***UNDER THE SHADOW OF STALIN AND HITLER (WORLD WAR II AND THE FATE OF THE EUROPEAN NATIONS, 1939-1941)***

**Summary**

**INTRODUCTION**

And further by these, my son,

be admonished: of making

many books there is no end;

and much study is

a weariness of the flesh.

(Eccl. 12: 12)

What was exactly the Second World War? When did it start? These questions appear simple at first sight, but they have an astonishingly great variety of answers. Unlike the First World War, the second one has raised much more irreconcilable assessments both among the public and among scholars. Seven decades since the end of the Second World War are obviously not enough for reaching a generally accepted viewpoint. There is no unanimity even about the start of World War II. In Chinese and Japanese eyes it broke out on July 7, 1937, when Japan launched a large-scale invasion of China. For their part, Europeans associate the beginning of the conflict with the German assault on Poland on September 1, 1939. For the Americans the Second World War started with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, perpetrated on December 7, 1941. There is some truth in each of these interpretations, but there is also too much distortion, subjectivity and deliberate concealment of crucial facts.

Practically everybody agrees that the First World War started with the war declaration of Austria-Hungary on Serbia on July 28, 1914, and the bombardment of Belgrade by the Austro-Hungarians on the following day and that it ended with the surrender of Germany under the Compiegne Armistice on November 11, 1918. There were continuous battles during the entire period from July 29, 1914 to November 11, 1918, and for this reason the conflict was known also as the All-European War. Even the participation of the United States, which was decisive for the outcome, was predominantly in Europe, on the Franco-German front. The battles in Africa, the Middle and the Far East, as well as all over the oceans played an auxiliary rather than a central role. The most important thing, though, is that the armed clashes had a clear beginning and a not less clear end.

Things are far from clear as far as the Second World War is concerned. There was a continuous warfare solely between the Japanese and the Chinese, but China declared war on Japan only on December 9, 1941. Moreover, the war between Japan and China was a regional clash rather than a world conflagration with no direct connection with developments in other parts of the Earth. True enough, Hitler tended to support Japan, whereas Stalin gave assistance to the Chinese, but this continued even after the conclusion of an alliance between Communist Russia and National Socialist Germany. The Russo-Japanese Neutrality and Friendship Treaty was concluded only on April 13, 1941, but two months later the German “Wehrmacht” invaded Russia and that was the end of the Soviet-Nazi Alliance. The two belligerent coalitions were in fact formed only after the Japanese blow to Pearl Harbor. It was only then that the United Nations, headed by the United States, Russia and Britain, faced the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, but Stalin agreed to denounce the Neutrality Pact with Japan and to take part in the operations against the Japanese only after the liquidation of the Third Reich in May 1945.

One may talk about a continuous warfare in Europe only after April-May 1940, when Hitler invaded Denmark and Norway, overran Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and France, and made a supreme effort to defeat Britain. The battle became even more “real” and devastating after June 22, 1941, when Hitler and Stalin came to grips with each other for the conquest of the planet. Until that moment there had been relatively short campaigns, often with no serious clashes. From September 1 to September 28, 1939, National Socialist Germany and Communist Russia conquered and partitioned Poland. From November 26, 1939, to March 12, 1940, Stalin made an attempt to conquer Finland. The next campaign was launched by Hitler, who overran Denmark and invaded Norway on April 9. The Norwegians offered a tough and efficient resistance and the Germans completed their conquest only in June 1940, when they had already occupied Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg and eliminated France, but they had to start the battle for England. Battles were waged also in North Africa, while Communist Russia was engulfing Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and annexing Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. However, these two Russian operations had a “peaceful” character, if we do not consider the hundreds of thousands and even millions of victims, thrown by the repressive services of Lavrenti Beria into the Soviet death camps.

It may be assumed, with some reservations, that in Europe the Second World War began in September 1939. However, the events from September 1, 1939, to June 22, 1941, are also distinguished by a number of inconvenient truths. For instance, scholars and observers rarely indicate that the Second World War, whatever it means, started not with the German invasion of Poland, but with the joint German-Russian invasion of Poland. True enough, on September 1, 1939, the German “Wehrmacht” invaded Poland from the west, the north and the south, but it is not less important that on September 17 Poland was assaulted from the east by units of the Russian “Red Army”. This fact is often concealed because of guilty conscience, because of the still existing Great Russian jingoism and Communist fanaticism, or simply in exchange for a good amount of money.

There are still attempts to underestimate the alliance character of the relationship between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union from August 23, 1939, to June 22, 1941. An increasing number of publications indicate, though, that during this period Hitler and Stalin were allies. Interesting in this regard is the conclusion of the British historian Lawrence Rees about the Soviet-Nazi alliance “*all but in name*”, while some of his colleagues name it an “*Unholy Alliance*”, hinting with black humor at the Holy Alliance of Russia, Austria and Prussia in the first half of the 19th century. According to the British scholar Adam Tooze it was precisely the alliance of Berlin with Moscow that gave the Reich a second breath in a suffocating blockade, imposed by Britain and France.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The prevailing stereotype is still about the primordial and extreme aggressiveness of Germany, whereas Russia’s aggressive ambitions are concealed or underestimated and this applies both to the First and to the Second World War. However, during the last couple of decades there appeared a number of publications that break up this preconceived notion, including works by Russian authors like Viktor Suvorov and Igor Bunich. Indeed, to some extent Bunich and Suvorov make a not quite serious impression, since their books are not entirely in conformity with academic standards, but their arguments are, nonetheless, quite convincing. According to Suvorov, in particular, Stalin followed strictly Lenin’s testament by throwing all his energy to carry out the conquest and Sovietization of the entire world. Stalin was presumably well prepared even for the war against Finland in the winter of 1939 to 1940. As a matter of fact, the “Red Army” succeeded in breaking through the Finnish defense, which amounted to a miracle, bearing in mind the Arctic cold and the famous “Mannerheim Line”. The question remains, nevertheless, for what reasons Stalin did not conquer Finland and did not transform the country into a “Soviet Republic”, although he intended to do that, since he had patched up a “government” under the Comintern apparatchik Kuusinen. Suvorov thinks that after the exhausting campaign Stalin found it more reasonable to avoid being dragged into a guerilla war.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Indeed the Soviet war machine suffered from setbacks in Finland in 1939-1940 in a way similar to the 1979-1985 developments in Afghanistan. Was Stalin aware of that, though? For the time being we have to limit ourselves to the assumption that from January to June 1940 an important change occurred in the course of the war, because in June 1940 Stalin dealt with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in precisely the same way, by annexing them to the “great” USSR. True enough, the three Baltic countries were an incomparably easier prey, but after the break of the “Red Army” through the Finnish defense line Finland could be also occupied and Sovietized accordingly. Moreover, under the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Finland, Latvia and Estonia had been ceded to the Soviet “zone of influence”, whereas under the Treaty for Friendship and for the Border, concluded at the end of September 1939, Hitler gave over to Stalin Lithuania as well. In April 1940 the fear of a possible British landing on the Norwegian coast made the Third Reich occupy Denmark and Norway, and in June and July of the same year, when the German National Socialists ran over France, the Russian Communists annihilated Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and, by the way, they justified their action also by the “menace” of “British imperialism”.

Suvorov’s chief opponent is the Israeli professional historian Gabriel Gorodetsky, but it should be noted that the Russian authorities granted him a special stipend in order to write his book “*The Icebreaker Myth*”. It should be also mentioned that, in a tested Soviet manner, Gorodetsky often conceals important aspects of a particular fact and even flatly denies the evidence. Such is, for instance, his claim that the loudly proclaimed intention of Hitler to conquer the entire world was the actual ultimate goal of his regime, whereas the constantly announced aspiration of Russian Communism to subjugate and Sovietize the planet was mere propaganda.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Gorodetsky’s ideas are not very original in this regard, since the US author Patrick Buchanan claims exactly the opposite, namely, that Stalin wanted to conquer the world, whereas Hitler sought domination “only” in continental Europe. At first sight Buchanan sounds more convincing, because the German dictator actually didn’t want a world conflict, but he intended to achieve his aims by a series of small “blitzkriegs”. The fact remains, though, that both Hitler’s and Stalin’s ultimate goal was the conquest and subjugation of the entire human race. It is quite another matter that not only Germany, as Buchanan claims, but also Russia lacks the resources for conquering the planet.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Under a totalitarian regime propaganda is one of the most powerful instruments of brainwashing. It is impossible to inculcate the dogma of the inevitable victory of Communism all over the world in several generations of Soviet subjects and then, all of a sudden, to tell the same people that the whole thing has been just dust in their eyes. Back in the second half of the 1920s the military command of Communist Russia had worked out itemized plans for the conquest and Sovietization of ever larger territories until the Bolshevik system would be forced upon the entire human race. These plans provided for such details as whom to entrust with the Sovietization of a particular country. It was explicitly stated that local elements should be given a most modest accessory role, higher positions had to be reserved to Soviet subjects of the respective ethnic origin, whereas the most important work had to be done by the repressive services of the Bolshevik state.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Numerous testimonies and reports clearly indicate that the entire mechanism of ideological brainwash, to which Stalin had submitted his soldiers, followed the same pattern. In 1939 a “red Army” soldier subconsciously precluded any other possibility than that of taking very soon the field for the “liberation” of Europe from “fascism and capitalism”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Russian Communism didn’t abandon its mania for conquering the world even at the time of Mikhail Gorbachev, whereas under Brezhnev all subjects of the Soviet Empire had to learn “scientific communism” as a mandatory branch of ideological knowledge. In fact “scientific communism” was a science about the means, methods and possible allies of Moscow’s strife for the subjugation and Sovietization of Earth. Stalin, obviously, could be no exception. As indicated by Suvorov too, the first reaction of each totalitarian regime is to seal completely the state borders in order to deprive its subjects of any information about the possibility of another way of life. However, this wouldn’t do, because the very thought that beyond the border there are societies, offering a different choice, could eventually lead to a general rejection of the official ideology, of the unique Party and its leader. In the eyes of Lenin, Stalin and their successors a truly permanent solution would be to achieve a situation, in which there will be nowhere to run away and this could be accomplished only by conquering the entire world and by destroying all alternative social and political systems.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Quite significantly, more and more are the authors, including Russian scholars, who share the views of Suvorov. True enough, a historian like V.A.Nevezhin criticizes not very correctly Suvorov for his opinion that Stalin prepared a preventive war against Hitler. In fact, as Nevezhin stresses, “*Stalin and his entourage, as indicated by the documents at the disposal of historians, imagined this war not as a preventive, but as an offensive one*”. As a matter of fact, though, this is precisely what Suvorov proves and there are no substantial differences between him and Nevezhin. However, Nevezhin is more cautious in his conclusions. He is right in complaining about the fact that Stalin’s archives are still inaccessible, but he is wrong in considering that the reason for the inevitability of the clash between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union was a would-be “ideological irreconcilability” between National Socialism and Communism and not the ambition of both Hitler and Stalin to rule over the world.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A highly valuable information about Stalin’s intentions during World War II is offered by politicians and statesmen of small European countries like Lithuania, Bulgaria, etc. Readers will have the opportunity to find out themselves that Moscow considered the annihilation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia merely as an episode toward the conquest and Sovietization of Europe which, according to the Russian dictator and his henchmen, was the objective of the Second World War, whereas the Third World War had to lead to the Bolshevization of the entire planet. Against the background of this irrefutable evidence, it is amazing how Gorodetsky tries to convince us that the engulfment of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia by Stalin’s Russia in June 1940 had been in response to the fall of France under Hitler and that it was not the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that opened the door to the Sovietization of the Baltic countries.[[9]](#footnote-9) The general impression of Gorodetsky's work is that in fact he reproduces the outdated propaganda themes of the Communist regime in seemingly more “intelligent” terms.

A more or less similar pattern may be seen in a number of western authors, who close deliberately their eyes to the fundamental aggressiveness of the Soviet state in order to justify the alliance of their countries with Stalin during World War II. Such distortions are noticeable even in the work of the US journalist William Shirer “*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*”, appreciated as a classical study of the history of German National Socialism. As a whole, Shirer’s account is well founded and detailed. He analyzes the logic of Hitler’s steps toward the Great War but, in examining the decision of the German dictator to attack Communist Russia, Shirer seems to abandon his logic and assigns this fatal move to some delirious self-confidence and hurt vanity because of Stalin’s successes. This view is deeply rooted in the historiography about the Second World War but it cannot find a plausible answer to the question as to why the German military feared a two-front war during the 1938 Czechoslovak crisis but did not object at all to Hitler’s decision to attack the Soviet Union before eliminating Britain. There were obviously very serious and urgent reasons for Hitler and his generals to engage in such a venture, but Shirer doesn’t say in fact a word about these reasons.[[10]](#footnote-10)

When dealing with the assault that National Socialist Germany perpetrated on Communist Russia on June 22, 1941, historians from both West and East usually present Hitler as the aggressor and Stalin as the victim, although a not entirely innocent one. Again Suvorov and Bunich are among the first authors who denied this legend and indicated that Stalin never prepared for defense but solely for aggression at the moment, chosen by him and that he was simply forestalled by Hitler. By the way, for many authors in the West, this was not a secret. As far back as the early 1960s the British historian A.J.P.Taylor contended that the Soviet military doctrine was entirely offensive but not defensive. Taylor was not the first one to claim that, since about a decade earlier the French historian M.Maurice wrote that National Socialist Germany had preferred “*accelerating the assault on the USSR before the USSR itself would be ready to strike*”.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It was in the 1960s too that a number of Finnish historians disclosed many important aspects of the aggression of Communist Russia, but they had to publish their findings abroad (mostly in Switzerland), hoping to deprive in this way the Soviet Union of unnecessary pretexts for harassing Finland. It is worth noting that even in their foreign publications the Finns are quite prudent in their assessments, but this conceals by no means the fact that Moscow had concrete intentions to launch a campaign to the west through the corpse of Finland and of the other small Eastern European countries, which still existed by June 22, 1941. Thus, for instance, Heikki Jalanti writes cautiously about the “impression” that Moscow prepared a new aggression. In this way he hinted in fact at the panic, created in Helsinki by Stalin’s firm intention to annihilate Finland even after the end of the Winter War in March 1940.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Nevertheless, authors like Gabriel Gorodetsky don’t seem to be embarrassed by all that. Faithful to his style, Gorodetsky frequently distorts facts and resorts to apparently innocent attributes only to present a particular event in a totally different light. Thus, in examining the two military games on maps, played by the Soviet command in early 1941, he claims that both games had an entirely defensive character[[13]](#footnote-13), which is simply not true. As one may see plainly from a study by the Russian author Vl.Karpov, in one of the games the “Red Army” had indeed to repulse an attack of the “Wehrmacht”, but in the other game the Soviet military forces attacked the Germans.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the same vein, when he deals with Stalin’s proposal for a mutual assistance pact with Bulgaria, Gorodetsky considers that the Russian dictator was highly concerned about the aggressive intentions of Hitler with regard to the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. This claim is based on the diary of Georgi Dimitrov that was not yet published at the time when Gorodetsky wrote his book. However, quotations from the diary are selected in such a way as to leave the readers in complete ignorance of the fact that the Russian dictator was not “concerned”, but in fact infuriated. Moreover, Stalin’s anger was due not to the German and Italian aspirations for the Straits, but to the fact that not only Germany and Italy, but also Britain had claims on a zone that Russia had considered for centuries as reserved for herself.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In a similar way Gorodetsky thinks that Stalin’s intention to dissolve the Comintern as early as in April 1941 proves how the Russian dictator was afraid of Hitler and this fear made him give up the idea of conquering and Sovietizing the whole world.[[16]](#footnote-16) Gorodetsky fails to mention, though, that Stalin decided to dissolve the Comintern after a number of governments, including that of the United States, took special legislative measures for banning the respective local communist party as an organization under the command of foreign headquarters.

It is inevitable to have also reservations as to Gorodetsky’s method to prove his allegations by selecting all sorts of declarations of diplomats, politicians and statesmen no matter of the moment when these statements have been made. Such quotations are obviously put in this way out of the context of the respective events and it is easy to provide them with an entirely different meaning. By the way, events and developments in the present work are examined in a strict chronological order to avoid precisely distorted interpretations of what has actually happened. In reality, the more Gorodetsky is honest about the evidence, the less convincing are his efforts to refute Viktor Suvorov and thus Gorodetsky reaffirms in fact Suvorov’s conclusions.

The book “*Hitler and Stalin before the Clash*” by Lev Bezymenskij is of a somewhat different character. The author has given up the efforts of the Soviet propaganda to conceal the crucial moments of the creation and activity of the Soviet-Nazi Alliance from August 23, 1939, to June 22, 1941. He quotes abundantly the texts of the Non-Aggression Pact of August 23, 1939, of the Treaty for Friendship and for the Border of September 28, 1939, as well as some quite revealing and compromising statements of Stalin in a relatively smaller circle. However, Bezymenskij fails to free himself completely from basic Communist legends, such as those about the attempt of Britain and France to direct the Nazi aggression against Bolshevik Russia and about the “peacefulness” of Stalin’s foreign policy. Neither is he able to overcome the quite popular belief that in 1939-1941 the “Red Army” was unprepared and weak. Within this context Bezymenskij also conceals a number of “inconvenient” facts, such as the sinister “detail” that the “Red Army” units Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were forced to admit to their territory in October 1939 outnumbered by far their own troops. Quite unconvincing is also the attempt to underestimate the smashing superiority the “Red Army” had by June 22, 1941, in tanks, planes and all sorts of combat equipment with regard to the “Wehrmacht”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Bezymenskij is also one of the authors who tend to overestimate the impact of France’s catastrophe in June 1940 on Stalin. According to Bezymenskij the surrender of the Third Republic presumably destroyed Stalin’s hopes for a continuous and exhaustive war on the western front and made him accelerate the engulfment of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, assessed in a scandalously euphemistic way as “*the entrance of Estonia, Lithuania and Estonia into the USSR as union republics*”. However, Hitler failed to eliminate Britain, although in the summer and fall of 1940 he made a supreme effort to this effect. Even Gorodetsky has to admit that the leader of German National Socialism decided to inflict, as soon as possible, a preemptive strike against Stalin only after Molotov’s visit to Berlin from November 12 to November 14, 1940. Hitler’s irreversible decision was due both to the British resistance and to the flat refusal of Moscow to cede the Balkans and Finland to Berlin. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that Stalin had decided to engulf the Baltic states long before the surrender of France, which is witnessed by Stalin’s revelations to the Soviet apparatchik Georgi Dimitrov, as well as by an order of the Russian war minister Semyon Timoshenko of July 3, 1940, about the status of the “Red Army” units in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. It’s quite another matter that even after the surrender of France the Russian dictator couldn’t believe that his German counterpart would attack him before eliminating Britain and would throw in this way Germany into a two-front war without having prepared his army for the harsh conditions of Russia.[[18]](#footnote-18)

To some extent Bezymenskij reminds of Gorodetsky by his underestimation of the views of Suvorov, but Bezymenskij goes further by accusing Suvorov of reviving the propaganda of Goebbels and by assigning to Suvorov thoughts that he has never uttered. More than once Bezymenskij repeats in his book that in Suvorov’s opinion not Hitler intended to assault Russia and that Hitler did not even assault Russia, but only Stalin prepared an attack on Germany.[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact Suvorov denies by no means the aggressive schemes of Hitler against Stalin, abundantly documented for long years in the scholarly literature. Suvorov simply claims that not only Hitler intended to attack Russia, but that Stalin planned an invasion of Germany, and not only of Germany, but of Europe as a whole.

Similarly to Gorodetsky, Bezymenskij hastily rejects the threats Stalin made to assault Hitler as “*boast*” and “*bragging*”. The same terms are used for the speech that Stalin delivered on May 5, 1941, although the Russian dictator clearly disclosed in that speech his intention to attack Germany as soon as possible. If Stalin really overestimated the combat capacities of the “Red Army” in order to discourage Hitler, as Bezymenskij claims, then why was this speech not only kept in deep secrecy, but the Russians dumped on the Germans a deliberately false version, making the impression that the Soviet leader was ready for peace and for new compromises with the Third Reich?[[20]](#footnote-20)

As a science, or at least as a humanity, history is based on primary sources and in modern and recent times “primary sources” means “archives”. Not knowing archives may easily lead experts to entirely wrong conclusions and this applies even more to those who have lived through the events and developments, dealt with in the present research. Such is, for instance, the fatal self-deception, shared even by Hitler and Mussolini, that Stalin presumably abandoned the idea of a “world revolution”. Apart from the unquestionable achievements of scholars in the field of World War II, this work is based on an abundant quantity of primary sources, both published and unpublished. This includes the documents of the German and Swiss foreign policy[[21]](#footnote-21), the already published diaries of Georgi Dimitrov[[22]](#footnote-22), Franz Halder[[23]](#footnote-23), Galeazzo Ciano[[24]](#footnote-24) and Bogdan Filov[[25]](#footnote-25), the published and unpublished Hungarian diplomatic papers[[26]](#footnote-26), the diplomatic and royal archives of Romania[[27]](#footnote-27), Churchill’s memoirs[[28]](#footnote-28), etc.

There can be hardly any doubt that the Second World War resulted to a great extent from the First one, but not because of the irreconcilability between winners and losers, as it is usually claimed. There were a lot of events in the interwar period, indicating quite persuasively that it was possible to overcome the antagonism between the victorious and the defeated powers. For instance, the 1925 Locarno Agreements created a regional collective security system of Germany, on the one hand, and France and Belgium, on the other, with Britain and Italy as guarantors. For its part, the 1932 Lausanne Conference annulled the reparations that the defeated countries had to pay to the winners.

As a matter of fact, the First World War made the Second one inevitable above all by creating the conditions and prerequisites for totalitarianism. On November 7, 1917, the Russian Bolsheviks under Lenin took power by a coup d’état in an atmosphere that favored immensely extremism because of the economic catastrophe, caused by the war. The diktat, forced upon Germany by the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty, gave in its turn a chance to the National Socialists under Hitler who, unlike Lenin, came to power in conformity with the constitutional and parliamentary rules, since Hitler was the leader of the largest party in parliament. Lenin repeatedly proclaimed that his ultimate goal was the Bolshevization of the whole world and he explicitly and plainly formulated the tactics the Soviet state had to follow until the moment was ripe for that: “*We should use the contrasts and contradictions between the two imperialisms, between the two groups of capitalist powers… As long as we have not conquered the entire world, as long as we are weaker than the remaining capitalist world, we should observe the rule: we should be able to use the contradictions and contrasts between the imperialists.*”[[29]](#footnote-29)

After defeating his opponents in the struggle for Lenin’s succession, Stalin strictly followed this testament and made everything possible to provoke a new conflict between the winners and the losers of World War I. Precisely for that reason the Russian dictator rejected abruptly the efforts of Britain and France for an alliance with Communist Russia in the summer of 1939. The refusal of the British and the French to throw the small Eastern European countries under the feet of Stalin played only an additional part. It should be obvious that, in the face of a bloc between Russia, Britain and France, Hitler would have never had the courage to assault Poland and to throw in this way Germany into a two-front war that would have inevitably ended even with a more dreadful catastrophe for the Germans. Moreover, even in the absence of a British-French-Russian alliance, Hitler would have never moved against Poland without a preliminary agreement with Stalin, at least because Russia was the eastern neighbor of the Poles and a traditional pretender to their territory. The key to the Second World War was, therefore, in the hands of Stalin and the only way of setting fire to a new world conflict was by achieving a friendly, if not an alliance agreement with Hitler. The Non-Aggression Pact, signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939, by the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and his Russian counterpart Vyacheslav Molotov, marked the beginning of the Soviet-Nazi alliance. Without that alliance the outbreak of a new war in Europe would have been impossible. After the conclusion of Nazi-Soviet pact there was nothing any more that could prevent Hitler from starting his expansion program with the complicity of Stalin. According to the secret protocol to the Non-Aggression Pact the western part Poland together with Lithuania were assigned to National Socialist Germany, while the eastern part of Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Bessarabia (then within the borders of Romania) were handed over to Communist Russia.

The entire strategy of Stalin aimed at the transformation of Russia into an infallible machine for the conquest of the planet. That was the objective of industrialization and collectivization, as well as of the 1936-1938 “Great Terror”, when the extermination of millions of loyal subjects of the dictator created such an atmosphere that if someone even dreamed about participating in a plot against the “Father”, the next day that same person would have given himself or herself to the authorities. Stalin imposed even more cruel changes in the High Treason Act that was draconian anyway. According to the new texts each “Red Army” soldier, who happened to be captured by the enemy, was to be immediately shot once back in Soviet hands and his property was to be confiscated. Moreover, the indictment for “treason” was to be brought not only against the prisoner of war, but also against all adult members of his or her family. “Severe punishment” awaited also those, who had known that someone could be captured, but who “*haven’t reported on that to the agencies of Soviet power*”. In 1939 these cannibalistic clauses were included in the oath of every “Red Army” recruit, while being sworn in.[[30]](#footnote-30)

It goes without saying that Stalin and Hitler would have hardly acted in such an unpunished way if the United States did not refuse to assume the responsibility of the superpower it had become by the end of the 19th century. After World War I the American society sank into an insane and shortsighted isolationism and Europe was left alone to the mercy of Lenin, Stalin and Hitler. Despite their large colonial possessions, Britain and France turned out to be helpless in front of the Nazi and Soviet aggression. Their “appeasement” policy only enhanced Hitler’s and Stalin’s belief that the two Western European democracies were hopelessly weak. Britain and France met with suicidal indifference the offensive of various authoritarian regimes, established in most European countries in the 1920s and in the 1930s as the last and only efficient barrier against Russian Communism and German National Socialism. As early as in 1922 Italy fell under the rule of the Fascists, headed by Benito Mussolini, who banned in 1926 all political parties and imposed the monopoly of his own Fascist Party. A similar, although somewhat milder one-party system was forced upon Spain by Franco after his victory in the 1936-1939 civil war against the more and more Bolshevized “Popular Front” regime, by Salazar in Portugal after 1932, and by Konstantin Päts in Estonia and Karlis Ulmanis in Latvia after the respective coups d’état in 1934. Of a one-party character was also the “enlightened despotism” of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and the same system was preserved after his death in 1938 by his close associate and successor Ismet Inönü, who had distinguished himself in the national revolution and in the war against Greece and the Entente. After the coup of February 1938 King Carol II of Romania imposed his own personal regime and tried to create a single state party too. In a number of European countries the multiparty system seemingly remained, but the opposition was in fact barred from access to the government. That was the case of Hungary under Regent Miklos Horthy after the country’s liberation from the Bolshevik terror in 1919, of the Yugoslav King Alexander Karageorgevich, who was succeeded by Paul as regent, of the “Sanation Regime”, forced upon by Jozef Pilsudski and reaffirmed after his death by a quadrumvirate, including the Inspector-General of the Polish Army Edward Rydz-Smigly, President Ignacy Moscicki, Prime Minister Felicjan Skladkowski-Slawoj and Foreign Minister Jozef Beck. After the 1926 coup d’état the Lithuanian leader Antanas Smetona followed initially a similar pattern, but in 1934 he decided also to ban all political parties except his own. For his part, King Boris III of Bulgaria removed in 1935 the perpetrators of the coup d’état of May 19, 1934, only to reaffirm the ban of all political parties and to rule as an absolute monarch, although he allowed a limited form of legal opposition activity. To some extent the military dictator of Greece Ioannis Metaxas ruled in a similar way after the 1936 coup, whereas Slovakia under Monsignor Jozef Tiso had a seemingly multiparty system, but these parties were resolutely pro-Nazi and ever more obedient to Hitler. By September 1, 1939, only 11 European countries enjoyed a stable multiparty representative democracy: Britain, France, Ireland, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland. By that time as many as three sovereign European states had been “peacefully” destroyed: Austria in March 1938, Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and Albania in April 1939. Austria and Bohemia were engulfed by the Third Reich. Slovakia became formally independent, but strictly controlled by Berlin, whereas Albania was in fact annexed to Fascist Italy.

**I.THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR II IN EUROPE**

A wise man’s heart is

at his right hand, but

a fool’s heart at his left.

(Eccl. 10: 2)

On September 1, 1939, at 4:15 AM sixty-two German divisions, amounting to 1,700,000 men, assaulted a poorly equipped Polish army, consisting of only thirty-six divisions and 600,000 men. The invasion of Poland by the “Wehrmacht” started simultaneously from west, north and south. The Nazi regime didn’t even bother to address an official war declaration to Poland. The very aggression was represented by the National Socialist propaganda as a response to a Polish attack on a German radio station at Gleiwitz (today Gliwice in Poland). A group of secret German agents, dressed in Polish uniforms, actually had simulated an attack on that station, which served as an excuse for the Nazi storm.[[31]](#footnote-31)

For the time being, Russia refrained from joining the German forces in the assault, but as early as in the morning hours the Nazis enjoyed the logistical assistance of the Bolsheviks, whose radio station at Minsk began to broadcast a special coded signal for the orientation of the German bombers. Yet too many people thought that peace could be still rescued. To that effect the Swedish businessman Birger Dahlerus tried to mediate between Germany and Britain, using his personal friendship with Hermann Goering, who was considered to be the second most important man in the Third Reich after Hitler. Italy’s Fascist dictator Mussolini asked Hitler for a release from the obligations under the May 1939 German-Italian alliance treaty and kept hoping for an international conference of the type held in Munich back in September 1938, when Britain and France had surrendered under Hitler’s diktat.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Hitler gave his accord to what amounted to Italy’s neutrality, but the leader of National Socialist Germany didn’t need Mussolini’s assistance anyway. All the remaining European countries hurried to proclaim their neutrality too. Switzerland had done this back on August 31, 1939, when the Swiss parliament chose Henri Guisan for general and supreme commander of the armed forces, but Guisan contacted the French military command for working out joint defense plans against a possible German attack. Neutrality was proclaimed also by the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, although his victory in the 1936-1939 civil war against the pro-Soviet “People’s Front” regime had become possible only thanks to Hitler’s and Mussolini’s military aid.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Hitler was not at all enthusiastic about the neutrality of Italy and Spain and he angrily warned Hungary, which had profited from the partition of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, to refrain from neutrality declarations. The German leader did not expect any active participation of the Hungarians, but he was furious at the refusal of Budapest to allow free passage to some German troops for Poland. Even the Slovaks sympathized with the Poles, although they owed their very existence as a sovereign state to the Third Reich. In any case a neutrality of Slovakia was out of the question. On the other hand, though, the “Fuehrer” was quite pleased with the neutrality of Romania, since Bucharest made it thus clear that it would not come to the assistance of Poland despite the 1921 alliance treaty, directed by the way against Russia, but not against Germany.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Hitler had enough reasons to believe that this time again the two leading Western European democracies, namely Britain and France, would fail to fulfill their obligations toward Poland under the alliance treaty that had been just concluded. Indeed, in the name of peace the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had abandoned Czechoslovakia to Hitler. France had sided actively with Britain in Chamberlain’s “appeasement” strategy, because the Third Republic was fatally weakened by a demographic collapse, as well as by the subversive activity of Communist and National Socialist agents. Finally, the United States was not only far away, but it still found itself in a deep isolationist dream and President Franklin D. Roosevelt could hardly do anything more than to issue from time to time purely moral and completely inefficient peace appeals.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Apparently, Stalin also was not quite sure whether Britain and France would intervene or, this time again, look for a “peaceful” solution, which would frustrate his expectations for a war between Germany and the two Western European powers. The French section of the Comintern (the “French Communist Party”) was therefore instructed to struggle for a new government, which would unite the nation, and to claim that the Cabinet of Ministers under Edouard Daladier could not be entrusted with the defense of the country.[[36]](#footnote-36)

However, British public opinion had radically changed as a result of the destruction of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, when Hitler flatly broke the promises, made by him at the September 1938 Munich conference. Any further expansion of Nazi Germany to the east would threaten not only the British colonial empire, but the very existence of the United Kingdom. So London responded to the peace efforts of Mussolini and Dahlerus by pointing out that any negotiation had to be preceded by the withdrawal of all German troops from Poland. In the meantime the German aviation had made several air raids on Warsaw and other Polish cities and the Polish army was retreating everywhere except at Westerplatte in front of Danzig (Gdansk) on the Baltic Sea, where a small unit resisted heroically all German attacks.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Meanwhile Britain addressed an ultimatum to Germany, exacting the withdrawal of German troops from Poland. France followed suit, but quite reluctantly. Hitler refused even to discuss the matter and on September 3, at 11 AM the United Kingdom declared war on Germany. Somewhat later the French ambassador to Berlin Robert Coulondre handed over a similar declaration to the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, but von Ribbentrop deliberately humiliated Coulondre, by making him wait until after the reception of the new Russian ambassador Alexander Shkvartsev, who had come to present his credentials.[[38]](#footnote-38)

That was the moment when Eire hurried to proclaim her own neutrality, which greatly embarrassed London, since the British could not use the Irish ports, although a German attack by sea seemed highly probable. Moreover, the Irish Prime Minister Eamon de Valera was a strong opponent of the 1921 compromise, which left Ulster to Britain after the proclamation of the Free Irish State. In 1936 Ireland severed all ties with the English Crown and became a sovereign republic, but remained in the British Commonwealth of Nations in order to make easier the union with the North. De Valera repeatedly declared his firm belief in the inevitable restoration of Eire’s unity and vehemently protested against the infractions of the Irish airspace by British planes.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Nazi, as well as Soviet aggression was no doubt greatly facilitated by the deep divisions and hatreds among many of the smaller countries, especially in Southeastern Europe. Hungary, for instance, had lost two thirds of her territory as a result of World War I and thought that with the German-Russian “Nonaggression” Pact the time had come for getting back Transylvania. To that effect the Hungarians concentrated several divisions on the Romanian border, whereas the Bulgarian minister to Moscow Nikola Antonov whose Russophilia amounted in fact to high treason, sought Soviet intervention against Turkey because of the 11 Turkish divisions, amassed on the Bulgarian border.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Among Hitler’s first reactions to the British and French war declaration was to send special envoys to Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark to warn them to preserve entirely their commerce with Germany and to resist British pressures to decrease their exports to the Reich. At the same time the German ambassador to Moscow Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg was instructed to secure the military intervention of Russia in conformity with the Molotov-Ribbentrop “Nonaggression” Pact of August 23. Last but not least, Berlin made it clear to Budapest that Germany opposed any Hungarian action against Romania.[[41]](#footnote-41)

As a matter of fact, though, British and French military planning relied heavily on the experience of World War I. Hence Britain and France waited for a German attack and expected to exhaust the Reich in another attrition war. In other words, the United Kingdom and the Third Republic were practically unable to launch a large-scale offensive and were not even ready to provide the Poles with an effective aid. This meant, among other things, that Poland was doomed to spend at least some time under totalitarian occupation, which eventually was going to last half a century. The immediate result of these tactics was that the French army stood idle at the German border, although the British started to land an expeditionary corps in France. However, the so-called “Funny War” became quite real in the high seas, where Hitler launched a series of U-boat assaults on all sorts of British ships.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Britain and France succeeded in imposing a strict sea blockade, but this measure affected quite painfully most European countries, whereas the Germans could secure the needed food and raw materials by rapidly increasing imports from Russia. Moreover, all German nonmilitary vessels, which happened to be out of Germany’s territorial waters, were ordered to leave for the Far North and to seek refuge in the Russian port of Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean. Thus, thanks to the Russians, the Germans could save a number of their passenger liners such as “Bremen”, “New York”, “Schwaben”, “Stuttgart”, “Cordilera”, and “Sankt Louis”, as well as many cargo ships and tankers.[[43]](#footnote-43)

In the night of September 3 to September 4 the Germans didn’t have major difficulties in conquering Poland’s access to the Baltic Sea. Later on September 4 units of the “Wehrmacht” landed near Warsaw. At this moment the Polish government had already ordered the chief government institutions to evacuate the capital. The problem was that the Nazis landed very close to a village where the President of Poland Ignacy Moscicki had just found refuge.[[44]](#footnote-44)

All the medium and small European countries that had proclaimed their neutrality hastened also to carry out a general mobilization. All of them wanted to keep themselves out of the war, but some of them, like Hungary and Bulgaria, had the impossible ambition of both avoiding bloodshed and achieving a revision of the peace treaties, forced upon them as a result of the First World War. This attitude had no doubt resulted from the bitterness of an often horrible ethnic cleansing of the elements that had had the misfortune to fall under modern foreign rule, but the revisionist response obviously made the countries, defeated in World War I, considerably more vulnerable to Hitler’s and Stalin’s blackmail.

