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GREECE, BULGARIA AND THE APPROACHING TRAGEDY,  
1938-1941

“Every nation for itself and God for us all”  
(Lord Canning)

The attitude of the two neighbouring states, Greece and Bulgaria, towards the second global conflict of this century has so far been dealt with separately, mostly in the context of their relations with the Great Powers<sup>1</sup>. The present study focuses on the bilateral context and attempts to establish the course of Greek-Bulgarian relations and to identify the main factors that shaped them at that critical stage. The role of the Great Powers can hardly be overlooked, given its catalytic importance and the fact that much of the primary material is derived from the British Archives. A number of published Greek documents is available for the period following the Italian attack

1. The case of Bulgaria has attracted by far wider scholarly attention than the Greek foreign policy of the period under discussion; monographs on Bulgarian foreign policy include: Ilcho Dimitrov, *Anglija i B'lgariya, 1938-1941. Navecherieto i nachaloto na vtorata svetovna vojna* (England and Bulgaria, 1938-1941. The Origins and the Beginning of the Second World War), Sofia 1983; Hans-Joachim Hoppe, *Bulgarien - Hitlers eigenwilliger Verbundeter*, Stuttgart 1979; Marshall Lee Miller, *Bulgaria During the Second World War*, Stanford University Press 1975; Stoyan Rachev, *Anglo-Bulgarian Relations during the Second World War, 1939-1944*, Sofia 1981; Dimitar Sirkov, *V'nshnata politika na B'lgariya, 1938-1941* (The Foreign Policy of Bulgaria, 1938-1941), Sofia 1979; Greek foreign policy is dealt with to the extent British records permit in: John S. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941*, Oxford 1977; the hindsight of a former diplomat is provided in: Βασίλειος Π. Παπαδάκης, *Διπλωματική ιστορία του ελληνικού πολέμου, 1940-1945* (Diplomatic History of the Greek War, 1940-1945), Athens 1956; a number of Greek diplomatic records are used in: Δημήτρης Κιτσίκης, *Η Ελλάδα της 4ης Αυγούστου και οι Μεγάλες Δυνάμεις. Τα αρχεία του ελληνικού υπουργείου Εξωτερικών, 1936-1941* (4th of August Greece and the Great Powers. The Records of the Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1936-1941), Athens <sup>2</sup>1990; finally, selected diplomatic records on Greece and the attack of the Axis Powers are published in: Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών (Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs), *1940-41, Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα* (1940-41, Greek Diplomatic Records), Athens 1980.

only, while, due to language barriers, access to Bulgarian sources was limited to secondary material.

### *A Sour Legacy*

Following the 1919 peace settlement, the trend of Greek-Bulgarian relations was an unhappy one. Bulgarian territorial claims, financial demands from both sides, as well as a climate of mutual mistrust and suspicion constituted the bitter legacy of prolonged conflict. In the first place, what originated as a treaty provision for an economic outlet for Bulgaria on the Aegean was left unresolved with a poisonous effect on bilateral relations: in 1923 the Lausanne Conference had confirmed the undertaking in clause 48 of the Treaty of Neuilly to accord Bulgaria freedom of transit and a free zone in Dedeagatch leased in perpetuity. A draft treaty giving her control of the port and placing the railway under international administration had been prepared too. Yet the Bulgarian delegation would have accepted nothing less than a territorial corridor connecting Bulgaria with the sea. Eleftherios Venizelos, head of the Greek delegation, then offered exactly the same conditions in the Salonika port as those given to Yugoslavia. This was also rejected, thus exposing the fact that Bulgarian interests did not concern an economic outlet of any sort but lay in acquisition of territory<sup>2</sup>. The activity of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO) and its influence upon successive Bulgarian cabinets between 1923-1934, and, afterwards, the increasingly open revisionist tone of the Bulgarian foreign policy, could only fuel Greek misgivings.

Furthermore, the question of minorities remained a constant irritant after the abortive Politis-Kalfov agreement of 1924, occasionally involving Belgrade; similarly the application of the Convention of Mutual and Voluntary Emigration of 1919 and the issue of Bulgarian war reparations strained Greek-Bulgarian relations, despite the short-lived settlements of 1928 and 1930. The Greek side tended to connect the Bulgarian claim to the outstanding balance from abandoned properties, under the Convention, to the question of war reparations accorded to Greece by the Peace settlement. After the suspension of reparation payments, the Greek governments reacted by raising tariffs on Bulgarian goods tenfold in 1932, which they maintained high until 1938<sup>3</sup>.

2. *The Times*, 4 Aug. 1923, "Bulgaria and the Aegean", statement by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Ronald McNeill.

