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PART 1

HITLER, SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AND  
THE WAR AGAINST ENGLAND  
APRIL–NOVEMBER 1940

## 1

BETWEEN THE AXIS MILLSTONES

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On 9 August 1940 an unusually long dispatch from the embassy in Rome lay before the officers of the military attaché branch at the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) in Berlin. Deciphered, the telegram read:

General Roatta<sup>1</sup> invited me today and asked me to transmit the following wishes of the Italian general staff:

The general staff of the army received from the political leadership the order to prepare a plan for an attack on Yugoslavia, predicated on the commitment of Italian forces against the northern border of Yugoslavia through Carinthia and Styria. . . . The initiation of these preparations did not mean that Italy meant to attack on shortest order, but only meant preparation by the general staff for a contingency that might arise in 2 months, in 1 year, or perhaps not at all.<sup>2</sup>

General von Rintelen<sup>3</sup> who sent the telegram added that Roatta had explained that an attack across the Julian Alps alone was not feasible and that the employment of an Italian army numbering 8 to 10 divisions from Austria was necessary. Consequently the Italian general staff had a few requests to make: would their allies please help with supplies, the use of railroads, hospitals (with German personnel) and, most important, 5000 motor vehicles? And could the necessary staff talks start as soon as possible?<sup>4</sup>

Could they? In order to fully understand both the Italian request and the German answer, it is necessary to go back and consider the importance of Yugoslavia to Hitler, Mussolini, the Axis and the war. The starting point in so doing is March 1939.

## YUGOSLAVIA – THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT

While it would be possible to write books about Hitler's attitude to, say, Russia or England, it is singularly difficult to get a clear picture of his thoughts on southeastern Europe in general, and Yugoslavia in particular. As an Austrian, he told Mussolini, he was 'familiar with all these regions and the mentality of their inhabitants';<sup>5</sup> words, however, which mean little because Hitler considered himself a specialist on almost any subject. In his *Mein Kampf* there are some singularly unflattering references to Germany's World War I Balkan allies: he

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calls them 'old impotent *Gerümpel*' (trash) and 'rotten bodies'. To him the region was a barbaric and inhospitable one, infested by *Serbische Bombenschmeisser*, an uncivilized world.<sup>6</sup>

Although large parts of southeastern Europe had at one time or other been ruled from Vienna and still contained large German-speaking populations, Hitler never used these facts as he did in other parts of Europe. Like Bismarck before him, he seems to have been of the opinion that 'the territorial problems and internal relationships of the [Balkan] states' did not concern Germany.<sup>7</sup> He even went so far as to declare his 'absolute political disinterest' in this region in article 3 of the secret protocol of the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact of 23 August 1939.<sup>8</sup>

Economically, however, things were very different. In the event of a war against the west, such as Hitler had to reckon with, Germany would be blockaded and cut off from her overseas supplies; and six years of intensive effort had not, at the outbreak of World War II, guaranteed her anything like self sufficiency in the most essential war materials. The countries of southeastern Europe, poorly developed industrially but comparatively rich in natural resources, were the obvious source – situated at the Reich's very back door – from which to draw some of the deficient materials. Chief amongst those was oil. With wartime demand exceeding supply (home production plus operational reserves) by 4 to 6 million tons in 1939, Germany's situation in this respect was unenviable. The only source from which the gap could be bridged were the Ploesti oil fields in Rumania, producing six million tons in 1939. The capacity of these fields, moreover, could be considerably augmented.<sup>9</sup>

Great as the importance of oil undoubtedly was, it is an error – a very fashionable one – to allow it to overshadow the value of the other raw materials which the Balkans could, and did, supply. Among these, the most important were chrome, manganese, copper, lead, nickel, tin and aluminium, all of them indispensable for the production of arms and therefore to the war effort. Yugoslavia's share in the supply of these materials was by no means insignificant. In aluminium, for instance, she supplied about one third of Germany's demand. Her output in copper, lead and hemp, though by no means sufficient to cover German needs, was still about the only major source open to Germany in wartime Europe. Above all, her production of tin was large enough to satisfy almost all Germany's requirements.<sup>10</sup> As a source of raw materials, therefore, Yugoslavia ranked second only to Rumania.

Who should get hold of these resources was a problem that preoccupied the leaders of the Rome–Berlin Axis for some time before the war. Though in principle the two dictators had divided their *Lebens-*

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*räume* in such a way as to make the 'East' belong to Germany and the 'Mediterranean' to Italy, the boundaries between these areas had – deliberately so, on Hitler's side<sup>11</sup> – been left vague. Their definition, varying considerably from time to time and from capital to capital, was a cause of constant friction within the Axis, with Yugoslavia as a focal point.