On September 5 Stalin’s right hand and Russian premier and foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov declared to the German ambassador in Moscow von der Schulenburg that Russia would by all means engage in a military action against Poland, but the appropriate moment for that had not yet come. However, he warned explicitly von der Schulenburg that the “Wehrmacht” should not occupy any Polish territory, assigned to Russia under the “Nonaggression” Pact of August 23. At the same time Molotov agreed that both the Soviet Union and the Third Reich had to exercise all their influence to make Turkey observe a “*complete neutrality*”.[[45]](#footnote-45)

At this particular moment the Polish government and high command, as well as the foreign diplomatic missions left Warsaw. The commander in chief of the Polish armed forces marshal Edward Rydz-Smigly decided to move his headquarters to Lublin in the east, but actually he lost control of the overall military situation, even though various Polish units continued to offer an incredible resistance to an overwhelming invader. On September 6 the Germans took the ancient Polish capital Cracow.[[46]](#footnote-46)

One of the reasons for the delay of Russia’s intervention against the Poles was Stalin’s desire to wait for the outcome of the battle in the Far East, where the Russians under the command of general G.Zhukov were about to annihilate an entire Japanese army. On the other hand, though, the Soviet media reflected exclusively the Nazi viewpoint of the German-Polish conflict. All anti-German literature was confiscated from the bookstores, people were sent to concentration camps for expressing some anti-Nazi opinion albeit in the mildest form and even the use of the word “Fascist” as an insult became punishable.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In the night of September 6 to September 7 some French border units at Saarbrücken undertook the first and only land offensive against the Germans, but the Poles waited in vain for at least some British and French air raids on the Nazi troops, advancing rapidly in Poland. Moreover, on September 7 the Romanians published an official neutrality declaration, as required by the Germans. At 9:30 AM of the same day the defenders of Westerplatte at Danzig (Gdansk) had to raise the white flag. The Poles had lost only 15 dead and 50 wounded, whereas the same battle took the life of as many as 400 to 500 Germans. Nevertheless, that was the first and only time during the war, when the surviving Poles were treated by the Germans as prisoners of war with all due honors.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Even at this moment the British War Cabinet had no clear idea about the way to respond to the German invasion of Poland. Prime Minister Chamberlain was fully aware that the United Kingdom could not offer the Poles any real assistance but he and his colleagues nourished the insane hope that once the Germans reached the Polish-Russian border this might cause a growing tension between Berlin and Moscow. On the other hand, it was expected that, after the destruction of Poland, the Nazis might guide their aggression toward the Middle East across the Balkans and Turkey and it was thought that Britain should encourage Turkey, Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia to form a neutral Balkan bloc. The problem was that these four countries had founded in 1934 the Balkan Entente against a revision of the post-World War I status quo in Southeastern Europe. This meant that the bloc was directed not against the great revisionist powers, i.e. Germany and Italy, but solely against Bulgaria and Hungary, disarmed and weak anyway.[[49]](#footnote-49)

By September 7 the Germans had already destroyed two Polish armies. Moreover, the US ambassador to Paris William Bullitt reported to the State Department about a warning of the French Foreign Ministry that the Russians might invade Eastern Poland. For their part, Hitler and his generals thought that France had no real intention to fight and the “Fuehrer” planned to force Poland to sever all ties with Britain and France and to reduce Poland to the regions of Warsaw and Cracow. In any case, the German command considered that the Polish campaign was almost finished and began to prepare the transfer of troops from Poland to the west.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Hitler had the wrong impression that even Britain’s reaction was “moderate” rather than intransigent, whereas, thanks to his spy network, Stalin was certain that the United Kingdom would fight by all available means. The outbreak of the war suited perfectly his strategy, formulated for the first time by Lenin, to provoke a war of attrition among the major European powers and to intervene at the most favorable moment. Stalin was pleased that Hitler was in fact “*undermining the capitalist system*” and that the Soviet Union would be soon able to impose its regime “*upon new territories and people*”. Under his instruction the secretary-general of the Comintern G.Dimitrov ordered the communists to support by no means “*Fascist Poland*” and to struggle “*decisively against their governments and against the war*”.[[51]](#footnote-51)

On September 10 the Russian authorities began an open mobilization, while the German minister to Bucharest Wilhelm Fabricius warned that the Romanians should by no means grant refuge to the Polish government, but the Romanians made it clear that they could not prevent the Polish ministers from coming to Romania as private persons. However, Molotov announced to the German ambassador von der Schulenburg that the Russians needed some time for attacking the Poles from the east and that they intended to justify the intervention by claiming that they had to rescue the Polish Ukrainians and Byelorussians as “*Slavic brethren*” from German occupation. That was an unacceptable excuse in the eyes of Berlin.[[52]](#footnote-52)

On September 11, when the Nazi invaders began to massacre representatives of the Polish elite, as well as Polish Jews, the Romanians allowed the transit of the Polish gold reserves for the United Kingdom, despite strong German protests. The Polish commander in chief Rydz-Smigly, President Moscicki, Prime Minister Skladkowski-Slawoj and Foreign Minister Beck decided to move the central government offices to a place near the Romanian border.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The French command had refused to carry out even air raids in assistance to the Poles, but it planned an offensive from the Middle East through the Balkans. The British rightfully considered such an offensive inappropriate and Foreign Secretary Edward Frederick Halifax preferred the idea of a neutral Balkan bloc with the participation of Bulgaria. This seemed to be more realistic, since Turkey and Greece made everything possible to keep themselves out of the war. The same applied to Yugoslavia, where a last-minute Serb-Croat compromise for the autonomy of Croatia had caused in fact a fatal state crisis. For the sake of a neutral Balkan bloc the British diplomacy began to suggest to the representatives of Yugoslavia and other countries of the region that, in exchange for a reaffirmed neutrality of Sofia, Bulgaria could regain Southern Dobruja, ceded to Romania as a result of World War I. The neutrality project found a favorable echo also in Italy since Mussolini saw in it an opportunity for heading such a bloc.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In the evening hours of September 15 von Ribbentrop instructed von der Schulenburg to declare to Molotov that if the Russians did not intervene soon to take their part of the Polish booty, there might emerge “new states” in the area. Apart from that the German foreign minister proposed that the Russians excuse their assault by the “*disintegration of the previously existing form of government in Poland*”. Somewhat later Molotov stated in response that the Soviet attack on Poland would be justified by the disintegration of the Polish state. On the following day the Japanese asked the Russians in the Far East for a cease-fire. The disaster was of such a dimension that Tokyo abandoned the dream of conquering Siberia and concentrated the expansionist endeavors against China and the colonies of the European powers in the region.[[55]](#footnote-55)

At 2 AM on September 17 Stalin summoned personally von der Schulenburg to the Kremlin to inform him that within four hours the “Red Army” would cross the Polish border. The Soviet boss went so far as to acquaint the German ambassador with the text of the note to the Poles and obligingly removed any hint at a possible anti-German connotation of the move, but at the same time he announced that the Turks had proposed a “*mutual assistance pact concerning the Straits and the Balkans*”. In fact Turkey had started negotiations with Russia to that effect before August 23, when there still seemed to be prospects of an alliance between the Soviet Union, Britain and France, directed against the Third Reich. With the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact these prospects came to nil, but the Turks kept hoping that a formal alliance was the most efficient way of declining the Soviet thrust upon Constantinople, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.[[56]](#footnote-56)

At 3 AM it was the turn of the Polish ambassador in Moscow Waclaw Grzybowski to be summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry, where Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Potemkin red out a note, declaring that the Polish state and the Polish government had ceased to exist and by that token all treaties and agreements between the Soviet Union and Poland lost their validity. Under these circumstances, the note continued, the “Red Army” had to cross the Polish border in order to protect the life and property of the “*consanguine Ukrainians and Byelorussians, living on Poland’s territory*”. The Polish ambassador refused to accept the note and pointed out that, as long as an army fought, the state of that army existed too. He stressed also the fact that the Ukrainians and Byelorussians, as well as Czech and Slovak legions waged battles against the Germans together with the Poles and asked “*what happened with the Slavic solidarity*” of the Russians. Later Grzybowski was to be punished severely for reminding the Bolsheviks about the “*Slavic solidarity*”.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Copies of the Soviet note to Poland were handed over to all foreign diplomatic representatives in Moscow, including the British ambassador William Seeds, who declared that he did not acknowledge the Soviet explanations, but he expressed at the same time the hope that the USSR would keep further its neutrality with regard to the United Kingdom. At 6 AM 600,000 Russian soldiers invaded Poland from the east, according to a plan worked out back in 1938, while another 200,000 to 250,000 “Red Army” soldiers were concentrated on the borders of Estonia and Latvia. Significantly, the local command of the Russian armed forces there was duly equipped with maps, designating these two Baltic countries, together with Lithuania, as “*Soviet Socialist Republics*”.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Marshal Rydz-Smigly responded to the Soviet invasion by preparing the withdrawal of most Polish forces to Hungary and Romania. Nevertheless, he ordered the remaining garrisons everywhere to fight against the Nazis to the very end, whereas “*war with the Soviets may occur only in case of offensive actions on their part*”, but the Polish units had to reject any Russian demand for disarmament. All units which happened to be in a territory, occupied by the “Red Army”, had to cross also the Romanian border. Rydz-Smigly and Foreign Minister Beck hoped that Romania would permit free passage to the government and the armed forces for France, where a new Polish army would be formed to continue the war against Germany.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Despite this desperate situation Polish units opposed resistance to the Russians in a number of places. At Przemysl troops under the command of General Wladislaw Anders even managed to destroy two Soviet infantry regiments, but the German minister to Bucharest Fabricius warned the Romanian foreign minister Grigore Gafencu that in case the Polish government found refuge in Romania they had to be immediately arrested. Otherwise the Third Reich would come to “*definitive conclusions*” as for the attitude of Romania. Eventually the Romanian government decided to grant “*hospitality*” to the Poles, but to retain them in Romania.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Meanwhile the Russians and the Germans engaged in joint actions against the Poles, although the Soviet Union still claimed to be neutral with regard both to Germany and to Britain and France. This “neutrality” didn’t prevent “Red Army” and “Wehrmacht” troops from besieging and taking the city of Brzesc (Brest). The Nazi-Soviet “Nonaggression” Pact assigned this city to Russia and units of the sinister Interior People’s Commissariat began immediately to arrest all Polish officers, priests, and intellectuals, while many of the war prisoners, taken by the Russians, were massacred immediately.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In the night of September 17 to September 18, when the Russians were rapidly taking over the checkpoints on the Polish-Romanian border, President Moscicki, Prime Minister Skladkowski-Slawoj, and Foreign Minister Beck managed to escape from Soviet imprisonment only to be put under luxurious arrest in Romania. Rydz-Smigly crossed the border somewhat later, but the Romanian authorities confined him to a remote place, where he could not initially contact the other members of the quadrumvirate.[[62]](#footnote-62)

On the following day the Russians took also the ancient capital of Lithuania Vilnius, whose capture by the Poles back in 1921 had constantly poisoned the Polish-Lithuanian relations during the entire interwar period. Under the new circumstances, though, the authoritarian Lithuanian government, headed by Antanas Smetona, granted asylum to some 40,000 Polish civilians and 13,500 military, fleeing from Soviet and Nazi occupation. Smetona even acknowledged further the Polish legation in Kaunas (the country’s new capital). Another Baltic country, namely Estonia, did not hesitate to give refuge to the Polish submarine “Orzel” (“Eagle”), which had operated until that moment in the Baltic Sea, causing not negligible problems to the Nazis.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Although the abandonment of Poland was very counterproductive as to the reliability of Britain’s and France’s guarantees, the commander in chief of the Eastern Mediterranean French forces general Maxime Weygand and his British counterpart in the same area general Archibald Wavell flew to Ankara to persuade the Turks to lend their armed forces and territory for joint operations of Britain, Turkey and the other Balkan countries against possible German or Russian aggression in the Balkans or in the Caucasus. However, President Ismet Inönü and his chief of staff marshal Fevzi Çakmak rejected the plan out of fear of Stalin, the more so as the Turkish foreign minister Şükrü Saraçoglu was planning a long stay in Russia. Berlin was ready to accept a Russian-Turkish Mutual Assistance Treaty, provided that it would not be directed against Germany, Italy and Bulgaria.[[64]](#footnote-64)

The prospects of a Russian-Turkish pact didn’t prevent the French Premier Edouard Daladier from suggesting a naval operation in the Baltic region. In the night of September 18 to September 19 the Polish submarine “*Orzel*” succeeded in escaping from the port of the Estonian capital Tallinn. Stalin used the incident for putting strong pressure on the Baltic countries, while the repression services of both Communist Russia and Nazi Germany were preparing the genocide of the Poles. The National Socialists put the stress on the cleansing of the Jews, the intelligentsia, the clergy and the Polish nobility, whereas the Russian interior ministry began the deportation of officers, landowners, priests, and policemen to the death camps.[[65]](#footnote-65)

At the same time the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill proposed to the British Cabinet under Neville Chamberlain the mining of the Norwegian territorial waters, because the Germans profited from that extremely large coast with too many fiords to transport iron ore from Sweden without risking an attack by the naval forces of the United Kingdom. However, the action would infringe drastically upon Norway’s neutrality and British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax managed, at least for the time being, to persuade his colleagues to refrain from such an initiative, pointing out that it could be carried out only with the agreement of the Norwegian government. Halifax was confident that Germany would be defeated soon, since by that time the British had installed in France their First Expeditionary Corps.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In any case, most European countries didn’t seem to be worried excessively by the aggression of the totalitarian powers. Some Bulgarian representatives even went so far as to seek Russian assistance for the foreign policy goals of Sofia. So the Bulgarian minister to Moscow Nikola Antonov entreated the Russian deputy commissar for foreign affairs Vladimir Dekanozov to make the Russian government intervene diplomatically against the concentration of powerful Turkish armed forces on the border with Bulgaria. Dekanozov apparently interpreted this as a direct invitation of the Bulgarians to be eaten up by the Russians and promptly proposed a mutual assistance pact between the Soviet Union and Bulgaria.[[67]](#footnote-67)

At the same time the rapid advance of the “Red Army” toward the Polish-Romanian border made King Carol II of Romania decree a general mobilization. For his part the Russian Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars (Prime Minister) and People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs Molotov declared to the German Ambassador in Moscow von der Schulenburg that Stalin had abandoned in the meantime the idea of a mutilated Polish state and considered that Poland should be partitioned between Russia and Germany. A couple of minutes later Molotov summoned the Estonian minister to Moscow August Rei to protest vehemently against the escape of the Polish submarine “*Orzel*” and to state that from that moment on the Soviet Union would take over the “defense” of Estonia’s territorial waters.[[68]](#footnote-68)

In a speech to the House of Commons Prime Minister Chamberlain carefully refrained from promising any concrete assistance to the Poles against the Russian invaders. Yet the British command had some plans for intervention in the Baltic region, provided that Russia would not join Germany, but this assumption was fatally outdated. In the afternoon of September 20 the Soviet navy entered the Estonian territorial waters and occupied some coastal areas, while Russian planes began to fly over the territory of the country at a low level. The only thing the Estonian government could do was to order the troops to oppose no resistance to the Russians.[[69]](#footnote-69)

On the other hand, Russia joined Germany in the pressure on Romania for having granted an asylum to the Polish government, but the First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill was ready to satisfy Stalin’s appetites for Bessarabia. In a note to the British War Cabinet he claimed that Romania had to cede Bessarabia to Russia and Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria which, in his opinion, would enable the formation of a Balkan Bloc.[[70]](#footnote-70)

The problem was that the undemocratic personal rule of Carol II in Romania lacked stability and the political crisis culminated in the assassination of Prime Minister Armand Calinescu in the evening hours of September 21, 1939. The coup was organized by the activists of the totalitarian and pro-Nazi Legion of Archangel Michael, who revenged in this way the assassination of their leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu on November 30, 1938, at the King’s order. It might be that the Legionnaires hoped to provoke the intervention of the German troops, concentrated on the Polish-Romanian border, and to come to power with their help.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Carol II hurried to appoint General Gheorghe Argeșanu to the premiership and the new government ordered the shooting of several hundred Legionnaires, who were serving various sentences in jail. However, their new leader Horia Sima managed to escape from Romania and to find refuge in Germany, where Hitler intended to use him as an additional means of pressure and blackmail on Romania.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Europe, as a whole, was no doubt increasingly helpless in front of the totalitarian powers and US President Roosevelt proposed to the two houses of Congress to revise the 1936 Neutrality Act, which banned the export of arms and ammunition to all belligerent countries, including Britain and France. The President’s idea was to amend the act in such a way as to allow the export of war materials to any power, able to pay in cash. Germany was in great need of hard currency and it was thought that such an amendment would be beneficial above all to the two Western European democracies. The opposition of the isolationists, though, delayed the implementation of the Cash and Carry Act for another two months.[[73]](#footnote-73)

On September 22, 1939, Stalin decreed a general mobilization in the western parts of Russia because of the “*special situation abroad*”. At the same time Russian and German units made a joint “Victory Parade” in the Polish city of Brzesc (Brest). The troops were reviewed by General Heinz Guderian on behalf of the Third Reich and by Sergej Krivoshein on behalf of the Soviet Union. The General Staff of the Romanian armed forces reacted by issuing new instructions for the country’s defense against a possible Russian attack, expected to come from the north and northeast.[[74]](#footnote-74)

On the following day the Russians invited the Estonian foreign minister Kaarel Selter to Moscow to sign a new trade agreement, as if nothing had happened. Selter left almost immediately for the Russian capital, hoping to find out what exactly the Soviets intended to do. While he was travelling in a night train to Moscow “The Sunday Times” claimed in an article, published on September 24, that the problems, caused by Russia’s action in Poland, would have diplomatic rather than military character. Without any touch with reality was also Italy’s plan for a neutral bloc of Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary under Italian leadership.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Hungary, in particular, decided to renew the diplomatic relations Russia had cut off in response to Hungary’s accession to the Anti-Comintern Pact back in February 1939. The pact itself had been formed by Germany, Japan and Italy in 1936-1937, officially not against the Soviet state, but against the subversive activity of the world Communist network, although the Comintern was clearly a Russian party and state body. After the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop “Non-Aggression Pact” on August 23, 1939, Japan had left the Anti-Comintern Pact, which actually resulted in its disintegration. Stalin apparently thought that there were no more obstacles to the renewal of diplomatic relations with Hungary, whereas the Hungarians were alarmed by the menacing presence of “Red Army” troops on the Polish-Hungarian border and hurried to send an official representative to Moscow.[[76]](#footnote-76)

The Italian idea of a neutral Balkan bloc was supported by Romania, but Russia and Germany didn’t conceal their skepticism, if not hostility, to the project. It was against this background that the Turkish foreign minister Şükrü Saraçoglu left for Moscow, hoping to persuade the Russians to conclude a mutual assistance pact with Turkey. To that effect he was going to acquaint them with the text of the forthcoming alliance treaty with Britain and France. His impossible hope was to attract somehow the Soviet Union into an alliance system, linked indirectly with the two Western European democracies, despite the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Meanwhile, having just arrived in Moscow, the Estonian foreign minister Selter was taken directly from the railway station to the Kremlin where, instead of completing the talks about a trade agreement, Molotov demanded military bases in Estonia, notably in Tallinn and in the country’s second largest city on the Baltic coast Pernu. According to Molotov the whole thing could be arranged by a mutual assistance pact. He explicitly stated that Germany would not object to such a treaty. The only concession Stalin’s second man in the Politburo made was to allow the Estonian government to think over the proposal within the next couple of days but in case of rejection, he pointed out, the Soviet Union would carry out its designs no matter of Tallinn’s position. Selter could at least take immediately the train from Moscow to Tallinn on the following morning.[[78]](#footnote-78)

By that time the Russian troops had gone as far as 200 to 300 kilometers into Polish territory. Brainwashed by an intense propaganda against any kind of ownership, the Soviet soldiers plundered everything they could take and carry with them. They had lived in such a misery that they could not even understand the use of one or another item they found in the stores, frequently putting brassieres on their ears for protection from the cold. For their part, Stalin’s officers took with them everything they liked from the houses they chose for their lodging, namely garments, kitchen vessels, clocks and watches, possibly jewels, etc. Incomparably more sinister was the rapidly growing number of people, killed as “unreliable” or simply “wealthy” people even before Stalin’s repressive services began the systematic extermination of the political, economic and intellectual elite. Rapes became also widespread, although such practices were officially forbidden, but the Soviet command simply closed its eyes. Even ordinary people, who were not affected directly by the killings, rapes and plunders, felt that they were in fact liberated from bread, salt and shoes and that the “Red Army” delivered Western Byelorussia and Western Ukraine not from misery and injustice, but from a good life.[[79]](#footnote-79)

On September 25 the Estonian foreign minister Selter returned from Moscow and hurried to meet the German diplomatic representative in Tallinn Frohwein, only to hear from the latter that the Estonians could not rely on the support of Berlin in their dealings with Russia. As a matter of fact, Hitler already planned an offensive to the west and the High Command of the “Wehrmacht” indicated in a special instruction that after the “pacification” of Poland the German troops had to be transferred westward against France.[[80]](#footnote-80)

At 8 PM Stalin and Molotov summoned the German ambassador von der Schulenburg to the Kremlin and declared that it would be a “*mistake*” to preserve a sovereign Polish state even on some part of Poland. The Russian dictator generously offered the Germans new Polish territories, including the regions of Lublin and Warsaw, in exchange for Lithuania, initially assigned to the Soviet Union. Stalin explicitly stated that he relied on the support of the German government for “*solving the problem*” with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but he failed to mention Finland, although Hitler had promised him Finland too.[[81]](#footnote-81)

The Cabinet of Chamberlain in London resented the Soviet brutality toward the Poles and the Baltic nations, but the First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill was confident that the antagonism between Russia and Germany was inevitable. In Churchill’s opinion the common border with the Soviet Union prevented the Germans from exposing their eastern front. He even thought that Russia’s interest in the Balkan “Slavs” and even the annexation of Bessarabia to the USSR were not detrimental to the strategy of Britain and France, since a German military presence in the Black Sea would pose a mortal threat to Russia. He erroneously assumed, though, that after the Polish campaign Germany would attack the Balkans.[[82]](#footnote-82)

On September 27 the “Wehrmacht” finally captured Warsaw, whereas the “Red Army” had taken by that time 230,000 or 240,000 Polish prisoners of war, only 82,000 of whom were going to survive until the summer of 1941. Just 2,599 Russians had died in the campaign, but the Soviet authorities arrested the prominent activists of all Ukrainian national organizations with the obvious purpose of eradicating completely any expression of Ukrainian identity. The Polish school system was also systematically destroyed and only a very limited number of teachers had the chance to preserve their position. Moreover, the Soviets addressed an ultimatum to Latvia to hand them over her naval and air bases and to admit 50,000 Russian soldiers on her territory.[[83]](#footnote-83)

It was only at this moment that France decided to take some measures against the Soviet agents, who had made quite a lot for the demoralization of the Third Republic. The French parliament banned the local section of the Comintern and proclaimed that the so-called “French Communist Party” was dissolved. The party secretary-general Maurice Thorez hurried to desert from the army and to find refuge in the Soviet Union, which was a relatively low risk since in France, as a deserter, he was to be sentenced to death and shot. However, the prohibition of the “French Communist Party” was far from diminishing its subversive activity, which included the publication of a black list of “*provocateurs, thieves, crooks, Trotskyites, traitors, driven out from the workers’ organizations in France*”. These comprised also those Communists, who rejected the alliance between Hitler and Stalin and many of whom were liquidated by the French Communist Party “police”.[[84]](#footnote-84)

For his part, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Georgi Kjoseivanov summoned the Bulgarian minister Antonov from Moscow back to Sofia to report about the Soviet proposal for a mutual assistance pact. Apparently Sofia was frightened by Moscow’s intention to treat Bulgaria in the same way as Estonia and Latvia. In any case, the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop learned about the Soviet ultimatums to Estonia and Latvia only when his plane landed at the airport of Moscow at 6 PM for a second official visit. Yet he didn’t know that Russia pressed also the Finns to cede two islands in the Gulf of Finland in order to put the entire eastern part of the Baltic Sea under Soviet control.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Ribbentrop’s mission was to conclude a closer alliance with Stalin but, before meeting his German counterpart, Molotov preferred submitting the Estonian delegation under Selter, who arrived in Moscow at 10 PM, to a new round of psychological torture, by demanding military bases not only on the islands, but all over Estonia. At the same moment Stalin obligingly offered von Ribbentrop a naval base near Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean, but on September 28 the daily of the Belgian Communist Party openly declared that sooner or later the war would end with the crash of Hitler, Chamberlain and Daladier and with the establishment of “*peace and socialism*” in France.[[86]](#footnote-86)

For the time being, though, the joint Soviet-Nazi pressure made King Carol II of Romania replace General Gheorghe Argeșanu with Constantin Argetoianu as Prime Minister. Argetoianu was both more liberal and more pro-German. He hurried to sign a new agreement for the monthly delivery of 130,000 tons of petroleum to Germany. Moreover, the Polish commander in chief Rydz-Smigly, who had been transferred to Craiova, was deprived of his phone connection and put in an almost complete isolation.[[87]](#footnote-87)

At 3 PM von Ribbentrop resumed his talks with Stalin and Molotov and a couple of hours later they agreed that Germany would take 188,000 square kilometers of Polish territory with about 22 million inhabitants, whereas Russia was going to annex 200,000 square kilometers of Polish territory with about 13 million people. This included also Western Galicia with the city of Lemberg (Lwow or Lviv), although the region had never been under Muscovite rule until then. The deal was celebrated at an exuberant dinner with many drinks and von Ribbentrop noticed that, contrary to the official Nazi propaganda, there were practically no Jews among the Soviet leaders and that the only Jewish member of the Politburo was Lazar Kaganovich. The German foreign minister had to admit to himself that there wasn’t any action of the “*international Jewry*” and that there was no coordination whatever between the “*Jewish circles*” of Moscow, Paris, London and New York.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Shortly before midnight Stalin and Molotov left the dinner in order to force upon the Estonian delegates a mutual assistance treaty, providing for the admission of “Red Army” units to Estonia, amounting to 25,000 soldiers, which was far more than the Estonian armed forces, consisting of 16,000 people in all. The pact was directed against any great power and thus Estonia could be involved in a war against Germany as well. Moreover, the Estonian foreign minister Selter had to sign a trade agreement for the gradual integration of his country within the Soviet economy.[[89]](#footnote-89)

On September 29, at 5 AM, after another round of talks and bargaining, the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars and People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs Molotov and the Foreign Minister of the German Reich von Ribbentrop signed a *Treaty for Friendship and for the Border*, whose first article delineated the border between the two totalitarian powers in Poland. The two governments gave each other a complete freedom for the administrative restructuration of the respective Polish territories. This was defined as a reliable foundation for the further development of the friendly relationship between the two peoples. A confidential protocol committed Russia to creating no obstacles to the resettlement of citizens of the Third Reich and of ethnic Germans from the territories under Soviet administration to the territories in possession of Germany. Under another secret protocol Lithuania which, according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939, had belonged until then to the German “sphere of interest”, was transferred to the Russian “sphere of interest”. A third secret protocol engaged the two powers to annihilate all sources of Polish agitation. Last but not least, an official declaration proclaimed that the collapse of the Polish state had removed all reasons for the war and that the German Reich and the Soviet Union would consult each other about the measures to be taken in case England and France decided to continue the conflict.[[90]](#footnote-90)

By the end of September the Polish campaign had cost the Germans 10,572 dead, 30,322 injured and 3,400 missing, whereas the Russians had much less casualties. The Soviet command began to work out concrete plans for a war on Finland. For their part, Nazi journals proclaimed that Russia, Germany and Italy would coordinate their action in Southeastern Europe and would not allow the interference of “*any alien power*” in the region, and not only that: “*Eighty million Germans and one hundred and eighty million Russians! Their union represents a bloc, possessing the greatest military and industrial power in the world and an empire, stretching in Europe and Asia over a huge territory, greater than never before.*”[[91]](#footnote-91)

For the time being, though, the Soviets concentrated their efforts on Lithuania. On the day of the signature of the Russian-German Treaty for Friendship and for the Border Molotov summoned the Lithuanian foreign minister Juozas Urbšys to the Kremlin with the attractive proposal to discuss the return of Vilnius and the Vilnius region to Lithuania.[[92]](#footnote-92)

This was no doubt at the expense of Poland, whose president Ignacy Moscicki was in fact in Romanian captivity and had hardly any choice, but to sign a decree for transferring his powers to Wladislaw Raczkiewicz. Raczkiewicz had found refuge in France and seemed to be a more convenient figure in the eyes of the French and the British, because he had been less connected with the “Sanation” regime. He immediately proclaimed the dissolution of the Polish parliament and appointed a provisional national council with consultative functions. A government in exile was formed under the premiership of General Wladislaw Sikorski, who was a renowned opponent of the undemocratic prewar system but who was careful enough to preserve some continuity, by choosing for foreign minister August Zaleski, even though Zaleski had headed the Foreign Ministry for a while under Pilsudski. The problem was that influential circles of the British government were ready to satisfy a lot of Stalin’s claims on Poland.[[93]](#footnote-93)

The Soviet press commented quite spitefully the Polish government in exile, but Stalin was apparently more interested in the Balkans. On October 1, at 6 PM, he finally received together with Molotov the Turkish foreign minister Saraçoglu. In those times Stalin did not hold any official state position, but Saraçoglu knew too well who was the real master and explicitly expressed his pleasure that Stalin also attended the talks. As it might be expected, this prevented by no means Stalin and Molotov from trying to dissuade the Turks from concluding an alliance with Britain and France. After quite long talks the Russian dictator apparently didn’t reject altogether the idea of a Russian-Turkish mutual assistance pact, provided that the forthcoming mutual assistance pact of Turkey with Britain and France would be directed by no means against Russia. Saraçoglu readily agreed with these terms.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The Soviet efforts to neutralize Turkey were in fact coordinated with those of the Nazis, who put at the same time Bucharest under pressure for having allowed the Polish president Moscicky to transfer his powers to Raczkiewicz. Hence Moscicki did not feel secure in Romania and he asked the Swiss government for asylum, the more so as he had become citizen of Switzerland back in 1908. Bern saw no alternative but to admit him into the Confederation, provided that he did not engage in political activity.[[95]](#footnote-95)

On October 2, 1939, the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop instructed the ambassador in Moscow von der Schulenburg to suggest to the Russians to prevent Turkey from concluding any pact at all with Britain and France. Von Ribbentrop thought that this could be achieved by a treaty between Russia and Turkey. However, the Russian war minster Kliment Voroshilov and the foreign trade minister Anastas Mikoyan tried to lay down to Saraçoglu such terms that would have threatened the very existence of Turkey as a sovereign country. Both Voroshilov and Mikoyan were members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), which under the Soviet system was above the state, and they obviously acted at Stalin’s instruction. The two Soviet dignitaries declared that if Turkey wanted to conclude a mutual assistance pact with Russia, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles had to be closed to alien military vessels. Moreover, units of the “Red Army” had to be allowed to establish bases in the zone of the Straits. The Turkish foreign minister saw no other choice but to reject these demands.[[96]](#footnote-96)

This didn’t prevent the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs from pressing the Bulgarian minister Antonov to present an unequivocal reply to the mutual assistance pact proposal. Antonov succeeded in avoiding a concrete declaration on the ground that he had to go to Sofia for consultations, whereas the Latvian foreign minister Vilhelms Munters didn’t have such an opportunity. He was simply told by Stalin and Molotov that Latvia had to admit 50,000 “Red Army” soldiers on her territory, which was far more than the Latvian armed forces. The Russian dictator made it clear that Hitler had handed over Latvia to the Soviet “sphere of interests” and that Latvia might disappear like Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. The amazing thing was that Stalin hinted at the possibility of a clash between Russia and Germany. On the other hand, the Romanian diplomatic representative in Riga Grigore Niculescu-Buzesti reported to his government that the visit of Munters to Moscow was accompanied by a considerable intensification of the Communist propaganda in Latvia.[[97]](#footnote-97)

Munters hurried back to Riga, while Polish units under the command of general Franciszek Kleeberg were delivering the last battle against the Germans at Klock, which was at 130 kilometers to the southeast of Warsaw and at approximately 60 kilometers to the west of the new Soviet-Nazi border. Munters tried in vain to get some support from the German minister to Riga Ulrich von Kotze and eventually returned to Moscow, happy enough that he could at least reduce the Russian army presence to 30,000 men, which was also more than the Latvian armed forces. Quite significantly, the Latvian government proclaimed at the same moment that it could not tolerate anymore the presence of a Polish legation in Riga, although practically all the European governments, including the Italian one, had preserved their diplomatic relations with the Polish government in exile.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Mussolini was fully aware that Germany would not support his idea of a neutral bloc under Italian leadership. Nevertheless, he decided to keep his neutral position further and, similarly to Stalin, he hoped that the European powers would exhaust each other in the war. His expectations were apparently reaffirmed by the fact that approximately at the same time the British completed the transfer of their Second Expeditionary Corps in France.[[99]](#footnote-99)

In the eyes of the Spanish dictator Franco, though, the war was above all a Soviet intrusion upon Europe and he saw peace in the West as the only means of stopping Russia. In a similar way the Portuguese dictator and prime minister Antonio de Oliveira Salazar openly declared his sympathies with the “*heroic self-sacrifice of Poland*”, his loyalty to the alliance with Britain and his concern that the Latin and Christian civilization of Europe was at stake.[[100]](#footnote-100)

The fears of Franco and Salazar were confirmed by Stalin’s intention to occupy also Catholic Lithuania together with the tiny region of Mariampole, although the Russian dictator had promised this strategic territory to Hitler. At 10 PM the Lithuanian foreign minister Urbšys landed at Moscow and was taken directly from the airport to the Kremlin, where Stalin and Molotov told him that Lithuania could regain Vilnius and the surrounding area only in exchange for a mutual assistance pact. Molotov explicitly stated that “*every imperialistic power could take possession of Lithuania*”. When Urbšys heard that under the proposed pact his country had to admit 50,000 “Red Army” troops, he exclaimed that this was “*an occupation of Lithuania*”. In response Stalin “generously” agreed to reduce the Soviet military presence to 35,000 men but this was also far more than the Lithuanian army. At 8 AM on October 4 Urbšys left back for Kaunas to consult his government.[[101]](#footnote-101)

Stalin had disclosed to him too that Hitler had handed over Lithuania to the Soviet “sphere of interests” and in the night of October 4 to October 5 the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop decided to inform discreetly the Lithuanians, the Latvians and the Estonians about the deal. On October 5 it was the turn of Latvia to sign a mutual assistance pact with Communist Russia. Under the terms of the pact Latvia had to admit 30,000 “Red Army” soldiers on her territory, whereas the Latvian armed forces amounted to 20,000 men only.[[102]](#footnote-102)

On the same day the Russians invited the Finns to send a delegation to Moscow to discuss “*concrete political problems*”, while Russian army units were joining the Germans in order to smash the last Polish forces, which still opposed resistance under general Kleeberg. That was the end of the Polish campaign and the beginning of the guerrilla war of the Poles against Nazi and Soviet occupation. For the time being, though, the only thing Kleeberg could do was to order his soldiers to retreat in small groups toward the Hungarian border.[[103]](#footnote-103)

At 2 PM Hitler could proclaim the end of the Polish state, but in his speech he failed to mention anything about Estonia. Latvia, and Lithuania. He explicitly stressed, though, that there were no obstacles to “*the close cooperation*” between Germany and Russia. In his words the “*difference of the regimes*” could not prevent them from a joint struggle for peace. The “Fuehrer” promised to respect the neutrality of Belgium and the Netherlands. He announced also a vast program for resettling the ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe to Germany and this clearly indicated that he had abandoned his plans for the Germanization of Eastern Europe and the European part of Russia. On the other hand, the National Socialist leader pleaded for peace and understanding with Britain and even pointed out that he had given up mentioning the problem of Alsace and Lorraine with France. Hitler went so far as to propose an international conference for an arrangement of the “*Jewish question*”, for the cession of colonies to Germany and for the renewal of international trade, but less than an hour after his speech he told his generals that the operation for the conquest of Belgium and the Netherlands before the assault on France could not be postponed any more.[[104]](#footnote-104)

The French premier Edouard Daladier reacted to Hitler’s “peace proposal” by declaring that France would not lay down her arms before getting guarantees for real peace and general security, whereas the German military tried in vain to persuade Hitler that the Reich was not prepared for an immediate offensive to the west. On October 7 the “Fuehrer” issued a decree for the deportation of the Poles and the Jews from the Polish territories, annexed directly to Germany, to the General Government of Warsaw and for their replacement with ethnic Germans.[[105]](#footnote-105)

In the same evening a Lithuanian delegation, headed by Foreign Minister Urbšys arrived again in Moscow for a new round of psychological torture under the form of midnight “negotiations”. The next morning the Russian newspapers were full of reports about “spontaneous” demonstrations in Vilnius for the inclusion of the city in the so-called “Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic”, which was a mere province of Communist Russia. Moreover, the Nazi and Soviet occupation authorities in Poland continued the extermination of the Polish national elite. Silesia, Poznan and the Baltic access were annexed directly to Germany and within a short time the Nazis liquidated about 60,000 Polish professors, lawyers, priests, landowners, and peasant and workers’ leaders. For their part, the services under the command of Beria worked on preliminary “black lists” of people who were to be exterminated immediately. “Enemies of the people” were not only the landowners and the middle class, but also the professors, the priests, the lawyers and the leaders of political parties and nongovernment organizations.[[106]](#footnote-106)

On October 8 the Lithuanian deputy premier Kazys Bizauskas and the commander in chief Stasys Raštikis hurried to Moscow to reinforce the delegation there, while the Finns were expecting that the Russians would demand four islands in the Gulf of Finland and a base in some Finnish port. The government in Helsinki was ready to yield to these demands, but “*without crossing the border line*”. Finnish troops were concentrated on the Soviet frontier to meet any eventuality. For his part, the Finnish minister to Berlin Aarne Vuorimaa asked the state secretary of the German Foreign Ministry Ernst von Weizsaecker whether the Reich would remain indifferent to the Soviet advance in the Baltic region, but von Weizsaecker replied coldly that Germany was in no position to interfere in the forthcoming Finnish-Russian talks.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Two days later, after a generous dinner, offered by Stalin to the Lithuanian delegates despite their reticence and fatigue, Foreign Minister Urbšys had to sign a mutual assistance treaty that gave Vilnius and the Vilnius region to Lithuania, but engaged the Lithuanians in a possible war against any European power. The USSR was given the right to install land and naval forces in determined areas of Lithuania’s territory. Moreover, Russia had the right to inundate Lithuania with an unlimited number of “Red Army” troops in case of a “*threat of attack through Lithuania’s territory*”. According to a bitter joke on the occasion, Vilnius became in this way Lithuanian, but Lithuania as a whole became Russian. Similarly to Estonia and Latvia, the Lithuanian authorities could control by no means the exact number of Soviet troops on their territory. The “Red Army” units showed no intention of leaving Vilnius after the “unification” and the Lithuanian government preferred remaining further in Kaunas.[[108]](#footnote-108)

On October 11 the Russian war minister Voroshilov ordered the concentration of as many as seven Russian armies on the boundary with Germany, Romania and Hungary. On the other hand, though, the Russians made it even easier for the Germans to create and use a naval base on the Arctic Ocean near Murmansk. This was accompanied by a new series of extermination actions in Poland. By a special order Beria included in the extermination lists also the state employees, the nongovernment and religious activists, as well as the members of the Ukrainian, Byelorussian and Polish cultural and sports societies. This resulted in the deportation of as many as 1.5 million people in the death camps, whereas the Nazi occupation authorities managed to deport “only” 426,820 human beings. Only the Ukrainians, who were liquidated or thrown in concentration camps, amounted to 3.5 million human beings. Significantly enough, the same order of Beria provided for the eradication of “*all anti-Soviet and antisocial elements*” in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, although these three countries were still considered sovereign states.[[109]](#footnote-109)

Now it was the turn of Finland. On October 12 a Finnish delegation under the veteran statesman and diplomat Juho Paasikivi arrived in Moscow. The Finns were immediately taken to the Kremlin, where Stalin personally demanded a naval base at Hanko at the entrance of the Gulf of Finland, as well as the cession of the city of Hanko itself together with five islands in the same gulf. Moreover, the Russian dictator claimed the cession of Finland’s access to the Barents Sea on the Arctic Ocean and another 3,000 square kilometers of the Karelian Isthmus. Last, but by no means least, the Finns had to dismantle all their defense systems against Russia and to reject all treaties with possible enemies of the Soviet Union. The Finns didn’t know that Stalin had already told the Comintern apparatchik of Finnish descent Otto Kuusinen that he wanted to see Finland moving along the Baltic scenario, but this didn’t prevent Paasikivi and his fellow countrymen from remaining immune to Stalin’s blackmail. They were probably encouraged by the cautious hope, expressed by Denmark, Norway and Sweden through their diplomatic envoys to Moscow that the Russian-Finnish talks would lead to nothing that could prevent Finland from enjoying “*her neutral position in peace and freedom*”. According to some diplomatic reports this humble Scandinavian initiative was coordinated with the US government.[[110]](#footnote-110)

At the same moment Chamberlain announced to the House of Commons that Hitler’s peace initiative deserved no confidence. Shortly before his speech in parliament Chamberlain had explained to the Polish foreign minister Zaleski that Britain expected from the Poles to fight against Germany, but Zaleski was unable to change the British attitude toward Stalin. For his part, Mussolini suddenly decided that Chamberlain’s firmness with regard to Hitler gave Italy the opportunity to strike a blow to Yugoslavia.[[111]](#footnote-111)

On October 13 King Boris III of Bulgaria repeated to his brother Prince Kiril and to his close advisers that he had decided to reject the Russian proposal and to replace the minister to Moscow Antonov with someone else because, according to the King, Antonov had become an excessive Russophile. However, the Bulgarian monarch couldn’t even guess that at this very moment the Russian military presented to Stalin an updated version of the plan for war on Germany. According to this new version the Soviet Union had to wait for the complete exhaustion of Britain, France and Germany and then the “Red Army” would be able to launch an assault for the conquest of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Constantinople with the Straits and at least the eastern part of Germany.[[112]](#footnote-112)

The Finns couldn’t have any knowledge about this plan either, but on October 16 a Finnish daily rightfully pointed out that by the mutual assistance treaties with the USSR Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had lost their independence. However, the First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill saw in the occupation of the three Baltic countries by the “Red Army” advantages for Britain. He declared to Prime Minister Chamberlain and the other colleagues in the Cabinet that the United Kingdom had an interest in the increase of Soviet power in the Baltic region since this would limit, in his view, the risk of German hegemony in the same area.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Churchill made this statement at the time of two smashing German air raids on the British navy in Scapa Flow, whose situation off the northern shores of Britain apparently didn’t secure a reliable protection. Moreover, despite his preparations for an assault on the Third Reich, Stalin obligingly enabled the Germans to enlarge and equip further their naval base to the northeast of Murmansk. A German U-boat was even able to depart from another Russian port and to sink the “Courageous” aircraft carrier, but Churchill’s only reaction to the German raids was to express again his discontent with Eire’s neutrality.[[114]](#footnote-114)