3. Κωνσταντίνος Καραμανλής, *Ο Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος και οι εξωτερικές μας σχέ-*

Bulgarian revisionism remained a constant source of anxiety for the Greek governments, reaching a point of obsession in the late 1930s. This accounted significantly for the decision of Athens to join Sofia's neighbours in establishing the Balkan Pact in 1934 and to seek British and French guarantees later on. Until 1939, and despite the emergence of the more immediate threat from Italy, Greek staff plans provided only for defensive warfare along the Greek-Bulgarian border. This trend of thought was reflected in the expensive programme of fortification in Eastern Macedonia — the so-called Metaxas line — as well in the direction of Greek manoeuvres. Meanwhile, the isolation of Bulgaria within the Balkan context contributed to her drift towards the revisionist camp<sup>4</sup>.

### *The Twilight of Peace*

Somewhat ironically, 1938 was marked by a spell of relaxation in Greek-Bulgarian relations. A trade agreement was signed between the National Banks of Bulgaria and of Greece in January. The following month, the Greek government, reversing the practice hitherto adopted, unilaterally accorded most-favoured nation treatment to most principal exports of Bulgaria. Sofia reciprocated later in the year. The net effect was some increase in a piteously low volume of trade, which, between 1936-1938 had accounted for only 0,3% of Greece's exports and 0,2% of her imports<sup>5</sup>.

On the political level, matters were rather more complicated. To be sure, both countries were ruled by authoritarian monarchical regimes, the Bulgarian maintaining some vestiges of parliamentary institutions, the Greek 4th of August regime aping the fascist model. Royal influence was paramount in the conduct of foreign policy, in the case of Bulgaria dictating a cautious, temporising approach to relations with the Great Powers without disavowing revisionist aspirations, while in Greece King George's presence guaranteed the preferential treatment of British interests. Anyhow, appearances of

*σεμς*, 1928-1932 (Eleftherios Venizelos and [Greek] Foreign Relations, 1928-1932), Athens 1986; Public Record Office (hereafter: PRO), FO 371/22371 R2032, Sir Sydney Waterlow to Anthony Eden, "Greece: Annual Report, 1937", 19.2.1938; FO 371/23777 R886, Waterlow to Viscount Halifax, "Greece: Annual Report, 1938", 31.1.1939.

4. Koliopoulos, pp. 120-122; FO 371/22371 R2032, "Greece: Annual Report, 1937", 19.2.1938.

5. FO 371/23733 R2140, George W. Rendel to Halifax, "Bulgaria: Annual Report, 1938", 16.3.1939; Bickham Sweet-Escott, *Greece: Political and Economic Survey, 1939-53* (London, 1954), p. 187 (table 18).

improvement owed much less to a genuine desire of the two sides for a settlement of their differences than to Great Power exigencies in the Balkans. Faced with German and Italian aggressiveness, the British government pondered over a general rapprochement between Bulgaria and the members of the Balkan Entente with a view to promoting stability in the region. The Turkish government, which the British would repeatedly try to employ in their effort to influence the course of Bulgarian foreign policy, acted as mediator. Negotiations were strictly limited to the question of lifting the restrictions on Bulgarian rearmament; anything more far-reaching, if realised, would almost certainly stumble upon substantial Bulgarian demands. The talks resulted into the Salonika Agreement on 29 July 1938. According to its terms, Bulgaria was once more free to rearm. The Agreement also provided for the reciprocal abolition of the demilitarised zones on either side of the Thracian border as stipulated by the Treaty of Lausanne. In return, both parts undertook to abstain from violence in their relations to one another<sup>6</sup>.

The government of Ioannis Metaxas loyally co-operated with British policy in bringing about the Salonika agreement, without raising the issue of a reciprocal Bulgarian undertaking to respect the *status quo*, as the Romanians had done — without success. The censored Greek press greeted the agreement with expectations for a substantial improvement in bilateral relations. In early October even King George II seemed to discuss the possibility of a visit to Sofia<sup>7</sup>. However, in Bulgaria the agreement aroused little enthusiasm as it was seen “as merely confirming a position already established”<sup>8</sup>. In effect, the agreement, a typical act of appeasement, merely provided a brief and deceptive thaw in the Balkans. All parties hastened to garrison their former demilitarised zones — even before the other parties to the Peace Treaties affected had given their assent. What was more, the recognition of Bulgaria’s right to rearm appeared a significant concession to the revisionist principle, since Bulgaria had not been required to renounce her claims. Henceforward, the question of including Bulgaria in the Balkan Pact could only be discussed on the basis of territorial concessions. The Czechoslovakian crisis decisively tipped the balances in favour of the revisionist dictatorships. In Sofia, the Munich agreement was hailed as suggesting the termination of

6. Dimitar Sirkov, “The Salonika Agreement of July 31, 1938”, *Études Historiques*, vol. VIII, Sofia 1978, p. 349; FO 371/23733 R2140, “Bulgaria: Annual Report, 1938”, 16 3.1939.

