

PROPOSAL FOR A SECOND FRONT IN THE BALKANS IN SEPTEMBER 1939

Poland's Western allies, France and Great Britain, did not give the due support to Poland invaded by Germany in September 1939. The two Western Powers did not relieve their Polish ally by attacking Germany's provinces on the Rhine and by bombing her industrial centers. Unimportant undertakings of small French forces in the Saar area had absolutely no influence upon German offensive against Poland.¹ The allied Staffs were nevertheless looking for another possibility how to bring help to Poland.

Because Germany's Western frontier seemed to be unpenetrable and unshakable, one had to find another side for attack. As it had been in the First World War, the Allies were planning also in September 1939 to fight other way into the South of Germany. What was later advocated by Churchill as an attack on the German "soft underbelly," in September 1939 had been seriously taken into consideration by the French General Staff as a help for Poland. That was the motive for General Weygand's mission.² This mission had been decided however when it was not yet certain whether Italy would remain neutral or would take part in the war on Germany's side. Therefore the primordial aim of Weygand's mission was directed rather more against Italy than against Germany. The Italian "non-belligeranza" proclaimed on September 1, did alter a lot in the plans of the Western Powers.

Also the rôle of the Balkan states in international politics after the outbreak of the Second World War changed at once after the Italian proclamation. Instead of directing the Balkan countries against Italy, the Western Powers decided since to avoid anything that in Rome could be considered as a provocation. This imposed neutrality to be maintained also in the Balkans.

It is true, the new attitude of fascist Rome was not trusted in the capitals

1. French point of view : M. Gamelin, *Servir*, vol. III (Paris, 1947), chapter "L'offensive pour la Pologne;" Polish reply to it : a paper by the General W. Stachiewicz in the Polish-Paris monthly *Kultura*, No 40-41, February 1951.

2. M. Weygand, *Rappelé au Service* (Paris 1950); M. Gamelin, *op. cit.*; A. Papagos, *La Grèce en guerre* (Athens 1945).

of the Balkan states, inspite of Mussolini's unsincere efforts to produce a temporary relaxation.³ Raymond Brugère, the French Minister to Belgrade, reported on September 3 his conversation with Prince Paul, Regent of Yugoslavia. The latter's point of view was categorical: fascist Italy is and will remain a foe who is bound to attack earlier or later. France and Yugoslavia have therefore to be vigilant and join their forces. Let us quote: "...aucun semblant de vérité et de sincérité n'est sorti de la bouche de Mussolini et de celle de Ciano. (...) Le comte de Ciano déclarait au Ministre de Yougoslavie à Rome⁴ que la neutralité italienne serait 'vigilante' et qu'elle ne durerait qu'aussi longtemps que les intérêts de l'Axe, non engagés dans l'affaire de Dantzig, ne seraient pas en jeu. (...) Il [= Prince Paul] souhaite que nous arrivions le plus tôt possible à Salonique avec ou sans consentement de l'Italie."⁵

Thus the Regent of Yugoslavia advised France to form a bridgehead at Thessaloniki. He had said: "with or without Italian consent." But he did not mention the consent of the master of that city, i.e. Greece. We may conclude that he had been assured the consent would not be refused by the Greek Government.

Prince Paul was right: Mussolini's thoughts were indeed not sincere. The entry on September 4 in Ciano's Diary contains a sentence: "Il Duce... sogna ancora imprese eroiche contro la Jugoslavia per giungere al petrolio rumeno."⁶ And Ciano himself had even threatening ideas: on September 6 he invited the British Ambassador Sir Percy Loraine and asked him to calm the Turks who were allegedly "too much anti-Italian." According to Ciano the British had to advise the Turkish Government: "di starsene tranquilli se non vogliono che tutti i Balcani prendano fuoco."⁷ Of course, the menace was without any practical consequence because Italy had then no chance of bringing about a trouble in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the British diplomacy took the threat seriously into consideration and gave some pressure at Ankara, as Loraine was assuring Ciano a few days later.⁸