For his part, Hitler told his frightened generals that the English would be ready for negotiations only in case of defeat and that Germany had to invade Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg and then attack France and Britain by mid-November. The chief of staff of the land forces Franz Halder and State Secretary von Weizsaecker even thought to stage a coup d’état against Hitler but in fact they were helpless.[[115]](#footnote-115)

On the other hand, though, the German dictator began to realize that the installment of Soviet troops in the Baltic countries could be directed only against the Reich. On October 18 he told his most faithful general Wilhelm Keitel that the Polish territory was important for a strategic concentration of German troops. He even proposed the building of military defenses on the new border line with Russia. To that effect Hitler accepted entirely Stalin’s view against any form of restoration of the Polish state and planned to assign to the Poles the role of “*cheap slaves*”.[[116]](#footnote-116)

Despite his doubts about Stalin Hitler didn’t have the slightest intention to support the Finns in their negotiations with the Russians. The problem was that Sweden, Norway and Denmark couldn’t offer the Finns any assistance either. The Swedish prime minister Per Albin Hansson refrained from any reassurances in this regard. Hardly more efficient was the “friendly” intervention of US President Franklin Roosevelt, although the Russians hurried to reassure the Americans that the talks between Finland and the USSR were conducted in conformity with the sovereignty of Finland. These Soviet declarations didn’t sound very convincing, since on the same day it was the turn of the Latvians and the Lithuanians to conclude binding trade agreements with Russia. The aim was to consolidate economically the Soviet occupation. Thus, in the near future, Russia had to take 15 per cent of the entire foreign trade of Lithuania, although until that moment Britain had been the main trading partner of the three Baltic countries.[[117]](#footnote-117)

On the other hand, the Turkish foreign minister Saraçoglu, whose long visit to Moscow turned out to be a complete failure, returned to Ankara with the feeling that Russia had changed her Balkan strategy and that the most threatened country in the region was Romania. He assured the Romanian ambassador to Ankara Vasile Stoica that the existence of Romania was of capital importance for Turkey and he declared to the Russian ambassador Aleksej Terentiev that his government would respect the guarantees, given by Britain and France to Romania.[[118]](#footnote-118)

On October 19 Turkey concluded a mutual assistance pact with Britain and France for 15 years. However, the British and the French were to help the Turks only in case of war in the Mediterranean, caused by the aggression of some European power. It was solely in such a situation that Turkey had to assist Greece and Romania, whereas in case of some conflict out of the Mediterranean the three powers were ready just to consult each other. Moreover, in a special supplementary protocol Turkey explicitly declared her refusal to take part in any military operations against Communist Russia.[[119]](#footnote-119)

In this way Turkey intended to remain neutral in case of a conflict between the two leading Western European democracies and Russia, but London seemed to be more preoccupied by the neutrality of Eire. Asked by the British representative John Maffey for permitting the United Kingdom to use Irish ports for a better protection of the Royal Navy from German U-boats, Prime Minister de Valera pointed out that Dublin would agree to such a cooperation only in exchange for the unification of Ulster with Eire. For the time being, though, de Valera went on, Ireland would observe strict neutrality, despite his personal sympathies with the British and the French in their war against Germany.[[120]](#footnote-120)

The British-French-Turkish alliance created hardly any serious problems to Stalin, who intensified his pressure on Finland. In the night of October 21 to October 22 an enlarged Finnish delegation left for Moscow for a new round of painful talks with the Russians. The delegation included also Finance Minister Väinö Tanner, who was a Social Democrat. According to the Romanian diplomatic representative to Helsinki George Lecca in this way the Finns wanted that all political parties be represented in the delegation.[[121]](#footnote-121)

The following day, as if to demonstrate what fate awaited Finland as well, the Soviet occupation authorities staged a vote in the Russian part of Poland for a “People’s Assembly of Western Ukraine”. There was a single list of candidates, carefully selected by the authorities, often among the least literate individuals. Those who refused to take part in the voting, were declared deserters and even ill people were taken from their beds to the polling stations. Any attempt at secret voting was punishable as a “counterrevolutionary activity”, which meant death. Nevertheless, there was a quite strong resistance, since the regime couldn’t claim more than 91 per cent of the ballots in favor of its candidates.[[122]](#footnote-122)

This was accompanied by new friendly gestures of Stalin toward Hitler. On October 23 the German battle ship “Deutschland” dragged into a Soviet port the SS “City of Flint”, which was the first American freighter, captured by the Nazis. The United States was still a neutral power and the capturing of American citizens was a scandal in itself. The US government even thought for a moment of severing the diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, but the Russians hurried to explain to the Germans that they could not stay any longer in one of their ports with American prisoners.[[123]](#footnote-123)

The impossible choice between Hitler and Stalin made the countries of Central and Eastern Europe demonstrate their preference for Hitler as a lesser evil. Boris III of Bulgaria included in the government the representative of a militantly anti-Semite and pro-Nazi organization. On October 24 the King dissolved the parliament ahead of schedule in order to secure for himself an even more obedient National Assembly and more freedom of action in the field of foreign policy. The elections were to be held during a whole month constituency by constituency, which made government pressure on the voters much easier.[[124]](#footnote-124)

In fact the very existence of the small European countries was at stake, as proven by the dreadful fate of Poland. On October 26 the “People’s Assemblies” of “Western Ukraine” and “Western Byelorussia” appealed for admission into the “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”, which was the official name of Communist Russia. Berlin was deeply concerned about the ethnic Germans in the Russian part of Poland and a delegation of 400 people was dispatched to Moscow to negotiate their exchange with Ukrainians and Jews from the Nazi occupation zone of Poland. This didn’t prevent British Foreign Secretary Halifax from reiterating in the House of Commons that the guarantees, given by the United Kingdom to Poland before the war, were valid only for a Nazi, but not for a Soviet aggression.[[125]](#footnote-125)

For his part, Hitler made it ever clearer that he had abandoned the Baltic countries to Stalin. This was indicated, among other things, by the agreements that Germany concluded with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for the repatriation of the ethnic Germans from the Baltic countries to the Third Reich. Under these agreements some 70,000 people resettled to Germany, which put an end to the German ethnic presence in the Baltic region.[[126]](#footnote-126)

Stalin could be hardly more encouraged in his further aggression. On October 29 the Russian war minister and Politburo member Voroshilov was acquainted with a plan for the “*annihilation of the land and naval forces of the Finnish army*”. According to the plan the “Red Army” had to invade Finland from everywhere and to defeat the Finnish armed forces with the help of the aviation. To that effect the region of Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) was reinforced with fresh formations.[[127]](#footnote-127)

Two days later the Supreme Soviet, which was a sort of rubberstamp “parliament” of Communist Russia, approved unanimously and solemnly the admission of “Western Ukraine” and “Western Byelorussia” to the “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”. In a speech on that occasion Stalin’s second man, Molotov, announced that a restoration of the previous Polish state was out of the question. He venomously blamed Britain and France for their “aggression” against Germany and claimed at the same time that Russia was neutral and that “*the entrance of our troops in ex-Poland was by no means in contradiction*” with that “neutrality”. In the same vein he boasted that the Soviet Union had gained a territory, “*equal to the territory of a large European state*” and he threatened directly Finland by stating that the Soviet Union had provided Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with a “*reliable defense*” and that the Finns were outnumbered even by the inhabitants of Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). As it might be expected, Molotov put entirely on his Turkish colleague Saraçoglu the blame for the failure of the negotiations and accused Turkey, although in somewhat softer terms, of having abandoned her policy of careful neutrality by her treaties with Britain and France.[[128]](#footnote-128)

In the night of October 31 to November 1, while still in the train from Helsinki to Moscow, the Finnish delegation learned about Molotov’s speech, and stopped in the middle of the journey to ask for new instructions. After a midnight session the Council of Ministers ordered the delegates to continue their way to Moscow, because the Finnish government got the impression that Molotov had given up the idea of a mutual assistance pact. The Finns were even ready to grant the Russians a naval base, although this would threaten the country’s sovereignty and would mean the abandonment of neutrality.[[129]](#footnote-129)

Molotov’s pronouncements were immediately repeated by the press of the Comintern network. Thus a newspaper of the “Bulgarian Communist Party” promptly described Britain and France as “aggressors” and appealed for the conclusion of a mutual assistance pact between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, while a Russian trade delegation in Berlin was pressing the Germans to deliver an enormous quantity of arms and ammunition. Goering, Keitel and the commander in chief of the German navy admiral Erich Raeder even protested to the Foreign Ministry of the Reich that it was impossible to fulfill these excessive demands, but Hitler needed Russian food and raw materials as much as Stalin needed German weapons and technology. So the “Fuehrer” saw no alternative but to satisfy the demands of the “Leader of the World Proletariat” and the only thing Hitler could do was to instruct his subordinates to show the Russians everything except the newest models and the secret production.[[130]](#footnote-130)

Among the reactions of Britain and France to the Soviet-Nazi pressure was to seek a closer military cooperation with the countries that were threatened by Nazi aggression. At 11 AM on November 1 a group of French officers asked for a meeting with their Swiss counterparts at the state border. The French declared that they were instructed to give immediate assistance to the Swiss in case of a German attack, but only on condition that a Swiss officer explicitly invited them to do so. Under the constant German protests against the freedom of the media in Switzerland and against the would-be tolerance of Bern toward the activities of the Polish emigration, the Swiss foreign minister Giuseppe Motta thought it wise, for his part, to look for military cooperation with all the neighbors of the Confederation against any aggression. Yet the commander in chief of the Swiss armed forces general Guisan had already established a close link with the French military to the point that a phone call would be enough for joint actions against a German attack.[[131]](#footnote-131)

Unlike Switzerland Finland was threatened not by Nazi, but by Soviet aggression. True enough, the government in Helsinki still hoped to avoid the admission of Russian naval bases on Finnish territory by offering the Russians some islands in the Gulf of Finland. However, the Turkish ambassador to Moscow Ali Haydar Aktay declared to the Hungarian minister Jozsef Kristofi that the Soviets were ready to wage a war against Finland even in the forthcoming winter and that after solving “*the Finnish problem*” the Russians were going to concentrate their “*dynamism*” on Romania for Bessarabia.[[132]](#footnote-132)

On November 3 Molotov directly told the Finnish delegates that there was no progress in the negotiations and that under these circumstances the floor had to be given to the soldiers. At the same moment the Bulgarian premier Kjoseivanov, whom King Boris III intended to replace with some less ambitious person, had the courage to reject the Russian proposal of a mutual assistance pact on the ground that such a treaty might “*accelerate the war in the Balkans and, above all, provoke an assault of Turkey and England on Bulgaria*”.[[133]](#footnote-133)

Meanwhile the Germans arrived with the American ship “City of Flint” and her captured crew in a Norwegian port, where the German crew was immediately interned, while the captured American sailors were set free. It was only at this moment that the US Senate and the House of Representatives approved the Cash and Carry Act, which in fact lifted the embargo on the export of weapons and ammunition to Britain and France.[[134]](#footnote-134)

On November 5 the German ambassador to Brussels Vicco Karl Alexander von Buelow-Schwante, who was involved in a plot against Hitler, warned King Leopold III of Belgium that the situation was extremely serious, whereas another conspirator, colonel Hans Oster, informed the military attachés of Belgium and the Netherlands in Berlin that the Third Reich was going to attack the Low Countries on November 12. The following day, i.e. on November 6, Leopold III visited Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands and the two monarchs offered publicly their good offices for peace negotiations.[[135]](#footnote-135)

For his part, the Romanian ambassador to Ankara Vasile Stoica made an official proposal of a Balkan neutral bloc, but Bulgaria met the idea with reservations, whereas Germany and Russia were more or less hostile. On the other hand, the Soviet-Nazi alliance increased the gap between the Social Democrats and the Communists in the Scandinavian countries as well. In Stockholm the Social Democrats organized an anti-Communist protest rally and the Danish premier Thorvald Stauning, who was also a Social Democrat, published an anti-Communist article, although in a less conspicuous parochial newspaper.[[136]](#footnote-136)

That was the moment when Stalin publicly disclosed his feeling that the difference between Communism and National Socialism was not as deep as it appeared at first sight. On November 7, in a speech dedicated to the anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik coup d’état, the Russian dictator proclaimed that, “*unlike the bourgeois leaders of the Chamberlain type*”, the German “*petit bourgeois nationalists*” were flexible and had no connection “*with the capitalist traditions*”. He did not exclude “*a Nazi evolution from their present-day behavior*”.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Indeed Hitler was flexible enough to postpone the assault on Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg. The German leader was confused by the sudden peace appeal of Leopold III of Belgium and Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, which deprived the Reich of an excuse for the attack. Moreover, the German ambassador von Buelow-Schwante reported from Brussels that Leopold III had revealed to Wilhelmina that he had exact information about the concentration of German troops on the Belgian border and that the assault was planned to begin in two or three days. So the attack couldn’t be a surprise anymore and Hitler didn’t seem to have much choice. As a matter of fact this was only the first of a series of postponements that were going to disorient quite efficiently the intelligence services of the western European democracies.[[138]](#footnote-138)

On the other hand, the Nazi repression services simulated an attempt upon Hitler’s life after his annual speech, dedicated to the anniversary of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. Seven veteran National Socialists died of a bomb explosion that occurred well after the departure of the “Fuehrer”. The German and Russian press hurried to blame the British for the attempt, but the Nazi comments did not fail to mention that the perpetrator planned to look for refuge in Switzerland, which made the Swiss fear that the attempt might serve as an excuse for a German invasion of the Confederation. The head of the German secret police Heinrich Himmler went so far as to order the kidnapping of two British spies from the Netherlands to Germany as would-be organizers of the crime.[[139]](#footnote-139)

Even Mussolini was somewhat less enthusiastic than the Russian press in congratulating Hitler for having escaped death. High ranking Italian officers like Marshal Pietro Badoglio frankly confessed to the Italian foreign minister Ciano, who was also a son-in-law of Mussolini, that in case of war they would prefer fighting against the Germans to fighting on their side. For the time being, Italy refused to take part in Hitler’s economic blockade of Britain, while Ciano was constantly complaining to the Germans about rumors that there wouldn’t be any resettlement of the South Tyrolean Germans to Germany, as promised by Hitler, but that Italy would hand over South Tyrol to the Reich.[[140]](#footnote-140)

Such controversies didn’t seem to exist between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Yet on November 13, 1939, after long hesitations, the Finnish delegation in Moscow rejected the Russian demands and returned to Helsinki. The Russian war minister Kliment Voroshilov immediately responded by ordering the completion of the concentration of troops against Finland. Within a week the Soviet command had to be ready with a concrete plan for the assault. In face of the imminent aggression a Norwegian committee started to collect funds for the Finnish Red Cross. According to some diplomatic sources, the Finns were prepared to fight and got a certain amount of artillery pieces from Sweden, planes from Germany and weapons even from Hungary.[[141]](#footnote-141)

On the other hand, though, Hungary, together with Bulgaria, was quite reluctant to accept the Romanian initiative for a neutral bloc, the more so as the Romanian government rejected the British efforts to induce the Romanians to agree to some territorial rectifications in favor of Budapest and Sofia. The point was that Hungary and Bulgaria had openly declared that they would join a neutral bloc in Central and Southeastern Europe only after a satisfactory arrangement of the territorial issues. Despite the hostility to the idea, displayed not only by Hungary and Bulgaria, but also by Germany and Russia, King Carol II of Romania persisted on the neutral bloc project and that was the position of the new Cabinet of Ministers, which he formed on November 23, by replacing Argetoianu with the former leader of the Liberal Party Gheorghe Tatarescu as prime minister.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Yet for the time being Stalin’s attention was concentrated not on Romania, but on Finland. In the afternoon of November 26 the Soviet interior ministry staged the shelling of a small “Red Army” unit at Mainila, close to the Finnish border. Four soldiers died and another eight were injured. Molotov immediately summoned the Finnish minister to Moscow A.S.Yrjö-Koskinen, accused the Finns of “provocation” and of concentrating their troops on the Russian border and demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Finnish troops from the front fortifications of their defense line. In other words, the Finns had to abandon the first of their three defense systems, known as the Mannerheim Line.[[143]](#footnote-143)

Two days later Yrjö-Koskinen handed over to Molotov a written reply of his government, proposing a joint enquiry of the Mainila incident and a withdrawal of troops from both sides of the border. Molotov responded by a written declaration, which denounced the nonaggression treaty between the two countries. That was followed by the recall of all Russian political and trade representatives from Finland, whereas Stalin decided to form a puppet government of “New Finland” under Kuusinen with the aim of transforming the country into another “Soviet Socialist Republic”, i.e. into a mere province of Communist Russia. In the face of imminent Soviet aggression the Romanian foreign minister Gafencu announced to the German minister to Bucharest Wilhelm Fabricius that Romania withdrew the neutral bloc proposal.[[144]](#footnote-144)

At 8 AM on November 30 between 240,000 and 450,000 Russian soldiers assaulted Finland with 1,900 guns, 1,500 tanks and between 1,000 and 2,500 combat aircraft. For their defense the Finns could rely only on 140,000 soldiers, 400 pieces of artillery, 60 tanks and merely 270 aircraft. According to some authors the “Red Army” troops, invading Finland, were going to reach about one million people, whereas the Finns could mobilize a maximum of 640,000 soldiers, which amounted to 16 per cent of the entire population. Helsinki and other major cities were immediately exposed to devastating air raids. However, the Finns were much better equipped and trained for warfare in the Arctic region, where temperatures often fell under minus 40 degrees centigrade, while the Russian soldiers didn’t even know how to run skis. Moreover, for more than two decades the Finns had been preparing themselves for such an attack and by 1939 the Mannerheim Line was probably the world most efficient defense structure.[[145]](#footnote-145)

The Russian invasion of Finland was accompanied by a further consolidation of the Soviet-Nazi alliance. At Hitler’s explicit orders the German diplomatic representatives were instructed to support the aggression and to refrain from any kind of sympathies with the Finns. On the contrary, they had to criticize the Finns for the favorable attitude of their media toward Britain and for the refusal to conclude a nonaggression treaty with Germany, similar to that with Russia. The press and the radio of the Third Reich obligingly reproduced the Soviet viewpoint of the conflict. Moreover, the German and the Russian secret services reached a concrete agreement for the mutual exchange of “undesirable elements”. In this way Stalin could get rid of some 350 Communists of German descent, who were simply transferred from Soviet to Nazi concentration camps, whereas Hitler handed over a number of Russian émigrés, including supporters of Leon Trotsky, who had been Stalin’s chief rival in the struggle for the succession of Lenin.[[146]](#footnote-146)

On December 1 the Finns formed a national coalition government with the governor of the National Bank Risto Ryti as premier and the Social Democrat Väinö Tanner as foreign minister. However, the Russian air raids forced the new Cabinet of Ministers and the Parliament to leave Helsinki for an unknown destination, while the diplomatic corps had to remain in the capital, losing any contact with the government. On the same day the first German warship „Sachsenwald” entered the new naval base that Stalin had secured to Hitler near Murmansk.[[147]](#footnote-147)

Hitler’s solidarity with Stalin only increased the mistrust of Mussolini toward the Third Reich and the British thought it possible to work for the separation of Fascist Italy from National Socialist Germany. To the German representatives the “Duce” constantly stressed the “*anti-Bolshevik orientation*” of his policy. In the same vein Ciano instructed the chief of the Italian military intelligence general Carboni to agree with the minor demands of his German counterpart admiral Wilhelm Canaris in order to be able to reject the serious claims. For his part, the Spanish dictator Franco distanced himself from the totalitarian model by renewing the subsidies for the Catholic Church with the hope of achieving some agreement with the Holy Seat. Much more important was the fact that he was preparing a decree, restoring fully the rights of the king-in-exile Alfonso XIII on the throne of Spain and a monarchy was completely incompatible with modern totalitarianism.[[148]](#footnote-148)

In neighboring Sweden the Russian assault on Finland led to a political crisis. The Swedish foreign minister Rickard Sandler sent in his resignation after his colleagues in the Cabinet rejected his recommendation to provide the Finns with assistance. Sandler’s resignation served as a pretext for reshuffling the government by adding representatives of the Conservative and of the Liberal Party to the Social Democrats and the Agrarians. Sandler was replaced with Christian Günther, who was not a politician, but a career diplomat. All political forces agreed that Sweden had to avoid both intervention in the Russian-Finnish war and a declaration of neutrality, since nonintervention instead of neutrality did not preclude assistance to Finland in the future.[[149]](#footnote-149)

Under these circumstances Stalin apparently felt quite confident and summoned the chairman of the “*New Finland’s*” government Kuusinen to sign “*A Mutual Assistance and Friendship Treaty*”. According to this treaty the Soviet Union “generously” gave Finland 420 million Finnish marks and ceded to Finland 70,000 square kilometers of Soviet Karelia, although in a traditionally Russian way the Finns of Karelia had been proclaimed and forced to be a different “Karelian” ethnicity. In exchange for that Finland had to hand over to Russia the Karelian Isthmus, islands in the Gulf of Finland and to lease Hanko to the Russians for a naval base. This treaty had no legal force whatsoever, but it was conceived merely as a justification of the Soviet assault on Finland.[[150]](#footnote-150)

To the same effect the Soviet authorities started to recruit a Finnish “Red Army” among the Russian soldiers of Finnish descent. As a matter of fact, though, even some Finnish Communists fought in the ranks of the national army against the Soviet invaders. Moreover, the Finns succeeded in capturing two “Red Army” divisions, whose soldiers had merely gone mad because of the murderous frost. The lakes and swamps made it impossible for the assailants to go around a resisting force on the road and to advance further. Thus small units were able to stop forces that largely outnumbered them. Last but not least, the morale of the Finns, which was very high anyway, was enhanced even further by the sympathies of the world public opinion with their cause, as well as by the presence of 9,000 Swedish volunteers, as well as by the Swedes and the Norwegians, fighting for Finland in the air force. The Hungarian government under Pal Teleki also sent a volunteer corps to Finland, while the United States proclaimed a moral embargo on Communist Russia. The Roosevelt administration banned the export of planes and strategic materials to the Soviet Union and granted the Finns a loan of 10 million dollars, but the President vetoed a motion for an unlimited loan.[[151]](#footnote-151)

On the other hand, the German command apprehended that the Russian aggression against Finland might lead to the landing of British forces on the Norwegian coast. On December 8 Admiral Raeder strongly recommended to Hitler the occupation of Norway and the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg, who was in charge of the Party’s foreign relations, revived his plan for a National Socialist Revolution with the help of the former Communist Vidkun Quisling. Like many other Communists, Quisling became in the 1930s an ardent supporter of National Socialism, but his popularity in Norway was so low that he was incapable of winning over enough votes to secure a seat in parliament even for himself.[[152]](#footnote-152)

The Russian-Finnish war only deepened the cleavage between Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany. An outstanding Fascist like Italo Balbo gave his newspaper such an anti-Communist stand that Mussolini rightly considered it as directed also against the Third Reich. This didn’t prevent Ciano from promising the Finnish minister to Rome more aircraft deliveries. The Italian press condemned vehemently the Soviet aggression and the newly appointed Russian ambassador N.Gorelkin declared that he could not present his credentials because he had been recalled back to Moscow.[[153]](#footnote-153)

On December 14 the League of Nations Assembly expelled the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics from the organization as an aggressor. The measure was in response to the complaint of Finland and resulted from the initiative of France and Britain, but the representatives of a number of small European countries abstained from voting. That was the position of Belgium, Luxemburg, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and even the Netherlands, although the Dutch were among the few members of the League of Nations who, back in 1934, had voted against the admission of Communist Russia to the League. Switzerland also preferred abstention and the same attitude was adopted by Turkey, although the Turkish press accused Russia of aggression and openly sympathized with the Finns, considered to be of the same “*race*” as the Turks. However, even the Finnish delegate abstained from voting, whereas by their abstention the representatives of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia seemed to sign the death sentence of their own countries.[[154]](#footnote-154)

The expulsion of the Soviet Union from the League of Nations removed all formal obstacles for a direct military clash of Britain and France with the Russians. The two Western European democracies even planned air raids on the Russian oil fields in Baku at the Caspian Sea. A British landing in Norway became more probable too. Prime Minister Chamberlain proclaimed in the House of Commons that the United Kingdom had to assist the Finns in their struggle against Russian aggression. As if in response, Hitler received Quisling, who boasted of being able to carry out a “revolution” in Norway and to call in the German army. For the time being the Reich granted him 200,000 gold reichsmarks in support of his activities. Meanwhile Stalin promised the Arctic Russian port of Murmansk for the concentration of part of the German landing forces and the “Fuehrer” instructed the High Command to work out concrete plans for the invasion of Norway, which included inevitably the occupation of Denmark too.[[155]](#footnote-155)

The Romanians saw in the British position an opportunity for renewing their endeavors to get an extension of the guarantee, provided to Romania by Britain and France on April 13, 1939, to a possible Russian assault as well. However, the British thought that such an enlargement would only increase further the solidarity between Berlin and Moscow. So the British minister in Bucharest Reginald Hoare declared to the Romanian foreign minister Gafencu that the United Kingdom was ready to extend the guarantees also with regard to Russia, only if Turkey would come immediately to the assistance of Romania and if there were no threats from Italy. In fact, the Turks were by no means ready to fight against the Russians for the sake of Romania.[[156]](#footnote-156)

On December 16, 1939, the Russians made a supreme effort to break through the Mannerheim Line, but their troops got stuck in the snow. Thanks to the specific geographic conditions and to the horrible frost two Finnish divisions were able to stop the entire Ninth Army under the command of Vasily Chuikov. Yet Stalin was confident that he could annihilate Finland and rejected all Finnish attempts at contacting him through Sweden. At the same time, as if to reaffirm Hitler’s concerns, the First Lord of the British Admiralty Churchill proposed the occupation of two Norwegian ports, namely Narvik and Bergen. The operation had to be justified by the need to assist the Finns, but its real aim was to stop the exports of iron ore from Sweden to Germany through Norwegian territorial waters.[[157]](#footnote-157)

The risk of a British military intervention in Scandinavia made Hitler even more willing to consolidate his alliance with Stalin. The German dictator turned his eyes on the Middle East countries that were either British colonies or under British hegemony, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Nepal and Southern China. At the same time he decided to advise Romania to arrange her relations with Moscow. The “Fuehrer” also resolved that he would avoid taking a definite position with regard to the Russian pressure on Sofia for a mutual assistance pact, although such a pact would easily lead to the submission of Bulgaria to Russia.[[158]](#footnote-158)

For his part, Stalin had no interest whatever in a direct clash with the British and the French, since such a conflict would ruin his entire strategy of maintaining an attrition war between Germany and the two Western European democracies until the best moment for Russia’s own intervention. His military attaché in Berlin Maksim Purkaev directly warned the chief of staff of Germany’s land forces Fr.Halder that the British and the French were preparing a landing in Norway.[[159]](#footnote-159)

By that time the Russians succeeded in taking over the Finnish port of Petsamo (today Pechenga in Russia) on the Barents Sea. However, the grim prospects of a further enlargement of the war to Scandinavia didn’t prevent the Hungarian military command from planning an armed action against Romania. On December 22 the Supreme Defense Council worked out a plan for intervention in Romania in one of the following cases: 1) if the Romanian army falls apart and a revolution breaks out in Romania; 2) if the Hungarian minority in Transylvania is threatened; 3) if by way of war or peacefully Romania cedes to Russia or to Bulgaria territories without satisfying the Hungarian demands. According to Prime Minister Teleki Romania had to cede to Hungary at least 50,000 square kilometers, inhabited in his opinion by 50 per cent Romanians and 50 per cent Hungarians.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Under the command of Semyon Timoshenko the Soviet troops against Finland numbered at that moment as many soldiers as the entire Finnish population. Moreover, in various propaganda materials the Russian authorities openly disclosed their claims not only on the Romanian province of Bessarabia, but also on Sub Carpathian Ukraine, which had been annexed to Hungary after the annihilation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Most observers believed that Romania would be the next victim of Soviet aggression after Finland, but Hungary could not be certain about her borders either.[[161]](#footnote-161)

On December 23, 1939, the French premier Daladier declared to the Chamber of Deputies that Finland should be given assistance in the war against Russia. For their part, the Turks were even ready to allow free passage of the French and British fleet to the Black Sea in case of a Russian assault on Bessarabia. Significantly enough, four days later the Russian diplomatic representative in Stockholm Madame Alexandra Kollontai surprised the new Swedish foreign minister Christian Günther by suggesting that a “*logical base*” had to be found for peace negotiations between Finland and the Soviet Union.[[162]](#footnote-162)

For the time being, though, the battles continued on a full scale and Italy’s moral and military support for Finland, however limited it was, led to a further deterioration of relations with Russia. In response to the departure of the Soviet ambassador Gorelkin Italy recalled her ambassador Augusto Rosso from Moscow. On January 3, 1940, Mussolini wrote a long letter to Hitler, warning him that even with the help of Italy Germany would never be able to put Britain and France on their knees and that the struggle against the West would be successful “*only after the annihilation of Bolshevism*”. The Italian dictator went so far as to propose the restoration of a mutilated Polish state as a price for the restoration of peace with the two leading western European democracies, but the idea was totally unacceptable both to Hitler and Stalin.[[163]](#footnote-163)

Ciano himself was worried about the fact that Hungary’s hostility toward Romania might encourage further Russian expansion in Europe. On January 6 he met the Hungarian foreign minister Istvan Csaky in Venice and warned him that Hungary could hope for the cession of some territories only in exchange for a guarantee that the Hungarians would not attack the Romanians in their back while fighting against the Russians. Csaky pointed out that Hungary would not content herself with minor territorial rectifications, but he promised that Hungary would not move against Romania, if Romania opposed strong resistance to a third party, meaning Bulgaria or Russia.[[164]](#footnote-164)

True enough, Bulgaria had never given up her claims on Southern Dobruja, but she had no intention whatever to regain that region by war. On January 13 the general secretary of the Turkish foreign ministry Numan Menemencioglu and the Bulgarian premier Kjoseivanov signed in Sofia a declaration of neutrality and friendship. Bulgaria and Turkey proclaimed that they would observe complete neutrality toward each other and the two countries agreed to withdraw their troops from the border zone between them.[[165]](#footnote-165)

At the same time Mussolini was angry at the blockade, imposed by the British and the French and he was ready to satisfy Hitler’s demand for stopping all exports of weapons and war materials to the two Western European democracies. However, Ciano persuaded Mussolini that Italy was in bad need of hard currency and eventually the “Duce” agreed that the German protests had to be rejected. On the other hand, the Italian dictator feared that his neutrality would prevent him from taking part in the future distribution of the booty by a victorious Germany and he planned to enter the war on Hitler’s side in the second half of 1940 despite the poor state of Italy’s armed forces.[[166]](#footnote-166)

In this way Switzerland was threatened both by Germany and Italy, but there was no doubt that the German threat was far more real and serious. For more than two decades the Swiss foreign policy had been in the hands of Giuseppe Motta as head of the Political Department (Foreign Minister), but he died on January 23 after witnessing the failure of his whole strategy of loyalty to the League of Nations. The Political Department was taken over by Marcel Pilet-Golaz, who was much less enthusiastic about the prospects of a lasting peace and much more careful about his country’s absolute and “integral” neutrality.[[167]](#footnote-167)

Three days later the Swedish foreign minister Günther responded to the suggestion of the Russian minister Kollontai for a “*logical base*” of peace negotiations between Finland and Russia by asking whether such a base would not preclude the Soviet claim on Hanko. Günther pointed out that the “Red Army” had already occupied the territories the Soviet Union wanted to annex and warned that if the Russian troops got too close to the borders of Sweden and Norway, the two Scandinavian countries might accept the military assistance of Britain and France.[[168]](#footnote-168)

The very existence of the medium and small European countries was, therefore, at risk and the ambition of Boris III of Bulgaria to hold even tighter the reins of government and to determine more closely the foreign policy, in particular, was one of the main reasons for the undemocratic and manipulated parliamentary elections, which ended on January 28, 1940. The result was that the government candidates won 141 seats in the National Assembly out of 160. True enough, the opposition could hardly offer a different view from that of the regime, the more so as Bulgaria had a remarkable economic growth and everybody approved and supported strict neutrality. The only exception were the Communists, who got ten seats (6.25 per cent) and who advocated complete submission to Stalin. Another 5 seats went to the pan-Yugoslav wing of the Agrarian Union, which was in favor of the engulfment of Bulgaria by Yugoslavia and quite susceptible to Russian influence. Thus only two deputies apparently shared a really democratic belief, whereas another two were nationalists rather than democrats and they were in fact the only stern opponents to Soviet aggression.[[169]](#footnote-169)

On the following day Kollontai sent through Sweden’s mediation a written note to the Finns, stating that Moscow did not preclude an agreement with the government in Helsinki, provided that Finland pointed out in advance the territorial concessions she was ready to grant to Russia. However, on January 31 the British ambassador to Rome Percy Loraine revealed to Ciano that the United Kingdom delivered more provisions to Finland but did not intend to send troops there. Loraine complained at the same time about the hostility of Mussolini toward Britain and stressed that such a position was an obstacle to a sincere and deep rapprochement.[[170]](#footnote-170)

Meanwhile the Belgians had forced a German plane, intruding in their airspace, to land and found out in the captured German officer secret documents, disclosing Hitler’s plans for the invasion of the Low Countries as an inevitable phase of the assault on France. The government under Hubert Pierlot ordered a new stage of mobilization of the army, while the Russians were launching another offensive for breaking through the Mannerheim Line between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga. By that time there were as many as 8 million people in Stalin’s concentration camps, where the average life expectancy of the inmates was less than a month.[[171]](#footnote-171)

On February 2 the Finnish premier Ryti and Foreign Minister Tanner, who were on a visit in Stockholm, informed the Russian minister Kollontai through the mediation of the Swedish foreign minister Günther that their firm decision was in favor of peace. Finland was even ready to go beyond the initial Russian territorial demands, but Ryti and Tanner made it clear that the Finns would also accept the Soviet offer of a territorial compensation to the north of Lake Ladoga.[[172]](#footnote-172)

Despite Loraine’s declarations to Ciano, the British and the French command were in fact preparing the dispatch of an expeditionary corps to Scandinavia with the participation of some Polish units. The corps was to land at the Norwegian port of Narvik and to occupy from there the iron mines in Sweden. The British rejected the French idea of a landing at Petsamo (Pechenga), captured in the meantime by the “Red Army”. The problem was that the plan could be put into practice only with the consent of Norway and Sweden, but the two Scandinavian countries would hardly agree to get involved in the war. The Finns were perfectly aware of this fact and they continued their secret contacts with the Russians, rightfully realizing that the very existence of such contacts suggested that, at least for the time being, Stalin might have abandoned his ambition to annex Finland.[[173]](#footnote-173)

As if to compensate the forthcoming compromise with Finland, the Soviet occupation authorities submitted Poland to a new wave of terror. On February 9 they began another mass deportation of “unreliable elements”, most of whom died during the horrible journey to the extermination camps in Komi and Siberia. Until the summer of 1941 only about 381,000 Poles were going to survive out of approximately one million inmates. The same genocide was applied not only to the ethnic Poles, but also to the Polish Jews. There were about 1,300,000 Jews in the Russian occupation zone of Poland and within a couple of months about 400,000 of them perished in various Soviet camps.[[174]](#footnote-174)

With regard to the Jews Stalin was even more murderous than Hitler, who had not yet come to the grim “final solution” for the extermination of the entire Jewish community, although the death rate in the Jewish ghettoes to be established soon in the Nazi part of Poland was going to be extremely high. On February 11 the close cooperation between Communist Russia and National Socialist Germany culminated in an economic treaty for the next 27 months. The agreement resulted from long and difficult negotiations, but it provided for an export from Russia to Germany, amounting to 640,000,000 reichsmarks. This included one million tons of grain, half million tons of wheat, 900,000 tons of petroleum, 100,000 tons of cotton, 500,000 tons of phosphates, 100,000 tons of chrome ore, 500,000 tons of iron ore, 300,000 tons of scrap and cast iron, 11,000 tons of copper, 3,000 tons of nickel, 950 tons of tin, and a number of other strategic items. In exchange for that Germany had to deliver to Russia the huge „Lützow” battle cruiser, the plans of the “Bismarck” combat ship, as well as big naval cannons, about 30 most modern combat aircraft, including “Messerschmitt” 109 and “Messerschmitt” 110 fighters and U-88 bombers. The treaty was, therefore, a fatal blow to the British blockade.[[175]](#footnote-175)

One of the consequences was that Moscow demanded new concessions from the Finns. In a note to Günther the Russian minister to Stockholm Kollontai stated that Finland had not only to provide the Soviet Union with a naval base at Hanko, but also to cede the entire Karelian Isthmus, as well as the region to the north of Lake Ladoga. Moreover, Kollontai hinted in another message that, before starting any negotiations with Russia, the Finns had to form a new Cabinet of Ministers with the participation of the Soviet apparatchik of Finnish descent and head of the puppet “government” Otto Kuusinen. At the same moment Romania declined the Finnish request for arms and ammunition on the ground that the Romanians needed these materials for their own defense.[[176]](#footnote-176)

On February 14 the “Red Army” finally succeeded in breaking through the second Mannerheim Line at Viipuri (Vyborg), which was then the fourth biggest city in Finland. The commander in chief of the Finnish armed forces marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim, after whom the famous defense line had been named, came to the conclusion that the cession of large territories to Stalin was inevitable, provided that Finland preserved her sovereignty.[[177]](#footnote-177)

Against this background most medium and small European countries endeavored to please both Hitler and Stalin. On February 15 King Boris III of Bulgaria replaced Georgi Kjoseivanov with Bogdan Filov as prime minister. Filov was chairman of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and minister of education in the previous government. Unlike his predecessor, Filov was much more obedient and he was ready to implement with equal enthusiasm a pro-Russian or a pro-German policy according to the King’s will. Significantly enough, the Interior Ministry was entrusted to Peter Gabrovsky, who belonged to a pro-Nazi and extremely anti-Semite organization, whereas the Foreign Ministry was taken over by Ivan Popov, who didn’t even bother to conceal his anti-Nazi feelings and his sympathies with Britain and France.[[178]](#footnote-178)

For their part, the Norwegians did their best to show a strict observance of the neutrality rules and protested strongly against a British attack on a German battle ship in the territorial waters of Norway. This dissuaded by no means Hitler from his plan for the conquest of Norway and Denmark. He appointed General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst commander of the operation. With Soviet permission three German ships were anchored in the Kola Gulf to surprise the British by additional naval forces from a direction, unknown to them.[[179]](#footnote-179)

On February 28 the Russians broke through the third Mannerheim Line and their road to Viipuri seemed to be clean. It was only at this moment that the US House of Representatives allowed the „Export and Import Bank” to grant a loan of no more than 20 million dollars to Finland, but the Finns could not use it for purchasing war materials. On the other hand, the Soviet victory made Hitler accelerate his preparations for the invasion of Scandinavia.[[180]](#footnote-180)

On March 1 the “Red Army” made its first attempt to capture Viipuri (Vyborg), but the Finns opposed an efficient resistance and were even able to destroy two Russian divisions. Britain officially demanded free passage for her troops through Sweden in assistance to Finland, but the Swedish foreign minister Günther rejected the request and urged the Finns to accept the Soviet peace terms. Somewhat later the Finns appealed for better terms again and asked Sweden for an alliance treaty with Finland. Günther turned down the possibility of such an alliance but he promised to mediate for less harsh peace terms with the Russians.[[181]](#footnote-181)

Stalin seemed to agree even with this. In any case Kollontai declared to her Finnish counterpart in Stockholm Eljas Erkko that the rumors about Stalin’s intention to force upon the Finns his puppet premier Kuusinen as member of their government were unfounded. Moreover, proceeded Kollontai, the Russian leadership was aware of Sweden’s attachment to the internal freedom of Finland.[[182]](#footnote-182)

On March 5 the Finnish government decided to accept the Russian terms, no matter of how harsh they were. It was only at this moment that Molotov had the kindness to inform the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg about the peace terms with Finland. However, Hitler also refrained from revealing to his Russian allies that he intended to strike at Denmark and Norway as soon as possible. The problem was that Germany could rely less and less on her alliance with Russia, although the “Fuehrer” didn’t seem to be fully aware of that.[[183]](#footnote-183)

On the same day the people’s commissar of the interior Beria informed Stalin in a letter that in the Soviet concentration camps there were still 33,368 inmates from the Russian part of Poland. He proposed the extermination of 25,700 of them, mostly army officers. The proposal was approved by Stalin, Voroshilov, Molotov and Mikoyan with their personal signatures. As a matter of fact, such a sinister result could be achieved by simply sending the victims to some Siberian death camp, which would have assured within a year the death of 20 per cent of the inmates that had survived the journey. On the other hand, though, the camp authorities needed five years for liquidating the required figure of human beings. Everything seems to indicate that, by accelerating the extermination of 21,857 Poles, Stalin intended to secure in advance the ethnic cleansing of the regions along the German border before moving against Hitler.[[184]](#footnote-184)

At this moment the German dictator had turned all his attention to Scandinavia. On March 6 he ordered the “Wehrmacht” to attack Norway and Denmark nine days later in response to the British and French demand for a free passage of their troops through Norway and Sweden. The German command decided in its turn to hand over to the Russians the intelligence materials about the concentration of French and British forces in the Middle East for an assault toward Iran and the Caucasus.[[185]](#footnote-185)

The British themselves hinted that an allied action in Scandinavia to the assistance of the Finns was imminent and Stalin finally decided to postpone the conquest of Finland for better times. A Finnish delegation was invited to Moscow, but on March 8 a central Soviet newspaper published an article by Kuusinen who appealed to the Finnish nation to admit that it had been put to death for the sake of Britain and France.[[186]](#footnote-186)

That same evening Hitler wrote a long letter to Mussolini in order to revive the Axis with Fascist Italy and to justify the alliance with Stalin. The “Fuehrer” reiterated that he intended by no means to restore a Polish state in any form whatever and stressed that Italy had no other choice but to side with Germany in the war against Britain and France. In Hitler’s words some evil-minded circles in England endeavored to eliminate the totalitarian regimes because they threatened the feudal-reactionary plutocracies.[[187]](#footnote-187)

On March 10 Hitler’s letter was carried to Rome by the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop, who assured Mussolini that Germany was able to provide Italy with one million tons of coal monthly. He even claimed that Stalin had abandoned the idea of a world revolution. The “Duce” reacted by asking whether he, von Ribbentrop, really thought so but at the same time the Italian dictator proudly declared that Fascism had to side with Nazism on the combat line. However, he refused to give a specific date for Italy’s entrance in the war, whereas von Ribbentrop didn’t even hint at the planned assault on Norway and Denmark, which was in the meantime postponed, but by no means annulled. In order to please Hitler, Mussolini expressed his wish to improve relations with Moscow.[[188]](#footnote-188)

Late in the evening on March 12 the Finish delegation in Moscow, headed by the former premier Juho Paasikivi, had to sign a peace treaty whose text was not even discussed. On behalf of Russia the treaty was signed by Molotov and another two Soviet officials. According to the terms Russia annexed the Karelian Isthmus together with the city of Viipuri (Vyborg) and a number of islands in the Gulf of Finland. Stalin was given for a 30-years period the Hanko Peninsula and the city of the same name for a naval and air base. Finland was also deprived of her access to Lake Ladoga and had to build an extraterritorial railway through the region of Petsamo (Pechenga) from Murmansk to Sweden. The Finns could maintain no military equipment whatever in that area, whereas the territories, ceded to Russia, contained 10 per cent of Finland’s textile, chemical and metallurgical industry, about 100 power stations and practically all the timber-producing and timber-processing facilities in Karelia. Moreover, Finland had no right to conclude agreements with third parties, if Moscow considered these agreements hostile to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the Russians had abandoned the demand for a bilateral mutual assistance pact. Finland had to withdraw her troops to the new border line until March 26, but the “Red Army” units could remain in the region of Petsamo until April 10, 1940. Finland’s casualties amounted to 23,452 dead and missing and 43,501 injured, but as many as 450,000 people had to leave the territories, ceded to Russia, within 12 days.[[189]](#footnote-189)

The Russians had much more casualties. These included from 54 to 72 thousand killed, and from 200 thousand to 540 thousand frozen to death, injured and missing. Under the terms of the peace treaty Finland had to hand over to the Soviets about 10,000 “Red Army” prisoners of war, who were deported to the Russian region of Arkhangelsk (Archangel) to the north of the Arctic Circle and shot to the last man. For Stalin the war with Finland was just a test for the readiness of the “Red Army” for the conquest of Europe. For their part, the military command of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were horrified by the fact that it had taken the Russians only three months to break through the Mannerheim Line. Their desperate conclusion was that any resistance to Soviet aggression was futile, the more so as the three Baltic countries were already under Russian occupation.[[190]](#footnote-190)

Hitler was to some extent relieved by the outcome, since Stalin had stopped his aggressive actions in the Baltic region. The German dictator got the wrong, if not suicidal impression that the “Red Army” was not very powerful and that its performance in Finland was weak rather than strong. On the other hand, though, Hitler was worried that he was losing all excuse for the invasion of Norway and Denmark, although Britain was also deprived of any political reason for an occupation of Norway.[[191]](#footnote-191)

**II.THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY ON THE VERGE OF ANNIHILATION**

There is none righteous,

no, not one:

There is none that

understandeth,

there is none that

seeketh after God.