7. FO 371/23777 R886, “Greece: Annual Report, 1938”, 31.1.1939.

8. FO 371/23733 R2140, “Bulgaria: Annual Report, 1938”, 16.3.1939.

the Versailles Treaty regime and triggered irredentist agitation. King Boris and his government chose to canalise it initially to the direction of Southern Dobrudja. Yet, further claims were from time to time officially restated: in April 1939, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Georgi Kiosseivanov, addressing the Foreign Affairs Committee of the *Sobranje*, referred to the Aegean outlet; the same claim was reiterated by the Bulgarian Ambassador in Ankara in June<sup>9</sup>. As a result, Greek-Bulgarian relations would deteriorate by the end of 1938 to a degree justifying a diplomat's remark that "the only tangible result of this short-lived rapprochement was the renaming of the 'Voulgarotkonou' street in Salonika"<sup>10</sup>.

The Greek government turned towards extracting a formal British commitment to Greece's security. Even before the signing of the Salonika agreement, Metaxas had proposed either a guarantee, or, alternatively, the conclusion of an Anglo-Greek alliance. King George reiterated the proposal shortly after Munich<sup>11</sup>. It was a course of action dictated by the regime's almost unqualified attachment to Britain. Save from the threat posed by the expansionist policy of fascist Italy and Bulgarian revisionism, there were domestic reasons too. Britain had been the catalyst in the restoration of the monarchy and had opted for cooperation with the regime established under the King's auspices. Metaxas, for his part, ensured the protection and special treatment of British interests in the country. Yet, his proposals for the conclusion of an Anglo-Greek alliance were repeatedly turned down. Divergence of security considerations were crucial in this respect: whereas the Greek government seemed almost exclusively preoccupied with the Bulgarian danger, the British were mainly concerned with containing German penetration of southeastern Europe and reasserting their position *vis-à-vis* the Italians in the Mediterranean.

Disillusionment with appeasement hardened the Greek government in its anti-revisionist attitude. This became evident in spring 1939, when some quarters, including the British Minister to Sofia, suggested a comprehensive

9. Sirkov, pp. 352-3; by the same author, "Bulgaria's National Territorial Problem during the Second World War", *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 19.3. (1991), 3; FO 371/24882 R939, Rendel to Halifax, "Bulgaria: Political Review of 1939", 12.1.1940; Παπαδάκης, pp. 19-20.

10. FO 371/23777 R886, "Greece: Annual Report, 1938", 31.1.1939.

11. Koliopoulos, pp. 87-93; by the same author, "Greek Foreign Policy and Strategy, 1939-1941", *Balkan Studies*, 29.1 (1988), 93-4; according to Kitsikis, Metaxas' offer of alliance was not sincere but was made at the behest of King George and in the hope that the British would refuse it: Κιτσίκης, pp. 91-2.

settlement between Bulgaria and her neighbours with the hope to facilitate the formation of a solid pro-Western Balkan bloc. Although the British had in mind Southern Dobrudja as a possible *quid pro quo*, reports of Anglo-French interest in such a scheme seriously upset Athens. Metaxas felt the need to reaffirm publicly that any demands regarding territorial change, “even if pressed by peaceful means”, would be considered by Greece as a hostile act<sup>12</sup>. Eventually, the Foreign Office felt disinclined to pursue this course. The British guarantee of April 1939 to Greece and Romania went some way towards allaying anxieties regarding Western-sponsored revisionism. Reversely, it did not fail to disappoint Sofia.

Revisionist aspirations apart, other important reasons accounted for Bulgaria’s increasing attachment to Germany and the Axis powers. The Germans entertained immense leverage through the virtual control of Bulgarian foreign trade and rearmament. A considerable section of the Bulgarian ruling élite and the military were overtly pro-German, while German influence was evident in key positions in the police, in the press, as well as among the intelligentsia. Moreover, Germany could capitalise on the Bulgarian establishment’s fear of Soviet influence and communism<sup>13</sup>. The Western powers proved entirely ineffective in challenging this influence. In the British Foreign Office a trend of thought could go as far as to concede Germany her *Lebensraum* in the whole of central and eastern Europe. George Rendel, the British Minister who had been at pains to preserve a measure of British influence in Sofia, often working to “correct the impression” of antirevisionist Britain, had ample reason to feel frustrated<sup>14</sup>.

### *Neutrality of Sorts*

When war broke out in September 1939, suspicion and uncertainty about the intentions not only of the neighbour but also of the Great Powers temporarily created a state of nervousness and tension. Allied guarantees to Greece and Romania, and the Treaty of Alliance between Britain, France and Turkey, signed in October 1939, seemed to solidify an anti-revisionist bloc around Sofia. Rumours of Allied intention to set up an “eastern front” in the Balkans

12. Elizabeth Barker, *British Policy in South East Europe in the Second World War*, London 1976, pp. 7-8; Παπαδούκης, pp. 18-19; FO 371/23777 R886, “Greece: Annual Report, 1938”, 31.1.1939.