3. Documents in the Greek White Book : *L'agression de l'Italie contre la Grèce* (Athènes 1940, also English edition).

4. Boško Hristić ("Christitch"), Yugoslav envoy to Rome 1937-1940.

5. Quoted in : R. Brugère, *Vevi, vidi, Vichy... et la suite* (Paris 1944, 1953), p. 161-162.

6. G. Ciano, *Diario*, volume primo 1939-1940 (Milano 1948, 5th ed., p. 158 (I have not at my disposal the English translation).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 160; Sir Percy Loraine had been till autumn 1938 British Ambassador at Ankara.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 162 (Sept. 11); the Ambassador's assurances were most certainly connected with the British note to Paris, quoted below.

Indeed, the Foreign Office directed to Paris on September 9, no doubt in connection with Ciano's warning, a very explicit note, asking the French to restrain from any activity in the Balkans which could be considered by Italy as hostile to her. This very interesting document deserves to be quoted entirely, although we do not dispose of its original text:

“Le Gouvernement de Sa Majesté est convaincu de la nécessité de ne prendre actuellement aucune initiative qui puisse entraîner l'Italie à se joindre à l'Allemagne. Nos communications à travers la Méditerranée sont vitales pour nous et pour la France, et en aucun cas elles ne doivent être mises en danger.

“Il est impossible d'estimer le pour et le contre d'une action dans les États balkaniques sans tenir compte des conséquences presque certaines qu'une telle action entraînerait sur la politique italienne et qui serait pleine de dangers pour notre cause commune. L'information contenue dans un télégramme de l'ambassadeur de Sa Majesté à Rome est très significative à cet égard.⁹ Dans la situation actuelle Lord Halifax se range dans l'ensemble à l'avis de Sir Percy Loraine. A l'heure actuelle, toute l'action dans le Sud-est de l'Europe qui risquerait de rendre plus probable l'entrée de l'Italie en guerre contre nous devrait être évitée avec soin.”¹⁰

Thus the British vetoed the French plans and they were paralysing the mission of General Weygand. Most probably Ciano's warning had been connected with the rumours around that mission and not only with the anti-Italian attitude of the Turkish press. The Italian secret service could learn also a bit about other French activities in certain Balkan capitals. In general, the Italian diplomacy was very well informed.

In fact, such activities existed, not only in Ankara but also in Belgrade, Bucharest and Athens. The French were paying particular attention to Yugoslavia, because this was the only Balkan state which was neighbour of both Axis Powers and was therefore of greater strategic importance for the Western Allies.

Also Yugoslavia was seriously interested in such contacts with the West. Prince Paul sent in July 1939 an outstanding military chief, General Petar Pešić to France and England, for consultation with the General Staffs of both countries. Pešić met twice the French Commander-in-Chief General Gamelin.

9. Allusion, of course, to the Ciano's protest before the British Ambassador, mentioned above.

10. Quoted in : G. Bonnet, *Fin d'une Europe (La défense de la paix)*, vol. II, Paris Genève 1953), p. 381; the English text had not yet been published.

The latter was very optimistic and anticipated that the Western Powers will be obliged to occupy Thessaloniki to prevent its occupation by Italy. Thus the Thessaloniki bridgehead been mentioned already in July, Gamelin informed Pešić that a French General will be sent to Turkey to prepare the proposed Thessaloniki operation.¹¹ That was an announcement of Weygand's mission.

During his stay in England some time after Pešić, Prince Paul could learn how exaggerated was this General's report and that the British were hardly willing to co-operate in a Balkan operation.¹²

Therefore Yugoslavia declared officially its neutrality after the outbreak of the war in September and was very anxious to distance herself from Turkey which had been linked already with Britain and France since May and June 1939.¹³

Such was the attitude of Yugoslav diplomacy conducted since February by Aleksandar Cincar-Marković, former Minister to Berlin and a man deeply impressed by the German military power. His fear of Germany had been increased since the conclusion of the German-Soviet treaty on August 23. That fact provoked in this Yugoslav diplomat however a strong resentment against Hitler, as was reported by the American Minister to Belgrade Arthur Bliss Lane.¹⁴ Nevertheless Cincar-Marković was decided to maintain Yugoslav neutrality as long as possible.

