

SERBIA A SECOND BELGIUM FOR ALLIES AND GERMANY

The Geographical, Military and Political Aspects of the Balkan Conflict Which Threatens to Reduce the Slav State to the Vassalage of Austria—Problems Confronting the Armies.

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The parallel between Serbia and Belgium is too striking not to provoke comment. In a military way the resemblance is almost complete; on the political side the familiar Belgian problem seems soon to be reproduced. To get at France, to open the road to Byzantium and thence to Egypt and India, Germany is fighting in the valley of the Morava as she fought in those of the Sambre and the Meuse.

Her revenge came four years later when, under Russian guidance, there was formed the Balkan alliance which ended in the first Balkan war. In this war Serbian troops overran Old Serbia and Macedonia. Uskub, Pristina, Monastir, Pripilj and Kupriji were captured. In Albania Serbian armies reached Durazzo and Montenegrin troops entered Scutari.

When it came time to make peace, however, Austria again intervened. Bulgaria and Serbia had divided the Turk provinces in a secret treaty; to Serbia was to fall Northern Macedonia west of a line drawn from Lake Ochrida to Egri Palanka, together with Albania north of the Skumbi River. Thus Serbia was to acquire a window on the sea, which meant independence of the Austrian market.

Bulgaria declined to make the necessary sacrifice, acting under Austrian influence, and the second Balkan war followed. In this Bulgaria was beaten, lost all of Northern Macedonia to Serbia save the Strumnitza circle, and to Greece surrendered Kavala and Drama. Serbia thus became a considerable state, with an exit to the world, acquired economic independence, but also earned the permanent hostility of both Austria and Bulgaria.

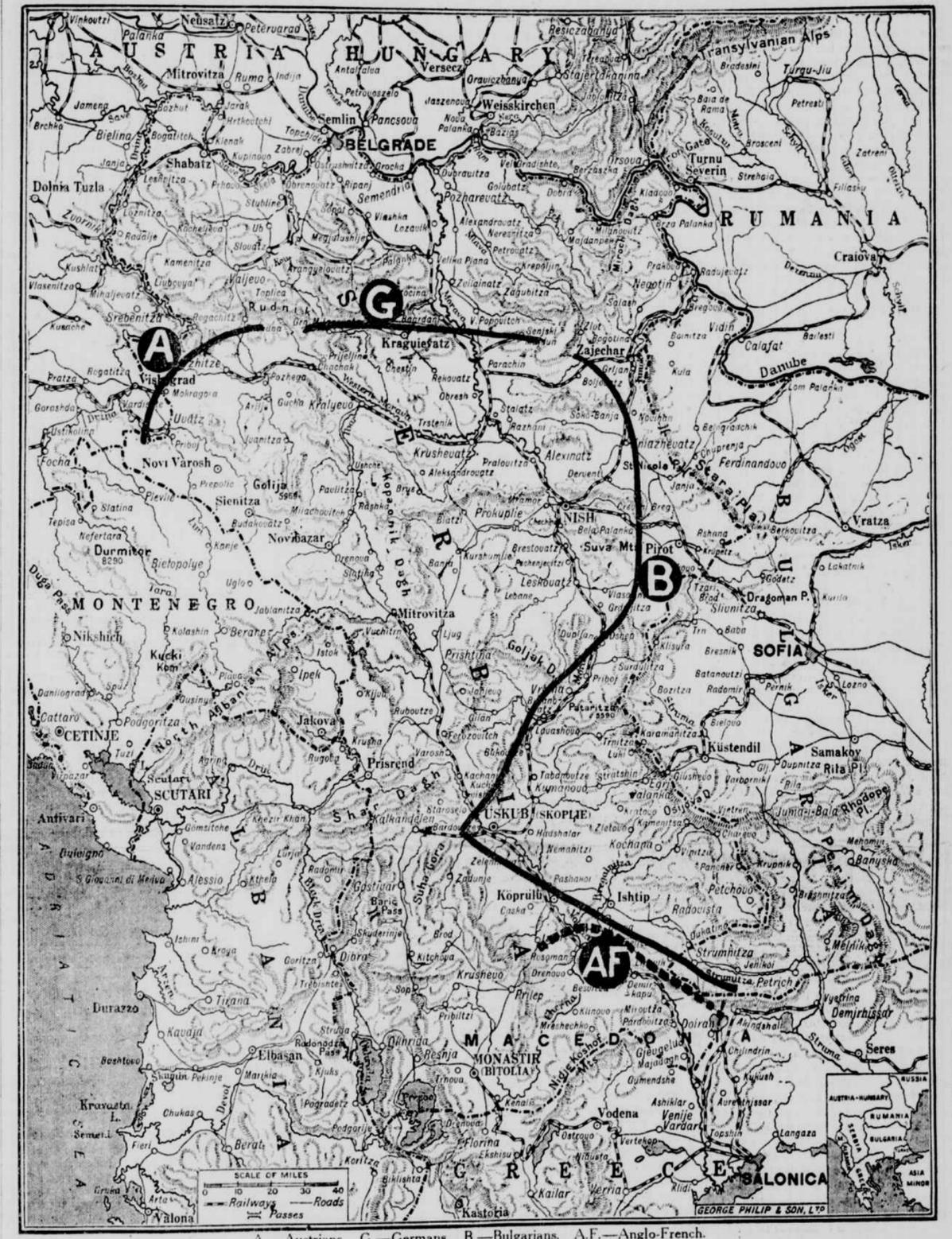
As for Austria, Serbia had now become for her not a nuisance but a peril, for the Serbs now began to plan to liberate the Serbs of Bosnia and to found a great southern Slav state, extending from Trieste to Durazzo and from the Drava to the Skumbi. It was this peril which led to the Austrian declaration of war upon Serbia, which proved the signal for Armageddon.