(Rom. 3: 10-11)

On March 15 an official announcement was published simultaneously in Stockholm, Oslo and Helsinki that Sweden, Norway and Finland were prepared to start negotiations for the conclusion of a defensive alliance between the three countries. The mood in Sweden was somewhat less courageous. According to the Romanian diplomatic envoy in Stockholm Barbu Constantinescu, the Swedes were worried by the big concessions the Finns had made to the Russians and considered that “*the Russian-Finnish peace treaty is a victory for Germany*”. Moreover, in the eyes of the Swedish public the annexation of Vyborg and the Hanko Peninsula by Russia deprived the Finns of any future military options.[[192]](#footnote-192)

The Finns felt the peace treaty with Russia as a national catastrophe, just like the Hungarians and the Bulgarians after World War I, although in 1916-1918 the Bulgarians had victoriously frustrated a Russian attempt to annex Bulgaria before conquering Constantinople and the Straits. Scandinavian solidarity was for the Finns a possible way out of international isolation, but on March 16 the Russian premier and foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov summoned the new Swedish minister in Moscow Assarsson to the Kremlin. Molotov declared that an alliance of Finland with Sweden and Norway could be directed only against the Soviet Union and that it would be incompatible with the neutrality policy of Norway and Sweden. Assarsson tried in vain to persuade Molotov that the only aim was to strengthen the relations of Finland with the rest of the Scandinavian countries and that the planned alliance had a purely defensive character. Eventually Sweden, Norway and Finland saw no other choice but to postpone their alliance plans.[[193]](#footnote-193)

On the other hand, despite the end of the Russian-Finnish war, the British didn’t preclude a possible conflict with the Soviet Union. The British military attaché to Sofia colonel Ross even worked out a plan for the defense of the Balkans in case of a German attack from the northwest, of a Russian attack from the northeast and of a joint German-Russian attack from the north. According to Ross, the first option required the construction of a defense line on the Danube, South Yugoslavia and Albania, whereas a Russian or a joint Russian-German assault had to be met by a defense line in Eastern Thrace. The second option required the military cooperation of Bulgaria. Colonel Ross was aware of the poor state of Bulgaria’s relations with Romania, Greece and Yugoslavia, but he thought that a military cooperation between Bulgaria and Turkey might be possible.[[194]](#footnote-194)

As if in confirmation of the British fears, the Hungarian prime minister Pal Teleki sent to the Hungarian minister in Washington DC Janos Pelenyi a detailed instruction about a government in exile to be formed in the United States, if the Germans occupied Hungary on their way to Romania. Teleki was in fact transmitting the ideas of Regent Miklos Horthy who was the real master of the country. A sum of 5 million dollars was to be transferred to Pelenyi in Washington for the support of such a Hungarian government in exile.[[195]](#footnote-195)

Horthy apparently had enough reasons to fear a German occupation, since at that very moment Hitler endeavored to consolidate his shaking alliance with Mussolini, which meant, among other things, that Hungary could rely ever less on an Italian support against the designs of the Reich. In the snowy morning of March 18 Hitler and Mussolini met at the Brenner Pass, which was once at the border between Italy and Austria, but now was a checkpoint between Italy and Germany. The talks were centered on the forthcoming assault of Germany on France. Mussolini ardently declared that Fascist Italy had no alternative but to side with National Socialist Germany. However, he added, Italy needed four to three months to be prepared militarily for the intervention. Hitler readily agreed but he didn’t even mention about his plans for an attack on Denmark and Norway. Russia was apparently not even mentioned, but on the same day the German ambassador Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg reported from Moscow that the Soviet Union had a visible desire to improve relations with Italy.[[196]](#footnote-196)

At the same time Stalin accelerated further the mobilization of his own armed forces. On March 20 it was decided in Moscow to prepare within the next three years 208,400 commanders and 890,000 junior officers for the “Red Army”, but full mobilization had to be completed as early as in 1940-1941. By that moment the German “Wehrmacht” had mobilized 4,020,000 men and had 420,000 motor vehicles at its disposal.[[197]](#footnote-197)

This went parallel with an even closer Soviet-Nazi coordination of the genocide strategy in Poland. To that effect representatives of the Russian People’s Commissariat of the Interior (NKVD) and of the German Gestapo met at their first joint symposium in the medieval capital of Poland, Cracow. Special attention was paid to the Polish prisoners of war. The Germans were more pragmatic and ready to set free the peasants, whereas the Russians did not allow anyone to leave the POW camps. Lists were exchanged with people to be exterminated and in this regard Stalin’s services proved to be more efficient, since from April to May they were going to shoot 15,000 prisoners of war. Only 9,000 of them were active army officers, while the rest were mobilized teachers, legal experts, lawyers, physicians and priests.[[198]](#footnote-198)

The Romanians had all reasons to believe that they would be the next victim of Stalin after Poland, the Baltic countries and Finland. These fears were reaffirmed by a special envoy of the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who conveyed to the Romanian foreign minister Grigore Gafencu von Ribbentrop’s sympathies with the would-be evolution of the political system in Russia. According to von Ribbentrop and his envoy Russia did not have a Bolshevik regime any longer but, thanks to the clever leadership of Stalin, was moving toward a nationalist regime on a socialist basis. This regime showed much more understanding of the political tendencies of the Axis and ever less understanding of the Jews and it was fully competent to cooperate for the preservation of peace in Eastern Europe. The Soviets had offered a great economic support and this also made Russia closer to the national and social forms, prevailing in the Third Reich. The words of the German envoy were a kind or warning about Bessarabia, whose union with Romania at the end of World War I had never been recognized by Moscow.[[199]](#footnote-199)

To make things worse, Romania could hardly rely on the two Western European democracies, the more so as France suffered from another cabinet crisis. On March 21 the French Chamber of Deputies passed a vote of no confidence and on the following day Premier Edouard Daladier sent in his resignation. His government was accused, among other things, of allowing the failure of the idea of armed intervention in assistance to Finland. Daladier was also tired of the “funny war”, which consisted mainly in fighting against the agents of Stalin and Hitler in France. He was replaced by the right-wing Liberal Paul Reynaud, who had strongly opposed both the 1936 “Popular Front” government and the 1938 surrender of Britain and France in Munich, when Czechoslovakia was sacrificed to Hitler. However, he appointed Daladier war minister in order to secure the support of the Radical Party, but the new Cabinet of Ministers got only one parliamentary seat more than the opposition.[[200]](#footnote-200)

Hungary could not rely on Britain and France either and on March 23, 1940, the Hungarian premier Teleki paid a visit to Mussolini and Ciano in Rome. After three days of talks Mussolini saw in the Hungarian fears of German occupation an opportunity for urging them to preserve their neutrality and to wait patiently for a territorial solution in their favor. The Italian dictator pointed out that Hitler was also interested in the preservation of peace in Southeastern Europe. On the other hand, though, the “Duce” stressed that he would not remain indefinitely neutral and that he intended to intervene at a particular moment on Germany’s side.[[201]](#footnote-201)

A reshuffling of the government took place in Finland too. Väinö Tanner, in particular, was replaced as foreign minister by Rolf Witting. Tanner was a Social Democrat, but he became the object of violent verbal attacks by the Soviet press and Prime Minister Risto Ryti preferred him taking over the Food Ministry, whereas Juho Paasikivi, who had conducted the peace negotiations with the Russians, left the Cabinet altogether and was appointed Minister of Finland to Moscow. The new council of ministers was a real national coalition, supported by all the major political forces, namely the Social Democratic, the Peasant, the Liberal, the Conservative and the Swedish Party. One of the most important measures was to continue the fortification of some sections of the border with Communist Russia.[[202]](#footnote-202)

Indeed, Stalin didn’t intend to tolerate the existence of Finland forever and on March 27 he summoned a plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) to discuss the Finnish war and the fighting capacity of the “Red Army”. It was one of those grim shows of passionate and “spontaneous” self-criticism Stalin routinely staged, before eliminating another group of high-ranking apparatchiks. The people’s commissar of defense Kliment Voroshilov complained that the preparations had been insufficient, that a number of commanding officers were unfit and that the army had been badly equipped. Those chiefs of staff, who attended the meeting, were also severely criticized.[[203]](#footnote-203)

Hitler hardly knew the details of Stalin’s further war steps, but he was quite confident in his alliance with Russia. In the afternoon of the same day the “Fuehrer” told the commander in chief of the land forces Walther von Brauchitsch and the chief of staff of the land forces Franz Halder that a rupture between France and Russia would be desirable and that never since the 1870 defeat of France by Prussia did Germany enjoy such a favorable political and military situation. The leader of German National Socialism stated that he trusted entirely Mussolini, but he was aware that Italy was going to enter the war only after a decisive blow to France by Germany. After discussing some details of the planned offensive against France through Belgium and the Netherlands, Hitler pointed out that the conquest of Norway and Denmark had to begin on April 9 or April 10 and that the assault on Belgium, the Netherlands and France had to start four or five days later. Simultaneously, the German military intelligence (the Abwehr) began to prepare an uprising in Ireland with the help of an outstanding terrorist of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).[[204]](#footnote-204)

On March 28, 1940, as if responding to these designs, the joint Anglo-French Supreme War Council decided to begin mining the Norwegian territorial waters by April 5, in order to stop the transportation of Swedish iron ore to Germany. Sweden and Norway had to be warned about the action on April 1 or April 2. Mines were to be put in the Rhine as well, but probably the most important decision was that during the present war France and Britain would neither negotiate, nor conclude with Germany cease-fire agreements or peace treaties without the consent of the other ally.[[205]](#footnote-205)

The problem was that the Soviet-Nazi Alliance was also consolidated further. On March 29 Molotov declared in a speech the clear intention of the Soviet Union to subordinate completely Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and to reserve a similar fate for Finland too. He reiterated hysterically that Russia would not support the British and French “*imperialist policy against Germany*” and that the hostility of Britain and France toward the Soviet Union had increased because of the deep “*class roots of the hostile policy of the imperialists against the socialist state*”. Hitler was no doubt pleased by these assurances and he ordered to grant priority to the war deliveries to Russia even over the German armed forces despite the complaints of his generals that the German industry could not satisfy the needs of the “Wehrmacht”.[[206]](#footnote-206)

Hitler’s preparations for the invasion of Scandinavia activated the conservative anti-Nazi resistance. An opponent to National-Socialism, namely colonel Hans Oster of the military intelligence warned the Dutch military attaché to Berlin colonel J.G.Sas about the imminent German assault on Denmark and Norway. Sas hurried to hand over this information to the Danish air-force attaché Kjölsen, but the government in Copenhagen refused to believe in their own man. In a similar way the Norwegians fatally underestimated the reports about a concentration of German troops and war ships in the North and Baltic Seas.[[207]](#footnote-207)

However, Stalin and Molotov were reluctant to accept an invitation for an official visit to Hitler in Berlin. As the German ambassador von der Schulenburg reported from Moscow, the Russian leader and his foreign minister feared that a visit to Berlin might lead to a rupture of diplomatic relations and even to war with Britain and France, something, which Stalin wanted to avoid by all means. In Schulenburg’s opinion that was the reason for the categorical denial, made by the Soviet TASS news agency, of the rumors about an imminent visit of Molotov to Germany. Under these circumstances the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop decided to stop, for the time being, the efforts to invite Molotov and possibly Stalin to Berlin.[[208]](#footnote-208)

Moreover, Hitler proved to be much less efficient in the naval warfare against Britain. By April 1, 1940, the Germans had lost already 71 ships of 340,000 tons and 25 U-boats, whereas the British losses amounted to 200,000 tons. On the other hand, though, the Anglo-French coalition was helpless in face of the ongoing terror in Poland. By the same time as many as 261,517 Poles and Polish Jews had been forcefully deported from the territories, annexed directly to Germany, to the General Government of Warsaw. Nevertheless, in the territories, annexed directly to Germany, there remained as many as 8,530,000 Poles, of whom only one million were considered by the Nazi authorities as fit for Germanization. However, those Polish army units, which had refused to lay down arms, launched an increasing armed resistance against the Nazi and Soviet occupying powers.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Stalin’s reluctance to visit Germany didn’t prevent Hitler from searching for a consolidation of the alliance by mediating for an improvement of relations between Communist Russia and Fascist Italy. On April 1 the German ambassador to Rome Hans Georg von Mackensen reminded Ciano of Mussolini’s wish to normalize relations with Moscow. The German diplomat even recommended that the Italian press begin to publish articles, “*more or less praising the Soviet Union*”, but Ciano recalled the verbal attacks Molotov had made against Italy in his speech three days ago.[[210]](#footnote-210)

Despite the growing rumors about an imminent German attack on Scandinavia, the British government decided to pay more attention to the situation in the Balkans. On April 2, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced to the House of Commons that the United Kingdom’s diplomatic representatives in Ankara, Athens, Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia and Budapest were summoned to London for a special conference on Southeastern Europe. Being on vacation in Britain, the British ambassador to Rome Percy Loraine would also take part in the conference. Chamberlain had to admit, at the same time, that trade between the United Kingdom and Southeastern Europe was quite modest.[[211]](#footnote-211)

The same afternoon Hitler ordained that the assault on Denmark and Norway had to start on April 9, at 5:15AM. He explicitly stressed that the operation should be carried out in such a way as to prevent the kings of Denmark and Norway from running away from their respective countries. Von Ribbentrop was instructed to take all possible measures in order to make the Danes and the Norwegians surrender without opposing any armed resistance. At 2AM on April 2 two German supply ships, disguised as British vessels, set for Narvik far to the north on the Norwegian Sea.[[212]](#footnote-212)

For his part, Stalin kept preparing his own assault on Germany, which included also the massacre of 25 700 “unreliable” Poles. Most of the victims were army officers, 4,404 of whom were transported to Katyn and shot one by one in the neck. Later the Germans were going to discover the mass grave in the Katyn Forest but, for the time being, their efforts were directed at amassing troops for the invasion of Norway and Denmark. Even at this moment, though, the British Cabinet of Ministers interpreted the concentration of German naval and land forces in the Baltic port of Stettin (today Szczecin in Poland) only as a countermeasure against a possible attack of the United Kingdom on Narvik or on some other Norwegian port.[[213]](#footnote-213)

Apparently the British government was still more concerned about Southeastern Europe than about Scandinavia. Before leaving for the conference in London, the British minister to Sofia George Rendel called upon King Boris III, who seemed to have forgotten his earlier complaints about the would-be Russophilia of the Bulgarians and stated that the Bulgarian peasants were immune to Russian propaganda. In his opinion Russia had lost the war on Finland and he shared his satisfaction that, as a result, this war had diminished the threat of a Soviet aggression on the Balkans and toward the Straits. Boris III reiterated his attachment to peace and neutrality, but he reminded of Bulgaria’s revisionist claims with regard to Romania. Rendel replied by declaring that the war was conducted “*against the German and Russian system of liquidation of individual freedoms*”. He assured the King, as well as Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and Foreign Minister Ivan Popov that Britain also favored a revision of the peace treaties but she rejected Hitler’s methods.[[214]](#footnote-214)

The Romanian foreign minister Gafencu was considerably less optimistic about the Russian threat than the Bulgarian king. On April 4 Gafencu told the British minister to Bucharest Reginald Hoare that Russia’s hostility toward Romania, evident in the last speech of Molotov, imposed an “*utmost caution*” on the Romanians. Gafencu clearly showed his awareness that Britain and France didn’t want to get involved in a war with Russia and he didn’t fail to point out that he didn’t expect Britain and France to cause complications on the Danube. He warned, though, that such complications would submit Romania “*not only to repression measures by Germany, but also to a flank attack by Russia*” and that Romania might be partitioned between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union just like Poland.[[215]](#footnote-215)

On the following day the first lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill began to implement the plan for the mining of the Norwegian territorial waters and for the dispatch of British and French troops for the occupation of a number of ports on the Norwegian Sea, namely Trondheim, Stavanger, Bergen and Narvik. In order to prevent the enemy from using these ports, the British and the French had to occupy also the strip of Norwegian territory between Narvik and the Swedish border. British troops began to embark on ships for the Norwegian coast, but even at this moment the Cabinet of Chamberlain still believed that the amassment of German armed forces in the Baltic Sea was just a maneuver for frustrating Britain’s intention to mine the Norwegian territorial waters.[[216]](#footnote-216)

Hitler carefully concealed his intention to invade Denmark and Norway not only from Mussolini, but also from Stalin. On the other hand, though, despite the discontent of the Russians with the fact that the Soviet Union exported much more commodities to the Third Reich than the other way around, military cooperation between the two totalitarian powers went on more or less smoothly. On April 6 the German tanker “Jan Wellem” left the Russian port of Murmansk for Norway too, after the Russians had obligingly filled it with enough fuel. Even more ironic was the fact that the German command expected no British action in Scandinavia whatever, but Hitler was going to look for a justification of his own aggression in a possible British assault.[[217]](#footnote-217)

The German preparations for the invasion of Denmark and Norway didn’t seem to worry too much even the countries that were most directly concerned. Under these circumstances it was hardly a surprise that the Hungarian government was interested above all in a possible action of the Third Reich against Romania. The Hungarian premier Pal Teleki and the High Command went so far as to accept a possible occupation by the “Wehrmacht”, provided that it would secure territorial gains from Romania. It was decided that Hungary could participate actively in an invasion of Romania only in case of a Russian offensive and that the Germans should be asked to be more specific about whether they had concrete information about Russia’s intentions and about whether the Germans intended to forestall the Russians in occupying the Romanian oil fields. In any case, according to Teleki and the Hungarian chief of staff general Henrik Werth, Hungary had to ask Germany for the permission to occupy Transylvania and Eastern Slovakia and that a coordination was needed with Italy for frustrating a possible intervention of Yugoslavia.[[218]](#footnote-218)

On April 7 several German war ships, loaded with land forces, were spotted as they were sailing for Norway. A British Royal Air Force unit attacked another German fleet in the Skaggerak Strait in close proximity to the Norwegian coast, whereas the “Orzel” Polish submarine, already operating as part of the British navy, sank another German liner, transporting troops to Norway. For his part, General Kurt Himer, who was the chief of staff of the German expeditionary corps that was to conquer Denmark, arrived in Copenhagen by train. True enough, he was dressed in plain clothes, but his mission was to inspect the Danish capital and to find a pier that would be fit for the coming German ship.[[219]](#footnote-219)

Somewhat later von Ribbentrop instructed the German ministers to Oslo and Copenhagen to wake up the respective foreign ministers early in the morning of April 9 and to justify the Nazi invasion as an operation for the protection of the two Scandinavian countries from British and French occupation. The royal palaces had to be put under strict control in order to prevent King Christian X of Denmark and King Haakon VII of Norway from finding refuge abroad. The diplomatic missions and the citizens of the neutral and friendly countries had to be treated in a polite way. In fact the only neutral power that deserved such a treatment was the United States, while the powers that, according to von Ribbentrop, were friendly to the Third Reich, consisted of Italy, Russia, Spain and Japan.[[220]](#footnote-220)

Part of these instructions were dispatched to the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg, who had to inform Molotov about the assault on Norway and Denmark only on the day of its beginning at 7AM. Von der Schulenburg had to assure Molotov, though, that the German operations would by no means affect the territory of Sweden and Finland. Moreover, the German ambassador had to point out that a possible invasion of Scandinavia by the British and the French might have led to a reopening of the Finnish problem.[[221]](#footnote-221)

Sweden and Italy were to be acquainted with the German invasion at 6AM of the same day. The Swedes had to be reassured that the operation would by no means affect their territories or territorial waters, but they had to be warned at the same time to refrain from any mobilization measures and to continue unimpededly their trade with Germany. Solely Mussolini had the privilege not to be awaken in the early morning hours, but to receive the German ambassador to Rome von Mackensen only after the beginning of his regular working day.[[222]](#footnote-222)

The British and the French were still under the illusion of forestalling the Germans in Scandinavia. On April 8 at 6AM their diplomatic representatives to Oslo and Stockholm handed over to the Norwegian foreign minister Halvdan Koht and to his Swedish counterpart Christian Günther notes, announcing that the two western European powers began mining Norway’s territorial waters. The British even intended to land a small unit in Narvik to control the railway to Sweden, but the moment London learned about the advance of the German armed forces against Denmark and Norway, the British command abandoned the plans for a preemptive occupation of Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik. The reaction of the Norwegian government was not adequate either, because it protested strongly not against the obvious intention of Germany to attack the country, but against the mining of Norway’s territorial waters by the British.[[223]](#footnote-223)

Few were therefore those who expected a German invasion of Scandinavia and it was hardly a surprise that the government in Budapest was concerned mostly by a possible occupation of Hungary by the Germans in transit for Romania. A special envoy of the Hungarian premier Pal Teleki directly asked Mussolini whether Italy would assist Hungary in case Hungary decided to oppose a resistance to the Germans, but the Italian dictator advised them to accept the German demands and reiterated his solidarity with Hitler and his intention to fight the English and the French.[[224]](#footnote-224)

Even the British seemed to pay at least as much attention to Southeastern Europe as to Scandinavia. On the very eve of the German invasion of Norway and Denmark the diplomatic representatives of the United Kingdom to Belgrade, Rome, Ankara, Budapest, Bucharest, Sofia and Athens began to confer in London under the chairmanship of Foreign Secretary Edward Frederick Halifax about the situation in that region. The British minister to Sofia Rendel rightfully pointed out that the Russian threat was more serious to Bulgaria than the German one and that the United Kingdom had to encourage an improvement of the relationship between Bulgaria and her neighbors by promising, among other things, a territorial rearrangement in Bulgaria’s favor after the end of the war. The ambassador to Ankara Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen predicted that a possible annexation of Bessarabia by Russia would alarm the Turks, but they would assist the British in a war against Germany and Russia only in case of a direct assault on Turkey. Halifax declared that Britain’s policy with regard to Turkey had to rely on a defensive front of Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania and Hungary. The British minister to Bucharest Hoare claimed in his turn that the Bulgarian-Romanian relations were not as bad as before any more, since the Romanians had promised to their Yugoslav, Greek and Turkish allies in the Balkan Pact that they would settle the Dobruja problem after the end of the war. All participants agreed that, despite a more favorable attitude toward Moscow, King Boris III of Bulgaria had not abandoned his anti-Soviet policy. At approximately the same time the Bulgarian minister in Washington DC Dimitûr Naumov reported to Sofia that US President Franklin D.Roosevelt also admitted that the injustice, done to Bulgaria as a result of World War I, had to be at least partially redressed in order to consolidate the situation in the Balkans.[[225]](#footnote-225)

On April 9, at 4AM local time the German ministers to Copenhagen and Oslo abruptly woke up the Danish foreign minister Peter Munch and his Norwegian counterpart Halvdan Koht and handed over to them an ultimatum that their governments should accept immediately and without resistance the protection of the Third Reich against an Anglo-French occupation. An excuse of the Nazi aggression against Denmark and Norway was found, among other things, in the recent intention of the British and French government to intervene militarily in the conflict between the Soviet Union and Finland.[[226]](#footnote-226)

At precisely the same moment mechanized German units had already crossed the Danish border, whereas the Norwegians declared that they did not intend to obey and that the battle had already started. Indeed they opened fire on the German units that were trying to capture Oslo and stopped them at 25 kilometers from their capital, which is at the end of a deep fjord. The Norwegians even sank the ship, boarding the Gestapo agents, who had the order to arrest King Haakon VII and the Cabinet of Ministers.[[227]](#footnote-227)

Before dawn German forces landed in Copenhagen as well, only at a couple of hundred meters from the royal palace and the headquarters of the Danish army. It looked so fantastic that some people thought that they were witnessing the shooting of a movie. When the Germans reached the royal palace, though, they were met with fire, the more so as at this very moment King Christian X was conferring with his ministers. The war minister proved to be the only member of the Cabinet in favor of further armed resistance. Eventually, in accordance with his ministers, the King ordered a cease-fire. The Danes gave 13 dead and 23 injured, while the number of the killed Germans amounted to approximately 20 people.[[228]](#footnote-228)

By 8AM the Nazis took Narvik in the Far North of Norway’s Atlantic coast and about half an hour later, the Danes accepted all German terms. For the time being the Danes could preserve their multiparty representative democracy and the coalition government under Thorvald Stauning of the Social Democratic Party remained in power. No measures were taken even against the 7,000 Danish Jews, but every step of the Cabinet of Ministers, especially in the field of foreign policy, had to be submitted to the preliminary approval of the Nazi occupation authorities.[[229]](#footnote-229)

Meanwhile the British naval forces, already sailing for the Norwegian coast, were ordered to push at any price the Germans back from Bergen and Trondheim. On their way the British ships clashed several times with German vessels despite the snowstorm, which was ravaging at that moment in the Norwegian Sea, whereas at 9:30AM King Haakon VII, the Cabinet of Ministers and the members of parliament managed to escape from Oslo to the north. The country’s gold reserves were saved from German capture in a similar way and transported to Britain.[[230]](#footnote-230)

At 10:30AM the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg announced to the Russian premier and foreign minister Molotov about the invasion of Denmark and Norway. Molotov showed full understanding of the German motives. In his words there could be no doubt that the English had gone too far and didn’t take into account the interests of neutral countries. He wished Germany a complete success in her “*defense measures*” and promised that the Soviet Union would resume immediately the deliveries of grain and petroleum that had been temporarily stopped.[[231]](#footnote-231)

In the afternoon of April 9 the Germans managed to capture Kristiansand at 330 kilometers to the southwest of Oslo, but they were still unable to take the Norwegian capital. In the same evening the leader of the pro-Nazi “National Unity” Party Vidkun Quisling intruded into the headquarters of the Norwegian national radio station and proclaimed that he assumed power because the government of Johan Nygaardsvold had run away. Quisling appealed for a cessation of hostilities against the Germans but his appeal only encouraged the Norwegians to oppose an even more powerful resistance to the invaders.[[232]](#footnote-232)

In the morning hours of April 10 the British attacked the German navy unit in Narvik in the Far North and destroyed most of the German ships. Another bad surprise for Hitler came from Iceland, whose government proclaimed complete sovereignty from Copenhagen. Until that moment Iceland had been under the supremacy of Denmark. According to the preliminary agreements, the complete cessation of Iceland from Denmark was planned for 1943, but the Icelanders decided to hurry things out of fear that the Nazis might try to occupy their island as part of the Danish territory. The Americans felt relieved since Iceland offered a relatively easy access to the Atlantic coast of Canada.[[233]](#footnote-233)

It was only in the late afternoon that the first German units penetrated into Oslo but the city looked deserted and even the German minister Curt Bräuer had left for a small town in the north to meet with King Haakon VII. The King refused to receive him in the absence of his ministers and Bräuer had to talk with the monarch in the presence of Foreign Minister Koht. By a combination of threats and promises the German diplomat tried to persuade Haakon VII to recognize the government under Quisling, which was unanimously rejected both by the monarch and by the Cabinet of Ministers. Meanwhile a German unit made an attempt to capture the King, but it was dispersed by the Norwegians and Haakon VII and the government of Nygaardsvold moved further to the north.[[234]](#footnote-234)

In the morning of April 11, thanks to the arrival of two German cargo ships from the Russian port of Murmansk, the Nazis captured the airport near Trondheim, situated at a strategic point in the middle of the coast on the Norwegian Sea. These developments made the first lord of the Admiralty Churchill believe that the next victim of Germany and Russia might be Sweden. However, the British Prime Minister Chamberlain rejected his idea about trying to get the Swedes involved in the war, arguing that such an initiative would bring the United Kingdom more liabilities than assets because of the attachment of Stockholm to a policy of strict neutrality.[[235]](#footnote-235)

In the night of April 11 to April 12, after the obvious failure of the attempt to induce Haakon VII to collaborate, the Nazis made an air raid on the village where the King was hiding together with the Cabinet of Ministers. At the last moment the monarch and the government found refuge in a nearby forest, but the aviation of the Third Reich destroyed completely the village. Somewhat later the British occupied the Faroe Islands, a Danish possession, situated between the Great British Isle, Iceland and Norway. The local governor made a formal protest but the population was pleased with getting protection from a possible Nazi invasion. US President F.D.Roosevelt availed himself of the opportunity and declared that Greenland, which was another Danish possession, belongs to the western hemisphere and instructed the American Red Cross to provide the local population with medicines, if medical supplies from Denmark became unavailable.[[236]](#footnote-236)

The commander of the German forces in Norway general Nikolaus von Falkenhorst and the minister of the Reich to Oslo Curt Bräuer did not at all feel secure about the situation in Norway either. In the late evening of April 12 Bräuer telegraphed to Berlin that Quisling was so unpopular that he was unable to form even some similarity of a government, because four of his ministers were not in Oslo, whereas another two flatly refused to assume positions in such a Cabinet. Bräuer suggested that Norway might be placed under direct German administration. One of the first retaliatory measures was an order of general Falkenhorst to take some 20 hostages among the most distinguished inhabitants of Oslo, who had to be shot in case of continuous resistance or sabotage activities.[[237]](#footnote-237)

Hitler was still unaware that the ongoing extermination of “enemies of the people” in the newly acquired western territories of the Soviet Union were only an element of Stalin’s preparations for the assault on Germany. In the night of April 12 to April 13 at least 300,000 close relatives of those Poles, Ukrainians and Jews, who had been already killed, were loaded on freight railway cars from Eastern Poland either to Siberia or to Northern Kazakhstan. Many died during the transportation, while the rest were left in the open area. In this way the Soviet authorities liquidated another 100,000 human beings, mostly women and children.[[238]](#footnote-238)

Yet the German dictator didn’t seem to preclude entirely the option of losing the war, although not in favor of Britain, but in favor of Russia. In a long conversation with Quisling’s newly appointed war minister Viljam Hagelin, the “Fuehrer” stated that even if Germany lost the fight, England would never win, but the winner would be Russia, especially in the northern countries. Hitler reiterated that any resistance to the Germans was senseless, but he hardly concealed his doubts about the stability of the Quisling Cabinet, by stressing that it had to secure the active support of the trade chambers, the ship owners and the intellectual elements, which was obviously not the case.[[239]](#footnote-239)

In fact Hitler wanted simply to blackmail the Scandinavian countries with the Russian threat. Anyway, a couple of minutes later Hagelin had to leave the chancellor’s office for a while to avoid the official representative of Norway, who was still in Berlin and to whom Hitler declared that the Norwegian king Haakon VII had to follow the example of the Danish monarch Christian X. The “Fuehrer” boasted that Germany was going to provide the Danes with everything they had been importing until that moment from Britain and France, even if Germany had to attract Russia to that effect. This didn’t prevent the German dictator from accusing the media of neutral countries like Norway, Belgium, Switzerland and Turkey of publishing materials, hostile to the Reich, but of banning friendly commentaries under the pretext of freedom of the press.[[240]](#footnote-240)

On April 14 at 6:30PM a special envoy of the German foreign ministry, Theodor Habicht, and the German minister to Oslo Bräuer engaged in difficult negotiations with Quisling in order to persuade him to resign since his “government” was rejected even by those Norwegians, who were ready to collaborate with the Reich. Quisling claimed that he was the only one, capable of maintaining peace and order in Norway, but Habicht and Bräuer tried to console him with the idea that he could form a government at a later stage, when his “National Unity” Party would have a sufficient number of supporters.[[241]](#footnote-241)

It was only at noon of the following day that Quisling agreed at last to resign together with his short-lived government. He was allowed to speak on the national radio in order to calm down his followers. Quisling was put in charge of the demobilization, while his Cabinet was replaced by an administrative council under the chairmanship of Chief Justice Paal Berg. The ironic thing was that Paal Berg was going to become the secret leader of the Norwegian Anti-Nazi Resistance. On the other hand, as the Hungarian minister to Stockholm Matuska reported to Budapest, collaboration with Germany was supported also by the local “*pro-Communist elements*” in Norway.[[242]](#footnote-242)

The administrative council was not a permanent solution in the eyes of Berlin either, because the new body lacked the authority of royal approval. In a telegram von Ribbentrop instructed Bräuer to work out with general Falkenhorst the details of a plan for the abduction of King Haakon VII and Crown Prince Olaf, although the Germans did not know their whereabouts. At the same moment, though, the state secretary of the German Foreign Ministry von Weizsaecker informed the chief of staff of the land forces Halder that a “*strengthening of Russian troops*” was reported on the border with Germany and Romania.[[243]](#footnote-243)

On April 16, instead of worrying about the Soviet troop concentration, Hitler was enraged by the failure to capture the Norwegian king to the point that he ordered the dismissal of the German minister to Oslo Bräuer. Yet the “Fuehrer” was no doubt encouraged by the decision of the Swedish government under Hansson to yield to the German demand for the transit of some non-military materials through Sweden for the German troops at Narvik in Norway, as well as of some medicine workers, but the permission was granted for one transit only.[[244]](#footnote-244)

Despite the amassment of “Red Army” units on the eastern borders of Germany, the Third Reich and the Soviet Union went on to be unanimous in the genocide of the Poles. For the time being, though, the murderous methods of German National Socialism appeared to be considerably less efficient than those of Russian Communism. Some economic considerations forced the general governor of the Warsaw region to introduce a labor conscription for all Poles, aged between 14 and 25 years. This limited to some extent the deportation of the Poles from the territories, annexed directly to Germany. However, by that time the Nazi authorities had exterminated some 43,000 Poles, whereas those, who had the dubious privilege to remain in Germany, were submitted to undernourishment. Each contact with the German population was prohibited and any sexual intercourse between a Pole and a German was punishable by death.[[245]](#footnote-245)

The Hungarian premier Pal Teleki had apparently forgotten his sympathies with Poland and wrote a letter to Hitler, suggesting tripartite talks between Germany, Italy and Hungary about Romania. He expressed a readiness to join the Rome-Berlin Axis, provided that Hungary would be granted equality at least as far as the problems of Southeastern Europe were concerned. In a letter to Mussolini, though, Hitler reiterated his belief that the Balkans had to be kept away from the war.[[246]](#footnote-246)

This interest in peace in the Balkans might have been enhanced by developments in Norway, where the British engaged in the first land battle with the Germans at Lillehammer. The Germans succeeded in pushing the British and the Norwegians back to the north. Significantly enough, at that same moment Sweden allowed another 514 Germans to cross her territory from Norway to Germany as sailors from cargo ships, but there were members of U-boat and battle ship crews among them.[[247]](#footnote-247)