But the Foreign Minister in Belgrade was not the only decisive factor in foreign affairs. Also the Prime Minister and still more the Head of State had a great authority in this domain. The chairman of the Government, Dragiša Cvetković was well known as a francophile and Brugère after the latter's appointment praised him in his report to Paris: "un de nos meilleurs amis."¹⁵ Prince Paul was more anglophile but also more cautious than the

11. Pešić's (pron. : Peshitch) report is published in an article by A. Smith-Pavelić : Jugoslavija i Trojni Pakt (Yugoslavia and Tripartite Pact), in the Croatian emigré periodical *Hrvatska Revija* (The Croatian Review), Buenos-Aires 1956, vol. VI, pp. 67-70; cf. J. B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis 1934-1941* (New York and London 1962), p. 149.

12. J. R. M. Buthler, *Grand Strategy*. II. September 1939 - June 1941 (London 1957), p. 64 sq.

13. Cf. Ž. Abramovski, Sukob interesa Velike Britanije i Nemačke na Balkanu uoči drugos svetskog rata (Conflict of British and German Interests in the Balkans on the Eve of the 2nd World War), in the Yugoslav periodical "*Istorija XX veka*" (History of 20th Century), vol. II, p. 95 sq. (Belgrade 1961).

14. *Foreign Relations of the United States. Diplomatic Papers 1939*. Vol. I : General (Washington D.C. 1956), p. 404-405.

15. Report published by the Germans in : *Auswärtiges Amt 1939/41*, Nr. 7 - Dokumente zum Konflikt mit Jugoslawien und Griechenland (Berlin 1941), document No 33.

members of the Government and was active with great circumspection anxious not to provoke the Axis Powers.

Moreover, the relations with other countries were maintained also by the Yugoslav General Staff, of course only in the military domain. And the Yugoslav Generals were strongly pro-Western.¹⁶ Therefore the French military attaché General Merson was met with a very friendly attitude of the Yugoslav army representatives. On August 19 Brugère and Merson discussed with the Yugoslav Chief of Staff General Simović the problems of co-operation for the possible defense of Thessaloniki.¹⁷ After the outbreak of war the French could obtain from the Yugoslav Government facilities concerning transportation of military materials to Poland.¹⁸ The Germans learned after finding the secret documents of the French General Staff in Charité-sur Loire in June 1940.

Also in all three remaining states members of the Balkan Entente Western influence was rather strong: the strongest in Turkey, the weakest in Rumania which as a neighbour of both Soviet Union and German oriented Hungary had to be extremely cautious.¹⁹ Therefore, although having an alliance with Poland (but directed exclusively against Soviet Union), Rumania under strong German pressure could not do very much for her ally and was obliged to declare neutrality on September 6.²⁰ The Western Powers could not evidently count upon Rumania in their plans for a Second Front in the Balkans.

Certainly more susceptible to Western influence was the Greek Government of General John Metaxas, traditionally mistrusting Italy and since the signature of the Steel Pact in May 1939 also Germany as Italy's ally. Although very cautious too, wishing to avoid everything that could upset Italy and Germany,²¹ the Greeks were in touch with Britain and France, according

16. Characteristic declaration of the Yugoslav military attaché in Budapest, Lt. Col. J. Vučković (Voochkovich) on Sept. 12: *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, serie 9. vol. I, No 175; Cf. Hoptner, *op. cit.*, passim.

17. See the above quoted (note 15) volume of documents published by the Germans in 1945, document No 41.

18. French report from Belgrade, Sept. 5: *ibid.*, doc. No 43.

19. On Rumanian policy in September 1939 see: A. Cretzianu, *The Lost Opportunity* (London 1957), p. 28 sq.; A. Hillgruber, *Hitler, König Carol und Marschall Antonescu. Die deutsch-rumänischen Beziehungen 1938-1944* (Wiesbaden 1954), p. 55 sq.

