan Studies*, 14 (1973), pp. 247-92; idem, "La Sécurité régionale de la S.D.N.", *The League of Nations in Retrospect*, Berlin and New York, 1983, pp. 272-7; D. Kitsikis, "Les Projets d'Entente balkanique, 1930, 1934", *Revue historique*, 241 (1969), pp. 117-40. See also, T. I. Geshkoff, *Balkan Union: A Road to Peace in South-Eastern Europe*, New York, 1940.

3. Ipourgio Exoterikon, 1940-41. *Hellenika Diplomatika Eggrafa* (Ministry of Foreign

The proposal made to the British government first by King George II and later, more plainly, by Metaxas, a few days after the start of the violent attack and the Greek forces' counter-offensive into Albanian territory, is directly linked with this state of affairs. The Balkan Policy of the British government had, at the beginning of the war, looked upon a neutral Italy. In order to facilitate the building up of the Empire's resources for a long war it had initially aimed at encouraging the Balkan states "to form themselves into a benevolently neutral bloc"⁴. After the entry of Italy into the war and, particularly, in the aftermath of its invasion of the Balkans, in the Greek Prime Minister's opinion, England ought to have shifted the war from a defensive to an offensive footing against Germany; by the time the Greek armed forces had decided to embark upon war operations, the Balkan front was the only secure base for successful operations against the Axis powers. "Consequently", he concluded, "England must consider, seriously and quickly, transferring the theatre of war from Egypt to Greece, in which case there is hope that this military action would draw in the vacillating Yugoslavs and the supportive Turks; and if it does not draw in Bulgaria, it will certainly neutralise it"⁵. Irrespective of whether or not it was possible successfully to put such a strategy into practice under the prevailing circumstances of the war, the direct connection of a counter - offensive initiative by the Greek and British forces with the prospect of winning over the friendly nations in the region and neutralising any potential adversaries was put forward as a condition for the success, and even as a desirable consequence, of this daring operation. In the end surprised no doubt by the way the operations on the Albanian front were going⁶, the British were unable to adopt Metaxas's plan,

Affairs, 1940-41. Greek diplomatic documents), Athens 1980 (hereafter H.D.E.), pp. 7-8: Mavroudis (Athens) to Simopoulos (London), 31 October 1940.

4. Public Record Office: CAB. 66/8, Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 11 June 1940.

5. I. Metaxas (mem.), 17 November 1940 (H.D.E., pp. 24-6). On the proposal submitted by the King, see: King George II (Athens) to King George V I, 10 Nov. 1940; King George VI (London) to King George II, 15 Nov. 1940 (H.D.E., pp. 19-20, 23-4).

6. On the first day after the Italian attack on Greece, the latter's ability to resist was estimated as follows: "Meanwhile, what about Greece? It is a tragedy to my mind that we have nothing except naval help to offer them. I should have thought it might be possible to rush out the ground staff of some bomber squadrons to Crete, flying the machines over later, as well as to send over even if it were only a couple of battalions from Egypt to stiffen the local Greek forces. I am by no means sure that the Greeks will not put up a good fight and only be pushed back gradually from point to point in their very broken country, especially if they are given real hope of our coming to their help. If so, we ought to be able to make

not because they rejected the principle, but because London found it impossible to allocate sufficient military forces to the Balkan front without directly endangering the defence of Egypt. This basic concept was at the bottom of Britain's regular supplying of the Balkan front's needs throughout the critical period between the Italian offensive and the German invasion of Greece in April 1941.

In view of this state of affairs, from this point onwards the Greek government's inclination was to seek the necessary support to enable Greece to face the obvious German threat in one of two ways: either with the help of significant British reinforcements, or by the adoption of "firm stances" by the neighbouring states, including Turkey. On the occasion of the first bilateral negotiations, which took place on 13-15 January in Athens between the Greek representatives (the Prime Minister and Fieldmarshall Papagos) and the British representatives (M. Palairet and General Wavell). Metaxas stated that the concentration of the German army in Romania "may pose a threat to Greece", which could be averted either by "an encounter with sufficient Anglo-Greek forces for this purpose" or by "the attitude adopted by the Balkan states and Turkey"⁷.

On the eve of the arrival of the commander of the Middle East forces, the British Minister to Athens had visited the Greek Prime Minister and announced that the British government, considering the German threat to the Balkans to be an absolutely serious one, had ordered its ambassadors in Yugoslavia and Turkey to make representations to the governments to whom they were accredited, drawing their attention to the danger and asking them what attitude they would adopt if the threat were carried out. More specifically, London's question was intended to clarify what position Yugoslavia itself would adopt in the event of Berlin's requesting that German troops be allowed to pass through its territory, and how Turkey would react if the Germans came down to Greece either via Yugoslavia or via Bulgaria. Palairet also informed Metaxas that "further and stronger steps are to be taken in Sofia relating to Bulgaria's position"⁸. The Greek government made similar moves: in a letter dated 6 January, the Prime Minister appealed to the Yugoslav regent not to allow the German forces to pass through Yugoslavian

sure of their hanging on to the Peloponnese and at any rate all the islands, even if continental Greece should have to go" (WO 216/118, [India Office] to Sir J. Dill, 28 Oct. 1940).