Rome's position on this question is best summarized in the words of Attolico, its ambassador in Berlin, who asserted that 'the Mediterranean has certainly been assigned to Italy, and the adjacent countries and the Danube basin [*sic*] also belong to this area'.<sup>12</sup> By the time it was made, however, this claim had lost any semblance of reality. Much better equipped economically than either Italy or France, Germany began to acquire economic leadership in the region in 1936.<sup>13</sup> The annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia turned such Italian preeminence as had existed in the Danube basin in the early thirties into a myth. The occupation of Czechoslovakia in particular gave the Duce a nasty jolt, because he regarded himself as the principal architect of the Munich settlement.<sup>14</sup> Hounded out of central Europe, he tried to make a stand over Yugoslavia. In a speech dated 26 March 1939, he said that 'geographically, politically, historically, militarily' the Mediterranean belonged to Italy, and that the Mediterranean included the Adriatic, so that Italian interests in relation to the Slavs there were 'preeminent but not exclusive'.<sup>15</sup> He then made representations in Berlin to see whether this attitude was shared there, only to receive an answer that was conciliatory in form but highly ambiguous in substance.<sup>16</sup>

How to get hold of Yugoslavia was another point on which the Axis partners differed. Hitler's approach to this problem was almost purely economic; the Balkans were one place where he does not seem to have had any territorial aspirations, and his main aim there was to secure, among that of other countries, Yugoslavia's output of raw materials. This was an aim that could best be achieved by friendly relations – and German–Yugoslav relations in the years immediately preceding the war were friendly – and by means of peaceful penetration, such as practised by Shacht. Mussolini, on the other hand, took a different view of the matter; not only did he have his territorial claims on Yugoslavia, dating from the *vittoria mutilata* of World War I – Dalmatia, etc. – but to him Yugoslavia was a French stooge specifically created with the intent of containing Italy, 'a typical Versailles creation'.<sup>17</sup> While Hitler wanted a viable – not to say strong – Yugoslavia with whom he could trade, Mussolini's aim was to dismember her – by political means if possible, by armed force if opportune.

The Duce's history as a Yugoslav-baiter was, indeed, a long one. His dispute with that country dated almost from his assumption of power, or even earlier if his role in D'Annunzio's 1919 Fiume expedition

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is counted. His lever for dismembering Yugoslavia was the Croat autonomist movement headed by Vladko Macek, and in particular the cut-throats of Ante Pavelic's more extremist Ustace organization. In 1937, however, Mussolini concluded that, following the decline of French influence as a result of Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland and the gradual disintegration of the Balkan Entente, his subversive policy was likely to drive an isolated Belgrade into the arms of a resurgent Germany. He therefore reversed his policy, effecting a *rapprochement* and signing a non-aggression pact with Yugoslavia in the hope of turning her into an Italian satellite and thus keeping her out of Hitler's reach. In this policy he found a convenient partner in the quasi-fascist government of Milan Stoyadinovic, a man ostensibly willing to play the role cast for him and who was also personally congenial to Mussolini.

The fall of Stoyadinovic in February 1939 put an end to this policy. Rome now decided to assign an independent Croatia, torn from Yugoslavia and linked to Italy by a personal union, the role previously earmarked for Yugoslavia.<sup>18</sup> Connections with Macek, allowed to lapse during the Stoyadinovic era, were re-established almost immediately.<sup>19</sup> Everything seemed to be going smoothly when the news of the Prague coup brought home to Mussolini the dangers inherent in such a policy. Disappointed because twenty years of conspiracy with Italy had failed to produce results, the Croat separatist movement might turn to Berlin. When Macek's first lieutenant, August Kosutic, went to Prague in mid March 'for personal reasons', Rome feared that the Croats had drawn the – for Italy – wrong conclusions from the Czech affair, and panicked.<sup>20</sup>

If further proof is needed of the way in which Yugoslavia formed the object of a dispute between Rome and Berlin, it is supplied by what followed. Afraid lest the Croats turn to Germany, Mussolini suddenly decided he had to do everything to strengthen Belgrade against them. Performing a complete *volte face*, he all at once discovered Italy was, after all, interested in a 'strong and united Yugoslavia', and even started to promote, after years of warmongering, Yugoslav–Hungarian friendship as a barrier against German expansion in the direction of the Adriatic.<sup>21</sup> To avoid jeopardizing Belgrade's position, moreover, he postponed his planned invasion of Albania until he could sound out Yugoslavia and perhaps offer her some kind of compensation.<sup>22</sup>