13. Sirkov, “Bulgaria’s National Territorial Problem”, 5, 7; FO 371/24880 R8007, Rendel to Halifax, 708, 16.10.1940.

14. Barker, pp. 6-7; FO 371/24877 R7159, Rendel to Halifax, 525, 20.8.1940.

intensified Bulgarian apprehensions. At some point, their government was led to “expect almost daily the presentation of an Allied ultimatum”<sup>15</sup>. Uncertainty regarding the course of the European conflict and a certain measure of insecurity compelled King Boris to announce Bulgaria’s neutrality on an early date. On the Greek side of the border there were also signs of nervousness: recollection of two Bulgarian invasions within living memory led some people to abandon their homes in the frontier zone. The authorities tightened security measures, including the deportation of a number of “suspect elements”<sup>16</sup>. Some relaxation ensued after the Bulgarian declaration of neutrality on 16 September 1939.

War-scare in the Balkans considerably eased after the collapse of Poland. During the six months of the “Phoney War”, as both camps strived to advance their position mainly through diplomatic and economic means, a number of bilateral understandings manifested the tendency of the Balkan powers to restore a measure of confidence between them. In September, Greece and Italy reached an understanding followed by the withdrawal of troops from either side of the Greek-Albanian border<sup>17</sup>. A similar agreement between Bulgaria and Turkey was concluded in the following month<sup>18</sup>. The 7th Council of the Balkan Pact, which met at Belgrade in early February 1940, was hailed as a high mark of Balkan solidarity. Yet, it was to be the last. Bulgaria proved a major stumbling bloc. Allied, particularly British, efforts concentrated on securing the consolidation of a neutral Balkan bloc. More clearly than before, territorial concessions were regarded as a precondition for bringing Bulgaria in. As it turned out at the Belgrade Balkan Council, the idea was for Romania to offer Bulgaria some accommodation over Southern Dobrudja. Yet the Romanian Foreign Minister Grigore Gafencu turned the tables on the rest of his colleagues by proposing that they should all contribute territory for the common purpose. That was something the latter were not prepared to accept<sup>19</sup>.

15. Barker, p. 16; Sirkov, *V'nshnata politika*, pp. 168ff.; FO 371/24882 R939, “Bulgaria: Political Review of 1939”, 12.1.1940.

16. FO 371/24877 R440, E.C. Hole, HM Consul, Salonica, to Sir Michael Palairet, HM Minister, Athens, 5.9.1939.

17. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection*, pp. 114-120.

18. FO 371/23780 R10587, Rendel to Palairet, 19.11.1939; FO 371/24871 R8793, minutes.

19. Barker, pp. 11, 57; Miller, p. 14; Ιωάννης Μεταξάς, *Το προσωπικό του Ημερολόγιο* (I. Metaxas’ Personal Diary), vol. 4, Athens 1960, p. 451; Rachev’s claim that the British government “demanded” from Metaxas “that Bulgaria be granted an outlet on the Aegean

Meanwhile, the policy of neutrality was practised by the Athens and the Sofia governments in consistently diverging directions. From the early stages of the war Greek neutrality was evidently biased in Britain's favour: in September 1939 Metaxas declined the expressed renewal of the Greek-Italian pact of friendship, while, following two Anglo-Greek trade agreements in October 1939 and January 1940, the Greek government undertook to drastically curb its trade with Germany; at the same time, it secured the services of the Greek merchant marine to the British transport needs<sup>20</sup>. In Bulgaria, the government of Bogdan Filov, who succeeded Kiosseivanov in January 1940, consolidated the pro-German orientation of Bulgarian foreign policy, despite the image of impartiality, which Tsar Boris seemed anxious to maintain *vis à vis* the Western powers. An increase in contacts with the Soviet Union, proved more of a side-effect of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and was quite short-lived to have a real effect on the pro-Axis course of Bulgarian foreign policy<sup>21</sup>. Significantly, from the outset, both Athens and Sofia expressly undertook not to take any step in foreign policy without, at least, prior consultation with London and Berlin respectively<sup>22</sup>.

While the two countries progressively lined up along diametrically opposite directions, the prospect of an understanding still attracted some people. In April 1940, Panayotis Pipinelis, the Greek Ambassador to Sofia, discussed the possibility of a Greek-Bulgarian rapprochement, similar to that effected between Greece and Turkey. Greek hopes were encouraged by Turkish-Bulgarian contacts, which had produced a number of common statements stressing their commitment to good neighbourly relations. According to the Turks, the Bulgarians had also undertaken "to defend their neutrality against all comers"<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, the preservation of Bulgarian neutrality was all that Greece and the Western Allies wished for. Concrete proposals for improving Greek-Bulgarian relations were put forward by at least two diverse, but not entirely unconnected, sources. In April 1940, the Third Secretary of the British Embassy in Sofia, G. L. McDermott, came up with a functional approach: drawing attention to the improvement in Greek-Bulgarian trade figures following the reversal of the Greek tariff policy on Bulgarian agricultural

at Dédé Agach in the name of Balkan unity" is passed totally unsubstantiated by either British records or Metaxas' diary: Rachev, pp. 12, 14.