7. I. Metaxas (mem.), 15 January 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 58-9).

8. I. Metaxas (mem.), 12 January 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 51-2).

territory⁹; and the Greek ambassadors in the neighbouring capitals were ordered to pass on to the central authorities all information concerning the three Balkan states' attitude to the war developments.

The initial results of these joint activities were summed up in a memorandum written by Metaxas on 15 January immediately after his talks with General Wavell: "Regarding the position of the Balkan states, we have faith in Turkey, but we do not yet know what reply was given to the explicit British questions asked in Ankara. We believe that Bulgaria will not put up armed resistance to the passage of the German troops; and it is likely there will be collaboration between them. We know definitely that Yugoslavia will put up armed resistance to the passage of the German army through its territory to attack us, if Germany attempts this without provocation. Yugoslavia does not believe that there is any danger for the time being of German troops' moving down from Romania through Yugoslavia or Bulgaria. On the other hand, it has reason to be quite certain that the transfer of British troops to Macedonia will provoke an immediate German offensive; and, in that case, Yugoslavia makes no promises about the position it will adopt, nor whether it will put up any resistance to the passage of German troops through its territory in the direction of Greece"¹⁰.

The only clear reaction was that of Belgrade, as expressed in Prince Paul's reply to Metaxas's letter, and this response had a decisive effect on the Greek-British decisions. In view of Yugoslavia's threat that "although it was determined now to defend itself against any passage of the German army through its territory, the abovementioned assurance would be retracted in the event of a German attack provoked by the dispatch of British troops to Macedonia"¹¹, Metaxas was strengthened in his reticence towards the British pressures

9. I. Metaxas to Prince Paul, 6 January 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 45-6).

10. I. Metaxas (mem.), 15 January 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 58-9). On the exchange of views between the Greek Prime Minister, on the one hand, and his Yugoslav counterpart on the other, as well Prince Paul, see: Rossetis (Belgrade) to Metaxas, 11 January 1941. Metaxas to Rossetis, 12 Jan. 1941. Metaxas (mem.), 13 Jan. 1951. Metaxas (mem.), 16 Jan. 1941. Metaxas to the Yugoslav Minister in Athens, 17 Jan. 1941. Rossetis to Metaxas, 17 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 50-62). For the text of the letters exchanged between Metaxas and Prince Paul (13-17 January), see, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-61.

11. Metaxas (mem.), 18 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 62-3). Belgrade's position was also transmitted to the British government. According to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, "Prince Paul of Yugoslavia was alarmed at our proposal to send increased military assistance to Greece, and to build up a Salonika front. He took the view, apparently, that this would provoke the Germans into making a strong attack on Salonika; whereas if we

for the immediate dispatch of military reinforcement to Greece. The Greek Prime Minister was not disposed to accept the weak British assistance that London was able to provide at that particular moment: it was limited to five regiments — mainly military — artillery supplies, and a number of tanks¹². In his own terms, “while the dispatch of this force would be a provocation leading directly to a German and probably a Bulgarian attack on us, the inadequacy of this force will make our resistance a certain failure ... For this reason, we prefer to examine jointly and embark rapidly upon the necessary preparations for transporting British troops in such a way as not to attract the Germans’ attention”. However, this transportation would not take place “unless the German troops entered Bulgaria”¹³.

A brief survey of the first high-level bilateral Greek-British talks, in relation to the decisive stand adopted by the neighbouring Balkan states towards a possible German attack in the region, leads to a twofold conclusion: firstly, the idea of a multilateral peripheral front, under British leadership, to stop the German advance, proved completely unrealistic; secondly, the Greek-British side was in no position to diagnose the major diplomatic activities taking place on the initiative of the Wilhelmstrasse secret diplomacy.

Bulgaria had approached the Axis Powers long before its official accession on 1 March 1941, and on 8 February its military representatives had signed a special protocol with their German counterparts that determined Bulgaria’s role in the event of a German attack on Greece. In Yugoslavia, the government of Tsvetkovitch had intensified its secret negotiations with Berlin since January 1941, and on 14 February had even suggested the creation of an anti-British Balkan bloc. As far as Turkey (which was also engaged in a probing dialogue with Germany) was concerned, its procrastination in giving an explicit reply to the British proposals masked the inclination of the officials in Ankara to avoid entering into an alliance with Britain, or even with Greece, and to preclude involvement in the war as long as Turkey itself was not attacked by Germany¹⁴.

continued as at present they were unlikely to do so, at least for the present” (CAB. 65/21, W. M. (4) 6th Conclusions, 14 January 1941).