For his part, on April 22, 1940, Mussolini had to postpone the entrance of Italy into the war for the spring of 1941, because Norway had delayed the end of the conflict and changed the theater of war operations. In other words, the “Duce” had to calm down his aggressive appetites, the more so as he became aware that Italy was not at all ready for war. The Italian foreign minister Ciano could reassure the French ambassador André François-Poncet, his US counterpart William Philips and some other diplomatic representatives that no Italian war action was to be expected in the foreseeable future.[[248]](#footnote-248)

This didn’t prevent the Anglo-French Supreme War Council from expecting an imminent German attack on the West. At a session in Paris the French premier Paul Reynaud described a rather grim perspective by stating that the Allies could put only 90 French and 10 British divisions against 150 German divisions. Moreover, the Germans could mobilize in his view as many as another 300 divisions. The British Prime Minister Chamberlain was somewhat more optimistic at least about the situation in Scandinavia, where some 13,000 troops had already landed around Trondheim. It was decided to reinforce them with another 5,000 British, 7,000 French and 3,000 Polish troops and to make an attempt to capture both Trondheim and Narvik.[[249]](#footnote-249)

On April 24 Hitler appointed the inveterate National Socialist Josef Terboven Reichskommissar (Imperial Commissary) for Norway because, according to the decree, the government of Nygaardsvold had created a state of war. Terboven could use the Norwegian council, headed by Paal Berg, only for carrying out his administrative orders. The Reichskommissar could issue decrees with the force of law. The existing Norwegian legislation could be preserved only insofar as it was compatible with the German occupation. On the other hand, Hitler hurried to reply to a letter of King Gustav V of Sweden, who had given assurances about an uncompromising neutral policy, by stressing that Germany would respect “*absolutely*” the neutrality of the Swedes.[[250]](#footnote-250)

At 8PM of the same day, in the presence of Ciano, the German ambassador to Rome von Mackensen handed over to Mussolini the letter Hitler had written a couple of days ago about the request of the Hungarian premier for a tripartite conference. The Italian dictator fully agreed with the decision of the “Fuehrer” to reject the request and to hold Hungary back from any action against Romania, which might push Yugoslavia in the arms of Britain and France: “*Any precipitate action by Hungary might bring Russia into the Balkans, which would be a very serious thing.*” Moreover, Hitler made it clear that he was displeased with the Italian ambassador to Berlin Bernardo Attolico and Mussolini and Ciano saw no alternative but to replace him with Dino Alfieri.[[251]](#footnote-251)

Attolico had the disadvantage of being too much attached to peace, which was hardly tolerable for Mussolini, whose bellicosity seemed to grow parallel to Hitler’s military successes. The Italian dictator remained untouched not only by a letter of the French premier Reynaud, who appealed in vain for a renewal of Latin solidarity, but even by the warnings coming from the United States. In a letter to the “Duce” President Roosevelt hinted that his country could not remain neutral forever, but in his reply Mussolini stated that Italy could not stay any longer without an access to the oceans and that if America was for the Americans, then Europe should be for the Europeans.[[252]](#footnote-252)

For their part, the Swedes were not at all sure that Hitler would keep his word about the respect of their neutrality, the more so as Berlin resumed the pressure on Stockholm for more transit permissions. Eventually the Swedes agreed to allow the transportation of provisions and medical supplies for the German army in Norway and even of prisoners of war from Norway to Germany, although neutrality rules required from Sweden to intern such prisoners on her own territory. For a while the Swedes refused only the transportation of ammunition for the “Wehrmacht” in Norway. However, at 2AM on May 1 von Ribbentrop instructed the legation in Stockholm to start immediately negotiations for the transportation of war materials and arms through Sweden to Norway in exchange for the delivery of some artillery pieces and machine guns by Germany to Sweden.[[253]](#footnote-253)

On May 2 the British and French troops, which had landed near Trondheim, were forced to re-embark on the ships for Britain and to abandon the plans for the capture of the city. King Haakon VII and the Norwegian government had already moved to the Far North in Tromsø. Despite these dramatic developments, most Norwegians kept considering their king and the Cabinet of Nygaardsvold as the only legitimate authority in their country and even Quisling had to admit it.[[254]](#footnote-254)

The new German victories apparently accelerated Stalin’s preparations for his own war. He removed Voroshilov from the war ministry and replaced him with Semyon Timoshenko, who had distinguished himself by his ruthless war methods in Finland. Voroshilov didn’t fall in disgrace, despite his poor accomplishments as military. More important was the fact that his removal from the war ministry, but by no means from the Politburo, was accompanied by an increasing number of Soviet “protests” against the Romanians for perpetrating “border incidents”, although Bucharest had obviously no interest whatever in irritating Stalin. At the same time numerous “Red Army” units were transferred toward the Greater Middle East and India.[[255]](#footnote-255)

Hitler didn’t seem concerned enough about the intentions of Russia, even though he postponed the assault on the West for another three days. On May 4, though, the Dutch representative to the Holy Seat reaffirmed in a telegram to his government that the Germans would invade the Netherlands and Belgium on May 10 and this information was immediately transmitted by the Dutch to the Belgians. Besides, the Belgian premier Pierlot made a militant speech to encourage his fellow countrymen. He declared, in particular, that Belgium was well armed and ready to oppose resistance to any aggression.[[256]](#footnote-256)

Actually the concentration of Russian troops in Central Asia was more or less in harmony with Hitler’s preparations for the assault on the West, since it was apparently directed against the British possessions there. This impression was enhanced by the Soviet ambassador to Ankara Aleksey Terentiev, who assured his German counterpart Franz von Papen that the common aim of the Soviet Union and the Reich was to keep Turkey out of the war. Terentiev also stated that if Italy entered the war without affecting the Balkans, Russia would not intervene even in a conflict between Italy and Turkey. This seemed to announce a softening of Stalin’s position toward Italy, but on May 6 Molotov declared to von der Schulenburg in Moscow that, as far as the Russian-Italian relationship was concerned, the “Soviet Government” did not hurry.[[257]](#footnote-257)

The following day Hitler dispatched a letter to Mussolini, to be handed over on May 9, about the assault on the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg, while von Ribbentrop sent to von der Schulenburg in Moscow two memorandums that were to be given to the Russian government also two days later. As usual, the memorandums justified the action by an imminent aggression of Britain and France against the Low Countries. At the same moment the British Prime Minister Chamberlain was severely criticized in the House of Commons for the failures in Norway. The attacks came both from the Left and from the Right, but Chamberlain valiantly defended the first lord of the Admiralty Churchill by pointing out that the latter had not been in charge of the coordination between the General Staffs during the Norwegian campaign.[[258]](#footnote-258)

In the afternoon of May 7, though, bad weather forced Hitler to postpone the attack again, but on May 8 the German radio station announced that Britain was about to invade the Netherlands. In fact, at this very moment the United Kingdom had to find a solution to the cabinet crisis that resulted from the critics against Prime Minister Chamberlain. The Liberal leader and former Prime Minister David Lloyd George openly invited Chamberlain to send in his resignation. Eventually, the Cabinet managed to preserve its majority by 81 votes more than all the other political parties together, but more than 30 Conservative members of parliament voted against the government, whereas another 60 Conservatives abstained from voting. In the afternoon two leading representatives of the Labour Party declared personally to Chamberlain that they would not participate in a national coalition under his leadership.[[259]](#footnote-259)

On May 9 Hitler issued the orders for an attack to be launched early in the morning of the next day. It was only at 5AM on May 10, when the German army began the invasion of Luxemburg, Belgium and the Netherlands, that the German ambassador to Rome von Mackensen woke up Mussolini to hand over to him Hitler’s personal letter and the two memorandums about the action. The diplomatic representatives of Belgium and the Netherlands in Berlin were treated in a similar way. They were summoned by von Ribbentrop at 5:45AM to hear that the German army entered into their countries in order to preserve their neutrality from an imminent Anglo-French assault. The same declaration was made by von Weizsaecker to the chargé d’affaires of Luxemburg. As for the foreign ministers of the Low Countries, they received the respective notes only after the Germans had already started the bombing and shelling. The Belgian and Dutch foreign ministers, in particular, stated explicitly to the German representatives that from that moment on their countries were at war with the Reich.[[260]](#footnote-260)

At 7AM Mussolini declared to von Mackensen that he agreed fully with the German action and that Italy would enter the war as soon as her armed forces were ready for that. Britain and France were more surprised than Mussolini by the German attack. At first sight the belligerent armies were equal to each other, consisting of 136 German divisions against 135 British, French, Belgian and Dutch divisions and of 2,580 German tanks against 3,100 tanks of the Allies. However, the German tanks were concentrated in the Ardennes Mountains, whereas the French had scattered their tanks all over the front. Even worse was the fact that the French army was seriously demoralized by the propaganda of National Socialist and Communist agents. Yet the British had enough forces to occupy Iceland in order to protect more efficiently the sea route to America. They had no intention whatever to change the government of Iceland and hurried to send a diplomatic representative to Reykjavik. The local newspapers refrained from any comments, but the Icelanders felt in fact relieved because the only armed force they had consisted of some 70 policemen, who obviously could do nothing in case of a German assault.[[261]](#footnote-261)

At 8:15AM the Germans captured the railway station of the city of Luxemburg, but by that time the Grand Duchess Charlotte and the government had already left the country for France. The Nazis continued also their air raids on Brussels, killing 41 civilians, although the Belgian capital had the status of an open city. In their turn the Swiss mobilized another 450,000 soldiers, 57,000 horses and 10,000 motor vehicles, but their aviation consisted of only 70 fighters.[[262]](#footnote-262)

It was only in the late afternoon that the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg informed officially Molotov about the assault on the Low Countries. Once again Molotov congratulated the Germans on their “*defense measures*” and wished them success. Stalin knew that a joint action of Britain, France and Russia would smash Germany and the “Red Army” could go in this way as far as the Elba River, but he dreamed about reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, the Russian dictator was not quite sure whether a Soviet offensive from the east would not lead to a possible agreement between Britain and France, on the one hand, and Germany, on the other. It seems that he came eventually to the conclusion that Russia should wait another six months, expecting that during that time the western European powers and Germany would exhaust each other to the point of total collapse.[[263]](#footnote-263)

Meanwhile the British overcame their cabinet crisis thanks to King George VI. Initially the monarch tried to persuade Chamberlain to remain in office, but finally he used his power to accept or to reject a resignation by stating that he would accept the resignation of Chamberlain, provided that Churchill would be the next Prime Minister. It was a difficult choice since Churchill had too many enemies. The Labourites hated him because of his actions against the trade unions in the past, while the Conservatives could hardly forget his violent critics against Chamberlain’s appeasement strategy with regard to Nazi Germany. Neither could the Tories swallow up easily Churchill’s readiness to ally with Stalin against Hitler. Yet at 6PM Greenwich Mean Time King George VI entrusted Churchill with the formation of the next Cabinet of Ministers.[[264]](#footnote-264)

For the time being, though, the British could barely do anything more than to issue declarations of solidarity with the Belgians like Pope Pius XIII, who sent to King Leopold III of Belgium, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands and to Grand Duchess Charlotte of Luxemburg telegrams, expressing his sympathies with them. Mussolini was furious and the new Italian ambassador to the Holy Seat Attolico protested against the telegrams. Pius XII promised to avoid taking sides, but he also declared that he would do nothing contrary to his conscience even at the risk of deportation to a concentration camp.[[265]](#footnote-265)

On May 11 at noon the Belgian fort of Eben-Emal, considered impregnable until then, had to surrender. The diplomatic representatives of Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Bulgaria, Spain and Egypt left Brussels, but the envoys of the United States, Italy, the Holy Seat, Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, Columbia and Iran chose to stay further in the Belgian capital. It was only in the afternoon that the 7th French Army reached the Dutch city of Tilburg, but the French and the Dutch lacked any support from the air. At 10:30PM Luxemburg was already placed entirely under German administration.[[266]](#footnote-266)

In the night of May 11 to May 12, at the initiative of the new British Prime Minister Churchill, eighteen bombers of the Royal Air Force dropped their bombs not on some military targets, but on the civil population in Westphalia. However, the other members of the Cabinet did not approve these tactics, among other things, because of their inefficiency from a military viewpoint and for the time being such bombings remained an exception.[[267]](#footnote-267)

On May 12 the British Expeditionary Corps came finally to the aid of the Belgians, but by that time the Germans had already captured 4,000 allied soldiers against some 100 casualties only. This didn’t prevent the British, the French and the Norwegians, assisted by some Polish units, from launching in the following night an operation for the reconquest of Narvik in order to secure a basis for King Haakon VII of Norway and the government of Nygaardsvold and to stop the export of iron ore from Sweden to Germany through Norway and through the Norwegian Sea.[[268]](#footnote-268)

On May 13 the House of Commons approved unanimously the new national coalition government under Winston Churchill. The Cabinet consisted of 15 Conservatives, 6 Labourites, 3 National Liberals and one Liberal, while another five ministers didn’t belong to any political party. In a speech before the vote Churchill declared: “*I say to the House as I said to ministers who have joined this government, I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many months of struggle and suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime.*”[[269]](#footnote-269)

While Churchill was promising victory at any price, the Germans took the city of Sedan in Northern France and threatened to cut the Franco-British front into two. This exacerbated further the antipathy between the French premier Reynaud and his predecessor Daladier. Eventually Daladier got the foreign ministry, whereas Reynaud took personally the war ministry. For their part, the Dutch decided to surrender, while Mussolini came to the firm conclusion that within a month Italy had to declare war on France and Britain. Last but not least, Stalin chose this moment to complete the engulfment of the three Baltic countries, by addressing a threatening note to Lithuania, accused of hostile acts toward the Soviet Union.[[270]](#footnote-270)

In the morning hours of May 14 Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands and the government of Dirk Jan de Geer embarked on two ships for Britain, while the defenders of Rotterdam engaged in negotiations with the Germans for a cease-fire agreement. However, Hitler ordered the total bombardment of the city to accelerate the surrender of the Dutch. The German planes destroyed completely the center of Rotterdam, killing 814 civilians and leaving another 78,000 with no roof. At the same time the Germans broke through the defense lines in the Ardennes Mountains, which was a complete surprise for the French, and rushed toward the English Channel through the rear of the allied troops in Belgium.[[271]](#footnote-271)

At sunset the commander in chief of the Dutch forces general H.G.Winkelman ordered his troops to lay down arms, while the French premier Reynaud informed the British about the German breakthrough at Sedan. Under these circumstances the United Kingdom simply rejected the demand of the Polish government in exile to protest against the atrocities, committed by the Soviet occupation authorities in Eastern Poland on the ground that Britain was at war with Germany, but not with Russia.[[272]](#footnote-272)

On May 15 at about 7AM Reynaud called Churchill on the phone and told him that France had been defeated and that the war was lost. The British prime minister tried to persuade his French counterpart that in five or six days the Germans would stop their advance because of the lack of supplies and then the Allies would be able to counterattack. US President Roosevelt was not quite sure about the fate of the two Western European democracies either and in a letter to Mussolini, written at the request of Churchill and Reynaud, he tried to persuade the Italian dictator to improve his relations with France and Britain. However, Roosevelt’s quotations from the Gospel could hardly impress Mussolini, who was an atheist and hated profoundly the Church.[[273]](#footnote-273)

On the same day Churchill wrote his first letter to Roosevelt in his capacity of prime minister. He warned the President that the United States might remain alone in the face of a totally subdued and Nazified Europe and asked for the delivery of several hundred combat aircraft, as well as for antiaircraft equipment. In Churchill’s opinion if Italy entered the war, the United Kingdom would need also some 100 submarines. He was ready to pay for the deliveries in dollars but he entreated the United States to continue the deliveries even if Britain would be unable to pay any more. Churchill went so far as to ask for the dispatch of a couple of squadrons in the Irish ports as a preemptive measure against a possible German landing in Eire, but the Americans wanted by no means to be involved to such an extent in the European affairs. For similar reasons Washington DC rejected a demand of Dublin for the proclamation of the Irish status quo as vital for the American interests.[[274]](#footnote-274)

For his part, Stalin’s new war minister Timoshenko ordered the preparation of the “Red Army” for large-scale offensive operations. The drills to that effect had to last from eight to ten hours daily. All Soviet soldiers had to learn how to operate day and night, as well as under the worst weather conditions, whereas the railway troops had to be trained to reconstruct the European tracks to the broader Russian standard as fast as possible. Moreover, the Russian soldiers had to be brainwashed along the lines of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine even more intensely than before. In fact, beating and execution became almost the only forms of punishment in the army.[[275]](#footnote-275)

Expecting the worse, the Latvian government entrusted secretly the minister to London Karlis Zarinš with almost absolute powers. In case of losing contact with the government in Riga Zarinš had to take over the leadership of all envoys and representatives of Latvia. If he deemed it necessary, he could dissolve any diplomatic mission abroad except the Latvian legation in the United States.[[276]](#footnote-276)

The open solidarity of the Soviet press with the Nazi aggression in the Low Countries only accelerated the negotiations of the Swiss with the French for the transfer of the Swiss gold reserves to the United States through France. The problem was that at this very moment the French banks were ordered to leave Paris, while the Swiss had been involved in refining the gold coming from Russia to the United States through Germany. Eventually, the French handed over to the Swiss their gold reserves that had been already transferred to New York in exchange for the gold, coming from Switzerland to France.[[277]](#footnote-277)

The Germans were rapidly approaching Paris and the roads were blocked by retreating soldiers and civilians. The aggressors didn’t even bother to capture the French and simply told them to throw their weapons and to move to the south in order to encumber less the roads. The Germans even shouted to the French that they had no time for taking them prisoners, while the premier of France Reynaud had the fatal idea to include in the Cabinet marshal Philippe Pétain, who was at this moment ambassador of France to Madrid. The marshal was renowned as a hero of World War I and as the victor at Verdun, in particular, but he maintained close and friendly relations with the German ambassador Eberhard von Stohrer and was convinced that France had to surrender.[[278]](#footnote-278)

On May 16 the Belgian government under Hubert Pierlot left Brussels for Ostend to the north of the Strait of Dover. The Belgian ministers were accompanied by some of the foreign diplomatic representatives, but their departure caused a panic. People started to loot the stores and not only the policemen, but even the firemen fled from the furious crowd.[[279]](#footnote-279)

The same day Churchill flew to Paris only to find out that the French were evacuating their capital and that they had no more striking forces. He had written a personal letter to Mussolini in a last attempt to dissuade the Italian dictator from siding with Germany in the war by stating, among other things, that if he, Churchill, had to choose between Communism and Fascism, he would prefer Fascism. Hitler also didn’t know that the French had no more striking forces and, fearing a counterattack, he ordered his tank units to stop their rapid advance toward the English Channel.[[280]](#footnote-280)

In the evening hours of May 17 relatively small German units entered Brussels. The British had withdrawn from the Belgian capital, but they had destroyed a number of strategic bridges, as well as the water, phone and gas facilities, depriving the inhabitants of these services for several days. The local police had been disarmed before the arrival of the Germans and now the armed Belgians among the civilian population had to hand over their weapons to the Germans too. Despite their promise to respect the property of everyone, the occupation authorities requisitioned all cars and trucks and closed all stores and gas stations.[[281]](#footnote-281)

At the same time the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop put a hard pressure on the Swedish minister Arvid Richert for the passage of troops and war materials through Sweden to Norway and back. Richert had to fly the same night to Stockholm to acquaint his government with the new German requirements. After a midnight session the Cabinet of Hansson instructed him to tell the Germans that Sweden could not allow the transport of troops and ammunition, but only of 2,000 sailors from the destroyers at Narvik. Moreover, the Swedish foreign minister Günther was ready to come to Germany for a personal meeting with von Ribbentrop.[[282]](#footnote-282)

The following morning Hitler appointed Arthur Seyss-Inquart Imperial Commissary of the Netherlands. The country was therefore placed under direct German administration. As to Seyss-Inquart himself, he had played a crucial role in the engulfment of Austria by Germany in 1938 and his loyalty to Hitler and to the National Socialist regime was unquestionable.[[283]](#footnote-283)

At 6PM the German command succeeded in persuading Hitler that after the fall of Brussels and Antwerp in German hands there was absolutely no reason for delaying any more the advance westwards. The “Fuehrer” finally gave the respective order, while the commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France general John Gort recommended measures for a possible evacuation of the British troops from France to Britain.[[284]](#footnote-284)

On May 20, 1940, Prime Minister Churchill instructed the Admiralty to gather all sorts of vessels for a possible transportation of the Allied forces from France to Britain through the Strait of Dover. Things went even worse for the British because, under the impact of opposition in Congress, President Roosevelt had in fact refused to deliver the combat aircraft and antiaircraft equipment, solicited by Churchill. In a new letter to Roosevelt the British prime minister hinted that in case of a catastrophe he and his Cabinet might be replaced by people, ready to obey the will of the Germans.[[285]](#footnote-285)

The battles in the west were accompanied by the concentration of a rapidly increasing number of Russian troops on the borders of Hungary and Romania. Yet the Hungarian premier Teleki was apparently unable to give up the claims on Romania. In a letter to Hitler he promised to postpone the fulfillment of these claims to a later stage, but at the same time he pretended that Russian Communism was finding a favorable ground in Slavic nations like Yugoslavia and Slovakia.[[286]](#footnote-286)

In the evening hours a German tank division reached Abbeville at only 15 kilometers from the English Channel to the south of the French-Belgian border. In this way the Belgian, British and French troops in Belgium were cut from the rest of the Allied forces and in fact encircled. Hitler was full of joy, while von Ribbentrop instructed the German ambassador to Tokyo general Eugen Ott to tell the Japanese that the German-Dutch conflict was a purely European affair and that the Reich was disinterested in Dutch India (Indonesia). Ott had to add that Germany understood fully Japan’s concerns about the Pacific area and that Berlin had always followed a friendly policy toward Tokyo.[[287]](#footnote-287)

The rapid advance of the “Wehrmacht” in the West and the concentration of Russian troops in the East apparently dispersed the fears in Budapest of a possible Nazi occupation. The fact was that Teleki wrote to the Hungarian minister to Washington DC Pelenyi that the formation of a government in exile was not a pressing issue any more. The Hungarian premier intended to ask Pelenyi to send back the five million dollars, assigned to that effect.[[288]](#footnote-288)

The increasing aggressiveness of Stalin made Hitler and his commanders think more seriously about a possible armistice and peace with the United Kingdom. Some military even tended to consider that a certain discrepancy appeared between Germany and Italy, because for Italy the main enemy was England, whereas for Germany the main enemy was France. Besides, there were no concrete military and political agreements between Germany and Italy, the more so as the German command was confident that the “Wehrmacht” could handle the situation on the western front without the help of the Italians.[[289]](#footnote-289)

On May 22 the Romanian foreign minister Gafencu informed the German diplomatic representative in Bucharest Wilhelm Fabricius about the concentration of Russian troops and about the firm intention of the Romanians to fight in case of Soviet aggression. Gafencu directly asked Fabricius whether the Reich was interested in the conquest of positions at the Danube by Russia. The German diplomat replied that Stalin had done a great favor to Hitler and that Hitler was not the man to forget that. He went further by stating that Romania had to reach an agreement with her eastern neighbors and that the Romanians had to yield some territories to the Russians for that purpose.[[290]](#footnote-290)

The concentration of “Red Army” units on the western borders of Russia was accompanied by an ever more intense campaign in the Soviet press, directed not only against Romania, but also against Finland. There was also an increase in the subversive activities of the Communists of Finnish descent, who founded a Finland-USSR Association for Peace and Friendship. Despite its name, this association carried out a series of violent street demonstrations against the would-be hostile policy of Finland toward the Soviet Union.[[291]](#footnote-291)

The concentration of Russian troops on the Bessarabian border against Romania began finally to worry the German command. According to General Alfred Jodl the Soviet troop movements created a critical situation for the Reich, but at that very moment the “Wehrmacht” succeeded in encircling as many as 45 French, British, Canadian and Belgian divisions in Western Belgium and Northwestern France. Significantly enough, that was the time, chosen by Hitler, to decree the direct annexation of the two Belgian municipalities of Eupen and Malmedy, whose population, despite its predominantly German character, had voted after the end of World War I for Belgium.[[292]](#footnote-292)

The emerging catastrophe of the two leading Western European democracies made the Irish Prime Minister Eamon de Valera send Joe Walsh, who was in charge of the foreign affairs, on a secret mission to Britain. Walsh had to inform the British that in case of a German attack Eire would no doubt fight the invaders and ask for the assistance of the United Kingdom. However, in conformity with the neutrality of Ireland, British troops could penetrate Irish territory only after a German landing, but the British intended to persuade the Irish to admit British forces on their territory before a German invasion.[[293]](#footnote-293)

On May 24, though, Hitler was worried again by the quick advance of his own troops toward the Channel and ordered his commanders to stop the offensive until the arrival of fresh reinforcements. The British Expeditionary Force intercepted the order and Prime Minister Churchill realized immediately that in this way Dunkirk remained the only port on the Strait of Dover, which was out of the reach of the Germans, and that it could be used for the evacuation of the Allied armies from Europe to England.[[294]](#footnote-294)

Yet the destruction of the French, British and Belgian forces was only a question of time and on May 25, at 5AM King Leopold III engaged in a difficult conversation with the premier Hubert Pierlot and the other ministers. Pierlot and his colleagues firmly believed that the government had to leave Belgium and to continue the fight, whereas Leopold III thought to remain in Belgium, even at the risk of becoming a hostage of National Socialist Germany. He advocated surrender and the idea was supported by a leading Social Democrat, who told the King that the Belgians had to lay down arms unconditionally for the sake of the new socialist order in Europe. The monarch also hoped that he could negotiate with the Germans for a relatively less harsh armistice, but the Cabinet of Ministers flatly disagreed and left.[[295]](#footnote-295)

Somewhat later Leopold III met with General Maxime Weygand, who had been appointed in the meantime commander in chief of the French forces. The monarch told him that if he did not get an efficient assistance from the British and the French, he would be forced to surrender. Impressed by this declaration, Weygand hurried to a session of the French Council of Ministers and recommended an armistice with Hitler. The idea was supported by the new vice-premier Pétain, but the premier Reynaud and the President of the Republic Albert Lebrun rejected it on the ground that a Franco-British accord committed the two powers to conclude no separate agreements with Germany.[[296]](#footnote-296)

In the afternoon of May 26 Hitler repealed the order he had issued two days ago and the German troops could resume their offensive toward the Channel, but the British and the French had already organized the evacuation of their forces through Dunkirk and the Strait of Dover to England. However, at 5PM on May 27 King Leopold sent an envoy to the Germans to conclude a cease-fire agreement and duly informed the British and the French about the step. Churchill tried in vain to dissuade the King and reiterated the idea of the Belgian government under Pierlot that the monarch could find refuge in Britain and that the Belgians could continue the fight from there. For his part, Hitler ordained explicitly that the surrender of Belgium had to be unconditional, intending to split the Flemings and the Walloons into separate POW camps. Leopold III signed the surrender agreement at 11PM and thus about 500,000 Belgian soldiers had to lay down their arms. The Pierlot cabinet reacted, by issuing a declaration in Paris that the King was in no position to reign.[[297]](#footnote-297)

At approximately the same time the United States made a new effort to keep Mussolini out of the war. In another personal letter President Roosevelt invited the Italian dictator to state his demands, which would be transmitted to Britain and France. If an agreement on that basis became possible, Mussolini had to promise to preserve his neutrality until the end of the conflict. The French ambassador to Rome François-Poncet went so far as to offer to Italy Tunisia and even Algeria, which were then French possessions, but Mussolini had firmly decided to win incomparably more by war. He refused to receive US Ambassador Philips, while Ciano simply declared to François-Poncet that it was too late.[[298]](#footnote-298)

On May 28 Churchill wrote to his French colleague Reynaud that they had to show only a readiness to discuss the Italians demands, but to refrain from concrete offers, since Mussolini would hardly abandon his alliance with Hitler. Moreover, Churchill stressed, Britain and France should not abandon their independence without fighting to the very end. The conclusion of the British prime minister was that if the two powers did not yield, they could still avoid the fate of Denmark and Poland.[[299]](#footnote-299)

Churchill was right at least insofar as Mussolini had determined by that time the date of Italy’s entrance into the war on the side of Germany, namely June 10. The British didn’t know about that decision, but Churchill had no illusions and urged the military to work out the measures against a possible Italian attack. Among these measures was the armament and financing of the Ethiopian rebels, who fought against the rule of Fascist Italy, imposed on them in 1936.[[300]](#footnote-300)

Meanwhile the Germans didn’t know what to do with King Leopold III of Belgium and eventually decided to put him under a sort of house arrest in the palace of Laeken in Brussels. An incomparably worse surprise for Hitler was the joint counterattack of Norwegian, Polish and French forces at Narvik in Norway. The Allied troops amounted to some 25,000 people, who managed to expel the Germans out of the city and to destroy the railway from Narvik to Sweden. Thus the export of iron ore from Sweden to Germany through Norway and the Norwegian Sea was interrupted for one year. On the other hand, though, the German and the Swedish navy reached an agreement for installing anti-submarine barrages at the entrance to the Baltic Sea by German experts in civilian clothes, who could work even in Swedish territorial waters.[[301]](#footnote-301)

Despite the success at Narvik, Churchill became aware that France was about to fall and that Britain had to wage the war against Germany alone. This only encouraged him further to look for an understanding with Stalin. To that effect the Cabinet appointed a new ambassador to Moscow, namely Stafford Cripps, who belonged to the left wing of the Labour Party and who had distinguished himself by his pro-Soviet views. Only at a later stage did Churchill find out that the Soviet Communists hated the leftists even more than the Liberals and the Tories. The appointment of Cripps turned out to be a bad choice.[[302]](#footnote-302)

The fact was that Britain would by no means assist any future victim of Soviet aggression and such an assistance could be expected even much less from Germany because of her alliance with Russia. Under these grim circumstances King Carol II of Romania summoned his premier Tatarescu, the foreign minister Gafencu and the palace minister Ernest Urdareanu. According to Tatarescu Romania had to abandon her neutrality and to start negotiations with Germany, because the Reich was the only power capable of opposing the Russian claims, but Berlin had no motives to do it as long as Romania remained neutral. Gafencu rejected the idea, pointing out that Moscow and Berlin were friends and that Germany would intervene only if, in their resistance to a Soviet assault, the Romanians destroyed their oil fields. In his opinion, an abandonment of neutrality in favor of Germany would only accelerate the intervention of Russia. The King agreed with the views of Tatarescu about an orientation toward the Rome-Berlin Axis and Gafencu immediately sent in his resignation. Carol II replaced him with Ion Gigurtu, who had close business contacts with the Germans.[[303]](#footnote-303)

The Nazi leadership was apparently confident in the control of Romania and the efforts of the German diplomacy were directed more toward the improvement of relations between Russia and Italy. In the early morning of May 30 von Ribbentrop dispatched a telegram to the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg, reminding him that Mussolini had agreed to the mutual return of the respective ambassadors, with no further formalities, on one and the same day. Von Ribbentrop instructed von der Schulenburg to try to persuade Molotov to accept the idea.[[304]](#footnote-304)

Romania didn’t seem to be the immediate target of Stalin, at least for the time being, since Russia overloaded at this moment Lithuania with protests against the would-be abduction of a couple of “Red Army” soldiers, who had in fact run away from the barracks in search of drinks and prostitutes. The Lithuanian government made everything possible to comply with these protests, but Molotov practically ordered the Lithuanian premier Antanas Merkys to come to Moscow.[[305]](#footnote-305)

The Baltic countries were and still are farther away from Sweden than Norway and for that obvious reason Stockholm was more concerned about Norway than about the sinister developments across the Baltic Sea. The recapture of Narvik by the Allied forces encouraged the Swedish foreign minister Günther to propose unofficially to the German minister zu Wied that Narvik and the surrounding area be proclaimed neutral zone. The Norwegians might retain their territory to the north of Narvik, whereas the Germans could control the territory to the south, while the neutrality of the Narvik strip could be guaranteed by Swedish troops.[[306]](#footnote-306)

Germany intended by no means to evade her obligations under the agreements with Russia for the partition of Europe, but in the afternoon the “Wehrmacht” command had to observe helplessly how the British embarked at Dunkirk another 53,823 soldiers on the ships for England. Thus the successfully evacuated forces from continental Europe amounted to 126,606 persons in all, but there were only about 6,000 French among them. True enough, the heavy armament was left to the Germans, but the British command rightfully thought that the industry of the United Kingdom was bound to restore the losses, whereas the most important think was to save the life of the soldiers for the battles to come.[[307]](#footnote-307)

The upcoming collapse of France no doubt surprised Stalin, but apparently didn’t disturb him too much, since his foreign trade deputy minister Aleksey Krutikov came to Berlin and assured the Germans that the deliveries of copper, nickel and tin, scheduled by the bilateral trade agreement for the first twelve months, would be carried out in the next couple of days. As Krutikov added, this decision was due to the assumption of the Soviet leadership that Germany had an urgent need of these metals because of the increased military activity in the West.[[308]](#footnote-308)

This didn’t prevent Churchill from writing a personal letter to Stalin to be brought to Moscow by the newly appointed ambassador of the United Kingdom Stafford Cripps. In his letter the British prime minister tried to persuade the Russian dictator that Germany was striving for hegemony in Europe and thus created a threat both to England and the Soviet Union. For this reason, Churchill went on, Britain and Russia had to agree on a joint self-defense policy against Germany with a view to the restoration of the European balance of power.[[309]](#footnote-309)

Churchill didn’t seem or rather didn’t want to know that Stalin was also planning to conquer Europe. However, even before Cripps left for his new appointment, the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union issued an official declaration that Moscow would not receive him as an extraordinary envoy and wished to negotiate on the trade problems with the previous ambassador William Seeds or with the person who would replace the latter.[[310]](#footnote-310)

In the morning of May 31 Churchill flew to Paris for a new session of the joint Anglo-French Supreme War Council. He and the French premier Reynaud agreed that the Allied forces had to abandon Narvik in Northern Norway. In fact the British prime minister had accepted the plan of Stockholm for a neutral zone at Narvik under the control of Swedish troops. He reiterated that it was better to see a tragic end of the Western European civilization than to leave the two western democracies lagging behind, but the French vice-premier Pétain didn’t even bother to conceal his readiness for a separate armistice with Germany. Churchill stressed that Britain would continue to fight even without France.[[311]](#footnote-311)

At this very moment, though, the Nazis put a definitive end to the Netherlands as a sovereign country and Imperial Commissary Seyss-Inquart refused from that moment on to receive any foreign diplomat, who happened to be still in the Hague, whereas the French divisions, defending Lille, had to hoist the white flag. Thus the Germans captured some 50,000 French, who had covered until then quite efficiently the evacuation at Dunkirk, where already as many as 194,620 soldiers had embarked for England. For his part, Mussolini had written to Hitler that Italy intended to enter the war on June 5, but the “Fuehrer” urged him to postpone the action by three days. Eventually the “Duce” removed the date of his attack on France to June 11.[[312]](#footnote-312)

On June 1 the British minister to Athens Charles Palairet asked the Greek dictator General Ioannis Metaxas about his position as to a possible occupation of some Aegean islands by British and French troops, if Italy entered the war. Metaxas replied that he had already rejected the British guarantee for the sovereignty of Greece and that the Greeks would fight even for the smallest island or port. Somewhat later he made a similar declaration to the Italian minister Emmanuelle Grazi, who came to inquire him about the Greek reaction to a possible occupation of some Aegean islands by Italian troops.[[313]](#footnote-313)

Hitler apparently did not expect from Italy a serious war capacity, but his experts were already working out vast plans for the future economic order in Europe and even in the world. According to these plans the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Norway and Denmark had to enter into a customs and currency union with Germany, based on a “*planned economy*”. Bohemia, Moravia and Poland were to be an integral part of Germany proper, while Hungary and the Balkan countries had been already incorporated in the greater German economic area, since Germany took between 50 to 70 per cent of their exports and imports. Sweden, Finland, Lithuania. Latvia and Estonia had to be “integrated” in a similar way. As for Russia and Italy, Germany had to develop close trade relations with these two powers, but the final goal of the German economic space, including a restored and broadened colonial empire in Africa, was autarky, namely an economy that would rely entirely on its own resources without any significant trade relations with the outside world.[[314]](#footnote-314)

Russia and Italy were considered, therefore, partners rather than parts of the German economic area, while Hitler kept appreciating the two powers as allies and acted accordingly. On June 2 the German minister to Bucharest Fabricius responded to the Romanian soundings about improving relations with the Reich by declaring that Germany was prepared to work for a closer relationship with Romania, provided that the Romanian government took into consideration possible revision demands by the neighboring countries. Fabricius explicitly pointed out that Berlin had in mind the Russian claims on Bessarabia.[[315]](#footnote-315)

This was accompanied by a new Soviet note, exacting from Finland the return of all the property the Finns had presumably taken with them, while leaving the Hanko Peninsula to the Russians for a naval base. Against this sinister background, the Lithuanians and the Estonians followed the example of the Latvians and began to take measures in view of a possible government in exile. The authoritarian Lithuanian president Antanas Smetona, in particular, entrusted the minister to Rome and former foreign minister Stasys Lozoraitis with such a mission. At the same time the Lithuanians, the Latvians and the Estonians began to organize the transfer of their gold reserves abroad, mainly to the United States, while part of the Estonian archives were loaded on a ship for Sweden.[[316]](#footnote-316)

In the night of June 2 to June 3 the last 4,000 people of the British Expeditionary Corps were embarked on ships for England together with as many as about 60,000 French soldiers. Continental Europe seemed to have been abandoned to the mercy of Hitler and Stalin. In an order to his troops the commander in chief of the Swiss armed forces general Guisan encouraged his compatriots, by emphasizing that the landscape of Switzerland was totally different from that of the Low Countries and that the Swiss could rely on the Alps to defend efficiently their country against any attack.[[317]](#footnote-317)

The Swiss feared mostly, if not exclusively, a German attack, although Mussolini was about to join Hitler in the war. The Italian dictator was even ready to improve his relations with Stalin and found a favorable response in Moscow to that effect. In the evening of October 3 Molotov told Ambassador von der Schulenburg that the “*Soviet government*” agreed to send immediately their ambassador Gorelkin back to Rome and to receive again his Italian counterpart Augusto Rosso. Molotov went even further by hinting at a possible agreement for a mutual cooperation between Germany, the Soviet Union and Italy in the Balkans.[[318]](#footnote-318)

In the following morning the Germans took Dunkirk and captured another 40,000 French troops. The British forces were joined by only 14,000 Poles, 4,000 Czechs, 1,000 Dutch, 500 Belgians and 2,000 French, because the remaining 60,000 French soldiers intended to return to their home country. Despite this desperate situation, Churchill proposed to the chiefs of staff of the land, air and naval forces to begin immediately to work out plans for a counterattack on the European coast of the Atlantic Ocean.[[319]](#footnote-319)

The new German victories encouraged Franco to instruct the Spanish press to launch a campaign for the return of Gibraltar, taken by England from Spain in the early 18th century. The Spanish foreign minister Juan Luis Beigbeder y Atienza told the German ambassador to Madrid Eberhard von Stohrer that Spain’s demands included also Tangiers in North Africa, French Morocco and some border rectifications in favor of Spanish Guinea.[[320]](#footnote-320)

At 5AM on June 5 the Germans resumed their offensive on the entire, 650 kilometer long front line from the Somme River to the upper course of the Rhine. The French could oppose only 65 ill equipped divisions to as many as 143 German divisions. Even worse was the fact that the French command fell more and more under the influence of Vice-Premier Pétain and general Weygand who thought that it was senseless to continue the fight. As if in response to this defeatism, the French premier Reynaud called directly from the battlefield Charles de Gaulle, who had been just promoted to the rank of general, and appointed him Deputy State Secretary in the war ministry. De Gaulle was renowned for his insistence upon mechanizing the French armed forces and upon adopting the blitzkrieg tactics. Now he stated that, if necessary, the fight could be pursued from the colonies and advocated immediate preparations for the transfer of the French troops to North Africa. Reynaud agreed and urged him to leave for London in order to persuade the British that France was ready to continue the war from her African possessions.[[321]](#footnote-321)