20. Koliopoulos, pp. 127-132.

21. Sirkov, p. 205ff.; Miller, pp. 19-23; Rachev, p. 19.

22. Sirkov, p. 171; John O. Iatrides (ed.), *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports. Greece, 1933-1947*, Princeton N.J. 1980, pp. 166-7.

23. Παπαδάκης, pp. 39-41; FO 371/24877 R4459, Rendel to Halifax, 4.4.1940.



products, he proposed the strengthening of economic ties through a three-cornered trade arrangement involving Britain, as a first step towards a more profound understanding. He further proposed the completion of the Sofia-Struma railway line to join the railway to Salonika, a step with obvious military implications: it was for fear that the line might be of greater advantage to enemy forces that the Greek General Staff had in the past opposed such an extension. The Foreign Office shared these misgivings. Finally, the Ministry of Economic Warfare had its own reservations regarding British ability to carry through the proposed trade arrangement, and the scheme lapsed<sup>24</sup>.

McDermott's arguments were echoed in an unofficial Greek initiative that found expression during a visit of representatives of Greek-Bulgarian associations and the Greek Chambers of Commerce to Sofia in May 1940. The party's spokesman, Loukas Kanakaris Roufos, former Minister for Foreign Affairs<sup>25</sup>, spoke to Allied diplomatic representatives in Sofia of his own plan for an early rapprochement between Greece and Bulgaria. As a first step he suggested the the immediate ratification of the Greek-Bulgarian commercial convention — which was practically complete but held up for financial as well as political reasons. Upon returning to Athens Roufos pursued the matter further and solicited the support of Sir Michael Palairet, the Minister Ambassador to Greece. But the idea cut no ice with the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivan Popov, who brought up against it the previous recognition of the Bulgarian claim on abandoned properties<sup>26</sup>.

After the fall of France and Italy's entry into the war in June 1940, Greek anxieties regarding Bulgarian intentions ran high once more. Reports of extensive rearmament, particularly of the airforce, and troop movements in Bulgaria loomed large in the mind of the Greek General Staff and almost overshadowed the threat gathering in Albania. As late as April 1940, General Alexandros Papagos, the Greek Commander-in-Chief, came up with requests for reinforcing the Metaxas line<sup>27</sup>. In the diplomatic field, the signs

24. FO 371/24877 R4922, memo. by G. L. McDermott, 3rd Secretary, British Legation, Sofia, 12.4.1940; FO 371/24877 R4922A, FO memo. for Department of Overseas Trade, 27.5.1940, and Ministry of Economic Warfare to FO, 5.6.1940.

25. L. Kanakaris Roufos had served as Minister for Foreign Affairs under dictator Th. Pangalos in 1925-6, shortly after the Petrich incident.

26. FO 371/24877 R4922A, Rendel to Halifax, 11.5.1940; FO 371/24877 R6178, Palairet to FO, 18.5.1940; FO 371/24877 R4922A, Rendel to Halifax, 27.5.1940.

27. Koliopoulos, pp. 169-172; Μεταξά, *Ημερολόγιο*, p. 464; FO 371/24879 R5762; the Greek plan provided for static, defensive warfare, as the emphasis to fortifications clearly implied; Rachev's allegations that concentrations of Greek troops along the Bulgarian border aimed at "neutralising" Bulgaria, appear totally unfounded; cf. Rachev, p. 14.

were rather mixed. Indeed, there had been occasional assurances from the Bulgarian side: for what they were worth, in January 1940 assurances had been given to Turkey, Greece's formal ally, that Bulgaria would not attack any of her neighbours and that she would defend herself against any attack. Later, in August 1940, the Bulgarian Ambassador to London, Nikola Momchilov, told the British Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs that "Bulgaria (would) in no circumstances (seek to) profit" by an Italian attack on Greece in order to satisfy her claims. The Ambassador also admitted that unlike Southern Dobrudja, the "Aegean region" "raised a number of complicated issues"<sup>28</sup>. Yet Momchilov was overtly pro-Allied, and his statements did not necessarily reflect the mood prevailing in Sofia circles. By mid-1940 Bulgarian foreign policy had veered decisively towards the realisation of a clearly expansionist programme. Although Southern Dobrudja constituted the immediate target, Greek and Yugoslav territories also formed part of the agenda. Talking to Rendel in July 1940, Popov had referred to the claim for a territorial outlet to the Aegean as a "vital necessity" for Bulgaria. From Moscow, the Bulgarian Minister was reported in early October as attaching particular emphasis on the same issue<sup>29</sup>. Of course, the Greek government ignored at the time Mussolini's unsuccessful attempt to lure king Boris

28. FO 371/24870 R7264, minute of conversation, Richard A. Butler - N. Momtchiloff 21.8.1940; FO 371/24880 R7326, FO to Athens and Sofia, 23.8.1940.