12. Metaxas (mem.), 15 Jan. 1941; Metaxas (mem.), 18 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 58-9, 62-3). Instead of the ten divisions that Greece had requested: Metaxas (mem.), 12 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 51-2).

13. Metaxas (mem.), 18 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., p. 63).

14. In the succinct words of Frank Weber, “yet after the Italian aggression [against Greece], officials in Ankara made no effort, by activating the alliance with Britain, to drive that nail home” (F. Weber, *The Evasive Neutral. Germany, Britain and the Quest for a Turkish*

Both the Greeks and the British were perpetually ill-informed about the developments that were rapidly brewing in the world of secret diplomacy. For instance, it was not until 7 March that the first confidential, but still unsubstantiated, information was secured about Hitler's probable intention to attack Russia¹⁵. Without a doubt, the signs of Berlin's imminent extension of its military presence into the Balkans had been building up for a long time, but there was no precise information about the plan of military action. On 29 January and 7 February, the Greek ambassador to Berlin telegraphed that Germany did not intend to go into action in the Balkans, a piece of intelligence which the Foreign Office guardedly accepted, since it was not in any position to contradict it¹⁶. On 10 February, in an official statement to the British ambassador to Athens, the Greek Prime Minister expressed the hope that the German troops might perhaps simply remain on the alert in Bulgaria and not embark upon aggressive operations against Greece, as long as no British forces arrived in Macedonia¹⁷. For its own part, the British government did not rule out this possibility, though it considered that, after the Wehrmacht's expected entry into Bulgaria, the Greek front would have to be strengthened with allied forces¹⁸. Winston Churchill had introduced a decisive note in a speech the previous day, when, with reference to the situation in the Balkans, he stated his conviction was that the war would soon enter a phase of greater intensity, though he was not in a position to establish Berlin's precise strategic aims¹⁹.

The first clear indications of the impending German offensive against Greece began to be perceived in the two capitals shortly after the middle of February. The Greek ambassador to Ankara communicated his fears in this respect following talks with, and off-the-record remarks by, his German, Italian, and Japanese counterparts²⁰. Both he himself, however, and Orme Sargent, Director of Political Affairs at the Foreign Office, construed the

Alliance in the Second World War, Columbia and London, 1979, p. 59. See also, Metaxas (mem.), 12 Jan., 15 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 51, 58).

15. According to the information transmitted by the Greek Minister in Moscow, after a confidential conversation with his Swedish counterpart. The source of these rumours was Berlin. The British government had the same information: Mavroudis to Simopoulos (London), 7 March 1941. Simopoulos to Mavroudis, 11 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 151-6).

16. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 29 Jan., 7 Febr. 1941. Simopoulos to Mavroudis, 11 Febr. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 68, 73, 79).

17. Korizis to Simopoulos, 10 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 77-8).

18. Simopoulos to Korizis, 12 Feb., 14 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 79-80, 85).

19. *Times*, 10 Feb. 1941.

20. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 12 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 80-1).

outspokenness of their statements as part of the intimidation tactics employed by the Axis powers²¹. Under these circumstances, the atmosphere of confusion was not to be cleared up before the Greek-British summit meeting in Athens on 22 February. The confidential reports from Bucharest confirmed the increased German penetration into Bulgaria, but they also transmitted the pacifying reassurances of the Bulgarian and Turkish authorities²². The Foreign Office's reaction to the announcement of the content of a conversation between the Greek Minister to Sofia and the Bulgarian Minister for Foreign Affairs is significant: "Mr. Romanos [chancellor to the Greek embassy in London] has been told in the Foreign Office that a conversation between our Minister and the Bulgarian Minister for Foreign Affairs could have taken place between the British Ambassador and the Bulgarian Minister. This argument is reported by the British ambassador, who received this vague answer. The assurances of the Bulgarian Minister are deemed to be of only relative significance by the people here, whose disquiet is founded on facts. They see an increasing German infiltration in conjunction with the strategic deployment of German and Bulgarian military forces. The Foreign Office accepts that certain circles hope that there will be no German invasion, but they entertain only faint hopes in King Boris's efforts and there is considerable anxiety as to the development of the situation"²³.