On June 7 European democracy suffered another blow, because King Haakon VII and the government of Johan Nygaardsvold had no alternative but to embark upon a British ship for England at Tromsø in the Far North. The Norwegian troops were ordered to stop the combats and the end of the war in Norway deprived of any sense Sweden’s plans for a neutral zone at Narvik and the surrounding area. On the following day the Germans reconquered Narvik, but the western allies managed to rescue from the Nazis 24,000 French, British and Poles, who were also transported successfully to Britain. Significantly enough, even at this moment, despite his firm decision to join Hitler in the war, Mussolini rejoiced that the tough French resistance was likely to weaken the Reich, whereas Ciano noted in his diary that the attitude of the Kremlin toward Germany was not quite clear.[[322]](#footnote-322)

Indeed on June 9 the Russian war minister Timoshenko confirmed a plan for the formation of eight gigantic mechanized corps that could be used only for an assault. For his part, Molotov had summoned to Moscow the Lithuanian premier Antanas Merkys and accused his security services for the “abduction” of the Soviet soldiers, who had in fact deserted from the “Red Army”. The Russian foreign minister reiterated also his accusations against Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia of establishing a secret alliance between themselves. In a hopeless move the Lithuanian minister to Berlin Kazys Škirpa stressed his country’s readiness to satisfy practically all Soviet demands, but the director of the Political Department of the German Foreign Ministry Ernst von Woermann firmly declared that in the German-Lithuanian relations there was nothing that was kept secret from the Soviet Union. The only conclusion Škirpa rightfully did in his report to the Lithuanian government was that Lithuania could rely by no means on German help in front of the Soviet threat.[[323]](#footnote-323)

In the afternoon of June 10 Italy declared war on France and Britain, but Mussolini was careful enough to reassure Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey and Egypt that he would not involve these five countries in the conflict. His foreign minister and son-in-law Ciano intended to take personally part in the war as a commander of an air force unit. In Africa the Italians had some 215,000 troops against only about 50,000 British soldiers, but the Italian forces in Europe were rather modest and ill equipped.[[324]](#footnote-324)

Italy entered the war at the moment when France was about to collapse. The Germans had taken Rouen and Dunkirk on the Atlantic coast and were quickly approaching Paris. The French government and the diplomatic corps left Paris for Tours and Bordeaux to the south. In his way to Tours Premier Reynaud was accompanied by general de Gaulle, who had just returned from London. Between 7 and 10 million civilians rushed also to the south, blocking the roads and making an anyway chaotic situation even more desperate. For all that, Reynaud urged more than once Churchill to come to France for another meeting of the Supreme War Council.[[325]](#footnote-325)

Yet the Italians were unable to advance into France, although the French forces were threatened from behind by German units, moving fast down the Rhone valley. By the way, the French army was ordered to avoid any attack on the Italians, whereas the British captured quickly five Italian vessels and launched an assault on the Italian guards at the border between Egypt and Cyrenaica, which was then an Italian possession.[[326]](#footnote-326)

For his part, Franco seized the international North African port of Tangiers on the ground of maintaining the neutrality of the zone. True enough, the remaining three guarantors of that neutrality were Italy, Britain and France and with Italy’s war declaration these powers could maintain no more Tangiers’ neutrality. However, the Francoist propaganda presented the event as the first step toward achieving Spain’s national aspirations. On the other hand, though, Franco made it quite clear that the most he could do in favor of the Axis was to proclaim Spain a nonbelligerent instead of a neutral power.[[327]](#footnote-327)

At 7PM on June 11, after the Lithuanian premier Merkys had returned from Moscow to Kaunas and left Foreign Minister Urbšys to the mercy of Stalin for further “negotiations”, Prime Minister Churchill landed near Orleans for another, would-be regular meeting of the Franco-British Supreme War Council. The session began with a renewed demand of the French for more Royal Air Force units for the defense of France, but Churchill replied that Britain needed them for her own protection and appealed to the French to launch a guerrilla warfare against the advancing Germans, including in Paris. The only French present, who seemed to agree with such tactics, was general de Gaulle, while General Weygand directly admitted that France might be compelled to surrender. Moreover, the local French authorities in the south simply refused to allow the available British air force units to attack Northern Italy, fearing an Italian retaliation. For the same reasons even civilians started to block somewhat later the runways. However, the British had already engaged in long range raids to Turin and Milan, but in the night of June 11 to June 12 some of the Royal Air Force planes dropped by mistake their bombs on Geneva in Switzerland, killing four persons.[[328]](#footnote-328)

At 8AM on June 12, though, an entire French army corps had to lay down arms and the Germans captured another 8,000 British and 4,000 French soldiers, including as many as seven generals. This new disastrous blow to the democratic alliance coincided with new drastic measures of Stalin, who increased considerably the capital offenses in the “Red Army”. Significantly enough, on precisely the same day Yugoslavia resumed her diplomatic relations with Russia, after having refused to acknowledge the Communist regime for 23 years.[[329]](#footnote-329)

In the afternoon of June 13 Churchill flew back to France to confer with his French counterpart Reynaud this time at Tours. Despite his readiness to continue the fight, Reynaud directly asked whether Britain would agree to a demand of France about the possible terms of Hitler for a separate peace agreement between France and Germany. Churchill flatly rejected the idea, trying to persuade his hosts that the United States would soon enter the war. That was the last visit of the British prime minister to France for the next four years.[[330]](#footnote-330)

In the following morning at 9AM the 18th German Army entered Paris, which had been already evacuated by all French troops. The red Nazi flag was hoisted at the top of the Eiffel Tower, whereas the local Communists staged an enthusiastic welcome to the Germans, but the Nazi occupation authorities hurried to arrest the more outspoken Comintern functionaries and to get hold of their headquarters, including the editorial office of the “Humanité” daily. Significantly enough, at approximately the same moment the Nazi administration opened the first concentration camp in Poland at Auschwitz, which was going to become emblematic of the German National Socialism extermination practices.[[331]](#footnote-331)

Not less significant was the fact that the Turkish government prepared a declaration that Turkey would not enter the war because of Italy, since such a move risked involving Turkey in an armed clash against the Soviet Union. Apparently Ankara was impressed by the first successes of the United Kingdom in North Africa, where the British took two forts in Italian Libya close to the Egyptian border and captured 220 Italians soldiers. Indeed, these small victories could by no means compensate the catastrophe in France, whose government took refuge in Bordeaux on the Atlantic coast at 580 kilometers to the south of Paris.[[332]](#footnote-332)

The spectacular German advance in France was accompanied by a secret report from Stockholm to Berlin about a statement of the Russian minister to Sweden Madame Alexandra Kollontai that the European powers had a common interest in opposing “*German imperialism*”. Von Ribbentrop wanted von der Schulenburg to discuss tactfully with Molotov the hostile attitude of Kollontai toward Germany. The German foreign minister seemed to ignore the fact that no Soviet diplomat could act on his or her own initiative, without explicit orders from above.[[333]](#footnote-333)

By that time the Lithuanian foreign minister Urbšys was simply ignored both by Stalin and Molotov and left to contact only officials of a lower rank, whereas in the late evening of June 14 some 80 Russian soldiers attacked a Latvian checkpoint and killed several persons, including a woman and a kid. The rest were abducted to Soviet territory, while the Russian navy blocked all Latvian ports. It was only shortly before midnight that Urbšys and the Lithuanian minister to Moscow Ladas Natkevičius were summoned to the Kremlin by Molotov, who read an ultimatum, requiring the formation of a new “*friendly*” government in Kaunas and the admission of an unlimited number of “Red Army” units to Lithuania. Molotov had the “kindness” to be somewhat more specific, stating that the Soviet troops, already in Lithuania, had to be reinforced by another 9 to 12 divisions. The Lithuanian government had to respond to the ultimatum within ten hours, but Stalin’s foreign minister made it plain that, no matter of the reply, the “Red Army” divisions would move into Lithuania by noon on the following day.[[334]](#footnote-334)

President Smetona was ready even to oppose an armed resistance to the Russians. However, most of the ministers saw no alternative but to yield to the Soviet ultimatum and Smetona decided to leave the country. For his part, Stalin sent Andrei Vyshinski, Andrei Zhdanov and Vladimir Dekanozov as special envoys to Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania respectively. Vyshinski had become famous with his ruthlessness as state prosecutor at the Moscow show trials during the 1936-1938 Great Terror, Zhdanov was the local party boss in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), while Dekanozov was First Deputy People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs and had come from Georgia, Stalin’s native country. The task of the three envoys was to form puppet governments in the Baltic countries, which was not quite easy, because at that moment there were only 1,500 Communists in Lithuania, 1,000 Communists in Latvia and just 133 Communists in Estonia.[[335]](#footnote-335)

While Stalin was completing the destruction of the Baltic countries, Hitler was finishing France. In the night of June 14 to June 15 Churchill relieved the remaining British and Canadian troops from the orders of the French command and began their evacuation to England. In a letter to US President Roosevelt the British prime minister implored him to show a more active support for the government of Reynaud and warned that if Britain fell too, the USA would be left alone in the face of a united European bloc under Hitler, more powerful than the entire New World.[[336]](#footnote-336)

On June 15 the Germans took Verdun and broke through the famous Maginot Line, built by the French as a would-be impenetrable barrier. The “Wehrmacht” began the conquest of Alsace and Lorrain and encircled some 40,000 French troops near the Swiss border. The Polish government in exile asked the British for permission to move from France to the United Kingdom, but the British authorities issued only some 50 visas to that effect.[[337]](#footnote-337)

Hitler was so confident in his strength that he decided to demobilize some of the troops, although he had left only ten divisions on the Russian border. In preparing the invasion of Britain, the “Fuehrer” made another attempt to win Ireland over to his side. Thus the German minister to Dublin Eduard Hempel assured the chief of the Irish Foreign Department Joe Walsh that the fight of Germany against Britain might result in the completion of the Irish national union by adding Ulster to Eire. Yet Hempel refused to guarantee that Germany would not attempt a landing in Ireland.[[338]](#footnote-338)

At the same time those Scandinavian countries, which still preserved their sovereignty, were submitted to a new round of joint Nazi-Soviet pressure. The German foreign minister von Ribbentrop reiterated to the Swedish diplomatic envoy Arvid Richert the demand for a regular transit of German military personnel, arms and war materials through Sweden for Norway and back, while the Communists of Swedish descent rejoiced at the fall of the French capital, shouting: “*We’ve taken Paris!*”. Moreover, two Soviet fighters took down a passenger plane, flying from Tallinn to Helsinki. The Russians killed even those passengers, who managed to survive the crash. There was a French diplomatic courier among the victims, whereas the mail, amounting to some 100 kilograms, was taken away by a Soviet submarine.[[339]](#footnote-339)

For his part, the Deputy State Secretary of the French War Ministry general de Gaulle left again for London, where Prime Minister Churchill approved a plan, endorsed by de Gaulle too, for a Franco-British federation with a common Council of Ministers in charge of foreign affairs, defense and finances, but with separate parliaments and governments. Churchill thought that this project might help the French with pulling themselves together.[[340]](#footnote-340)

At 3PM the Russians replaced the “limited” occupation of Lithuania with an unconditional one. Lithuania was the only Baltic country, bordering directly on Germany and it was the first one to be flooded with the “Red Army”. In this way Stalin wanted to prevent the bulk of the Latvian and Estonian armed forces from escaping to Germany through Lithuanian territory. Too many Lithuanian soldiers and civilians found also refuge in Germany, but the only gesture the German minister to Riga Erich Zechlin could do was to provide Smetona and his family with passports and visas at the last minute. Nevertheless, the German police refused to let Smetona in and he had to cross the border clandestinely at midnight. The interior minister Kazys Skučas and the head of the State Security Augustinas Povilaitis did not have that chance, because the Germans flatly barred their access to the Reich and eventually they fell in the hands of the Soviet repression services to die later in the Siberian death camps.[[341]](#footnote-341)

At 11AM on June 16 the French premier Reynaud summoned his colleagues of the Cabinet to a session in Bordeaux, but the majority of the ministers advocated a surrender to the Germans. Indeed, at this very moment the invaders, advancing from the Rhine, reached the Swiss border and encircled another important group of French armed forces in the northeastern part of the country. Several million civilians rushed to the south, whereas Communists of French origin obligingly provided the Germans with useful information and showed them the right way. Under these circumstances general de Gaulle ordered from London a ship, carrying modern weapons from the United States to France, to cast anchor in some British port.[[342]](#footnote-342)

In the early afternoon of the same day another two Soviet ultimatums required from Latvia and Estonia an unlimited access of “Red Army” troops regardless of their number. Moreover, the Latvians and the Estonians had to accept governments, formed in fact by the Soviet envoys. The Estonian president Konstantin Päts and the Latvian president and premier Karlis Ulmanis saw no alternative but to yield to the Russian terms, the more so as Germany rejected again all entreaties to show at least some sympathy. Yet both men decided to stay in their countries, no matter of what might happen to them.[[343]](#footnote-343)

While Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were living their last days, France was about to lose her freedom. At 5PM the Cabinet resumed its session, but most ministers rejected the British plan for a federation between France and the United Kingdom. Some even accused the British of trying to impose their protectorate on the French and of willing to take possession of France’s colonial empire. Eventually Reynaud sent in his resignation and the new government was formed by Marshal Philippe Pétain, who was 84 years old and didn’t even conceal his intention to put an end to the Republic. Pierre Laval, who in the 1930s had endeavored to establish a close relationship with National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy, became his deputy. The Foreign Ministry was taken by Paul Baudouin, the defense was entrusted to another defeatist, General Maxime Weygand, whereas the Naval Forces were assigned to Admiral François Darlan. A sinister sign was the fact that the news about the new government led to violent assaults on Jews in the streets of Bordeaux.[[344]](#footnote-344)

The forthcoming collapse of France apparently encouraged the Spanish dictator Franco to raise his territorial claims, but not at the price of entering immediately the war on the side of Germany and Italy. His special envoy general Juan Vigon told Hitler that Spain wanted to have the entire territory of Morocco as a protectorate and to create a cultural and spiritual Spanish Empire, comprising the Iberian Peninsula with Portugal and Latin America. Yet the only thing Vigon could promise was not Spain’s entrance into the war, but a mediation for a cease-fire agreement between France and the German-Italian Axis.[[345]](#footnote-345)

At 9:20PM general de Gaulle landed near Bordeaux on the board of Churchill’s personal plane, carrying a written copy of the Franco-British Union Declaration. At the moment of de Gaulle’s departure from England the British prime minister didn’t know yet about Reynaud’s resignation, but he offered de Gaulle his plane just to get the general back in case of need. It was only after landing in France that de Gaulle learned about the replacement of Reynaud with Pétain and decided to leave back for London not later than the following day.[[346]](#footnote-346)

At midnight on June 16 to June 17 France’s new foreign minister Baudouin requested the Spanish ambassador Jose Felix de Lequerica, who had come with the French government to Bordeaux, to mediate as quickly as possible for a cease-fire with Germany. For his part, general de Gaulle risked arrest for stopping the US arms delivery to France and at 9AM he flew back from France to Britain after securing the departure of his wife and children on the board of the last available ship from Brest to England.[[347]](#footnote-347)

At approximately the same time Stalin’s envoy Dekanozov forced the Lithuanian premier and provisional president Antanas Merkys to hand over his powers to the barely known leftist journalist Justas Paleckis. The change was totally unconstitutional, but the Interior Ministry was entrusted to the only official Communist in the new government. The “Lithuanian Communist Party” was still banned, at least theoretically, but practically everything was already under the full control of the Soviet repression services. At 10AM the Latvian president Ulmanis and his ministers reaffirmed their decision to oppose no resistance to the “Red Army”, fearing that such a resistance would lead to the complete destruction of the country.[[348]](#footnote-348)

At about 2PM, when marshal Pétain ordered the French troops to stop the fight against the Germans, “Red Army” units, coming from Lithuania, entered Riga. The October 1939 Mutual Assistance Treaty provided for the “partial” occupation of Latvia without its capital, but now the Russian soldiers took the radio, phone and telegraph stations. The Russian legation directly mobilized the local Communists to stage an enthusiastic welcome and to stone the police station that happened to be on the same town square. According to some diplomatic reports the number of Soviet soldiers in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia amounted to 500,000 people.[[349]](#footnote-349)

On June 17 the news about the forthcoming surrender of France reached the United States and the Roosevelt administration decided to freeze all French deposits and to detain all French ships, anchored in American ports. At the same time, though, the Swedish envoy to London Björn Prytz reported to Stockholm about an approach of the British Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs Richard Butler for an informative mission with regard to Germany. Butler had apparently acted at the initiative of Foreign Secretary Halifax, but Churchill knew nothing about it. Prytz even supposed that in case of negotiations with Germany Halifax might replace Churchill as prime minister.[[350]](#footnote-350)

On June 18 Hitler ordained that he would consider the armistice terms with France only after consulting Mussolini. Until then the German army had to pursue further an already defeated enemy. It was only at this moment that the British sent a plane to take the Polish premier in exile Sikorski from France to England, while Stockholm eventually agreed to allow the Germans to transport military personnel, weapons and war materials through Sweden to Norway and back.[[351]](#footnote-351)

Yet the armistice terms that Hitler intended to impose on France appeared too mild in the eyes of Mussolini, who came with Ciano in Munich only to accept the decisions of the “Fuehrer” in this regard. The German dictator declared that a French government had to be preserved on French territory to avoid its possible transfer to North Africa. He rudely rejected the Italian demands for an occupation of the Rhone Valley with Toulon and Marseilles and for a disarmament of Corse, Djibouti and Tunisia. Moreover, the “Duce” had to agree to a separate armistice with France, while von Ribbentrop hinted at the existence of some contacts with Britain through the mediation of Sweden and mentioned a German plan for the deportation of the Jews to another French colony, namely Madagascar.[[352]](#footnote-352)

However, in a speech to the House of Commons Churchill announced his firm intention to continue the fight for the survival of Christian civilization and pointed out that Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand would also continue the war against Germany. This speech confirmed the impression of Prytz that the discrete soundings of Butler resulted from a personal initiative of Halifax. The Swedish government decided to refrain from informing Berlin about the move, but Prytz disclosed it nevertheless to the Germans.[[353]](#footnote-353)

By that time the British had succeeded in evacuating from France to England another 156,000 soldiers, including 20,000 Poles, but Churchill endeavored to save the French navy from German hands. For this reason he needed the cooperation of the new premier of France marshal Pétain and he agreed only reluctantly to allow de Gaulle to address the French by the BBC. At 6PM on June 18 de Gaulle appealed to the French to continue the fight. He invited the French, who had found refuge in Britain, to contact him and proclaimed that the fire of the French resistance should be never extinguished, but few were those of his fellow countrymen, who heard him.[[354]](#footnote-354)

On June 19 at noon Stalin’s envoy Zhdanov intruded himself to the residence of the Estonian president Päts to tell him in a peremptory manner that the next prime minister of the country would be Johannes Vares, who was a totally unknown physician from a small town. Officially Vares did not belong to any political party, but the Russians had made him sign a written declaration about his future duties, whereas the key Interior Ministry was entrusted to an open Communist, namely Maksim Unt. A confidant of Päts tried in vain to frighten the German minister in Tallinn Frohwein by stating that Stalin intended to concentrate a huge army in the Baltic region against the Reich. Frohwein didn’t show any emotions, although the Nazi intelligence services already knew that the Soviet Union had amassed troops on the entire border with Germany.[[355]](#footnote-355)

At almost the same moment Vyshinski, who was Stalin’s envoy in charge of Latvia, presented a list of ministers to the Latvian president Ulmanis. The new “*people’s government*” was headed by Augusts Kirhenšteins, who was not officially a Communist either, but for long years he had been president of the Latvian-Soviet Friendship Society. Similarly to Estonia, the Interior Ministry was given to an open Communist, Vilis Lacis. A timid attempt of Ulmanis to introduce some minor changes in the list was flatly rejected and even the program speeches of the new ministers were written in the Soviet legation in Riga. As an additional form of pressure a mob of secret Soviet agents, Russian marines and some local Communists of Latvian origin began to shoot and loot in the streets of Latvia’s second largest city Liepaja on the Baltic Sea coast.[[356]](#footnote-356)

On June 20 an entire French army corps demanded the Swiss authorities for asylum and internment according to the rules of neutrality. The unit consisted of 30,000 French, 12,000 Polish and 600 Belgian soldiers. They were welcomed warmly both by the French-speaking and by the German-speaking Swiss, who shouted slogans of sympathy with France and of hostility to the Rome-Berlin Axis. Together with the French corps the Confederation got some 4,500 horses, 2,000 motor vehicles and a not negligible number of weapons and artillery pieces.[[357]](#footnote-357)

In the late evening of the same day a group of Communists intruded themselves in the headquarters of the only existing Estonian trade union and took over the leadership by force. A Protest Committee was hastily formed, while the following morning all prisoners in the Latvian capital of Riga were freed from jail, which included much more criminal than political inmates. This mob forced the employers to release all their workers for a would-be spontaneous rally, where Stalin’s special envoy Vyshinski spoke about a friendly Latvia, but was often interrupted by equally “spontaneous” slogans for a “*Soviet Latvia*”. On June 21 a similar rally, guarded by Soviet tanks and troops, was staged in Tallinn as well and the Estonian president Päts was also forced to release all prisoners. Most of them were criminals too, except a very limited number of inmates, sentenced to jail for spying in favor of Communist Russia.[[358]](#footnote-358)

These developments could only enhance the Romanian fears of a Soviet assault and Prime Minister Tatarescu made another effort to convince the German minister to Bucharest Fabricius that Germany was interested in the role of Romania as a guard of Dniester and of the Danubian delta. To that effect King Carol II was even ready to follow the National Socialist example by transforming the official and only permitted National Revival Front into a single Nation Party with the participation of the pro-Nazi and totalitarian Legion of Archangel Michael. However, Fabricius remained untouched and went so far as to declare in a typically demagogic way that Germany refrained from any intervention in the internal affairs of Romania.[[359]](#footnote-359)

Hitler therefore persisted in his intention to be loyal to the engagements under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Treaty for Friendship and for the Border because, among other things, his efforts were directed at this moment toward the humiliation of France. At quarter past three PM on June 21 he met the French delegation, headed by General Charles Huntziger, in the same railway carriage at Compiegne, where 22 years ago the Germans had signed their surrender act that had put an end to World War I. Shortly after that the “Fuehrer” left for Paris, entrusting his generals with the finalization of the diktat. Under its terms France had to demobilize and to anchor her navy in the ports, in exchange for the promise that the Reich would not use for its own military purposes that part of the navy, which happened to be in ports under German control. The “Wehrmacht” was going to occupy two thirds of the French territory, including the entire Atlantic coast. The remaining “Free Zone” comprised the southeast of the country together with the Mediterranean coast, but the French could maintain there an army not exceeding 100,000 soldiers. All French prisoners of war, amounting to 1,850,000 men, had to be kept in camps until the end of the war. Moreover, every French, fighting against Germany for a third power, was to be immediately shot, if captured, and all anti-Nazis that had found refuge in France were to be handed over to the Nazi authorities.[[360]](#footnote-360)

The only thing the French delegates could do was to postpone the signature of the armistice agreement for the next day on the ground that they had no instructions by their government. As to the Italians, they had to wait patiently for the arrival of the same delegates to Rome for a separate armistice. At approximately the same time, though, the Italian ambassador to Moscow Rosso declared to Molotov that Mussolini wanted to exchange views with the Russians about the Balkans and even suggested that if the Soviet Union had claims on Romania, Moscow was expected to satisfy the revision demands of Hungary and Bulgaria as well. Molotov frankly approved the entrance of Italy into the war against France and Britain and went further by stating that Russia had lost her confidence in Turkey because of the alliance treaties with Britain and France. In fact, Stalin was ready to acknowledge Italy’s priority in the Mediterranean in exchange for a respect of Russia’s aspirations in the Black Sea. Yet Ciano assured the Russian ambassador Gorelkin in Rome that Italy was interested in preserving the status quo in the Balkans.[[361]](#footnote-361)

Meanwhile general de Gaulle proclaimed in London a “Free France” movement, hoping to attract at least some of the French colonial governors, who had openly rejected the surrender of France to Hitler. For their part, the Swiss thought that they might be Hitler’s next victim and their High Command planned, in case of a Nazi assault, to concentrate the bulk of the available armed forces in the middle of the Alps for an ultimate defense.[[362]](#footnote-362)

At 6:50PM on June 22 general Huntziger finally signed the armistice agreement with Germany. The German occupation zone, which amounted to two thirds of France’s territory with 29 million inhabitants, was separated from the “free zone” by a border control, although the French administration in the occupied zone was preserved. A special German Armistice Commission had to deal with French delegates in all controversies between France and Germany. The whole campaign had cost 49,000 dead and missing Germans, but as many as 120,000 killed French. As a result of the surrender of France Germany got 30 per cent of the world GDP and one fifth of the world population.[[363]](#footnote-363)

The Germans succeeded also in taking hold of the French archives and they found out that the Swiss High Command not only cooperated closely with the French, but a number of the Swiss operational plans were worked out by the French General Staff. However, after the surrender of France these plans were outdated and, as seen above, general Guisan had decided to adopt an entirely new strategy of establishing a citadel in the middle of the Alps.[[364]](#footnote-364)

The fall of France made the Portuguese dictator Salazar redouble his armed forces to 80,000 men. Although Salazar sympathized with German National Socialism and Italian Fascism, he had to take into account the pro-British feelings of his fellow countrymen and he sincerely feared that the Germans might continue their advance through the Pyrenees. Probably the same fear pushed the Spanish dictator Franco to be even more cooperative with the Reich and he ordered the arrest of the Belgian premier Hubert Pierlot and Foreign Minister Paul Henri Spaak at the moment they crossed the border from France to Spain. The two Belgians had passports and valid visas, but they were put under police surveillance in Barcelona.[[365]](#footnote-365)

On June 23 the Cabinet of Ministers under Churchill declared that it could not recognize any more the government in Bordeaux under marshal Pétain as the government of a sovereign country. In another two declarations His Majesty’s Government stated that it took into consideration the forthcoming formation of a French National Committee and that it was ready to support all leading figures in the French colonial empire who chose to resist the Germans further.[[366]](#footnote-366)

**III.THE PARTITION OF EUROPE**

They are all gone out

of the way, they are

together become

unprofitable;

there is none that

doeth good, no, not one.

(Rom. 3: 12)

On June 23, 1940, Molotov declared to the German ambassador von der Schulenburg that Russia would not wait any more for the annexation of Bessarabia and Bukovina from Romania even by force, if necessary. Bessarabia was assigned to Stalin by the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and by the Treaty for Friendship and for the Border. Yet the same did not apply to Bukovina, a region that had been part of the Habsburg Empire until 1918, but never under Muscovite rule. Von der Schulenburg reminded of Germany’s special economic interests in Romania because of the raw materials, imported from there, but Molotov pointed out that Moscow expected from the Reich to cooperate fully with the Soviets in this action.[[367]](#footnote-367)

Quite revealing of Stalin’s methods was also the sudden death of the new Bulgarian minister to Moscow Todor Hristov who, as a more trustworthy diplomat, had replaced Antonov only about half a year ago. The Russian authorities gave Hristov all the funeral honors, due to such occasions, but he was succeeded as minister by Ivan Stamenov, who had been recruited by the Soviet secret services as far back as 1934. Nobody in Sofia even suspected that a man, subservient to Moscow like Antonov, was removed only to be supplanted by a direct agent of Stalin.[[368]](#footnote-368)

Britain was hardly touched by the prospects of another Soviet aggression, but she made another effort to compel Eire to abandon neutrality and to enter the war as an ally of the United Kingdom in exchange for a vague promise of unification with Ulster after the end of hostilities. The problem was that the prime minister of Northern Ireland James Craig and the Protestant majority as a whole flatly refused even to discuss the idea of secession from the United Kingdom and de Valera was fully aware of that. This time again he refused to admit British troops on Irish territory before a German invasion and stressed that he could not throw his nation in the horrors of a modern war with a badly equipped army.[[369]](#footnote-369)

On June 24 Stalin’s envoy Dekanozov imposed as new premier and foreign minister of Lithuania the popular writer and scholar Vincas Kreve-Mickevičius, who sincerely believed that his country might coexist further with the Soviet Union but who lacked completely any political experience. Moreover, according to the reports of the Romanian chargé d’affaires in Riga Niculescu-Buzesti, the Soviet Union was amassing as many as 50 divisions in the Baltic countries. Many of these divisions were motorized, while the “Red Army” officers didn’t even bother to conceal that the operation was carried out “*with a view to a possible German-Russian conflict*”.[[370]](#footnote-370)

Hitler responded by ordering the dispatch of 15 infantry, 6 tank and 3 motorized divisions in Poland. Yet the Germans were concerned at this moment mostly about Romania, fearing that Stalin might occupy not “only” Bessarabia and Bukovina, but the entire Romanian territory. Berlin feared also that the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia and Bukovina could jeopardize the German ethnic minority in these two regions. All this resulted in the decision to urge the Romanians to satisfy Russia’s demands.[[371]](#footnote-371)

Shortly after 7PM of the same day the Italian and French delegates finally signed near Rome the armistice agreement. Mussolini could annex only some 800 square kilometers of French territory with a population of 28,000 people, because his army had been incapable of penetrating further to the west. The French agreed also to a demilitarized zone of 80 kilometers along the border with Italy in Europe and along the border of Tunisia in Africa.[[372]](#footnote-372)

In this way Switzerland was surrounded only by dictatorial and highly aggressive powers. All of a sudden the Swiss realized that their entire foreign trade depended on the will of Hitler and Mussolini. Despite some hesitations, though, the majority of the Swiss remained faithful to their democracy and to the free market economy. A group of young army officers founded a secret organization to continue the fight against the invaders, if the federal government decided to surrender in case of an Axis assault.[[373]](#footnote-373)

For the time being Britain had to face Germany and Italy alone. In an attempt to incite Stalin against Hitler Prime Minister Churchill wrote another message to the Russian dictator, warning him again that Germany strove for hegemony in Europe and that the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom were the only powers, capable of stopping Hitler. The USSR had to decide whether her interests were not threatened by the ambitions of the Reich. The newly appointed British ambassador Cripps had to hand over the message to Stalin personally.[[374]](#footnote-374)

At this very moment Molotov declared to the Italian ambassador in Moscow Augusto Rosso that Communist Russia found some of the Hungarian demands with regard to Romania “*reasonable*”, while the Bulgarian claims for Southern Dobruja and for a territorial access to the Aegean Sea were “*justified*”. The Soviet premier and foreign minister reiterated that Russia was ready to take Bessarabia and “*some other regions of Romania*” even by force, if necessary, but he promised to respect the interests of Germany and Italy in the area. Molotov hinted also at possible territorial requirements at the expense of Turkey, particularly for the Straits, and he went as far as to propose a recognition of Italy’s hegemony in the Mediterranean, provided that Italy acknowledged the Soviet hegemony in the Black Sea.[[375]](#footnote-375)

On June 26 Stalin restored in fact the servitude that had existed in Russia until 1861, by abolishing the right of the workers to move from one factory to another and by punishing with forced labor even those who came more than 20 minutes late at work. At 10AM “Red Army” units crossed the Romanian border at several points and took the town of Lipcani in the most northwestern corner of Bessarabia. That was the moment when Mussolini decided to inform the Russian ambassador to Rome N.Gorelkin that Italy would join Germany in the pressure on Romania to yield to the extortions of Russia.[[376]](#footnote-376)

In the afternoon Molotov told the German ambassador von der Schulenburg that Moscow was generous enough to demand “only” the northern part of Bukovina. The Russian premier and foreign minister frankly admitted that the most important thing was not the national unity of the Ukrainians, but the strategic railway connection from Bessarabia through Cernauti (Chernivtsi) to Lemberg (Lviv). As a matter of fact, only a little more than 23% of the total population of Northern Bukovina, amounting to some 4 million people, were ethnic Ukrainians. This time again Molotov concealed from von der Schulenburg the intention of the Soviets to act in the next few hours and the German diplomat was left with the impression that Russia would undertake some purely diplomatic approach only in a couple of days.[[377]](#footnote-377)

In the evening hours the joint pressure of Germany and Italy resulted in an order, issued by Bucharest to the Romanian troops in Bessarabia to withdraw from there within three days. Any response to Russian provocations and any firing on the Russians were explicitly prohibited. For their withdrawal, the Romanian soldiers had to use local roads and to go round more important towns in order to avoid encounters with the “Red Army”.[[378]](#footnote-378)

It was only at 11PM Moscow Time that Molotov summoned the Romanian minister Gheorghe Davidescu to the Kremlin to hand him over an ultimatum, requiring the cession of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina within the next 24 hours. Davidescu had the courage to object that two thirds of the Bessarabians were Romanians. Molotov interrupted him, by raising the typically Communist nation-building argument that Bessarabia was not inhabited by Romanians, but by Moldavians, who happened to be a new “nation” and “language”, promptly created by Soviet scholars and scientists.[[379]](#footnote-379)

At 8:30AM on June 27 the Romanian foreign minister Gigurtu informed the German minister to Bucharest Fabricius about the Russian ultimatum and asked the Germans to exert a restraining influence on Hungary and Bulgaria to refrain from any hostile action against the Romanians in case of a Romanian-Russian armed conflict. Some two hours later, after a phone call by von Ribbentrop, Fabricius told King Carol II that Romania had to comply with the Soviet demands. In telegrams to Ankara, Athens and Belgrade Bucharest asked the respective governments whether they would fulfil their obligations under the 1934 Balkan Pact to engage in a military action against Hungary and Bulgaria, if these two countries intervened together with Russia against the Romanians, but the Serbs and the Greeks answered that Romania had to avoid troubling the peace in the Balkans. The Turkish government declared a readiness to restrain Bulgaria, but the Italian minister in Bucharest Pellegrino Ghiggi transmitted Mussolini’s advice to the Romanians to accept Stalin’s ultimatum.[[380]](#footnote-380)

Germany had hardly any choice but to agree with the Russian encroachment on Romania, hoping to rescue the rest of this Balkan country from Soviet occupation. Another blow to Berlin came from Spain whose dictator Francisco Franco made it clear that German troops were not welcome on Spanish soil. Those units of the “Wehrmacht”, which had come to some Spanish towns to “fraternize” with representatives of Franco’s regime, had to leave back for France.[[381]](#footnote-381)

As for Bulgaria, Boris III and the Cabinet of Bogdan Filov did not intend to use the “*Bessarabian crisis*” for an assault on Romania, which was duly reported by the US minister to Sofia George Earle, although he strongly sympathized with the Bulgarian claims on Southern Dobruja. The absence of any belligerent intentions on the part of the Bulgarians was confirmed by the American diplomatic missions in Ankara and Belgrade.[[382]](#footnote-382)

After a stormy privy council King Carol II abandoned any hope for an efficient armed resistance against the Russians and in a telegram to Moscow the Romanians asked the Russians to determine the place and day for negotiations. However, in the eyes of Stalin and his henchmen negotiations were out of the question and Molotov exacted from Bucharest an immediate acceptance of the Soviet terms.[[383]](#footnote-383)

Late in the evening on June 27, 1940, the Bulgarian minister in Berlin Pûrvan Draganov and his Hungarian counterpart D.Stoyai tried to remind the director of the German Foreign Ministry Political Department Ernst von Woermann of their countries’ territorial demands with regard to Romania. Draganov even made an attempt to blackmail the Germans by pointing at the risk of Bulgaria retrieving Southern Dobruja thanks to Russia instead of Germany, but the two ministers were firmly told that Bulgaria and Hungary had to keep quiet and to refrain from taking advantage of the Bessarabian crisis.[[384]](#footnote-384)

However, unlike the Bulgarians, the Hungarian National Defense Council ordered the mobilization of the frontier battalions and their dispatch to the border with Romania. On the other hand, both the Balkans and Europe as a whole could hardly have any other impression but that of an ongoing close cooperation between Germany and Russia. A prominent Belgian socialist theoretician like Henri de Man went as far as to proclaim that “*the collapse of this rotten world is by no means a catastrophe, but a renaissance*”.[[385]](#footnote-385)

On June 28 the Hungarian minister in Sofia M.Ungert-Arnoti declared to the Bulgarian foreign minister Ivan Popov that Hungary was about to resort to force to get from Romania what she wanted. The Hungarian diplomat directly invited the Bulgarians to join in the action but Popov carefully replied that Bulgaria could hardly do that, because Hungary was able to rely on Germany, whereas Bulgaria was surrounded only by enemies.[[386]](#footnote-386)

Ten minutes to noon the Romanian government accepted all terms of the second Soviet ultimatum and asked only for a delay of the withdrawal of the Romanian troops from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Moscow “generously” accorded another twenty four hours, but the Russians didn’t observe even the deadline of four days they had determined themselves. Thus Romania lost 50,000 square kilometers with 3,700,000 inhabitants, 2,200,000 of whom were ethnic Romanians.[[387]](#footnote-387)

Among the remaining 1,500,000 people there was a significant number of Jews and there were whole towns, inhabited by a Jewish majority. During the entire interwar period this population had been subject to all sorts of harassments by the Romanian authorities and a not negligible number of Jews tended to regard the engulfment of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina by Russia as a kind of “liberation”. In reality the “Red Army” soldiers treated brutally even those Jews, who had welcomed them as “liberators”. Moreover, the Soviet authorities began to arrest almost all Romanian Jews and deported them to the Siberian death camps as Romanian spies. The ethnic Romanians were treated in an equally brutal way and only part of them managed to escape from the Communist “paradise” with a minimum of their personal belongings, because the Russians barred the bridges across the Prut River, which had become the new border line between Romania and the Soviet Union.[[388]](#footnote-388)

Moreover Stalin hurried to dispatch to the Danube delta a landing force and some seventy warships, ready to navigate upstream for an attack on Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Slovakia and Germany. In the face of all this King Carol II replaced Gigurtu as foreign minister with the former premier Constantin Argetoianu. In this way the King hoped to give a new impetus to the rapprochement with the German-Italian Axis rather than with the Soviet-Nazi alliance, even though Stalin and Hitler apparently preserved the solidarity with each other and this included also their murderous anti-Semitism. Thus in the night of June 28 to June 29 the NKVD carried out another cleansing operation in the Russian part of Poland and deported to the Soviet death camps some 80,000 people, 84 per cent of whom were Jews.[[389]](#footnote-389)

A similar terror was sweeping out the Lithuanians, the Latvians and the Estonians despite the fact that the three Baltic countries were still formally independent. Even the Lithuanian Prime Minister Kreve-Mickevičius, although appointed actually by the Soviet occupation authorities, didn’t know what was going on in his own country. He repeatedly asked for a meeting with the Russian premier and foreign minister Molotov and finally got an invitation. In the evening of June 29, 1940, Kreve-Mickevičius left for Moscow.[[390]](#footnote-390)

As before, his British counterpart Churchill was not at all touched by the Baltic tragedy, because he desperately needed foreign assistance. He urged the British ambassador to Washington DC Philip Kerr (Lord Lothian) to tell US President Franklin D.Roosevelt that until April the United States was so sure that the Allies would win that it didn’t care about helping the British, but now the United States was sure that the British would lose and didn’t see any sense in helping them. Churchill warned Roosevelt about the risk of Britain becoming a German protectorate, but in his letter to Lord Lothian he proudly added that Hitler had no serious chances in this respect.[[391]](#footnote-391)