But it is essential to recognize that in taking Macedonia, in alliance with Greece and Rumania, Serbia had also made a dangerous enemy in Bulgaria, who was sure to attack her if the chance should come. In doing this she had insured herself with treaties of alliance with Greece and Rumania, but both were to fail her at the critical moment, because both declined to face, not Bulgaria, but Austria, Germany and Turkey.

Turning now to the geographical aspect: Serbia is a country of about 35,000 square miles, almost exactly the size of Indiana, with a population of 4,500,000. It is fairly regular in outline, some 160 miles broad from east to west and a trifle more than 250 miles long from Belgrade to Monastir. It is a country with no large cities, wholly agricultural, a country of small holdings like France, a pure democracy, with no considerable bourgeois element and no nobility.

Its geography, so far as it is interesting from the military point of view, may be set forth simply by comparing the country to a long, narrow house, facing north upon the Danube. Through this house, from north to south, runs a wide corridor, rather nearer the eastern or Bulgarian side, which leads up the Morava and down the Vardar Valley and connects Belgrade with Salonica, 50 miles south of the Greek frontier.

TERRITORY INVOLVED IN THE TEUTONIC DRIVE FOR CONSTANTINOPLE THROUGH SERBIA AND THE POSITIONS OF THE CONTENTING FORCES.



A.—Austrians. G.—Germans. B.—Bulgarians. A.F.—Anglo-French.

corridor; the other continues south along the Serbo-Greek corridor to Salonica. Just north of Nish another railroad goes west along the Bosnian-Bulgar corridor to Uzhitze, just east of the Bosnian frontier. The frontier at Vishegrad begins an Austrian line leading to Serajevo, where it meets the main Austrian railway lines.

The Military Aspect. Now, in a military sense, these two corridors, the Serbo-Greek and the Bosnian-Bulgar, are all that is of vital importance to understanding the military operations. The purpose of the Austro-Germans is to open a road from the Danube through Nish to Bulgaria. All that is necessary for them to do is to push south along the first corridor to Nish and then turn east along the second toward Bulgaria.