The Greek and British leaders were almost equally ignorant of the real intentions of the Bulgarian, Yugoslav, and Turkish governments. In Sofia, both the Greek and British ambassadors became the vehicles of the Bulgarians' repeated assurances that their country wished to maintain its neutrality, but was in no position to resist the Germans if they entered by force²⁴. Colonel Donovan, the U.S. government's special envoy in the Balkans, whose mission Eden described as "exceptionally beneficial"²⁵, was forming the impression that King Boris "has accepted the present situation under great pressure from Germany and is trying, by backing down in various ways, to gain time, in the hope either that peace will save the day or that the event will take place elsewhere and transfer the Germans' attention away from the Balkan Penin-

21. *Ibidem*. See also, Simopoulos to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (H.D.E., p. 82).

22. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 14 Feb. (T. 5320), 14 Feb. (T. 5407), 14 Feb. (T. 5425); Ministry of Foreign Affairs (off. note), 17 Feb., Simopoulos to Mavroudis, 18 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 83-6, 88-9, 91-2).

23. Simopoulos to Mavroudis, 16 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 86-7).

24. Pipinelis (Sofia) to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 Jan., 13 Jan. 1941; Rossetis (Belgrade) to Metaxas, 29 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 48-9, 53, 65-8).

25. R. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, New York, 1948, p. 258.

sula... He gives me the impression", he concluded, "of a visionary with a somewhat exaggerated belief in the virtues of peace" [!]²⁶. However, the confirmation a few days later of the imminent entry of the German troops created a climate of intense anxiety and pessimism amongst the Allies²⁷; even though the Greek Minister to Sofia, in a report dated 12 February, still expressed the hope that the trenchant language employed by the British Prime Minister three days earlier would dispel the impression in certain circles²⁸ that "the Germans could pass through Bulgaria without facing the consequence of a war with Bulgaria, and as a result it would have a very beneficial effect on the [Bulgarian] authorities' thinking and on public opinion"²⁹. Broadly speaking, one might say that up until the official announcement of Bulgaria's joining the Tripartite Treaty on 1 March, there still remained a last faint hope that Bulgaria's "integrity" would be preserved and a mass German military penetration be avoided³⁰.

As far as their mutual expectations from Yugoslavia were concerned, the Athens and London governments passed from optimism to utter pessimism. At first, Belgrade categorically rejected any notion of Germany's entering the central and southern Balkans: Yugoslavia would oppose, by force of arms if necessary, the entry of German troops into either its own or Bulgarian territory, and was not prepared to permit Thessaloniki to be captured. These assurances were given by the Prime Minister to the Greek ambassador on 17 January, and in a conversation with the British ambassador, the regent Prince Paul confirmed his country's decision to defend itself against any

26. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 3 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 69-70). See also, D. Kitsikis *I Hellas tis Tetartis Avgustu ke e Megale Dinamis* (Greece of 4th August and the Great Powers), Athens 1974, p. 110.

27. According to the British Prime Minister's statement to the Cabinet, "the evidence in our possession showed that the Bulgarian Government were conniving at the German infiltration into their country. Aerodromes were being constructed and hutments were going up, and it was only a question of a short time before Germany would be in a position to compel Turkey to fall in with her wishes". Nevertheless, the Turkish Foreign Minister was—according to Churchill—"affecting to regard as exaggerated the reports of the German penetration into Bulgaria" (CAB. 65/21, W.M. (41). 12th Conclusions, 3 February 1941).

28. Simopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 Febr., 9 Febr. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 72, 76).

29. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 12 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 81-2).

30. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 14 Feb. 1941; Simopoulos to Mavroudis, 16 Feb. 1941; Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 20 Feb. 1941; Rafail (Angora) to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 83-4, 86-7, 93-4, 115). See also, D. Kitsikis, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-3.

German offensive and to prevent, with arms if necessary, the German troops from entering its territory³¹. Without, of course, appreciating the radical change in Yugoslav policy which had come about in the meantime after the summit conference at Fusi³², a month or so later British officials were expressing their disappointment with the Belgrade government's attitude: although it would probably not allow the German forces to pass through its territory, it would not be prepared in any way to resist their passage through Bulgaria³³.

The vision of a Balkan front able to withstand German pressure was inextricably linked in the minds of the British with the belief that Turkey was destined to serve as their main source of support in the area. "The Turks no doubt would fight, and fight gallantly," Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary, observed in April 1940³⁴. Following Italy's entry into the war, the British Chiefs of Staff Committee recommended that "our policy should be to do all we can to induce Greece and Yugoslavia to intervene on the side of Turkey, France, and ourselves"³⁵. In early 1941, after Mussolini's attack on Greece, as reports of Nazi intentions to move troops stationed in Romania into Bulgarian territory reached London, the threat of a German invasion of Greece appeared compelling enough for the British government to try to secure a declaration from Ankara to the effect that Turkey would go to war against Italy or would intervene in the event of German penetration into Bulgaria or Yugoslavia, irrespective of the Germans' ultimate objective. In his reply on 19 January, the Turkish Foreign Minister gave the British Ambassador the spoken assurance that he "would regard as a *casus belli* various eventualities, including a German attack on Greece or a threat to Thessaloniki³⁶. But at the same time, the Turkish government expressed the view that neither war with Italy nor a "pure and simple" declaration against Germany "would at present constitute a practical or useful solution". An alternative suggestion that "common decision and action" between Turkey and Yugoslavia should be sought, with the prospect of including Bulgaria later, was futile, owing to the negative attitude of the Tsvetkovitch government³⁷.