Mussolini, however, was too much of a Yugoslav-baiter to persist for long in this policy. Having received some kind of reassurances from Berlin to the effect that Germany did not lay exclusive claim to Yugoslavia, he soon resumed his connections with Macek. More dangerously still, he went ahead with his invasion of Albania. The character of that operation, however, underwent a change; it was turned into a demon-

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stration of Italian independence *vis à vis* the Axis partner and interpreted as a measure designed to call a halt to German expansion in southeastern Europe.<sup>23</sup>

To the Germans the occupation of Albania on 7 April 1939 was, indeed, most unwelcome. Since their factories were working overtime in preparation for war, they were sensitive to any upheaval that might endanger the free flow of raw materials; moreover, they anticipated the Anglo-French accusation that the Axis was out to dominate this region.<sup>24</sup> The Italian action, while of little value strategically and economically, lent substance to precisely that accusation. While ostensibly congratulating the Duce on 15 April, therefore, Göring also warned him not to repeat the Albanian adventure elsewhere; all the Axis wanted from Yugoslavia was a benevolent neutrality that would allow Italy and Germany to make all purchases necessary for the war effort. Mussolini was not easily convinced; to him a reliable Yugoslavia was an occupied, or at least a dismembered one.<sup>25</sup>

Ignoring Göring's warning, therefore, Mussolini went on intriguing with Macek's envoys. Late in May his foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano recorded in his diary an agreement that had allegedly been arrived at with the Croats. The agreement provided for a Croat rebellion financially supported by Italy to start within four to six months; Italian troops would then be called in and an independent Croatia proclaimed. This state would then enter in a kind of confederation with Italy.<sup>26</sup> All this in defiance of Hitler, who continued to stress the importance of a 'strong and united Yugoslavia'.<sup>27</sup>

Mussolini's hopes were soon dashed. Macek disowned the agreement which, he claimed, had been negotiated behind his back.<sup>28</sup> Instead he signed, on 23 August, a *Sporazum* (agreement) with the Yugoslav minister president Dragisa Cvetkovic, which gave the Croats a considerable degree of autonomy and made Macek himself deputy premier. With this Mussolini, who now had to fall back on the extremist Ustace organization, effectively saw his hopes for dismembering Yugoslavia buried.

Help came from an unexpected side. The shadow of war was hanging over Europe, and Hitler began to realize that, in spite of the 'Pact of Steel' signed between Germany and Italy on 22 May, Mussolini was not going to enter the war. To get him in, the Führer unexpectedly dangled the Yugoslav bait before Ciano's eyes on 12 August. Provided the Axis countries covered each other's back, he said, they could eliminate what he called 'the uncertain neutrals'; Italy, for instance, should fall upon Yugoslavia who could be considered such an 'uncertain neutral'.<sup>29</sup>

War broke out on 1 September; Mussolini swallowed his pride and stayed out. Nor did Hitler resent the fact for very long. After the

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termination of the Polish campaign he realized that he could do without his ally whose 'nonbelligerence', moreover, served the useful purposes of protecting his southern flank and keeping open a door for overseas imports. Once Germany was at war and blockaded, Yugoslavia's importance as a supplier of raw material increased; on 5 October, therefore, an economic treaty was signed between the two countries, effectively tying almost the whole of the latter's output in raw materials to the former's use.<sup>30</sup> This in turn led to an immediate flare-up in German-Italian relations with Ciano instructing his representative in Belgrade to see what he could do to prevent agreement.<sup>31</sup>

Hitler's desire to keep the war away from Yugoslavia was not helped by that country's policy. Hemmed in as she was between Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria – all of them more or less hostile – Yugoslavia's only possible course was to stay out of the conflict, but her sympathies, particularly those of the army and air force, were clearly on the side of the allies. In September 1939, Prince Paul is reported to have said to the French minister, Brugere, that his country would enter the war on the side of the allies as soon as the latter seized Salonika – and thus secured an Italian-proof connection with Yugoslavia – and cleared the Adriatic and Mediterranean of the Axis.<sup>32</sup> Yugoslavia also participated wholeheartedly in the planning of the Anglo-French Salonika expedition in the winter of 1939–40.<sup>33</sup>

With spring and the fall of France Yugoslavia's pro-western policy crumbled. The outbreak of war had deprived Yugoslavia of her previous support in resisting the Axis, and the military defeat of the west left her at the mercy of Germany. Prince Paul, however, had foreseen this possibility as early as autumn 1939, and was looking for another ally capable of making Germany think twice. There was only one state in Europe strong enough to play this role: the Soviet Union.