The British prime minister was not only indifferent, but even favorable to the Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, which made the surviving countries in the area look for the protection of Germany. Shortly before noon on June 30 the Romanian King Carol II spoke to the German minister in Bucharest Fabricius about a possible political agreement between Romania and the Reich. However, Fabricius pointed out that such an agreement could not be directed against Russia, although the German intelligence services knew that Stalin had started a secret mobilization and that he was amassing troops in the Caucasus, activating his navy in the Black Sea and the Baltic region, and testing new weapons, including jet planes. Carol II apparently did not object to the remark of Fabricius, but he obligingly accused Britain of inciting the sudden Russian offensive in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the King warned that Germany had to take up quite soon an unequivocal position toward the Communist threat, as well as toward a likely resumption of Russia’s expansion in the Balkans.[[392]](#footnote-392)

Indeed Moscow kept inciting the Hungarians against the Romanians. The Russian minister to Budapest Nikolai Sharonov encouraged Hungary to take military action for the retrieval of Transylvania and the government of Pal Teleki intended to mobilize another army corps despite German objections. Southeastern Europe was therefore becoming a point of friction between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union but, for the time being, Stalin turned his attention to the final stage of the Baltic tragedy.[[393]](#footnote-393)

At 11PM on June 30 the Lithuanian Prime Minister Kreve-Mickevičius was received at last by Molotov in the Kremlin. After accusing Britain, France and Poland of the failure of the negotiations in the summer of 1939 for an anti-German alliance and after reminding of the Soviet “generosity” in giving back Vilnius to the Lithuanians, the Russian premier directly summoned his guest to admit “*the truth*” that “*small nations are bound to disappear in the future*”. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland “*should join the glorious family of the Soviet Union*”. The Soviet system was going “*to reign all over Europe*”, sooner in the Baltic region and later in the rest of the continent.[[394]](#footnote-394)

Kreve-Mickevičius tried in vain to make Molotov believe that this would push the Lithuanians to an armed resistance against the Russians. In his opinion Germany would hardly tolerate a Sovietization of the Baltic countries and, because of the precarious general situation, Russia herself was not interested in such developments. Molotov replied by exposing quite frankly the Soviet tactics, namely to wait for the exhaustion of Germany and then to conquer Europe: “*The final battle between the proletariat and the degenerated bourgeoisie will take place in Western Europe, somewhere in the Rhine zone and this battle will determine the fate of Europe forever.*” He recalled how Lenin had predicted that during the Second World War the Bolsheviks would assume power in Europe in the same way as during the First World War they had assumed power in Russia. In conclusion Molotov emphasized that the Lithuanians and the rest of the Baltic nations had to “*accept without hesitation the leading role of the Communist Party*”, whose “*decisive intention is to unify the whole of Europe and to introduce the new order*”.[[395]](#footnote-395)

At this very moment the Soviet command had already prepared a new military plan for a two-front war against Germany and Japan. Yet the stress was put on the west. According to the Russian estimates Germany and her allies, namely Italy, Romania, Hungary and Finland, would be able to concentrate against Russia 233 divisions, 10,550 tanks, 13,900 planes and hardly more than 18,000 cannons. It was considered that 180 Russian divisions would be enough to smash this force by a surprise attack, the more so as the Soviet divisions were to be additionally reinforced by 14 tank brigades and 172 air force regiments.[[396]](#footnote-396)

Despite the ongoing concentration of “Red Army” units on the western border of Russia, Germany didn’t display too much concern about Stalin’s intentions, while the French government under marshal Pétain decided to move from Clermont-Ferrand to the even smaller resort town of Vichy. This only enhanced further the humiliation of France in front of Germany. For their part the Free French under general de Gaulle created their own intelligence services to lead the armed resistance to Nazi occupation and to the collaborationist regime of Pétain.[[397]](#footnote-397)

At 10AM on July 1, after a short and horrible night, Kreve-Mickevičius was summoned by the Soviet deputy foreign minister Vladimir Dekanozov for a sightseeing tour of Moscow. After the tour Dekanozov invited the Lithuanian premier to a lunch but, to the disappointment of the Russian, Kreve-Mickevičius did not drink alcohol. The Lithuanian prime minister summarized the situation by stating that Russia apparently wanted to restore her old imperial borders from the times, preceding World War I. Dekanozov harshly objected that his guest was wrong: “*The Second World War will put in our hands the whole of Europe, which will fall in our lap like a ripe fruit. The Third World War, which is inevitable, will bring us victory over the entire world.*”[[398]](#footnote-398)

The lunch was attended by a third man, who was introduced as Vasiliev and who was an agent of the secret services. According to the Soviet diplomatic practices, each meeting between a Russian official and a foreigner had to be supervised by such an informer. At a particular moment of the conversation Vasiliev inserted the surprisingly frank remark that “*today the only real enemies*” of the Soviet Union were Germany and Japan. Germany was going to lose the war even without Soviet assistance and she would be cut into pieces. Japan would be also defeated. As for the United States, it would never intervene in favor of the tiny Baltic countries and, by the way, it would be destroyed by the greed of its own people, whose only god was the dollar. Britain and France were disregarded as declining powers. France, went Vasiliev on, was predetermined for the USSR, since there were as many as 50,000 Communist “*tutors*”, working for the Soviet interests there: “*For quite a long time we’ve been able to take over the government and we’ll do it, if necessary.*”[[399]](#footnote-399)

Stalin was somewhat less frank about Germany, when he finally received the new British ambassador Stafford Cripps. The Russian dictator interpreted Churchill’s personal letter as a desperate call for help and he accused Britain again of trying to incite Germany against the Soviet Union. He reiterated that the prewar power balance was over and that Germany did not strive for hegemony in Europe. Stalin emphasized once more that his aim was to avoid war with Germany, but he admitted that Germany might attack Russia in the spring of 1941, if Britain had lost the war by that time. He added, though, that the German military successes did not threaten the “*friendly relations*” between the Soviet Union and Germany.[[400]](#footnote-400)

As if to confirm Stalin’s impression about the weakness of the United Kingdom, the Romanian king Carol II proclaimed that he rejected the guarantee, provided by Britain on April 13, 1939, for Romania’s territorial integrity and independence. This guarantee had been given unilaterally by London immediately after the annihilation of Czechoslovakia by Hitler and now the Hungarians thought that Carol II’s proclamation removed the risk of British intervention in case of an assault on Romania for Transylvania. However, the Hungarian premier Pal Teleki flatly refused to look for Stalin’s cooperation to that effect.[[401]](#footnote-401)

Yet the Hungarians mobilized new recruits and that was accompanied by incidents on the border with Romania. Germany and Italy warned Hungary that in case of an attack on Romania the Hungarians would be left alone, without any assistance on the part of Germany. A similar warning was addressed to Bulgaria and the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop instructed the minister to Bucharest Fabricius to inform the Romanians about the efforts of the Reich to restrain the Hungarians and the Bulgarians from undertaking an action against Romania.[[402]](#footnote-402)

As before, Hitler was interested in maintaining peace in Southeastern Europe and in preventing Russia from further operations in the area, because he planned to concentrate his army for the annihilation of Britain. On July 2, 1940, he ordered the High Command to prepare immediately an assault on England, although he was aware that a landing was possible only after achieving a predominance in the air. For the time being, the “Fuehrer” didn’t set a date for the beginning of the invasion.[[403]](#footnote-403)

On the same day Carol II handed over to Fabricius his personal message to Hitler. The King stressed again that he denounced the British guarantee and declared his decision to cooperate closely with Germany. Yet he warned that according to the available information the Russians intended to cross the newly established boundary in order to take hold of the Romanian oil fields. Carol II directly asked Hitler for protection, by dispatching a military mission to Romania.[[404]](#footnote-404)

While Hitler was planning his assault on England, Britain spared no efforts to counteract the Nazis and their allies or, rather, their subordinates. At 9:30AM on July 3 vice-admiral James Somerville, who was in command of the British fleet at Gibraltar, had arrived with his ships at the Algerian port of Mers-el-Kebir and tried to negotiate the passage of the French vessels into the hands of the Royal Navy. The French refused to do so and the British responded by an attack, which resulted in the death of 1,350 French sailors. At the same moment the United Kingdom Admiralty took possession of every French combat ship, anchored in British ports. The French didn’t oppose any significant resistance but, nevertheless, the action caused the death of two British and one French sailor. France retaliated by an air raid on Gibraltar.[[405]](#footnote-405)

Under these circumstances Churchill and his Cabinet could hardly pay any attention to the annihilation of the Baltic countries, even if they wished to. The fact was that on the day of the Mers-el-Kebir battle the Soviet occupation authorities in Estonia ordered an immediate holding of parliamentary elections, although it was entirely unconstitutional. The same was to happen in the remaining two Baltic countries but, significantly enough, the German minister to Kaunas Erich Zechlin hurried to notify the Lithuanian foreign ministry that the Reich could do nothing for Lithuania and that in conformity with the Soviet demands the German authorities were about to seal completely the border between Lithuania and Germany.[[406]](#footnote-406)

At the same time the Nazi leadership planned to cleanse Europe from the Jews. The initial idea was to force France to cede to Germany the island of Madagascar and to deport the Jews there. True enough, the Jews would be entitled to have their own police forces, mayors, post offices and railway administration. In fact, though, the Jews had to hand over practically all their possessions to the Reich, whereas Madagascar was to be transformed into a huge ghetto after the model of the already existing Jewish ghettoes in a number of cities under Nazi occupation, where the Jews had indeed their own police forces, but where many of them were dying daily of hunger and diseases.[[407]](#footnote-407)

Hitler decided also to use the Romanian king’s pledges of loyalty for forcing out new territorial concessions, this time in favor of Hungary and Bulgaria. At 2AM on July 4 von Ribbentrop dispatched a telegram to the German minister in Bucharest Fabricius, instructing him to point out to Carol II that Germany had strongly advised Hungary to keep quiet and then to ask the monarch whether he was ready to negotiate with the Hungarians and the Bulgarians about a revision of the status quo. Fabricius had to urge the King to acknowledge the fact that if he wished to grant his nation a secure existence in the future, he had to cede the lands, inhabited by Hungarians and by Bulgarians respectively. When he got this message later on the same day, Carol II reiterated that the Bulgarian problem was easier than the Hungarian one and remarked that Hitler hadn’t answered his question about a close cooperation with Germany.[[408]](#footnote-408)

In order to prove the seriousness of his willingness to cooperate with the Reich, the King replaced Gheorghe Tatarescu as premier with Ion Gigurtu, who had maintained close business contacts with the Germans and was appreciated by the German Foreign Ministry as a man always favorable to the Reich. The position of Romanian foreign minister was assigned to Mihail Manoilescu, who was also known for his sympathies with National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy. Moreover, Manoilescu had a friendly attitude toward the self-made Romanian totalitarian organization, namely the Legion of Archangel Michael or the “Iron Guard”. The very leader of the Legionnaires, Horia Sima, was appointed minister of the cults and arts.[[409]](#footnote-409)

The Romanians had hardly any choice because even the Serbs reacted as Russophiles rather than allies of Romania. According to a report of the American legation in Belgrade the leading circles of Yugoslavia interpreted the annexation of Bessarabia by Russia not as a tragedy, but as a strategic measure of the Soviet Union against a possible attack. In this respect the Bulgarians were much more reserved, although they were suspected of trying to avail themselves of the opportunity to retrieve Southern Dobruja. The fact was that a member of the Bulgarian parliament, Georgi Lipovanski, published an article, which actually denied not only the legend about the Russophilia of the Bulgarians, but also the myth about their would-be Slavic origin. On behalf of his colleagues in the National Assembly Lipovanski thanked the Hungarian deputies for the sympathies they expressed toward the Bulgarians and pointed out that the Bulgarian-Hungarian friendship was nourished by the closeness of the two nations to each other.[[410]](#footnote-410)

On July 5 France severed her diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom as a response to the British attack at Mers-el-Kebir. The cabinet of Churchill tried to maintain an unofficial contact with Vichy, but Pétain’s deputy, Pierre Laval, declared in a public speech that the government intended to put France on the same footing as the German and Italian “*constitution*”. Otherwise, Laval warned, Hitler was going to force his system upon the French.[[411]](#footnote-411)

This was, no doubt, only one of too many signs of Germany’s ever stronger positions in the West, but Stalin apparently endeavored to create further difficulties for Hitler in the East. Thus Molotov reiterated to the Hungarian minister to Moscow Kristofi that the Hungarian demands with regard to Romania were as justified as the Soviet claims on Bessarabia. For his part, on July 6 the new Romanian foreign minister Manoilescu transmitted to the German minister in Bucharest Fabricius a message of Carol II to Hitler that the King was ready to start direct negotiations with Hungary and Bulgaria, but in fact the Romanians intended to protract, the more so as the government faced a strong resistance of too many quarters to any concessions to the Hungarians. The monarch refused to receive the leaders of the democratic opposition and reacted to the demand of an influential military like general Ion Antonescu to form a new government by ordering his arrest.[[412]](#footnote-412)

This nervousness was enhanced further by the ongoing rumors that the Balkans would be the next victim of Soviet aggression after the Baltic countries. In any case, at this particular moment Stalin was trying to seize the gold reserves of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in foreign banks. However, Britain was not likely to hand over the Baltic gold deposits to Russia, while the United States was blocking immediately the deposits of each country under foreign occupation. Only Sweden did not have the courage to confront Stalin on that issue.[[413]](#footnote-413)

On July 7 the Italian foreign minister Ciano paid a visit to Hitler and von Ribbentrop in Berlin to hear from the “Fuehrer” that he had not yet made a definitive decision about Britain. Hitler declined Ciano’s offer of ten land divisions for an assault on the United Kingdom, but he readily accepted the assistance of 30 Italian air squadrons to the same effect. The German dictator shared the mistrust of Italy in Yugoslavia and Greece for their close contacts with France before the surrender of the Third Republic, but he warned Ciano that an Italian attack on Yugoslavia might encourage Hungary to move against Romania, which in turn might induce a Russian advance toward Constantinople and the Straits. Moreover, Hitler pointed out, such a development might cut off all oil supplies from Romania to Germany and Italy. Ciano had to agree to the postponement of Italy’s designs on Yugoslavia until the end of the war against England. Hitler didn’t conceal his suspicion that the Hungarians might hope for a joint attack with Russia on Romania. Eventually Ciano had to wait for the arrival of the Hungarian premier Teleki and Foreign Minister Csaky, expected in Munich within a couple of days.[[414]](#footnote-414)

Hitler’s concerns about Southeastern Europe were accompanied, among other things, by new measures of reaffirming the German power in Denmark. For the time being, the Danes could maintain further their democratic and multiparty system of government and Stauning could continue to serve as prime minister, but he had to separate from a number of his closest associates and to replace Peter Munch with Erik Scavenius as foreign minister. Munch had served this position for 11 years, but Scavenius was ready to conclude a customs and monetary union with Germany.[[415]](#footnote-415)

Late in the afternoon of July 8 even neutral Sweden had to yield to the pressure of Germany and to conclude an agreement for the transit of German troops to Norway and back. The German soldiers could not exceed 500 people daily and they could carry only their personal weapons, while the rest of the armaments had to be shipped separately. The Germans were also entitled to transport across Sweden all sorts of goods and war materials, but each convoy needed a special permission of the Swedish authorities. Moreover, the number of troops going to Norway had to be equal to the troops coming back from there. The Swedish foreign minister Günther went that far in compromising with the Reich because, among other things, he feared another Russian invasion of Finland.[[416]](#footnote-416)

The same evening the Lithuanian government was forced to agree to hold parliamentary elections exactly as required by the Russian occupation authorities. The elections in the three Baltic countries were to take place in one and the same day and everybody was aware that this was going to be the final step of the destruction of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as sovereign states. The Lithuanian premier and foreign minister Kreve-Mickevičius sent in his resignation, but he survived miraculously the Sovietization of his country and in 1944 he even succeeded in escaping to the West. It was on July 8, 1940, again that Britain and the United States froze all the assets of the three Baltic countries, but Switzerland and Sweden assented to hand over these deposits to Stalin.[[417]](#footnote-417)

The elections themselves were scheduled for July 14 and 15, but the non-Communist candidates were immediately submitted to all sorts of intimidations into withdrawing in advance from the vote. Many gave up running for parliament, but not few were also those who presented their program, as required by the authorities. Facing violent mass rallies, staged by Soviet agents and local Communists for a Soviet republic and for the glorification of Stalin, these candidates had the courage to demand a strict observation of the respective constitutions and of the alliance treaties with the USSR.[[418]](#footnote-418)

This was, no doubt, a spontaneous move and paradoxically enough, a similar spontaneity characterized the Nazi friends in Romania. On July 9 the Legionnaires or the “Iron Guards” left the government on the ground that it was “*bolshevizing*” the country. In fact Horia Sima and his supporters were furious that King Carol II had not given the entire power into their hands, but the German envoy to Bucharest Fabricius reported to Berlin that Prime Minister Gigurtu and Foreign Minister Manoilescu were “*good*” and efficient for the Reich.[[419]](#footnote-419)

On July 10 at dawn Communist bands and police units invaded the homes of the non-Communist candidates in the Baltic countries, aimed their guns at them and forced them to sign declarations of withdrawal from the election. All of them were proclaimed “*enemies of the people*”, but those who, even under these circumstances, failed to sign such a declaration, were simply deleted from the lists as “*nationalists*”. Somewhat later the opposition activists were warned not to spend the following night at home in order to avoid arrest. Thus the Estonians, the Latvians and the Lithuanians had to vote for a single list of government candidates after the example of Bolshevik Russia, National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy.[[420]](#footnote-420)

As for terror in the territories under Nazi occupation, Hitler restricted himself, for the time being, to confiscating the real estate, the stores, the shares, the securities, the copyrights, etc., belonging to the “enemy”. The enemy consisted mostly of citizens of Britain and her colonies and dominions and France and her colonial possessions. At the same moment the Nazis made their first large-scale air raid on England. The main target was the southern coast, mostly Kent.[[421]](#footnote-421)

Meanwhile Marshal Philippe Pétain summoned to Vichy the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies to entrust him with practically dictatorial powers, including those of President Albert Lebrun, who in fact resigned. Pétain was entitled to dissolve both houses of parliament and to work out a new constitution, which was to replace the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies with consultative Legislative Assemblies. The French Republic was to be changed into a French State, based on Labor, Family and Fatherland. The vote took place under the impact of rumors that all those who would reject the proposal might not find their way home. Thus only 80 deputies and senators rejected the bill and another 17 abstained from voting, while as many as 589 people approved the act. That was the end of the Third Republic and of democracy in France.[[422]](#footnote-422)

On the same day the Hungarian premier Teleki and Foreign Minister Csaky were received by Hitler, von Ribbentrop and Ciano in Munich. Csaky was carrying a personal letter for Hitler by the Hungarian regent and dictator Horthy, who pretended that the Romanians had always cheated and betrayed their allies and that they were not sincere in their rapprochement with Germany. According to Horthy the historical mission of the Hungarians was to defend Europe against the East, but Hungary would be able to do it further only by controlling the Carpathians. Transylvania was Europe’s only natural fortress and, in Horthy’s words, “*Germany was the only country, which might prevent Russia from seizing the entire world step by step*”.[[423]](#footnote-423)

In the conversation that followed, Teleki began with presenting a number of political, historical and ethnographical arguments in favor of the Hungarian claims on Transylvania, but Hitler pointed out that the main enemy of the Axis Powers was England, which had to be conquered by a life and death struggle. Germany was therefore interested in peace in Southeastern Europe and in the security of the Romanian oil fields. The “Fuehrer” didn’t conceal his skepticism about the capacity of Hungary to wage a war on Romania, but he showed a sympathy with the Hungarian demands and recommended direct negotiations between Budapest and Bucharest on the issue. Hitler promised to warn the Romanians that a German-Romanian cooperation had to be preceded by a satisfaction of the Hungarian and Bulgarian territorial wishes. Ciano wholly agreed with Hitler and it was finally decided that Hitler and Mussolini would address a joint message to King Carol II of Romania.[[424]](#footnote-424)

In this way Romania had lost her former allies, without getting any new ones. France had neither the means, nor even a desire to restore her former positions in Eastern Europe. On July 11 Pétain proclaimed himself “*Head of the French State*” with Pierre Laval as his deputy and heir. The marshal was entitled to appoint the ministers and his decrees had the force of law. He became also commander in chief of the armed forces.[[425]](#footnote-425)

For their part, the Romanians announced their withdrawal from the League of Nations, which had lost any significance as a world peace-keeping organization. Under German pressure Carol II released general Ion Antonescu from jail. True enough, the general was confined to a monastery at Bistriţa, but there he could receive regularly the German minister to Bucharest Fabricius and the German special envoy for economic questions Hermann von Neubacher to discuss with them his plans for a close alliance of Romania with Germany and Italy.[[426]](#footnote-426)

As a matter of fact, Romania had to choose between two evils, because Hitler apparently endeavored to catch up with Stalin in terror. Thus in the night of July 11 to 12 the NKVD carried out a new wave of arrests in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with as many as 2000 people arrested in Lithuania. For their part the Nazi authorities introduced the racist legislation of National Socialist Germany in Alsace. This resulted in the expulsion of 10,000 Jews from the region and it was openly proclaimed that Alsace had to be cleansed from all “*antinational elements*”, who had served the French cause before the war.[[427]](#footnote-427)

The new wave of terror in the Baltic countries was accompanied by further concentration of Russian troops on the Romanian border with ever more frequent raids of “Red Army” units on Romanian territory. On July 13 Carol II reaffirmed his departure from the League of Nations and in a personal message to Hitler the King agreed to reach a peaceful territorial arrangement with Hungary and Bulgaria. Moreover, the monarch reiterated that he entrusted himself and his country to the protection of National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy.[[428]](#footnote-428)

As if to confirm the hopes of the Romanians and the rest of the Eastern Europeans for possible cleavages in the Soviet-Nazi alliance, Molotov declared late in the afternoon of the same day to Ambassador von der Schulenburg that Moscow refused in fact to cede to Germany the small strip of Lithuanian territory around Mariampole. The area was assigned to Germany by the Treaty for Friendship and for the Border, but it was intolerable for Russia to lose a section of the strategic railway and road connection from Kaunas, which was still the capital of Lithuania, to Koenigsberg in East Prussia (today Kaliningrad in the Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea between Poland and Lithuania). Perhaps even more important was the fact that Stalin was unable to give a territory, once conquered by the “Red Army”, back to “capitalist restoration”. The only thing Molotov could do was to assure that the Reich would be allowed to evacuate the ethnic Germans from Lithuania, including from the region of Mariampole.[[429]](#footnote-429)

Another unpleasant surprise for the Nazis came from the genuine joy with which the French celebrated on July 14 the anniversary of the 1789 revolution as their national holiday. The festivities took place in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, as if these territories were still parts of the Third Republic and not under the Vichy regime of Pétain, who had just denied the basic ideas of this revolution. For his part, the Free France leader general de Gaulle carried out in London a parade of the armed forces under his command. In a radio speech Prime Minister Churchill apologized for the assault on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir and congratulated the French, expressing the hope that France would soon rise again as the world champion of freedom and human rights.[[430]](#footnote-430)

The grim irony was that exactly on the same day the Soviet authorities displayed in the Baltic countries all the brutality of the Communist interpretation of “free elections”. Actually, the very notion of “election” as “choosing or selecting by vote” was replaced by supporting a single list of candidates and in most polling stations people were not allowed to cast their ballots secretly. Significantly enough, at least two official and only possible candidates in Lithuania didn’t even know that they were running for a seat in parliament. By that moment the NKVD had arrested between 15 and 20 thousand “*enemy elements*” and as many as 1,480 oppositionists had been executed in Latvia only. “*Enemies of the people*” were also declared all those, who abstained from voting. The very voting was, therefore mandatory, but it was easy to instruct reliable Communists to vote more than once at various polling stations, the more so as the streets were full of armed “Red Army” soldiers.[[431]](#footnote-431)

Yet the Soviet authorities were not quite satisfied with the turnout and decided to continue the sinister “electoral” show one day more. However, on July 15, when Hitler addressed with the approval of Mussolini a letter to King Carol II, pointing out that if Romania wished to survive, she had to cede territories to Hungary and Bulgaria, the turnout gave the Communist candidates only 81.6 per cent in Estonia. That was far below the usual 99 per cent in the Soviet Union proper, although as many as 35,119 ballots were simply forged. Both in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia a significant part of the voters were “Red Army” soldiers, dressed as civilians, which, according to the official data, resulted in 99.2 per cent of the cast ballots for the Soviet list in Lithuania and 97.6 per cent of the cast ballots in Latvia. According to some unofficial reports, though, the Lithuanians, who took part in the “election”, amounted barely to more than 14-15 per cent of those who were supposed to vote.[[432]](#footnote-432)

Churchill and de Gaulle were hardly touched by the Baltic tragedy. The Free France leader, in particular, was already planning his first operation for taking possession of the French colonies, controlled by the regime in Vichy. This included an assault on Dakar, the capital of Senegal and of French Equatorial Africa, as well as an attempt to conquer Chad, whose governor Félix Éboué was a native African, hostile to the surrender of France. Chad was strategically important as the southern neighbor of Libya, which was an Italian colony at the time.[[433]](#footnote-433)

At the same moment the German High Command set 13 elite divisions for a landing in England. The first invasion wave had to consist of 90,000 soldiers, but on the third day of the operation there had to be already 260,000 German troops on British soil, reinforced by six tank and another three motorized divisions. As a diversion the “Wehrmacht” had to simulate an attack on Eire too but, if necessary, that assault might become real. Within a couple of days there had to be 39 divisions in all, but the commander in chief of the navy admiral Raeder objected that such a landing would need almost 20,000 vessels, which would simply ruin the German economy. Moreover, the Germans risked losing all their ships, if amassed in such a way.[[434]](#footnote-434)

Meanwhile the German intelligence services intercepted and decoded a report of the Yugoslav minister to Moscow Milan Gavrilović about how the formal head of the Soviet state Mihail Kalinin had declared to him that there should be a fight against the constantly increasing demands of the Germans. Kalinin obviously was instructed by Stalin to say that and the Russian dictator probably wanted to encourage in this way the British to resist further to the Reich. Nevertheless, in a speech to the Reichstag Hitler reiterated that the Nazi-Soviet understanding had established definitively the spheres of the two powers, but at the same time he emphasized that until that moment neither of the two powers had made even a single step beyond their respective zones. Thus Hitler acknowledged the annexation of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and part of Finland to Russia, but he apparently hinted that Stalin shouldn’t want more.[[435]](#footnote-435)

Quite a lot of the German concerns were about Petsamo on the Finnish outlet to the Arctic Ocean. Petsamo (now Pechenga in Russia) was one of the most important production sites of nickel on Earth. The Reich needed badly this metal and, thanks to direct agreements with Finland, concluded until that moment, Germany was entitled to at least 60 per cent of the nickel, produced there. However, the Russians wanted to take over the British-Canadian concession and the Germans were not sure whether Stalin would grant them the same quota further. These fears were confirmed by a declaration of Molotov to von der Schulenburg in Moscow that the Soviets would not tolerate a third party in the region. Yet Hitler didn’t want to tease Stalin by insisting on more than 60 per cent of the Petsamo nickel and, for the time being, he left the Finns to defend their interests alone in the face of an ever more brutal Soviet pressure.[[436]](#footnote-436)

On July 18 the NKVD network staged a series of “spontaneous” mass rallies, demanding the transformation of the Baltic countries into “Soviet Republics”, which in fact meant the completion of their annihilation as sovereign nations. In this regard Denmark had an incomparably happier fate, although on July 19 the cabinet of Thorvald Stauning had to announce the withdrawal of their country from the League of Nations.[[437]](#footnote-437)

At 7PM Hitler addressed another peace proposal to the English in a speech to the Reichstag. The “Fuehrer” was astonishingly careful and even avoided his usual manner of raising his voice to hysterical proportions. He didn’t fail to attack personally Churchill, but he asserted at the same time that he didn’t see any reason for continuing the war. The German dictator went so far as to claim that he didn’t want to destroy the British colonial empire and he was, no doubt, sincere in his belief that it was not the English people, but their politicians who wanted war. Indeed Hitler appreciated the English as representatives of the “superior Aryan race”, but he thought that Britain’s attitude was dictated by the Jews. He failed to make any concrete overtures about Poland and the rest of the countries, occupied by the “Wehrmacht”, and the BBC flatly rejected the new German peace proposals, without even consulting previously the Cabinet of Ministers.[[438]](#footnote-438)

The British were obviously encouraged by developments in the United States. In a speech after his nomination by the Democratic Party for a third term, President F.D.Roosevelt explicitly attacked the dictators, although without mentioning their names. The German chargé d’affaires in Washington DC Thomsen obligingly reported to Berlin that as a representative of the Jewry Roosevelt endeavored to prolong the war as much as possible.[[439]](#footnote-439)

Hitler was by no means indifferent to the growing American assistance to Britain and on July 21 he ordered the High Command to secure, as soon as possible, a superiority to the Royal Air Force in order to achieve the surrender of Britain by September 15. The “Fuehrer” worried also about the apparent rapprochement between the United Kingdom and Russia and he instructed the High Command to work out plans for a war against Russia. It was thought at this moment that Stalin would be barely able to mobilize more than 50 to 60 divisions against 80 to 100 German divisions and that the campaign, therefore, would not last more than five weeks. The aim of such a campaign would be the defeat of the “Red Army” or, at least, the occupation of a sufficiently large territory and a Ukrainian state, a union of the Baltic countries, Byelorussia, Finland. Hitler went so far as to determine the end of September 1940 as the beginning of the attack against Stalin, but the chief of the High Command and newly promoted marshal Keitel objected that this was quite inappropriate because of the bad weather conditions in Russia after September.[[440]](#footnote-440)

Up to this moment Hitler himself had contributed to the annihilation of the Baltic countries, which were proclaimed on that same July 21 “Soviet Socialist Republics” by the hastily summoned “people’s” parliaments. Although the deputies were carefully screened by the NKVD, the parliament buildings of the three countries were full of heavily armed “Red Army” soldiers. The transformation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia into mere provinces of Communist Russia was accompanied by the confiscation of the farms and by the nationalization of the industry.[[441]](#footnote-441)

Hitler kept demonstrating an indifference toward the fate of the three Baltic nations, but he was apparently worried by the aggressiveness of Stalin and Mussolini and he decided to invite most of the Southeastern European leaders to Germany. At the same time, he accelerated the Nazification of the occupied territories, by banning, for instance, the return of the French refugees to the border zone on Germany and Belgium. Thus the Nazi authorities confiscated some 110,000 hectares of land from the French. Significantly enough, despite the checkpoints on the demarcation line between the “free” and the occupied zone of France, Communist publications could be disseminated freely in the occupation zone.[[442]](#footnote-442)

As if to confirm Hitler’s concerns, a Turkish diplomat at the embassy in Berlin hinted to two German Foreign Ministry officials that in case of a Russian attempt to annex two regions in the Caucasus and to establish two military bases in the Dardanelles, Turkey would fight. The two German officials refrained from any comment but, on the other hand, the German minister to Belgrade von Heeren reported that the resumption of diplomatic relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union had encouraged not only the Communist, but also the Russophile tendencies both in Serbia and Croatia. According to von Heeren the Russophiles in Yugoslavia didn’t consider that there was a substantial difference between Russia and the Soviet Union. Even members of the government expected from Russia protection against the German-Italian threat and hoped that a war between the Reich and the Soviet Union was inevitable and that such a war would make the situation of Yugoslavia easier.[[443]](#footnote-443)

Feelings in Finland were completely different. Stalin transferred new “Red Army” troops toward the Finnish border and many people thought that Russia was about to launch another assault on the Finns. Against this background Molotov demanded the removal of the former foreign minister V.Tanner from the Finnish government altogether, the demilitarization of the Aland Islands at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia and the right of the Russian consul to control this demilitarization. The only German reaction so far was to sign another agreement with Finland, providing for the delivery of minimum 60 per cent of the nickel, extracted at Petsamo, to Germany.[[444]](#footnote-444)

As before, the Finns could hardly rely on any significant foreign assistance against Russia and the same applied to Switzerland with regard to the Rome-Berlin Axis. On July 25, 1940, the commander in chief of the Swiss armed forces general Guisan summoned his commanding officers to Ruetli, where representatives of the three peasant communities of Schwyz, Uri and Unterwalden had founded the Swiss Confederation by an oath on August 1, 1291. In a speech, as well as in an order, issued the same day, Guisan pointed out that there had been never before so many troops on the Swiss borders and that the assault could come from everywhere. The very existence of Switzerland was at stake and the middle of the Alps had to be transformed into a redoubt where the Swiss army would never surrender. In accordance with Guisan’s instructions and recommendations the Swiss began to mine as many as 1000 factories, as well as some of the most important mountain passes.[[445]](#footnote-445)

For the time being, though, there were still no German plans for an action against the Swiss, since the Reich was worried about developments in Southeastern Europe, the more so as this region kept attracting the appetites of Stalin. At noon on July 26, 1940, von Ribbentrop received the Romanian premier Gigurtu and Foreign Minister Manoilescu in Salzburg. Von Ribbentrop accused Romania of conducting until recently a pro-British policy. By stating that Lithuania and Latvia had made the same mistake, he clearly hinted that Romania might be engulfed by Russia in a similar way. By this blackmail von Ribbentrop wanted to force the Romanians to agree with radical territorial changes in favor of Hungary and Bulgaria, but Gigurtu and Manoilescu tried to persuade him that it was preferable to carry out a more moderate revision of the borders, combined with a population exchange. In their endeavor to please the Nazis, the two Romanians proclaimed the readiness of their country to participate in the National Socialist economic system. This didn’t prevent von Ribbentrop from insisting upon direct negotiations of the Romanians with the Hungarians and the Bulgarians, as soon as possible.[[446]](#footnote-446)

In the afternoon Gigurtu and Manoilescu were taken by von Ribbentrop to Hitler at his “Berghof” mountain residence. Not quite convincingly, Gigurtu tried to make the “Fuehrer” believe that by creating a Unity Party under his personal leadership, King Carol II intended to reorganize everything after the German model. Gigurtu showed himself ready to concede territories to Hungary and Bulgaria, but he asked Hitler for guarantees and reiterated the demand for a “*German military mission*” in Romania. For his part, Hitler admitted, among other things, that the ethnic Germans in the region preferred Romanian to Hungarian rule, but he emphasized the interest of the Reich in peace in Southeastern Europe on the basis of a “*reasonable*” and “*just*” arrangement between Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria. After such an arrangement, Hitler continued, Germany and Italy would provide Romania with the guarantees the Romanians asked for. At a particular moment of the conversation Foreign Minister Manoilescu inquired if an arbitration could be expected in case the negotiations with Hungary and Bulgaria came to a deadlock. Hitler and von Ribbentrop hurried to reject the idea on the ground that the Vienna Award of November 1938, when an agonizing Czechoslovakia was forced to cede new territories to Hungary, had been unsatisfactory, especially for the Hungarians.[[447]](#footnote-447)

In the morning of July 27, 1940, it was the turn of the Bulgarian premier Bogdan Filov and Foreign Minister Ivan Popov to be welcomed by von Ribbentrop at the Salzburg railway station. Filov and Popov were encouraged by a declaration of the British legation in Sofia that the United Kingdom supported the Bulgarian demand for the return of Southern Dobruja. Although the British had made it clear that, unlike Dobruja, the United Kingdom didn’t support the claims of Bulgaria on a territorial access to the Aegean Sea, the two Bulgarian statesmen felt quite easy, the more so as von Ribbentrop demonstrated a friendly behavior, reminding his guests of the German-Bulgarian “*brotherhood in arms*” during World War I. The German foreign minister revealed that the Reich had “advised” Romania to solve the territorial problems with Hungary and Bulgaria by way of direct negotiations, while Filov pointed out that the Bulgarians wanted the restoration of the pre-1913 border with Romania. For his part, von Ribbentrop reiterated his belief that the problem of Dobruja was easier than that of Transylvania.[[448]](#footnote-448)

At that very moment Gigurtu and Manoilescu were already in Rome to hear from Mussolini and Ciano exactly the same arguments, as they had heard from Hitler and von Ribbentrop. At 4PM Filov and Popov were received in their turn by Hitler, who didn’t fail to repeat that in case of war of the Southeastern European countries against each other Germany would lose any interest in the region in the same way as she had lost her interest in the Baltics. The sinister conclusion of the German dictator was that this didn’t mean that other powers would lose their interest, hinting at the annexation of the Baltic countries by Stalin. Immediately after these words, though, the “Fuehrer” almost shouted out that if some power decided to infringe upon the economic interests of the Reich in Southeastern Europe, there would be a “*terrible strike back*”, and Filov got the impression that Hitler meant Russia. Nevertheless, after declaring his support for the Bulgarian demands, the “Fuehrer” asserted again his readiness to guarantee the new status quo together with Italy and Russia or, at least, together with Italy. At the end of the meeting Filov asked Hitler whether, according to the Nazi-Soviet agreements, Bulgaria did not belong to the Russian “sphere of interests”. The “Fuehrer” assured him that there had been no provisions for the Balkans, although the Reich had to concede to Russia the right to a revision, since the Germans themselves claimed the same right.[[449]](#footnote-449)

On July 28 Hitler received the Slovak president Jozef Tiso, accompanied by his premier and foreign minister Vojtech Tuka and the new interior minister Sano Mach, who had been imposed at the insistence of the Germans. It was a pilgrimage rather than a state visit and Tiso reassured his hosts how happy the Slovaks were under the fatherly protection of the “Fuehrer”. Hitler didn’t mention Russia explicitly, but he pointed out that Germany would not allow any other great power to move toward the Carpathian Mountains. Eventually Tiso rejected vehemently the rumors about an inclination of Slovakia toward Russia within the framework of a Pan-Slavist strategy, but his attempt to raise the issue of the 400,000 Slovak minority in Hungary was declined.[[450]](#footnote-450)

Hitler apparently didn’t have major difficulties in imposing his will on the small countries of Southeastern Europe, but the same did not apply to the Spanish dictator Franco, who decided that it would be better if Spain remained a neutral instead of a nonbelligerent power. To that effect he met with Salazar and the two leaders reaffirmed the bilateral Spanish-Portuguese friendship and nonaggression treaty, signed back in March 1939. It provided for assistance if one of the contracting parties was attacked by a third power. Moreover, Spain and Portugal took the obligation to avoid participation in blocs, directed against the other contracting party. The meeting of Franco with Salazar resulted in an additional protocol, which acknowledged the existing alliances of the two countries with third powers and which provided for mutual consultations for the defense of their sovereignty. In this way Franco acknowledged the traditional alliance of Portugal with Britain, while Salazar found in the treaty with Spain a counterbalance of that same alliance.[[451]](#footnote-451)

Stalin didn’t seem to be very interested in these developments, but on July 29, 1940, Molotov required from Ambassador von der Schulenburg an information about the talks of Hitler with the Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Slovak statesmen. The Germans obligingly informed their Russian allies that they had advised the Romanians to satisfy the Hungarian and Bulgarian territorial demands but, naturally enough, they carefully failed to disclose that the Soviet threat had been also an important topic during these talks.[[452]](#footnote-452)

The problem was that the Hungarian-Romanian negotiations were about to come to a deadlock even before their start. Thus Hungary intended to require the cession of the western Romanian city of Oradea as a pledge that the Romanians would begin to negotiate at all, whereas the very rumors about more territorial losses gave a strong impetus to the democratic opposition against the personal regime of King Carol II. This made Prime Minister Gigurtu declare that he considered a population exchange as the best solution.[[453]](#footnote-453)

In the face of increasing Soviet aggressiveness and in preparation of the battle for England, Hitler took new measures for an ever stricter economic control of the occupied countries. A special German envoy was sent to Copenhagen to achieve a customs and currency union between Denmark and the Reich. The idea belonged to the new Danish foreign minister E.Scavenius, but the prospects of a total submission of Denmark to Germany made him much more reluctant and he began in fact to protract the talks.[[454]](#footnote-454)