But the Bulgars have a second purpose and a second mission. They desire to reconquer Macedonia as soon as possible and to prevent the arrival of Anglo-French aid to the Serbs. This aid is coming north along the Serbo-Greek corridor toward Nish, but is still a long way from the city and cannot possibly reach the town before it falls to the Bulgars. Accordingly, they have struck across the mountains from their own country and entered the Serbo-Greek corridor, half-way between Nish and the Greek frontier, taken the city of Uskub and the town of Kumanovo, where the Serbs won their great victory over the Turks in the first Balkan war.

force is descending the Serbo-Greek corridor from Belgrade and the Danube on a wide front, and has taken Kragujevatz, and is approaching the junction of the two corridors just north of Nish.

Now, to use another figure, the Serbian forces are in obvious peril of being caught in a huge net, one end of which is carried by the Austrians advancing from Vishegrad, the other by the Bulgars, who have passed Uskub and are pushing west to join hands with the Austrians. The rest of the net is carried by the Germans coming south along the Serbo-Greek corridor and the Bulgars coming west along the Bosnian-Bulgar corridor.

Germany's Road to Safety. Laying aside for the moment the possibility that the Allies may be able to get up in time to check and throw back the Bulgars, who are about Uskub, there is only one road to safety left to the Serbians, and that is south along the valley of the Ibar, which comes north into the Bosnia-Bulgar corridor from Montenegro. By this valley the Serbs can, if they retreat before the Austrians and Bulgars meet, get back into the mountains of Montenegro. Once there they can, unquestionably, make a prolonged resistance, resorting to guerrilla warfare in a country of mountains snow-covered already and lacking in roads and railroads.

Conceivably, the Serbs will be able to draw south enough troops to push the Bulgars back upon Uskub. If they can do this there is available a road southwest over the mountains from Nish, through Pristina to Prisenrd. The advantage of this route would be that it would bring the Serbs nearer to their Allies, who are coming north up the Serbo-Greek corridor. In addition, a fairly possible trail runs from Prisenrd to Scutari, only forty miles, and near Scutari the Boyana River is navigable.

At the very best, discarding all possibility of effective Allied intervention, the Serbs can hope to get back on a front north of the Montenegrin frontier, with their right flank covering the Prisenrd-Scutari road. At the worst, they must face the possibility of complete envelopment and destruction, as a result of the successful advance of the three hostile armies. The Bulgar pushing west from Uskub and Pripilj, the German pushing south from the Danube and the Austrian coming east from Bosnia.

The Allies in Macedonia. It remains now to consider the Allied intervention. The immediate objective of the French troops, which were landed at Salonica, was to cover the lower end of the Serbo-Greek corridor, at a point west of Strumnitza, where the Bulgar frontier is but ten miles away from the railroad. This seems to have been done successfully and the French, reinforced by the British, have pushed north along the railroad to a point a little southwest of the town of Istip, which is occupied by Bulgars. Roughly speaking, they have covered half the distance from the Greek frontier to Uskub.

confronted with growing Bulgar forces pushing east from Strumnitza and south from Kupriji. In point of fact, the French and British, as rapidly as they have been detrained, seemed to have faced east and undertaken to guard the railroad from Bulgar attacks.

Meantime a small Serbian force occupying Kupriji, which is more commonly called Veles in the dispatches, has been driven out, has retaken and lost the town. As it now stands, the Bulgars have a wedge between the Allies and Uskub, which rests on Kupriji, forty miles to the south of Uskub. The Allies themselves are at least twenty miles south of this point and in recent days seem to have made little progress.

What seems to be true is that, despite the magnificent promises, the Allies have failed as yet to get any considerable number of troops into Macedonia, the first troops having been hastily withdrawn from the Gallipoli operations. Such troops as have arrived seem to have been insufficient to supply railroad guards for the rear and a force strong enough to make a dash for Uskub. There is in all this mournful suggestion of what happened in Belgium, and the appeals of the Serbs and their pathetic eagerness to learn the whereabouts of the Anglo-French troops recall the similar Belgian anxiety over reinforcements that never arrived.