Yugoslavia's relations with Moscow had not been good in the inter-war years. Belgrade like Paris had served as an asylum for a great many White Russians, who were cordially received. Until 1939 Czarist Russia was represented in Belgrade by a Mr Strandtman, a former councillor at the Czarist embassy. In autumn 1939, however, Strandtman talked with Prince Paul, and then suddenly announced he was no longer representing a government that no longer existed. Prince Paul had evidently decided to improve his relations with Stalin; the opening of negotiations, however, was delayed until ugly rumours concerning a forthcoming Italian attack on Yugoslavia<sup>34</sup> forced Belgrade to act. In March, the Yugoslav foreign minister Cincar Markovic established contact with Moscow via Ankara. He pointed out Italy's expansionist tendencies and suggested that Russia ought not to tolerate this policy. In reply Moscow formally stated that it opposed Italy's Balkan aspirations, and came out energetically for the maintenance of the *status quo*.



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Underscoring its point, the Soviet government expressed willingness to enter into negotiations towards an economic treaty; these began on 14 April and on 11 May ended with the signature of an accord. On 24 June, moreover, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established, and Belgrade sent Milan Gavrilovic, a leader of the Serb Agrarian Party and a confirmed liberal, to Moscow.<sup>35</sup>

As Italy came nearer intervention in the war, the likelihood that Yugoslavia would be drawn in increased. Having made his decision to join Hitler in March,<sup>36</sup> Mussolini was casting around for a victim small enough to suit Italy's limited resources.<sup>37</sup> The choice turned out to be a very limited one; as early as 1936 Stamagge had recognized that, in the event of a European war, Italy's weakness would render her unable to attack anywhere except on the 'eastern front', that is either Greece or Yugoslavia.<sup>38</sup> Even Mussolini was forced to admit – heaven only knows what this must have cost him – that Italy would be unable to do 'anything spectacular',<sup>39</sup> and when he issued his so-called 'plan of war' on 31 March 1940 he envisaged offensive action only on the Balkan front.<sup>40</sup> Talking about Croatia, the Duce's hands 'fairly itched'.<sup>41</sup> At the end of April, he had his army chief-of-staff Marshal Rodolfo Graziani prepare a plan of war based upon an offensive against Yugoslavia, and the air force started to deploy accordingly.<sup>42</sup> His first reaction to the German invasion of the Low Countries of 10 May was to time the rising of Pavelic's Ustace, with whom an agreement similar to the one he had previously tried to obtain from Macek had been signed in January, for early June.<sup>43</sup> As late as 29 May he confirmed his directive to Graziani.<sup>44</sup> At this period, just as one year earlier, these measures had a pronounced anti-German edge; their purpose, among others, was to get hold of a disputed area while the Big Brother was engaged elsewhere – snatch as you can.

Mussolini's army and air force were just starting their preparations when a letter from the Führer arrived, and brought his plans to a halt. Hitler had learnt of his ally's intentions in April<sup>45</sup> and confirmation reached him in May.<sup>46</sup> After all that we have seen of his Yugoslav policy, it is not hard to see why he was unhappy about the Duce's plans. Hitler's overwhelming priority during this period was the west; here he had concentrated almost all his troops and hoped to gain a decisive victory. In this context Italy's plans presented a diversion, and one that was totally unrelated to the war against France and England. Moreover, they did not make strategic sense. Even if completely successful, nothing more than the transformation of the Adriatic into an Italian lake could be achieved. The Adriatic, however, is an inland sea with limited strategic significance; being in possession of both sides of the Straits of Otranto, Italy could seal it off in any case. A successful campaign, moreover, would have the disadvantage of finally settling



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the question as to whose sphere of influence Yugoslavia belonged to, and this in a way which was not, his declarations to the contrary notwithstanding, what Hitler wanted.

But would it be successful? Hitler and his army high command (OKH) were not sure. They doubted whether 'Yugoslav national structure' was as 'decayed' as the Italians tried to make out;<sup>47</sup> and World War I had taught them a healthy respect for the Yugoslav soldier.<sup>48</sup> Everything considered, therefore, they tended to share Graziani's scepticism.

Leaving these doubts aside, the Italian plan carried other dangers. Following the agreement of October, Yugoslavia's entire economy had been geared to the Axis, so that an attack on her could not but disrupt – temporarily at least – the flow of raw materials. Even worse, Yugoslavia's covetous neighbours – Hungary and Bulgaria – might seize the opportunity to intervene, possibly drawing in Rumania<sup>49</sup> as well. This in turn would spell disaster to German war production, dependent as it was on Balkan raw materials. Finally, there was the mystery of Yugoslav–Soviet relations. Little as Hitler knew about these, he suspected a military pact and was definitely worried.<sup>50</sup> A Balkan explosion, such as might be produced by an Italian attack on Yugoslavia, might provide the Soviets with an excuse to surge southward; whether they would stop before reaching the Ploesti oil fields was anybody's guess.