31. Rossetis to Metaxas, 17 Jan. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 61-2).

32. First information received by the Greek government on 19 February from Moscow: Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 22 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., p. 95).

33. Romanos (London) to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., p. 92)

34. CAB. 66/7, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 29 April 1940.

35. CAB. 66/8, Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 11 June 1940.

36. FO 371/33311, Knatchbull-Hughessen to Eden, 5 February 1942.

37. FO 371/33311, Knatchbull-Hughessen to Eden, 5 February 1942 (report on Turkey during the year 1941).

By now the last hope, particularly as far as Britain was concerned, lay again with Turkey, even though the Allies' expectations about Ankara's possible role in combination with Belgrade or Sofia had just been dashed. London's disappointment in Belgrade's attitude was directly linked with the definitive failure of the plan of a common diplomatic front to deal with any danger from the North³⁸. And, as far as their appraisal of Turkey's position in relation to that of Bulgaria was concerned, the last sign of optimism had been given by Colonel Donovan in Ankara: "Following the Colonel's official talks here", the Greek Minister to Ankara telegraphed, "he has absolute faith in Turkey's attitude to its Allied obligations. With respect to various contingencies, the Colonel has established that in the event of an attack, Turkey will defend itself, and in the event of Germany's entering Bulgarian territory in order to attack us, Turkey will intervene"³⁹. The Foreign Office's information tallied with that of Greece, with one caveat: President Roosevelt's envoy was not convinced that Turkey would in fact intervene if Greece were attacked by the German forces alone⁴⁰. However, the British leaders no longer seemed to share this optimistic view: they maintained that in view of the unobtrusive and gradual German infiltration, "there will never come a specific moment when the situation in Bulgaria has reached the point when Turkey is forced to act". They added: "Furthermore, we here are not satisfied with the policy Turkey is following today; for Turkey absolutely insists that before it takes up a more active stand it must be supplied with more war equipment, while it is obvious that, having enormous needs itself, England is in no position to replace French production and to keep all of France's promises to Turkey"⁴¹. Oddly enough, this manifest scepticism on London's part, which was always mixed with the hope of more active help from Turkey, was not intensified when, on 17 February, the Ankara and Sofia governments concluded a non-aggression agreement, which, in Knatchbull-Hughes's estimation, "relieved Bulgaria of any anxiety about its southern frontier and permitted it to slip more easily into the Axis orbit without fear of Turkish reprisals"⁴².

38. Romanos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 Feb. 1941. Simopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 92-3).

39. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 5 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., p. 71).

40. Romanos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., p. 74).

41. Simopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., p. 76).

42. F. Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 81 The British Ambassador to Ankara, in a subsequent report, confirmed this: "It was on the 16th January that M. Saraçoğlu informed me that he hoped to reach some understanding with Bulgaria which would draw that country away from Ger-

If one looks for the underlying reasons which led Ankara to adopt this policy, it would appear more rational to accept the view put forward by the British Ambassador; namely, that Turkish officials were seriously disturbed by the Soviet-Bulgarian talks which took place in Sofia in November 1940, probably concerning a guarantee against a Turkish rather than a German attack on Bulgaria. Thus, the Turks attempted to cut the ground from under any such Soviet advances towards their northern neighbour⁴³.

Despite the perfectly accurate observations of the British Ambassador to Ankara, Foreign Office circles were inclined to underestimate the importance of the Turco-Bulgarian Declaration. On the other hand, Ankara announced that Turkish policy had in no way changed and remained faithful to Turkey's alliances; moreover, it could not remain indifferent to "foreign activities within [its] zone of security"⁴⁴. All the same, as far as Greece and Britain were concerned, this statement by the Turks was "anything but satisfactory"⁴⁵. However, the Greeks' evaluation of this event proved the most realistic: as they saw it, it was essentially a declaration that Turkey would remain passive, at least in the event of a German invasion of Bulgaria, and this, by extension, created the impression not only that Turkey would abandon Greece but also that it certainly had no intention of backing up the Yugoslav resistance⁴⁶.