Initial Success of Germany Means Failure of British Dardanelles Campaign.

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able to escape envelopment. It will break one arm of the net. If the Allies can clear these two railroads, then they can steadily increase their forces in Macedonia, until they are able to take the offensive against the Germans and Austrians to the north and menace the Belgrade-Nish-Constantinople railroad. The safety of the Serbian army will be assured, but its position will unpleasantly suggest that of the Belgians clinging to a tiny fragment of their territory in Flanders.

Macedonia. A second effect of Allied success to this limited extent would be the destruction of Bulgarian hopes of gaining Macedonia. They would, to be sure, hold that portion of Serbian Macedonia east of the Vardar Valley, but this would be a small reward for their efforts and was offered to them as the price of their neutrality by Serbia. Conceivably, the failure of Bulgar hopes would fan discontent at home and lead to a revolt against the Turco-German alliance.

But it is equally necessary to recognize that the Allies may not be able to get up in time to join hands with the Serbs and the Serbians will either be enveloped and destroyed or driven west into the Montenegrin mountains. This would leave the Allies to bear the whole brunt of an Austro-German-Bulgar thrust down the Vardar Valley and might end in their retreat into Greece. It is the possibility of this which seems to have dictated the caution which is being displayed in the Allied advance. The situation in the Near East, from the Allied point of view, is certainly bad enough without a new and real military disaster.

In the next few days the important thing to watch from the Allied side is the success or failure of the Anglo-French force in breaking the wedge that the Bulgars have driven in between them and the Serbs between Uskub and Kupriji. If the wedge is not broken then, even if the Serb army escapes, it will be flung into the mountains, where it may be destroyed by starvation or made useless by lack of munitions.

What Germany Will Do. As to German purpose, that is in part plain. It was essential to open a road promptly to the Turkish ally, who was suffering from lack of munitions. One road was opened when the Serbs were driven out of the corner of their country touching the Danube and commanding that stream. This opened the river, and supplies and ammunition were promptly dispatched by boat. But it was necessary, in addition, to get a more satisfactory route removed from Rumanian interference. This road will be had when the German and Bulgar armies meet at Nish.

There remains the possibility of the envelopment and destruction of the Serb army. Doubtless the Germans and Austrians will do their best to accomplish this. The complete subjugation of Serbia would be extremely welcome to Austria, who might either devastate the country completely, thus removing a peril for many years, or else, as has been suggested, partition it, taking the western half and giving the eastern to Bulgaria. Finally, there is the opportunity to attack the Allied army and drive it out of Macedonia and conceivably out of the Balkans. The fate of Sir John Moore's army in Spain will be recalled, and an evacuation of Salonica might be as spectacular and impressive as that of Corunna more than a century ago.

On the other hand, the Germans, having opened the railroad and river routes, may content themselves with taking a defensive position south of these lines and leave it to the Bulgars to deal with the Serbs and their Allies. This is wholly possible, for the country in Macedonia is hardly suitable for offensive fighting. The winter season makes operations difficult, and Germany may prefer to make her attack on England in Egypt. In other words, she may content herself with having opened the road to Constantinople and let the complete conquest of Serbia go by the board for the present.

In any event, German success in the main purpose of opening the road can no longer be doubted. This spells the complete failure of the British campaign at the Dardanelles and will probably lead to a prompt evacuation of the positions on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

A Minor Phase. In closing this review it is necessary to remind the reader that, despite all recent impressions to the contrary, this Serbian campaign is a minor phase of a great war. It is incomparably less important than Napoleon's Spanish campaign, and in this case the part of the French is being played by the Germans. In the end the Napoleonic Wars were decided not in the Peninsula but in Germany and Belgium and Russia. There is no reason to question the prospect that the decision will be had in the same places this time.