29. Ilcho Dimitrov, "La Bulgarie et l'agression italienne contre la Grèce", *Guerres mondiales*, 146 (1987), 59; Sirkov, "Bulgaria's National Territorial Problem", 4-5; FO 371/24870 R7147, Rendel to Halifax, 17.7.1940; FO 371/24870 R7782, Stafford Cripps, Ambassador to Moscow, to Halifax, 804, 1.10.1940. It ought to be noted that Bulgarian claims, at least those reaching London and Athens at the time, were limited to "an outlet on the Aegean" and did not explicitly include Greek Macedonia. The Macedonian party did not seem to have played a decisive role in influencing the course of Bulgarian policy at the time. IMRO had been effectively ostracised from Bulgarian public life since 1934, although its influence was by no means dead. Its exiled leader, Ivan Mikhailov reportedly sought to contact both the Allied and the Axis powers. In early 1940 Rendel was approached by Dr Radan Sarafov, nephew to the IMRO leader of its early period, Boris, who argued about the necessity for the Allies to win over the support of the Macedonian party as an obstacle to Soviet or German penetration of Bulgaria. Of course that would entail promises regarding eventual frontier revision, which the British Ambassador not prepared to contemplate. The Italians, traditional champions of the IMRO, at the time of their Greek adventure, seemed to have nourished a scheme for a joint Albano-Macedonian state under their control and, apparently, Albanian-dominated: FO 371/24880 R613, Rendel to Halifax, 5.1.1940; FO 371/24879 R6592, Rendel to Halifax, 297 & 298, 18.6.1940; FO 371/24880 R7075, Rendel to Philip B. Nichols, 25.8.1940; FO 371/24880 R8104, Lambert, Sofia, to FO, 19.10.1940; *ibid.*, FO to Ministry for Economic Warfare, 30.10.1940.

in common action against Greece, a fortnight before the invasion. Fear of Turkey and the apparent lack of Italo-German coordination lay, according to Bulgarian historiography, behind Boris' evasive attitude<sup>30</sup>.

### *Last Act*

During the early stage of the Italian attack, Bulgarian attitude was one of reserve: Popov could only express regret and stated to the Greek Ambassador that the Bulgarian policy remained unchanged. Pipinelis could detect among Bulgarian public opinion some sympathy for Greece making a stand against a formidable enemy<sup>31</sup>; however, his reports tended to present matters in too reassuring a way. In fact, both Rendel and Pipinelis laid much hope on King Boris' reluctance to commit the country on Germany's side<sup>32</sup>. For one thing, Boris was a man haunted by bitter memories and grave anxieties, who absolutely needed to play his hand safe. During this period, he was often reported by Rendel as being "nervous", "depressed" and "frightened". Realising that a decision was bound to affect the stability of the regime and the future of his dynasty, Boris tried to avoid the dilemma of taking sides. To the German demands for alignment with the Axis—submitted as early as 16 October 1940—he countered the danger of Bulgaria becoming directly involved into a conflict for which she was militarily unprepared. Uncertainty regarding the reaction of Yugoslavia and Turkey as well as Greek successes in Albania undoubtedly played a part in enhancing Boris' reservations. After his meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden on 17 November 1940, the German dictator would inform Mussolini that "Bulgaria, which showed little willingness to join the Tripartite pact, is now (i.e. after the Italian setback) completely disinclined to consider such a step"<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, Boris had his explanation to the Allies ready: in his much-quoted talk with President Roosevelt's personal emissary, Colonel William J. Donovan, he claimed: "As the head of a small nation, in dealing with a strong one wishing to make use of us, I must gain time. (...) I must not run the risk of having my country over-run without first attempting to reduce the shock"<sup>34</sup>.

30. Dimitrov, "La Bulgarie et l'agression italienne", 55-69; Miller, p. 35.

31. *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, nos. 8, 9, 23.

32. *Ibid.*, nos. 18, 30, 35, 110; FO 371/24922 R1071, record of conversation, Brig A.C. Arnold, British Military Attaché, - King George II, 13.1.1940.