The leaders of the two allied nations had the opportunity to cross-check their information and finally to clarify the Turkish and Yugoslav positions on the occasion of their important meeting in Athens between 22 and 25 February 1941⁴⁷. The Greek Prime Minister pointed out the absolute impos-

many and that Bulgaria was ready to examine proposals. The ensuing negotiations, which began to some extent with British approval, gradually took a line contrary to our own policy, for, whereas we had wished to induce Turkey to take a stern line against Bulgarian dealings with Germany, the Turkish Government gradually inclined to a friendly agreement which, by assuring King Boris of Turkish inaction, probably even encouraged him in his policy of selling his soul to Hitler".

43. FO 371/33311, Knatchbull-Hughessen to Eden, 5 Feb. 1942.

44. Concerning the exchange of views between Turkish, Greek and British officials on the subject of the explanatory declaration made by Ankara, see Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 25 Feb. 1941; Simopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 113-14, 116-17).

45. According to the joint statement of the Greek Prime Minister and the British Minister to Athens on 24 February 1941: Korizis (mem.), 24 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 107-8).

46. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 20 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 93-4). This statement was confirmed: Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 1 March 1941 (H.D.E., p. 118).

47. For the proceedings of the important meetings held in Athens between Greek and

sibility of ascertaining either Ankara's or Belgrade's intentions and of accurately forecasting the extent of the assistance they would be likely to offer. Anthony Eden, the head of the British delegation, had already arranged to go on to Ankara from Athens, and had also decided to write to the Yugoslav regent asking him to clarify his position in the event of German troops' entering Bulgaria⁴⁸. Both sides expressed their disapproval of the recent Turco-Bulgarian mutual declaration, but they were still basing most of their hopes on the assistance of Turkey.

King George II of Greece explicitly stated that the Greeks would fight, no matter who attacked them and whether or not foreign assistance was forthcoming⁴⁹. Nevertheless, in his memorandum, Alexander Koryzis observed, "I stressed how much, in the event of a German offensive, Greece would welcome any help Turkey might offer our army, even three divisions, or less than that, not only for military support, but also for the morale of the army and the people"⁵⁰. By now, the common Greek-British decisions and defence plans in the face of the impending German offensive, called for immediate clarification of the position to be adopted by these two Balkan neighbours.

On-the-spot inquiries into the Turkish government's intentions and stern moves in the direction of the Yugoslav government did not help the British Foreign Minister to reach definite conclusions. In reply to his assessment that the bulk of the British assistance would be given to the Greeks and that there would be very little left for them, the Turks said that they would not take any offensive action outside their own borders. Anthony Eden did not press them on this point; instead he endeavoured to persuade the Turkish leaders to regard the invasion of Greece as a *casus belli*, without, however, obtaining any definite response⁵¹. After meeting Eden in Athens and telling him that the Yugoslavs were still undecided, the British Ambassador to Belgrade was sent back to his post with a letter suggesting that the Yugoslav government cooperate with Greece against German pressure, and guaranteeing British support of a common Yugoslav-Greek front⁵².

British officials: H.D.E., pp. 96-108. See an initial account based on the British record of the Tatoi-conference in J. Koliopoulos, *op. cit.*, pp. 221ff.

48. Korizis (mem.), 22 Febr. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 96-101).

49. CAB. 65/22, 11 April (meeting) 1941.

50. Korizis (mem.), 24 Feb. 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 107-8).

51. CAB. 65/22, 11 April (meeting) 1941.

52. CAB. 65/22, WM. (41) 24th conclusions, 5 March 1941; Palaret to Prime Minister, 5 March 1941.

At a new meeting in Athens with Greek officials on 2 March, the British Foreign Minister expressed the view that there was no further point in relying on Yugoslavia, with whose regent he had failed to reach any agreement; though he did not, however, completely despair of its position. Nonetheless, his trip to Ankara had brought him to "the certainty of Turkey's loyalty". If Turkey were menaced, he explained, it would defend itself with all its forces; in the event of a German attack on Greece from Bulgarian territory, Turkey would hasten to help, "if Britain provides it with the necessary motorised forces and aircraft"; furthermore, in this case, and if Britain insisted, it would be prepared at least to declare war, although the Turkish leaders could see no point in "this platonic demonstration". Less optimistically, the Greek Prime Minister expressed his "justifiable disappointment in the attitude of both Turkey and Yugoslavia, upon whom we had based our strategy", and stated his "certainty" that "we shall fight with only the small forces we possess in Macedonia and with the support Britain is willing to offer us"⁵³.