20. Cf. I. Lugosianu, *La neutralité roumaine*, in the Rumanian periodical *Affaires Danubiennes*, No 5, p. 215 sq. (Bucharest 1939).

21. Here the author has used the documents published in the Greek White Book, the

to the guarantee obtained from these two Powers in April. Also the fact that Turkey, Greece's ally, had been closely tied to the Western Powers since May and June, had great importance to the foreign policy in Athens. But here too the military factors were in this matter more active than the diplomats. Particularly the Greek Chief of Staff General Alexander Papagos although closely co-operating with the Prime Minister, had had his own views upon and lively interest in opposing the possible Axis offensive in the Balkans, which might be supported by Bulgaria.²²

We know from the highly interesting memoirs of Papagos how anxious he was to establish firm contact with the armies of Greece's Balkan allies and to co-operate with the Western Powers.²² But he was restrained by the Government which feared Italian and German protests. Nevertheless also in Athens the French military attaché did obtain on September 13 facilities for the transport of military planes to Poland. Also his report on this case came later into German hands.²³

The idea of a bridgehead at Thessaloniki, thus on Greek territory, had been certainly first of all discussed with the Greek Foreign Ministry. However, we do not dispose of pertinent diplomatic documents from the period before the war. There seems to be no doubt that the Greek consent had been secured. In any case it was not a surprise for Papagos when he was contacted by the French after Weygand's arrival to Syria, whence the latter wanted to reach first Ankara and afterwards Athens.²⁴

The Greek Government was too cautious however to consent to Weygand's visit. They asked the French General not to come but Papagos decided to get in touch with him by sending to Ankara a Staff Officer, Lt. Col. Dovas, chief of the 3rd section of the Greek General Staff. The latter met Weygand in the Turkish capital on September 10 and had afterwards also a talk with the Turkish Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Fevzi Çakmak on co-operation of the allied armies.²⁵

During the meeting Weygand - Dovas several problems of military re-

Memoirs of Marshal Papagos and the monography by E. Schramm von Thadden, *Griechenland und die Grossmächte im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden, 1955).

22. Particularly interesting and rich in details are the documents published in the book of Papagos.

23. Document No. 108 in the quoted above volume published by the Germans in 1941 (see note 15).

24. On Weygand's mission see also : R. Massigli, *La Turquie devant la guerre. Mission à Ankara 1939-1940* (Paris 1964), p. 261 sq.

25. Reports of Lt Col. Dovas are published in the Memoirs of Marshal Papagos.

lations between Greece and the Western Powers were abundantly discussed. Weygand stated that he believed that the fate of war can be settled in the Balkans. He pointed out that because of the difficulty of piercing the German "Westwall," the Allied Powers will be obliged to attack their enemy from the South. He showed great interest for the area of Thessaloniki and asked for various information. But Dovas was certainly disappointed when told by Weygand that for the time being the French disposed in Syria of only one division and that the expected reinforcements would not exceed two further ones. He stated that Greece did not need such aid, having herself twenty divisions which lacked only better armament, particularly planes. To establish a bridgehead at Thessaloniki, France had to direct there first of all strong air force.

Weygand had been aware that immediate landing of allied forces at Thessaloniki (even if they were sufficiently strong) was for political reasons out of the question. On the eve of departure for Ankara he sent from Beyrouth a letter to Gamelin, stating that for the time being one can only require from the Greeks some preparatory work: "Tous ces retards et précautions, que je comprends, me sont très désagréables, parce qu'ils brouillent la question de Salonique. Je pense à ce sujet que, si la situation politique actuelle vis-à-vis de l'Italie ne permet pas une installation immédiate de troupes alliées à Salonique, du moins on peut demander à la Grèce d'accepter qu'une préparation très poussée de cette occupation soit faite — en particulier par l'envoi de spécialistes des bases et des ravitaillements; et peut-être même, grâce à l'exécution de certains travaux de route ou de défense par les Grecs eux-mêmes." ²⁶