33. Miller, p. 36.

34. FO 371/29721 R3928, memo. of conversation, Col. W. J. Donovan - King Boris, 22.1.1941.

In addition to royal reservations, Soviet strategic interests and influence in Bulgaria, although in itself not particularly welcome to both the British and the Greek governments<sup>35</sup>, eventually came to be considered a strong counter-argument against Bulgarian commitment to the Axis. If the latter proved unavoidable, Bulgaria, it was secretly hoped, might develop into a ground of German-Russian conflict. Besides, the Foreign Office had set as a primary objective for British policy in southeastern Europe “to exploit conditions which are likely to embroil the Soviet Union and Germany in the Balkans”<sup>36</sup>. Boris, for his part, perceived himself in an extremely delicate position *vis-à-vis* Russian influence in his country. He appeared disturbed by the prospect of having to choose between Moscow and Berlin, and expressed the hope that the “red peril” might eventually bring Britain and Germany to a negotiated peace<sup>37</sup>. The visit of the Secretary General of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Arkadi Sobolev, to Sofia in November 1940 was the culmination of a Soviet effort to keep the country away from the Axis by offering a pact of mutual assistance and holding the prospect of territorial advance. Concessions would involve territory in Thrace up to the Enos-Midia line<sup>38</sup>. The Soviet overture came to the heels of Boris’ visit to Berchtesgaden, where Hitler confronted the King with an “invitation” to Bulgaria to join the Tripartite Pact. Encouragement to Bulgarian territorial claims was also held out as a *quid pro quo*. While feeling obliged to accept in principle, Boris reserved his position in what proved to be his last manoeuvre<sup>39</sup>.

The Berchtesgaden meeting intensified Greek fears as it was realised that Bulgaria would sooner or later have to give some satisfaction to Germany. By that time German military penetration of Bulgaria was assuming serious proportions<sup>40</sup>. As a deferrent Greece, like Britain, would like a clear warning

35. FO 371/24922 R1071, record of conversation, Brig A.C. Arnold - King George II, 13.1.1940; FO 371/24877 R7159, Rendel to Halifax, 525, 20.8.1940.

36. Barker, pp. 19, 24-7; FO 371/24879 R6904, FO to Rendel, and Hankey, Minister to Bucharest, 826, 1.8.1940; *ibid.*, FO to Rendel, 458, 4.8.1940.

37. Barker, p. 56; Rachev, p. 41; FO 371/24879 R1570, record of conversation, Gerald Abraham, British Press Attaché, with King Boris, 26.1.1940.

38. FO 371/24871 R8685, Cripps to Halifax, 29.11.1940; FO 371/33128 R1650, FO minute by Clutton, 27.1.1942; FO 371/33122 R4361, Sir Hugh Knatchbull-Hughessen, Ambassador to Ankara, to Anthony Eden, 7.6.1942; Rachev (pp. 38-39) limits the Soviet offer to Eastern Thrace only; Miller (pp. 33-35) and Sirkov (p. 7) claim that Greek Thrace was also mentioned in Sobolev’s offer.

39. FO 371/24880 R8488, Rendel to Halifax, 837, 21.11.1940; *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, no. 51.

40. *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, nos. 43, 45.

from Turkey, their formal ally, to the effect that the passage of German troops through Bulgarian soil to attack Greece would “be followed by an immediate Turkish declaration of war”<sup>41</sup>. Ankara was already engaged in talks with Sofia, which, although encouraged by the British, were closely supervised by the Germans. The outcome was contrary to Allied expectations. The Pact of Friendship between Turkey and Bulgaria, signed on 17 February 1941, directly played into German hands. Instead of a Bulgarian undertaking not to allow any belligerent troops to pass through Bulgarian territory, the pact turned out a declaration of Turkish passivity and inaction in view of this very prospect<sup>42</sup>.

The Greek government, for its part, while it rejected offers of German mediation for an armistice with Italy —something quite unacceptable to the British— would not accept a British offer to land troops either. Metaxas and his successor wanted to avoid a step, which, while not offering adequate protection, would serve as a pretext to German intervention. The attitude of Yugoslavia and Turkey particularly baffled British and Greek planners. Finally, there was an understanding that a British Expeditionary Force should be dispatched to Greece only after the entry of German troops to Bulgaria<sup>43</sup>.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria’s pro-Axis drift culminated. Meeting with Hitler and Ribbentrop at Obersalzberg on 4 January 1941, Prime Minister Filov pledged to secure Bulgaria’s accession to the Tripartite Pact. The Nazi leaders, for their part, explicitly undertook to assist Bulgaria in gaining the long-coveted Aegean outlet. Significantly, Filov for the first time mentioned Macedonia, yet the German reaction was guarded in view of the plan for attracting Yugoslavia to the Tripartite too<sup>44</sup>. The trend of Bulgarian policy could no longer be concealed: by mid-January 1941 a bewildered British Minister could not extract an assurance from either Filov or Popov that Bulgaria would not permit the passage of German troops<sup>45</sup>. Only the leaders

41. FO 371/24870 R8534, Palairet to Halifax, 1187, 22.11.1940; FO 371/24870 R8764, Palairet to Halifax, 28.11.1940; *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, no. 45; Miller, p. 43.