For all these reasons, Hitler did not dream of giving his ally the green light over Yugoslavia. On 18 April he sent him a letter in which, while denouncing 'the smaller neutral states' which 'think they can enjoy the privilege of gravely insulting or damaging . . . insolently a few great powers' invoking 'democratic freedom of the press and public opinion' to excuse themselves, he added that 'I . . . am naturally convinced that for us it is desirable to hold the Balkanic region . . . out of the war.'<sup>51</sup> On 26 April he was reported 'struggling with all possible means' to keep the Balkans quiet.<sup>52</sup> To make sure Mussolini did not move he refused Italy's request for arms,<sup>53</sup> and by 23 May he believed he had the 'reins well in hand'.<sup>54</sup> Four days later, however, his army commander-in-chief was still sufficiently nervous to tell the foreign minister, Joachim (von) Ribbentrop, that he personally should take care lest the Balkans be driven into disorder by Italy.<sup>55</sup> On 30 May a letter arrived from Mussolini, announcing that 'I hold it desirable to prevent the extension of the conflict to the *settore danubiano-balcanico* from which Italy too, derives supplies.'<sup>56</sup>

Strange as it may seem, this ostensibly conciliatory letter alarmed Hitler. He knew his co-dictator too well to take him at his word, and in any case had not yet forgotten the unpleasant way in which the Albanian affair was sprung on him. This time he did not want to take any chances. He therefore proceeded to write Mussolini a letter in which he

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assured his ally that he was 'in perfect accord' with his desire to keep the Danube basin and the Balkans out of the conflict. Moreover, he recommended that the Duce make a public statement to that effect. To allow his ally time to digest the message, Hitler also asked him to postpone his entry into the war from 5 to 10 June – ostensibly in order to allow Germany to finish off the French air force.<sup>57</sup>

This was a bitter pill for Mussolini, but not one that he could refuse to swallow. By 2 June he had made up his mind to comply;<sup>58</sup> with almost indecent haste Berlin dropped the ridiculous pretext it had dreamt up to delay his entry into the war and Italy was allowed to select any date she liked.<sup>59</sup> Ciano told the Yugoslav minister that his country would not be invaded if it behaved 'loyally', a grave statement of which the minister 'loyally' took notice.<sup>60</sup> The day after, the withdrawal of Italian forces and their transportation to Libya – where they would presumably be free from Hitler's meddlesome interference – began;<sup>61</sup> and on 10 June Mussolini, when declaring war, grudgingly announced his intention to spare not just Yugoslavia, but Greece, Turkey, Egypt and Switzerland as well.

Hitler had won a considerable victory in the tug of war between himself and Mussolini and had proved that he was perfectly able to hold his ally's Balkan plans in check when he wanted to. Behind Mussolini's back, he was already reassuring the Yugoslavs; tongue in cheek, the German minister in Belgrade explained that 'anybody could see that the interests of the Axis powers . . . were identical, and that Germany wanted to keep the peace in southeastern Europe'.<sup>62</sup> Thereupon the Yugoslavs claimed they were satisfied, at least for the time being.<sup>63</sup> In any case, they did demobilize in July.

The lull was to be of short duration. On 1 July Hitler met the new Italian ambassador, Dino Alfieri, and committed the error of talking somewhat strongly about Yugoslavia. Referring to a collection of top level allied documents for the conduct of the war that his troops had discovered in an abandoned railway carriage near Vitry la Charité, he said that it had been proved 'just how equivocal and hostile' Yugoslavia's attitude to the Axis had been. Italy, he said, would have (*dovrà*) to clear 'many problems' at her frontier 'at the right moment'.<sup>64</sup> No sooner had this news reached Mussolini than the Italian air force and army were ordered to redeploy in the Parma–Padua area, in view of possible 'complications in the direction of Yugoslavia'.<sup>65</sup>

Mussolini had obviously interpreted Hitler's words as a broad hint that Germany would not object to an Italian action. To make doubly sure he instructed Ciano, who was about to leave for Berlin, to inform Hitler of the need 'to split up Yugoslavia'.<sup>66</sup> When he raised the subject, however, the Italian foreign minister was treated to an angry lecture: The decisive question in this connection was whether it was a matter of