The effect of the Ankara talks was thus not imposing. And the nearest future brought a temporary break-up of all plans in this domain because of Polish collapse and the entering of the Soviet Union upon the stage. This paralysed Rumania and imposed extreme circumspection on Turkey. The German success, partly due to the inactivity of Western Powers which did not give any support at all to their Polish ally, could not but frighten Yugoslavia. Greece was also been forced to be very cautious, inspite of Italian temporarily more peaceful attitude.²⁷ On the contrary, Bulgaria was emboldened by

26. Weygand's letter to Gamelin of Sept. 9, written in Beyrouth, had been first published by the Germans in: *Auswärtiges Amt* 1939/41, Nr. 6. Die Geheimakten des französischen Generalstabes (Berlin 1941; probably also in the Berlin press in summer 1940), document No 5, then in the volume quoted in note 15, as document No 107 (here the German translation only).

27. *Greek White Book*, as above; cf. Ciano, *op. cit.*, p. 168 (Sept. 19).

German success and the pro-Western Balkan states had to pay more attention to the activities of Sofia, which certainly could not but complicate the entire situation of the Peninsula.²⁸

In consequence the Western Powers were obliged to stop for the time being, their activities aiming at the formation of a Second Front in the Balkans. Weygand remained, it is true, in Syria and was forging further plans, then directed no more against Germany but against the Soviet Union. But this subject does not belong into the scope of the present paper.

We must say that the conception of a Second Front in the Balkans in September 1939 was in any case unreal and unrealizable. It was so for several reasons.

Before all, the French forces in Syria were then very scarce and there existed no disposable British ones in that area.²⁹ Thus there was nothing for the landing at Thessaloniki. Armed forces of the Balkan states, though pretty numerous, were then insufficiently armed, particularly as regards air force, tanks and heavy guns. Arms at their disposal were mostly from the First World War.³⁰ They could hardly oppose the Germans in a regular campaign, as had been shown by the events of 1941. Among the four members of the Balkan Entente only two, i. e. Greece and Turkey had then consolidated Governments. Yugoslavia and Rumania were facing serious internal difficulties and there existed a German Fifth Column in both countries.

Besides it, this plan did not take into consideration the attitude of that Power which started to show increased interest in Balkan affaires : the Soviet Union. Linked then temporarily with Germany and hostile to the Western Powers, the Moscow Government certainly would not be indifferent to a combination which might mean also encircling of the Soviet Union from the South West. There is no doubt that the Balkan project as conceived by Gamelin and Weygand had been directed as well against Germany and Italy as against Soviet Union. And the latter could certainly oppose that project by all forces at her disposal then even with German support.

Also from the technical point of view the idea of attacking Germany

28. On Bulgarian policy in 1939 cf. : Sir George Rendel, *The Sword and the Olive. Recollections of Diplomacy and the Foreign Service* (London, 1957), chapter XIV; also : Dino Kazakov, *Burni godini 1918-1944* (Turbulent Years) (Sofia 1949), p. 643 sq.

29. The above mentioned Weygand's letter of Sept. 9, stated that the British had then in Cyprus one company of troops only (*Die Geheimakten...*) ut supra, p. 178.

30. Detailed data in the Memoirs of Papagos; on the Yugoslav army also in military reports published by F. Čulinović, *Slom stare Jugoslavije* (The Break up of Old Yugoslavia) (Zagreb, 1958), p. 163 sqq.

from the South, across the Balkan Peninsula, was then, i. e. in 1939, impracticable. The situation was certainly different than in 1918. At the end of the First World War the enemy's boundary was much more nearer to Thessaloniki than in 1939 : it had been the Danube at Belgrade, at a distance of over 600 kilometers. Now the enemy's territory was situated twice as far, since to the former Austrian boundary North of Ljubljana the distance from Thessaloniki is more than 1,100 kilometers. True, between the planned bridgehead and the German frontier was situated the territory of a friendly state, i. e. Yugoslavia. But the latter was declaring her neutrality and was willing to maintain it : being under pressure of two very much stronger neighbours, which were allied between themselves, Yugoslavia believed to be able to save herself only if she stayed neutral, at least officially.