42. FO 371/29721 R6042, minute of conversation, Rendel - Momtchilof, 5.6.1941; FO 371/33128 R1650, FO minute by Clutton, 27.1.1942; *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, nos. 114, 115, 120, 140; Miller, pp. 43-4; Constantine Svolopoulos, “Greece and its Neighbours on the Eve of the German Invasion of the Balkans, 1941”, *Balkan Studies*, 28.2 (1987), 364-5.

43. Barker, pp. 42-3; Koliopoulos, p. 186ff.; *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, nos. 82, 98, 116.

44. Sirkov, *V'nshnata politika*, pp. 274-7; Miller, p. 39; Rachev, pp. 40-1.

45. FO 371/29721 R463, Rendel to Eden, 95, 18.1.1941; *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, no. 69.

of the democratic opposition still advocated adherence to neutrality. Boris' room for manoeuvring seemed exhausted and on 20 January he authorised direct negotiations with Germany on Bulgaria's accession<sup>46</sup>. Yet the Greek Ambassador as late as 14 February 1941 reported from Sofia several official denials of German pressure on Bulgaria to accept troops on her soil. On 1 March 1941, Bulgaria finally subscribed to the Tripartite Pact. German divisions immediately crossed the Danube into Bulgarian soil, but Pipinellis advised his government against following the British example of breaking diplomatic relations. In his view, which was shared in Athens, Greece should play for time and do nothing to precipitate matters<sup>47</sup>. Indeed, Greece would only break off diplomatic relations on 23 April and the declaration of war on Bulgaria, already occupying Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, would be delayed until 2 July!

On the day of Bulgaria's accession to the Tripartite, Filov publicly maintained that the German troops in his country had a "temporary task to perform, aiming at safeguarding the peace and tranquility in the Balkans" and that their presence "did not alter Bulgaria's pacific policy"<sup>48</sup>. "The last days of Bulgarian independence", a Foreign Office official would minute early in 1942, "were particularly sordid and hypocritical; while keeping to the letter of all her undertakings not to attack any of her neighbours or gain her claims by force, she allowed the Germans to use her territory as a base and then received her reward after the fighting was done"<sup>49</sup>. For Filov, however, an archaeologist of some esteem, Operation Marita had "once again proven the almost criminal folly of a small country opposing a great mechanised nation"<sup>50</sup>. Before long he should be able to realise that he had got History's lesson all wrong.

### *An Assessment*

On the eve of the Second World War, Greece and Bulgaria found themselves increasingly attached to diverging orbits. Even before the acute polarisation between the Western democracies and the Axis powers cast its heavy shadow over the rest of Europe, terms between Athens and Sofia had been

46. Sirkov, p. 282ff.; Miller, p. 39; Rachev, p. 43.

47. *Ελληνικά διπλωματικά έγγραφα*, nos. 74, 75, 106, 144, 146.

48. Παπαδάκης, p. 151.

49. FO 371/33128 R1650, FO minute by Clutton, 27.1.1942.

50. Miller, p. 54.

less than fair. Their different attitudes towards the existing settlement of previous conflicts was a crucial factor contributing to their eventual orientation. Bulgarian revisionism was undoubtedly encouraged by the dictators' successes in demolishing the Versailles Treaty edifice; Western reaction came a little too late to redress the balance, and could not prevent the Balkan states from giving in to the Axis. Greece was an exception: that was due not only to her geopolitical position as part of the Eastern Mediterranean, a region still dominated by Britain, but also to the predominant connection between this power and the Greek regime. On the other hand, German penetration of Bulgaria, economic and political, was already far-reaching and growing. In short, the status of both Greece and Bulgaria as independent actors on the international scene had considerably shrunk even before the outbreak of war.

The external environment was hardly conducive to an eleventh hour Greek-Bulgarian understanding, at a time when elaborate regional arrangements among countries with shared interests, such as the Balkan Pact, proved so feeble. What was more, such an understanding was faced as a serious foreign policy priority by neither Athens nor Sofia. Instead, both governments entrenched themselves in fatalistic anticipation of the initiatives of the Great Powers. The Greek government throughout remained deeply suspicious of Bulgarian intentions – in the case of its military advisers almost to a point of obsession. Both Bulgarian military capacity and adventurousness were overestimated. While the vision of San Stefano never quite lost its appeal, Tsar Boris and his government wished to minimise risks. Eventually, the Greek regime would take the fight, staking not only its own stability but also the survival of the nation itself. Political and social stability was a decisive factor for the Bulgarian ruling circles too. Although involvement in the war, one way or another, might prove inevitable, at the critical moment there was an option between cooperation and, at least, passivity. As it happened, Bulgarian policy was guided not by fear of German reaction if the country remained passive, but by the conviction that only by actively co-operating with the Axis Bulgaria could realise her claims against her neighbours.