Subsequent events were to confirm the most gloomy forecasts. On 1 March, Bulgaria joined the Triple Alliance and the German troops entered the country and began their march towards the Greek border. At the same time, London's concerted efforts and Athens's dramatic appeals met with no specific response from Belgrade, despite the restrained hopes of the British government in particular⁵⁴. The Greek Prime Minister's desperate appeal to his Yugoslav counterpart for a military collaboration between their two countries that would discourage Berlin's aggressive plans or "clear the Albanian front within a week"⁵⁵, were countered by the invocation of the delicate manoeuvres Belgrade would have to perform if it were not to deviate from its policy of "defence" against the pressure applied by the Axis powers. The only positive point was Yugoslavia's statement to the German government about Thessaloniki: the preservation of Greek sovereignty over this northern Greek metropolis was, for Belgrade, "the only conceivable guarantee"⁵⁶. But the ever weakening reassurances and the last vestiges of optimism evaporated when, around 21 March, it was announced that Yugoslavia was to join the Triple Alliance. This decision by the Tsvetkovitch government reached the

53. For the proceedings of the meeting, see Korizis (mem.), 2 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 120-34).

54. Simopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 March, 13 March, 21 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 151-2, 159, 166).

55. Korizis to Rossetis, 9 March (T. 8462) and (T. 8965) (H.D.E., pp. 152-4).

56. Rossetis to Korizis, 13 March 1941; Korizis to Rossetis, 15 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 160-2).

limits of political amorality when, by way of exchange, it elicited from Hitler a promise to satisfy its expansionist aims to the detriment of, precisely, Thessaloniki⁵⁷. By now the "painful surprise" suffered by the Greeks and the British was accompanied by the certainty that the German offensive would be announced at any moment⁵⁸.

The justifiable disappointment over the attitude of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia went hand in hand with the gradual fading of the two allies' hopes of positive help from Turkey. This realisation sprang from the confirmation of the fact that Turkey intended to avoid any involvement in the armed conflict, on the understanding that it would not be attacked by any of the warring powers. Ankara was supported in this policy by the aspiring invaders: the Bulgarian government gave its assurance that the German troops in the Balkans would not turn against Turkey⁵⁹; and in an exchange of letters, Ismet İnönü and Hitler essentially gave mutual assurances of non-aggression. R. Rafaïl, the Greek ambassador to Ankara, observed on 16 March: "From what has been said to me I conclude that if there remained the slightest doubt on Germany's part concerning Turkey's exclusively defensive position, this must by now have been removed by the answer Turkey has given"⁶⁰.

Despite the allied wing's efforts, which were also evident in the second, initially encouraging, meeting between Eden and Saraçoğlu in Nicosia⁶¹, Ankara showed no signs of abandoning this line, neither when on 27

57. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 21 March 1941; Simopoulos to Mavroudis, 22 March 1941; Rossetis to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 166-8).

58. Mavroudis to Rossetis, 23 March 1941; Korizis to Rossetis, 24 March 1941; Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 26 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 170-2, 174).

59. Mavroudis to Pipinelis, 4 March 1941 (H.D.E., p. 147).

60. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 16 March 1941; in confirmation: Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 29 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 163-4, 179-80).

61. CAB. 65/22, W.M. (41) 30th conclusions, 20 March 1941. According to the telegrams sent by the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister, Saraçoğlu had agreed to send a message in order to engage the Turkish Government in support of Yugoslavia. "In this message M. Saraçoğlu had said that the Turkish Government were determined to resist with all their forces an attack against them, and were convinced that Yugoslavia would do the same, if attacked. The message added that the Turkish Government thought Germany might attack Salonika through Bulgarian territory; that such an attack would constitute for the two countries a catastrophic danger requiring action in common". Finally, by the time Saraçoğlu after his return to Angora drew back and these instructions were never despatched (FO 371/33311, Knatchbull-Hughessen to Eden, 5 February 1942). On the optimism of Eden, after his meeting with Saraçoğlu, which was connected with Turkish special interest in the protection of Thessaloniki: Simopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 March 1941 (H.D.E., p. 166).

March a military coup overthrew the pro-Axis government in Belgrade and Peter II took power, nor even when on 6 April Germany mounted a simultaneous attack on Yugoslavia and Greece. In the first instance, the Greek government hastened to convey to the Turkish government its hopes that "since Turkey's action has hitherto depended on the position of Yugoslavia, which has been declared today in so revolutionary and jubilant a manner, Turkey too will come out on the side of the common struggle". Turkey's first statement, in response to the *démarche* made by the Greek Minister to Ankara, was "a mutual declaration with Yugoslavia that a German offensive against Thessaloniki will not be met with indifference by the two countries⁶²"; furthermore, the Turkish government sent a message to Belgrade urging contact between the two governments and manifesting Turkey's special interest in any attack against Thessaloniki⁶³.