Even if Yugoslavia might oppose the possible invasion of the Western Powers only apparently, there would be no doubt that Germany and Italy would be able to occupy Northern Yugoslav provinces at once, as was shown by the events of 1941. Thus the campaign for approaching the Southern German (i. e. former Austrian) boundary would be fought first on Yugoslav soil and would bring to its population disasters of all kind a year and half before. Even if Yugoslavia had joined the Western Powers since the first days of the war and attacked Germany, without strong allied help she would be defeated at once. And we know that the Allies had in 1939 almost no troops at their disposal in the Near East and that they could not enter Yugoslavia with forces of any importance for supporting her against the Axis Powers. Greece of course also preferred to avoid any provocation against Italy and she had no reason for participating in an attack upon Germany as long as the latter did not start to support the Bulgarian revisionism.³¹ For the time being, in 1939, the Greco-German relations were not bad. Thus, although the Greek Government was not unwilling to co-operate with the Allied Powers and even to allow the establishment of the Thessaloniki bridgehead, they would consent to it only if the Allies would come with a real imposing force, able to protect Greece against all kind of retaliation from the Axis Powers.

The idea of the Second Front in the Balkans in September 1939 must be in consequence qualified as a fantasy and as wishful thinking rather than a real strategical and political conception. The septuagenarian General Weygand (born in 1867) just like most of his contemporary French high mili-

31. We know from the German-Italian diplomatic conversations in 1939 and even 1940 that Hitler wished then to preserve the status quo in the Balkans and only later showed some interest for Bulgarian aspirations.

tary commanders was incapable to conceive the situation created by the events of 1939.

Jagellonian University, Cracow

HENRYK BATOWSKI

NOTE ON SOURCES

Archives.— For the study of diplomatic history of the Second World War in connection with the Balkan Peninsula, partly accessible are the documents of former Royal Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as far as they had been restored (they are now located in Dubrovnik). Further the Bulgarian archives in Sofia seem to be accessible for the year 1939, at least in a part. There is no information concerning the Rumanian documents, although some native historians (e. g. Mrs Eliza Campus, author of some important studies on Rumanian diplomacy³²) had been admitted to them. The Greek and Turkish archives seem to be not accessible for the events of the Second World War. Absolutely inaccessible are the archives of the Western Powers, except the American ones, in part at least accessible to the historians also for the year 1939. The German diplomatic documents are in principle accessible in Bonn and in microfilms in the capitals of the Western Powers.

Published documents.— For the events of September 1939 had been published the American, German and Italian documents; the British ones only through September 3, in the great collections which are however only selections. No French collection has been published until now for the year 1939. No Balkan state has published such collection and the Greek White Book published in 1940 presents of course only a very small selection.

Memoirs.— Only few statesmen and diplomats published memoirs in which one may find details for our subject. Here belong the Memoirs of the French Generals Gamelin and Weygand, of the Greek Marshal Papagos, of the Rumanian diplomats Gafencu and Cretzianu, of the French Brugère and Massigli, of the English Rendel and Knatchbull Huggessen. Of great importance are of course the Ciano Diaries and the book of the last Italian Minister to Athens before 1940, Grazzi. In other works of the Balkan authors (Yugoslav Fotitch, Bulgarian Kazasov, ect.), we can hardly find some details for our subject.

32. E.g. : Der Balkanblock der Neutralen (September 1939-März 1940), published in the East German periodical : *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig*, VI, 1956/7, *Gesellschafts und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, 1, pp. 15-22 (also in Rumanian, in the periodical *Studii din istorie contemporană*, II).