At this point, the conditions for establishing a powerful anti-Axis peripheral front were being strengthened not only by England, but by the Soviet Union as well. Official announcements and diplomatic moves by Moscow revealed its steadily growing interest in the developments on the Balkan front, centring initially on Bulgaria, later on Turkey, and finally on Yugoslavia. Russia vigorously expressed its opposition to Sofia's pro-German policy, and its decision to encourage the Balkan states' resistance to the German advance was by now determining the nature of its operations on behalf of a triple Athens-Belgrade-Ankara front, which, with Britain's military backing and its own moral support, would be able to thwart Berlin's aggressive plans⁶⁴. These concerted diplomatic manoeuvres, however, were not destined to achieve any specific and timely result, which, anyway, would not have corresponded with Ankara's deeper desires. More significant for Ankara was the Soviet government's "satisfactory" answer when asked what Russia's attitude would be if Turkey were attacked⁶⁵.

Although no-one knew the details of the secret talks which, just two months later, would lead to the bipartite German-Turkish Treaty of Friend-

62. Mavroudis to Rafail, 27 March 1941 (H.D.E., p. 175).

63. FO 954/28, R. A. Butler: Memorandum of his conversation with the Turkish Ambassador to London, 28 March 1941.

64. Rafail to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 Feb. 1941; Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 27 Feb. 1941; Pipinelis to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 March 5 March 1941; Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 6 March, 11 March, 25 March, 5 April 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 113, 115, 135-6, 149, 156, 173-4, 189-90).

65. CAB. 65/22, 11 April 1941. See also, Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 12 March 1941; Simopoulos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 March 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 158-160).

ship, “dictated by hard practical considerations”, the Nazi offensive against Greece, on 6 April, dispelled any illusions about possible Turkish help in the Allied Powers’ struggle against the Nazi grip on the Balkans. The Turkish government’s reaction to Yugoslavia’s and Britain’s calls “at least to declare war, even without undertaking any military action”, or even simply to sever relations with Germany, was at first to procrastinate and, finally, to reject their pleas⁶⁶. It is significant that in a talk with the Greek Minister to Ankara on 10 April, the Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Saraçoğlu, did not mince his words when he announced the ministerial council’s decision not to alter his country’s position, observing that he knew “full well that Turkey is not going to take part in the war”⁶⁷! The same evening, Rafail stated in a telegram: “We can expect no more from Turkey. Mr. Saraçoğlu looked as though today’s events on Turkey’s frontier were taking place on another continent and seemed vexed that he had to repeat yet again the by now self-evident theory that Turkey would fight only if it were attacked”⁶⁸.

In this way, Turkey once again wriggled out of its allied obligations arising from the Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 1939. The first time was when Italy declared war on Great Britain and France in 1940; Ankara then invoked protocol No 2 of the treaty, which absolved it from any action leading to armed conflict with the Soviet Union. On both occasions, it was Anthony Eden’s firm conclusion that Turkey, “according to the letter of the treaty, should have come to our military assistance”. However, the British Foreign Secretary followed his statement with a significant observation, which clearly indicated the extent of the pressure London brought upon Ankara: “On the second occasion we made no formal request, and indeed it was tacitly agreed that British interests would be best served by Turkey taking no action”⁶⁹...

Undoubtedly, such a conclusion by Great Britain was directly connected with the confirmation that the plans for a multilateral anti-Axis Balkan front had failed. However, Ankara’s decision to evade its written obligations and neglect the common interests on a regional basis by refusing to cooperate with its neighbours, certainly dealt the final blow to the notion of the Balkan nations’ rallying together against the aspiring invader. With reference to the

66. Simopoulos to Mavroudis, 9 April 1941; Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 7 April, 10 April 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 196-7, 201, 203-4).

67. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 10 April (T. 12335) 1941 (H.D.E., p. 202).

68. Mavroudis to Simopoulos, 10 April (T. 12348) 1941 (H.D.E., pp. 204-5).

69. PREM. 3/447/12A, Policy towards Turkey: memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs: 4 April 1944.

Turkish attitude at this final phase, Knatchbull-Hughessen stated: "Thus ended our long-drawn-out efforts to unite the Balkans in their common defense, efforts which had begun in peace time and which had been continued with increased intensity as the danger approached. The Balkan Pact had crumbled between the fingers of its signatories. Perhaps Roumania was the most to blame. If she had agreed in due time to some accommodation with Bulgaria over the Southern Dobrudja, matters might have taken a better course. But the fabric of the pact was flawed from the beginning. Once it had collapsed Germany was free to reap her customary harvest. Roumania was already submerged: the treachery of Boris placed Bulgaria under the German heel: Greece, triumphant over Rome in arms now, as in arts of old, was to pay her heroic sacrifice"⁷⁰.

70. FO 371/33311, Knatchbull-Hughessen to Eden, 5 Feb. 1942.