The Cabinet of Winston Churchill spared no efforts to please Stalin, but Britain was still alone in her fight against Germany. True enough, the United States constantly increased its deliveries of weapons, but this aid was not sufficient. In a letter to US President Roosevelt Churchill pointed out that the United Kingdom badly needed the immediate dispatch of at least 50 to 60 warships, but the Americans were ready to provide the vessels only in exchange for leasing some British naval bases in the western hemisphere.[[455]](#footnote-455)

On July 31, 1940, Hitler summoned his commanders to discuss with them the plans for a landing in England. It turned out, though, that such an operation could not begin before September 15, but the best time would be May 1941. Yet the “Fuehrer” insisted upon September, 15, 1940, as the beginning of the action for the conquest of Britain, and he decided that the destruction of Russia would deprive the English of their last hope for rescue. In his view the assault on Russia had to take place in May 1941, although it remained to be seen whether Finland and Turkey would be interested in such an attack. Everything seems to indicate that the German dictator still regarded a war against Russia only as an option and that he didn’t preclude altogether a possible arrangement with Stalin for the partition of the British colonial empire.[[456]](#footnote-456)

Hence, at least on the surface, Hitler endeavored to demonstrate a continuing solidarity with Stalin. Thus the German ambassador to Tokyo Eugen Ott assured the Japanese foreign minister Yosuke Matsuoka that no conflict could be expected between the Reich and the Soviet Union. For that reason, Ott added, Japan had to reach an agreement with the Russians. As a matter of fact, at this very moment the Russians and the Japanese had already started negotiations for a nonaggression pact.[[457]](#footnote-457)

The Soviet response to the Nazi gestures was more or less similar. On August 1, 1940, the Russian rubber-stamp Supreme Soviet was summoned to admit officially Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”. In a speech on that occasion Molotov reiterated emphatically that the “*friendly Soviet-German relations*” were rooted in “*the fundamental state interests of both the USSR and Germany*”. Molotov didn’t fail to boast how the Soviet borders were extended to the Baltic coast and claimed that the annexation of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina resulted from the respective “*free elections*”. As if to confirm the Communist interpretation of free elections and democracy, the NKVD deported at this very moment as many as 43,890 people to the Siberian death camps from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina only. The number of the Estonians, who died in the same camps, amounted to more than 60,000 people out of a total population of one million.[[458]](#footnote-458)

Despite Molotov’s kind words about Germany, Stalin kept amassing troops on the western borders, including in Bessarabia. In this volatile atmosphere the Romanian premier Gigurtu and Foreign Minister Manoilescu invited on August 2, 1940, a number of leading Transylvanian personalities to tell them that they had to be prepared for new territorial sacrifices. Manoilescu pointed out that if Romania did not start negotiations with Hungary and Bulgaria or if the failure of these negotiations led to a war of Romania with her neighbors, Russia was bound to intervene in order to secure the possession of the Danubian delta and of the Carpathian ridge and that would mean the end of Romania. Few were those who advocated rejection and resistance. In this respect the historian Aurel Lupaş proposed to solve the territorial controversy with Bulgaria at any price because, in his view, such an approach would enable Romania to oppose an efficient resistance to Hungary. The leader of the Legionnaires Horia Sima, who was also present, openly recommended a radical change of the entire political system in Romania by people, enjoying the confidence of Hitler and Mussolini.[[459]](#footnote-459)

Eventually the Romanians entered into negotiations with the Bulgarians, but not with the Hungarians, although the Germans warned the Hungarians to abandon the idea of demanding the city of Oradea as a pledge. On August 3, when the Italians invaded British Somalia from Italian Somalia, the Romanian ambassador to Belgrade Victor Cadere arrived in Sofia and met with King Boris III, Prime Minister Filov and Foreign Minister Ivan Popov. Cadere insisted on a population exchange and claimed that two towns, namely Silistra on the Danube and Balchik on the Black Sea had to remain in Romania, but his Bulgarian interlocutors reminded him that both Germany and Britain, as well as France had acknowledged the right of Bulgaria to retrieve Southern Dobruja according to the pre-1913 borders. Cadere noticed, on the other hand, that the Bulgarians had no ambitions about Northern Dobruja and that they wished by no means a common border with the Soviets. Somewhat later he reached an agreement with Filov for a bilateral Bulgarian-Romanian conference to take place in Craiova, Romania.[[460]](#footnote-460)

At this moment Stalin already had the Russian translation of Hitler’s plan for a naval and air assault on England. The Soviet leader waited for a German landing on the British Isles before launching his own offensive by a direct blow to Germany through Poland, as well as by the occupation of Finland in the north and of Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Northern Greece, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles in the south. The network of Soviet agents had to provoke “*social revolutions*” in all these countries. According to a training instruction for Russian spies Finland was to be annexed by the Soviet Union within a couple of months.[[461]](#footnote-461)

As before, the British didn’t have any reason whatever to worry about another Soviet aggression from the east, but they didn’t seem to show any serious concern even about the Italian invasion of British Somalia. For the time being, Prime Minister Churchill just approved a plan, proposed by the Free French leader general de Gaulle, for the conquest of Dakar by an entirely French force, escorted by British ships and aircraft. Churchill gave also his accord to providing the United States with military bases in the British overseas territories.[[462]](#footnote-462)

Ironically enough, Mussolini apparently endeavored to involve even Stalin in his destructive plans for Yugoslavia. To that effect he suggested to his foreign minister and son-in-law Ciano to achieve a dramatic agreement with Russia, so that Italy would be able to attack Yugoslavia during the second half of next September. The “Duce” went so far as to propose a visit of Ciano to Moscow, but Ciano was quite skeptical about the idea.[[463]](#footnote-463)

Anyway, the Germans warned the Italians to refrain from any action against Yugoslavia and Mussolini had to reorient his ambitions mainly against Greece. On August 11, 1940, the Fascist press began a noisy anti-Greek campaign for the assassination of a criminal, glorified by the media in Italy as an Albanian national freedom fighter. Rome might have been encouraged by the protests of Berlin against the deviation of Athens from neutrality. Greece was suspected of exporting strategic materials, produced with German assistance, to Britain and Turkey, but the Italian press campaign started as late as a month after the assassination of the Albanian “hero”. In reality Albania had been part of Fascist Italy since April 1939 and this incident meant that Mussolini intended to excuse his assault on Greece, scheduled for the end of September, 1940, as a war for the defense of the Albanian minority rights in Greece.[[464]](#footnote-464)

August 11, 1940, was also the day when, after a series of apparently futile preliminary meetings, the Hungarians agreed to send a delegation to Romania, as proposed by the Romanians. However, that seemed to be the only point in common, because Budapest insisted upon a territorial revision before any population exchange, whereas Bucharest saw it exactly the other way around, namely, that any change of the borders had to be preceded by a population exchange. By that time, in full accordance with a well-established Communist practice, the Soviet authorities in Bessarabia were launching a large-scale brainwash campaign for the creation of a separate Moldavian “nation” and a separate Moldavian language out of the Bessarabian Romanians. As a first step, several thousands of people with a more pronounced Romanian identity were massacred immediately, while another 150,000 were deported to the extermination camps. This was accompanied by a further concentration of “Red Army” units on the new Russian-Romanian border.[[465]](#footnote-465)

The ever more threatening Soviet behavior prevented by no means the “Komet” German warship from leaving the naval base that Stalin had obligingly granted to the Germans on the White Sea in the Far North. The German vessel began a long trip along the Russian Arctic coast, in order to penetrate the Pacific through the Bering Strait and to destroy or, at least, to damage a maximum number of British ships by a series of surprise attacks. The “Komet” could make the trip only with the assistance of Soviet icebreakers.[[466]](#footnote-466)

This new step in the Soviet-Nazi military cooperation was marked, among other things, by a joint Nazi-Fascist pressure on Switzerland. In the afternoon of August 13 the German minister to Bern O.Koecher presented a written protest against the speech and the order general Guisan had issued more than two weeks ago. The note, whose text had been carefully coordinated between Berlin and Rome, accused Guisan of instigating the Swiss public opinion against Germany and Italy. A couple of minutes later the Italian minister to Bern Attilo Tamaro handed over an almost identical text to the Swiss Political Department (foreign ministry) too.[[467]](#footnote-467)

In fact Hitler was much more nervous about Britain than about Switzerland and even Soviet aggressiveness was assessed from the viewpoint of a secure rear for the assault on England. On August 14 he disclosed to the commander in chief of the land forces von Brauchitsch his fears that a collapse of the British Empire would be profitable to Japan, Russia, Italy and America, but not to Germany. The “Fuehrer” immediately added, though, that peace with England was impossible as long as Churchill remained prime minister. Facing a Soviet pressure from the east and a possible British landing in Scandinavia, the German dictator decided to provide the Finns with a certain quantity of weapons and war materials, but in exchange for that Helsinki had to permit the transit of some antiaircraft artillery pieces through Finland for Norway.[[468]](#footnote-468)

On August 15, 1940, 801 German bombers and 1,149 fighters took off from the occupied French coast to England. The air force of the Reich was under the command of Hermann Goering, who thought that in four days he would be able to eliminate the British fighters, defending the south English coast and that in four weeks he would complete the destruction of the Royal Air Force. The British shot down 75 German aircraft against only 34 losses of their own planes, but the Germans managed to reach the outskirts of London, damaging four aviation plants and five airfields.[[469]](#footnote-469)

The beginning of the Battle for England encouraged also the Italians. In the night of August 15 to 16 the Italian troops succeeded in conquering the entire British part of Somalia on the eastern African coast. That was probably the only Italian victory during World War II. Britain badly needed arms, ammunition and war materials and Prime Minister Churchill was ready to lend a number of bases in the western hemisphere to the United States for 99 years.[[470]](#footnote-470)

On August 16 at noon the Hungarian delegate Andras Hory and his Romanian counterpart Valer Pop finally met in the Romanian city of Turnu Severin on the Danube to discuss possible territorial changes between the two countries. An unsurmountable obstacle was the fact that the Hungarians intended to retrieve a substantial part of Transylvania, while the Romanians didn’t want to cede any territory at all. Britain encouraged the Romanians to resist the Hungarian claims, although the relations between London and Bucharest had deteriorated significantly. The only thing Pop and Hory could agree upon was to postpone the conference for three days.[[471]](#footnote-471)

This stalemate was the last thing Hitler wanted, the more so as on August 17 the Germans lost 71 aircraft in exchange for only 27 British planes. The German dictator was more successful in urging Mussolini to abandon all his plans for Yugoslavia and Greece. On the same day the “Duce” sent a humiliating letter to the “Fuehrer”, stating that Italy accepted entirely the viewpoint of Germany not only about Greece and Yugoslavia, but also about Russia. Thus Italy had to avoid concrete engagements with Russia regarding the Balkans and to follow the German tactics of maintaining a certain level of tension between Russia and Turkey in order to prevent these two countries from getting too close to each other again. For his part, Hitler took new preventive measures against Stalin, by dispatching another 15 infantry, 6 armored and 3 motorized divisions to the east.[[472]](#footnote-472)

The Romanian-Hungarian negotiations in Turnu Severin resumed on August 19 at 10:45AM, when the Romanian delegate Valer Pop read a long memorandum that any revision of the borders had to be preceded by a population exchange. The Hungarian delegate Andras Hory responded by demanding another break of the session on the ground that the Hungarians needed some time to study the memorandum. The Hungarian minister in Bucharest Laszlo Bardossy stated to his German counterpart Fabricius that the Romanian response was “*unsatisfactory*” and that the whole matter had to be put to the arbitration of Germany, but Fabricius rejected this suggestion.[[473]](#footnote-473)

Some difficulties appeared also in the Romanian-Bulgarian negotiations, which started on the same day at noon in the Romanian city of Craiova. The Romanian delegate Alexandru Cretzianu tried again to demand some corrections of the new border line, but his Bulgarian counterpart Svetoslav Pomenov firmly reminded him that Romania had already agreed to the pre-1913 border. Under these circumstances the main controversy was about timing, since the Romanians wanted to withdraw from Southern Dobruja after the harvest, whereas the Bulgarians wanted to take possession of the region before winter.[[474]](#footnote-474)

The talks in Turnu Severin were resumed only at 8:30PM with Andras Hory insisting upon a territorial solution before any population exchange. Valer Pop reiterated that the solution had to be based on ethnicity and that before any territorial changes Hungary had to indicate the number of Hungarians to be evacuated from Transylvania. These fruitless debates lasted during the whole night of August 19 to August 20 and eventually Hory left Turnu Severin for consultations in Budapest.[[475]](#footnote-475)

Hungary and Romania proved to be unable to overcome their antagonism even in the face of Soviet aggression. During the same night Russian units opened fire on Romanian border guards and killed several people, while Stalin assigned 8,694,000 rubles to the Executive Committee of the Communist International, another 1,140,000 rubles to the Comintern youth structures and another 12,400,000 gold rubles for “*special expenses*” of the Comintern.[[476]](#footnote-476)

The most spectacular evidence of Stalin’s iron control over the Communists all over the world came on the following day, when an agent of the NKVD, Ramon Mercader, who had successfully penetrated the most intimate circle of Leon Trotsky as a lover of his secretary, killed the former rival of Stalin for the succession of Lenin in a most bestial way. For years Trotsky had been living in Mexico City in a villa, transformed into a real fortress, but he was hardly any threat to the Russian dictator any more, although he had served as the main excuse for the 1936-1938 Moscow show trials. Trotsky’s assassination was above all a clear sign of what was prepared for every Communist, who dared even the slightest hint at a more independent attitude toward Stalin.[[477]](#footnote-477)

These developments didn’t seem to attenuate the irreconcilability between Bucharest and Budapest. On August 21 the Romanian minister to Berlin Alexandru Romalo presented to the German Foreign Ministry an atlas of German, Italian and Hungarian maps of Transylvania, showing the predominantly Romanian ethnic character of the region. On that basis Romalo declared that the Hungarian demands were unacceptable and that the problem had to be submitted to the arbitration of Hitler, but the Germans reiterated again that the Reich didn’t want to arbitrate.[[478]](#footnote-478)

Another blow if not to Hitler’s plans, at least to his prestige, was the formal refusal of Denmark to negotiate further for a customs and currency union with Germany. Even less pleasant for the “Fuehrer” was the fact that despite his noisy agreement with the German viewpoint of the Balkans, Mussolini kept amassing troop in Albania against Greece. The “Duce” even boasted to his chief of staff marshal Pietro Badoglio that Hungary and Bulgaria would certainly join the Italians in their assault on Yugoslavia and Greece.[[479]](#footnote-479)

At 5PM on August 23 King Carol II of Romania summoned again his Privy Council in order to find a way out of the deadlock with Hungary. The opinions were as opposite as before. Thus the former premier Argetoianu claimed that Romania’s agreement with the cession of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria was a big mistake, because it created a dangerous precedent with regard to Hungary. However, another former premier, Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, pointed out that the cession of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria would strengthen Romania’s position toward Hungary. For his part the famous historian Nicolae Iorga, who had been also a prime minister for a while, warned that the present situation of Europe was by no means permanent. As for Southern Dobruja, he made the following statement: “*I am a nationalist, but not an expansionist, I was against the annexation… If we win friendship at this price, we wouldn’t pay too much.*” Most of those present were much more hostile to the idea of ceding even parts of Transylvania to Hungary and eventually the Privy Council reaffirmed that any territorial changes with Hungary had to be preceded by a population exchange on an ethnic basis.[[480]](#footnote-480)

In the night of August 23 to August 24 the Romanian high command gave a red alert order because of the concentration of another mass of Russian troops in Bukovina and Bessarabia. This could only complicate further Hitler’s concerns about the Balkans, the more so as his commanders had strong doubts about the very feasibility of a landing in England. To make things even worse, in a new raid the German aviation missed some aircraft plants and oil deposits near London and dropped the bombs on residential areas of the city. The British High Command thought to retaliate by attacking civilian targets in Germany, while the Greek Prime Minister Metaxas decided to declare a general mobilization in response to the ongoing concentration of Italian troops in Albania.[[481]](#footnote-481)

On August 24 the Soviet authorities massacred the surviving “Trotskyites” in the concentration camps, while the war minister Timoshenko issued an order, subordinating all military schools to the General Staff of the “Red Army”. These included 13 military academies, 54 infantry schools, 52 aviation schools, 3 cavalry and 8 tank schools, 3 chemical schools and as many as 25 military political schools for the ideological brainwash of the army officers and soldiers.[[482]](#footnote-482)

On the other hand, the “Red Army” intelligence service reported that the Germans intended to transfer as many as 150 divisions to the east. At the same time, in preparation of the landing in England, the Nazi occupation authorities in Alsace and Lorraine banned the use of French in public places as a form of subversive activity. All signs in French had to be removed and all French books had to be confiscated not only from the libraries, but also from private individuals. This completed the annexation of the two regions by Germany, despite Hitler’s promises to respect the territorial integrity of France.[[483]](#footnote-483)

On the same day another 1,000 German aircraft attacked the British radio stations and airfields. The Nazi command would maintain a similar pace for the next two weeks but, to Hitler’s displeasure, Andras Hory and Valer Pop met in Turnu Severin again only to attest the unsurmountable differences between Hungary and Romania. Hory also complained that the Romanians had transferred new divisions from Dobruja to Transylvania against Hungary, but in fact the Hungarian government under Teleki intended itself to launch an assault on Romania. Eventually, by the same evening the negotiations in Turnu Severin were suspended altogether.[[484]](#footnote-484)

In the night of August 24 to August 25 the Royal Air Force retaliated by carrying out its first raid on Berlin. There were no significant damages but these were the first British bombs, dropped on the German capital, despite the assurances of Goering that such bombings were impossible. At the same moment the Russians opened fire on the Romanians in the most northern part of Romania, while an entire Soviet airborne regiment was spotted in Bessarabia. Last, but by no means least, Molotov reiterated to the Hungarian minister to Moscow Jozsef Kristofi that the Soviet Union “*acknowledged the Hungarian claims on Romania and agreed with their implementation*”.[[485]](#footnote-485)

Hitler ordered the dispatch of another 10 infantry and 2 armored divisions from the west to Poland for the defense of the Romanian oil fields. He also decided that, in case of a Russian assault on Finland, Germany had to occupy Petsamo for the nickel deposits there. Until that moment, as noted by the chief of staff of the German land forces general Halder, the troops of the Reich, stationed in Poland, could hardly secure “*the customs service*”. In fact, the “Red Army” could easily reach Berlin without meeting any serious resistance but, instead of moving against the Germans, the Russians were quite cordial in assisting the German “Komet” war ship in her long trip across the Arctic Ocean to the Pacific through the Bering Strait.[[486]](#footnote-486)

An indirect blow to the Rome-Berlin Axis was the proclamation, issued on August 26 by the governor of the French colony of Chad Félix Éboué that his territory passed over from the Vichy regime to the Free French under general de Gaulle. That was the beginning of the gradual conquest of the African possessions of France by the Free French forces. The only thing the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop could do for the moment, was to warn the Greeks to refrain from mobilization and to accuse them again of siding with England.[[487]](#footnote-487)

Moreover, von Ribbentrop phoned up several times Ciano to express his concerns about the Hungarian-Romanian dispute. He announced his decision to invite the foreign ministers of Hungary (Csaky) and Romania (Manoilescu) to Vienna for a “*friendly advice*”. Ciano agreed with the idea and summoned the Italian ministers Pellegrino Ghiggi from Bucharest and Giuseppe Talamo from Budapest for consultations in Rome. Von Ribbentrop did the same with the German ministers Fabricius and Otto von Erdmannsdorff, who had to come to Berlin from Romania and Hungary respectively. Manoilescu was ready to submit the case to the arbitration of Germany, but he hoped that the Romanians would have the opportunity to present their point of view.[[488]](#footnote-488)

By the evening hours of August 27 Hitler had already made his decision and under his terms the Romanians had to cede a significant part of Transylvania to the Hungarians in order to make the new border close enough to the Romanian oil fields, enabling in this way a quick German reaction in case of a sudden threat. The “Fuehrer” ordered the preparation of 5 armored and 3 motorized divisions for the occupation of these oilfields by August 31. The Hungarian foreign minister Csaky was invited to Vienna together with his Romanian counterpart Manoilescu. The Italian foreign minister Ciano was to attend also the conference as representative of the other arbitrating power. Csaky had the privilege to be accompanied by Prime Minister Teleki as an “observer”, but neither the Hungarians, nor the Romanians were supposed to make any comments.[[489]](#footnote-489)

At approximately the same time Free French forces, amounting to hardly more than two companies, succeeded in taking over another African colony of France, namely Cameroon between Chad and the Gulf of Guinea. French Congo and Ubangi also acknowledged the authority of Free France, while Prime Minister Churchill fixed September 19 as the day of an assault on Dakar and urged US President Roosevelt to implement the agreement for the delivery of American arms in exchange for the lease of bases in the British overseas territories and dominions. Churchill warned, among other things, about an imminent Italian attack on Greece.[[490]](#footnote-490)

On August 28 Ciano was received by Hitler in “Berghof”, only to agree entirely with the views of the German dictator, who didn’t conceal his fears of a Russian intervention in case of a clash between Hungary and Romania, because nobody knew, as he put it, the scope of Russia’s interests. The Hungarians themselves risked losing some of their territories in favor of Russia but, nevertheless, the “Fuehrer” admitted that he was ready to support the Hungarian claims, because Romania, just like Yugoslavia and Greece, was essentially an enemy of Germany and Italy. However, Hitler pointed out, after solving the Hungarian-Romanian dispute, Germany and Italy had to guarantee the new borders of Romania.[[491]](#footnote-491)

At that moment the Russians had concentrated as many as 30 divisions in Bukovina only, but the Soviet war minister Timoshenko obviously thought that the “Red Army” was not yet ready for attack because of a desperately low discipline. He went to inspect the western military districts, but the German command had no way of knowing all this. The only thing it did was to postpone the operation for the defense of the Romanian oil fields for September 1.[[492]](#footnote-492)

On August 29 the Hungarian foreign minister Csaky and Prime Minister Teleki arrived in Vienna, where von Ribbentrop and Ciano submitted them to a brutal blackmail, threatening to abandon Southeastern Europe to Stalin, if the Hungarians didn’t accept unconditionally the award of Germany and Italy. Somewhat later it was the turn of the Romanian foreign minister Manoilescu to go through the same kind of psychological inquisition. The Romanians were simply told that they had either to accept unconditionally the award or to wait for the complete destruction of their own country. As if in support of Germany and Italy, the TASS Russian news agency published in the following morning a protest declaration, accusing solely Romania of the border incidents, which had occurred some 12 days ago and which had caused the death of several Romanian border guards, but not of a single Soviet soldier.[[493]](#footnote-493)

At 1:30PM on August 30 Manoilescu, Csaky and Teleki were introduced into the Belvedere Palace. It was only at this moment that Manoilescu could see on a map the territories that Romania had to cede to Hungary and he fainted. Barely brought to his senses, the Romanian foreign minister had to sign the award without any discussion. Csaky did the same and in this way Hungary was given Northern Transylvania, including the city of Cluj (Kolozsvar) and the region of the Szeklers. The whole territory amounted to 43,000 square kilometers with 1,176,433 Romanians, 911,550 Hungarians and 307,163 other ethnicities, according to the Romanian census, or 1,347,012 Hungarians, 1,006,353 Romanians and 163,926 Germans, Ukrainians and other ethnicities, according to the Hungarian census. In other words, more than one million Romanians were transferred to Hungary, while some 400,000 Hungarians remained on Romanian territory. The Romanian troops and authorities had to leave the area within 15 days. Those who opted for Romanian citizenship had to leave for Romania too and the same applied to the Hungarians in Romania. The only consolation for the Romanians was a special written declaration of Germany and Italy, which guaranteed the integrity and inviolability of the remaining Romanian “*national territory*”, after the settlement of the Southern Dobruja issue with Bulgaria. The Germans promised also to provide the Romanians with a military mission, tanks, antiaircraft artillery and an aviation squadron.[[494]](#footnote-494)

As early as in the afternoon of the same day the Second Vienna Award was met with ever more violent protests all over Romania. There were demands for a new government of “*national resistance*” and in quite a lot of cities and towns the protesters took full possession of the streets, chanting slogans not only against King Carol II, but also against Hitler and Mussolini. The leader of the officially banned, but still existing National Peasant Party Iuliu Maniu directly warned Carol II that, because of his personal regime, he bore the entire responsibility for his acts and, hence, there was no alternative for him but to abdicate.[[495]](#footnote-495)

In the evening of August 31 the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg informed officially Molotov about the Second Vienna Award. The Russian premier accused the Germans of failing to consult the Soviet Union in advance about the matter according to Article 3 of the Nonaggression Pact of August 23, 1939. In fact Stalin was so infuriated by the territorial guarantees, given by Germany to Romania that he was ready to suspend all forms of cooperation with the Reich, but his closest advisors managed to dissuade him from such drastic measures. Thus the Russians duly accompanied the “Komet” war ship to the Bering Strait and in the next couple of months the Germans would sink as many as nine British vessels in the Pacific Ocean.[[496]](#footnote-496)

The only Anglo-Saxon response, for the time being, was the agreement Britain and the United States reached at last for a closer cooperation. According to the agreement the USA had to deliver to the United Kingdom 50 destroyers that could be used against aircraft and U-boats. In exchange for that the United States was entitled to use for a 99-year period a number of British bases in Newfoundland, the Bermudas, the Bahamas, Jamaica, Trinidad, etc. By that moment as much as 69 per cent of the Americans believed that a German victory might jeopardize seriously the security of the United States. Moreover, they were worried about the ongoing expansion of the Japanese, who occupied French Indo-China with the forced accord of the Vichy government.[[497]](#footnote-497)

In the night of September 2 to September 3 King Carol II released general Ion Antonescu from confinement and sent two cars to take him to Bucharest, intending to entrust him with the formation of a new Cabinet of Ministers. Initially Antonescu wanted to form a “national unity” government, but the leaders of the Peasant Party Iuliu Maniu and of the Liberals Constantin Bratianu declined the offer. The two men were certain in the final victory of Britain, but they thought that, for the time being, the government had to enjoy Hitler’s confidence. Hence Antonescu decided to head a government, supported by the totalitarian and pro-Nazi Legion of Archangel Michael, but key ministerial and administrative positions were to be taken over by people, personally loyal to him.[[498]](#footnote-498)

In the eyes of the Legionnaires that was the moment for storming the power exclusively for themselves. In the night of September 3 to September 4 their protests degenerated into an open mutiny, but the police and the army succeeded in putting it down. Yet Prime Minister Gigurtu sent in his resignation and at 20 minutes past noon on September 4 Carol II appointed Antonescu premier. At 4AM on September 5 the King provided the general with emergency powers, but the new prime minister hurried to stop all questioning and punitive measures with regard to the rebels. As it might be expected, this could only give a new momentum to the “Legionnaire Revolution”, but demands for the abdication of Carol II came practically from everywhere and late in the same evening Antonescu declared to the monarch that he had to abdicate, because the government was not able to guarantee his personal safety any more.[[499]](#footnote-499)

As a matter of fact, the tragic drama of the Romanians had resulted to a great extent from the efforts of Hitler to pacify Southeastern Europe. At that very moment the “Fuehrer” had some reasons to believe that he was getting the upper hand in the Battle for England. He was confident enough to abandon the naval base Stalin had offered him on the Kola Peninsula section of the Arctic coast and the German command thanked the Russian dictator for the services, provided by him until then.[[500]](#footnote-500)

At 6:10AM on September 6 King Carol II finally signed an act of abdication in favor of his son and successor Michael, who was only 19 years old. Antonescu kept his promise to secure the personal safety of Carol II while leaving Romania for Switzerland. One of the results was that Antonescu concentrated in his hands the legislative, the judiciary and the executive power. He agreed to withdraw the Romanian troops from Northern Transylvania in full conformity with the Second Vienna Award, but like his predecessor, he failed to ratify officially the award.[[501]](#footnote-501)

For his part, Hitler transferred another 12 divisions to the Polish-Romanian border for the eventual defense of the Romanian oil fields, although Stalin seemed to be more interested at this moment in Finland than in the Balkans. Anyway, on the same day the Finns saw no alternative but to sign an agreement with the Russians for the transit of “Red Army” troops and arms through Finland for the Soviet naval base in Hanko. Russia was entitled to a maximum of four trains daily, but the Finns could not inspect the interior of these trains.[[502]](#footnote-502)

In the evening of September 6 the German air force made the first of a series of assaults on London. Hitler believed that the English might surrender even without a landing of the “Wehrmacht”. However, Stalin surprised him with another cold shower, by publishing a declaration of the TASS Russian news agency, which rejected vehemently all “rumors” about talks of the Soviet dictator with Ambassador von der Schulenburg for the annulment of the Anticomintern Pact and its replacement with an agreement between the USSR, Germany, Italy and Japan. The declaration explicitly pointed out that Stalin had not met the German ambassador for more than six months. It was both a warning that Stalin knew about the negotiations for a German-Japanese-Italian three-power pact and a tacit encouragement of the British to continue their resistance.[[503]](#footnote-503)

Yet the very fact that the Reich kept endeavoring to rescue the ethnic Germans in the Baltic region, by assuring their migration to Germany, clearly indicated that Hitler had abandoned his plans for Germanizing the European part of Russia and that, despite the ongoing preparations for a war against Stalin, he still didn’t preclude a possible arrangement with the Russian dictator. The “Fuehrer” was even ready to abandon his claims on the strip of Lithuanian territory in exchange for a financial compensation. It was Stalin who saw no alternative to the assault on Germany and Europe, but after a long inspection of the western military districts, the Soviet war minister Timoshenko came to the conclusion that the “Red Army” was not yet ready for such an offensive. Timoshenko found out, among other things, that “*the inspected units have been trained better in defense operations, while the offensive operations have been mastered badly and, in some cases, extremely badly*”.[[504]](#footnote-504)

A special target of the forthcoming Soviet aggression was no doubt Romania and this could only accelerate the negotiations with Bulgaria. On September 7 the Bulgarian delegate Pomenov and his Romanian counterpart Cretzianu eventually signed in Craiova the treaty for the return of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria. The area amounted to 7,695 square kilometers with about 350,000 ethnic Bulgarians. Another 56,000 Bulgarians had to resettle from Northern Dobruja to Bulgaria in exchange for 56,000 ethnic Romanians, who had to leave Southern Dobruja for Romania. Moreover, Bulgaria had to pay one billion Romanian lei as compensation. The two contracting parties declared the new border line as “*definitive and eternal*” and engaged themselves to refrain from any territorial demands toward each other in the future. For most Bulgarians the Craiova Treaty was a triumph of justice. Many prominent Romanians had not been very happy with the possession of a Balkan region like Dobruja at all, but a not negligible number among them had also the bitter feeling that the Bulgarians had joined the Hungarians in the flock of vultures, which assaulted Romania after the brutal engulfment and Sovietization of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina by Stalin.[[505]](#footnote-505)

The Romanian leader general Ion Antonescu renewed the request of the former king Carol II for German military experts. Hitler decided to dispatch a military mission under the command of General Kurt von Tippelskirch, who had to prepare the defense of the oil fields near Ploiesti at some 60 kilometers to the north of Bucharest. Moreover, von Tippelskirch was to carry out the reorganization of the Romanian armed forces.[[506]](#footnote-506)

Yet Britain remained the main target of Hitler’s aggression. In the evening hours of September 7 six hundred and twenty five German bombers, accompanied by 648 fighters, made a devastating raid on London, destroying not only gas stations, power stations, warehouses and ports, but also some residential areas. The British thought that a land attack of the “Wehrmacht” was imminent, because nobody knew that Hitler had not yet fixed the day for a land assault. The next evening another raid caused the death of 842 people, but by concentrating on the civilian population, the Germans lacked enough aircraft for the airfields and radar stations and thus the Royal Air Force was able to recover from the blows.[[507]](#footnote-507)

The stubborn resistance of the United Kingdom accelerated Hitler’s plans for a vast alliance, directed against the Anglo-Saxon democracies. The aim of the alliance was to prevent the United States from entering the war in support of Britain, while the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop feared that if Germany didn’t side with Italy and Japan, the Italians and the Japanese might desert to the enemy as during World War I. On September 9 the German ambassador to Tokyo general Eugen Ott was received by the Japanese foreign minister Yosuke Matsuoka. Ott was accompanied by a special envoy and the two of them assured Matsuoka that the Reich didn’t need the help of Japan against England, but expected from Japan to prevent by all possible means the United States from entering the war and that Germany acknowledged and respected Japan’s political leadership in “*Greater East Asia*”. The first step was to reach an agreement between Germany, Italy and Japan and then to start immediately negotiations with Russia. To that effect Germany was ready to mediate for closer relations between Japan and Russia. Matsuoka inquired about the reliability of the German-Russian alliance and the Germans stated that relations between Germany and Russia were good and that Russia fulfilled all her obligations to the satisfaction of the Reich.[[508]](#footnote-508)

Actually the Soviet-Nazi alliance encountered a number of difficulties. In the same evening Molotov declared to Ambassador von der Schulenburg in Moscow that the behavior of Germany at the Second Vienna Award had not been entirely sincere, because there could be no doubt that the “*Soviet government*” was interested in Romania and Hungary. After annexing Northern Bukovina “only”, the Soviet Union explicitly had pointed out that it expected the Reich to support the claims on Southern Bukovina as well, but by guaranteeing Romania’s territorial integrity the “*German government*” had violated this agreement.[[509]](#footnote-509)

Meanwhile, in the night of September 10 to September 11 the British retaliated by dispatching 100 bombers to Berlin, where they succeeded in hitting the Reichstag building and the Chancellery. The Berlin Opera was also set on fire, but the Germans attacked the same night the Westminster Palace, the residence of the prime minister at 10 Downing Street and the Admiralty. To make things even worse, as a result of a series of unhappy coincidences, the British were unable to stop three cruisers and three destroyers of marshal Pétain’s navy to pass through the Gibraltar Strait and to head for Dakar, which put in serious risk the whole plan for the seizure of that African city by British and Free French forces.[[510]](#footnote-510)

The following day Stalin appointed Andrei Vyshinski Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs. Vyshinski had played a crucial part in the destruction of Latvia and his appointment suggested that Stalin did not intend to negotiate, but to dictate his own will, no matter of the contracting party. Significantly enough, the Finnish minister to Berlin T.M.Kivimäki asked State Secretary von Weizsaecker for some German diplomatic support in the continuing dispute with the Russians about the demilitarized status of the Aland Islands. Von Weizsaecker replied that, as the strongest power on the Baltic Sea, the Reich might join the respective international convention.[[511]](#footnote-511)

Kivimäki had no means to know anything about the secret agreement that was concluded between the German air force staff and the Finnish General Staff about the transit of 5,538 “Wehrmacht” soldiers in three consecutive groups through the territory of Finland to the most northern corner of Norway. Another 1,102 German soldiers had to stay in Finland for organizing the transit. In exchange for that the Finns could rely on more deliveries of arms and ammunition from Germany.[[512]](#footnote-512)

While most of the surviving eastern European countries felt an increasing pressure from Moscow, Spain was quite far away from the Bolshevik threat, but Franco was obviously torn between the wish to carry out his colonial ambitions and the desire to keep himself and his country out of the war. That was the idea of the personal letter to Hitler that Franco’s brother-in-law and interior minister Ramon Serrano Súñer had to hand over to the “Fuehrer” during his visit to Germany.[[513]](#footnote-513)

Franco was concerned also by the African ambitions of Mussolini. On September 13 the Italians launched an offensive from Lydia toward Egypt, which was formally a sovereign country, but under British protection. The forces of the United Kingdom on Egyptian territory were not negligible, but the British decided initially to withdraw in order to drive the Italians away from their supply bases. At the same time British naval units shelled the ports of Ostend, Calais, Boulogne and Cherbourg, as if to prove the futility of the German plans for assembling a powerful fleet to assault the southern English coast.[[514]](#footnote-514)

For his part the Romanian leader Antonescu did his best to please both Hitler and the Legionnaires. On September 14 he proclaimed Romania a “*National Legionnaire State*”. The Legion of Archangel Michael was transformed into a National Legionnaire Party, while the ban of all other political parties was confirmed. Antonescu reaffirmed himself as the leader (“*conducator*”) of the National Legionnaire regime, while the leader of the Legion Horia Sima became “*commander of the Legionnaire movement*” and deputy prime minister. Antonescu assumed the position of interior minister as well, while the Foreign Ministry was assigned to Mihail Sturdza, who had served until that moment as minister of Romania to Stockholm and Copenhagen. However, too many key positions went into the hands of the Legionnaires, who simply lacked a sufficiently influential and authoritative leader for a total takeover.[[515]](#footnote-515)

This didn’t prevent them from establishing a sheer reign of terror. A witch-hunt was launched against all more prominent people, who had opposed the Legion or simply did not show enough understanding of the Legionnaires. The “Romanianization” of Jewish property, claimed by the defunct founder of the movement Corneliu Codreanu, degenerated into a mere plunder that affected by no means “only” Jews. Moreover, just part of the confiscated possessions went to the state, while the rest was taken over by local bosses of the National Legionnaire Party. The non-Jewish industrialists and “*bourgeoisie*” had to pay a special ransom, most of which went also into the pockets of outstanding revolutionaries. This was accompanied by the creation of Legionnaire cooperatives, as well as of a “*Workers’ Legionnaire Corps*” but most sinister of all was the extralegal “*Legionnaire Police*”, which started to kill all “enemies” without trial.[[516]](#footnote-516)

In the night of September 14 to September 15, while another European country was seemingly falling under totalitarianism, the Royal Air Force assaulted the entire Atlantic coast from Antwerp to Le Havre and destroyed a large number of German vessels, including 84 barges at Dunkirk. A magazine with 500 tons of ammunition was also annihilated. By that time Hitler had postponed indefinitely the date of the landing in England and now the naval command of the Reich suggested that the vessels, already amassed for the landing, should disperse.[[517]](#footnote-517)

On September 15 England was attacked by another 200 German bombers and 600 fighters but, thanks to an improved radar system, the British managed to meet the assailants early enough to prevent them from reaching London. The Germans lost 54 aircraft against 36 British machines. The murderous raids would continue, but the Germans failed to damage the British aircraft plants, which kept producing more planes than the Third Reich. It was a turning point of the Battle for England, although initially neither Churchill, nor Hitler were aware of that.[[518]](#footnote-518)

In the middle of an ever more devastating war and under the growing pressure of National Socialist Germany, the Swedes held their regular parliamentary election. For the first time in the history of Swedish representative democracy a single party, namely the Social Democrats of Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson got an absolute majority of 134 seats out of 230 in the lower chamber of the Riksdag (a similar outcome would happen again only in 1968). The Conservative right lost two seats but the greatest damage was inflicted on the supporters of Stalin and Hitler. The local Communists lost two seats and kept only one deputy, whereas the Socialist Party, which had split off from the Communist Party to orient itself toward German National Socialism, lost all its six seats and remained with no representative at all. Despite this turnout Hansson preserved the broad national coalition, which included practically all political forces except Stalin’s Communists and the pro-Hitlerite Socialist Party.[[519]](#footnote-519)

That was the moment of the arrival of Serrano Súñer in Germany, after the British had promised more aid to Spain, mainly in food. This didn’t prevent Serrano Súñer from proclaiming that Gibraltar was Spanish and that Spain’s ambition was to extend her influence to Hispanic America. On September 16, at 11AM he was received by von Ribbentrop, from whom he concealed the promise of the British, but complained about the blockade, imposed by them. Apart from Gibraltar, he reiterated the claims on French Morocco, noting that Spain had not yet gotten a concrete reply of Germany in this respect. Von Ribbentrop met these claims with the remark that they needed a careful study and that Germany wanted the whole of Central Africa for herself. The German foreign minister made clear the interest of the Reich in Spain’s entrance into the war, but Serrano Súñer pointed out that in such a case Spain would need 600,000 tons of grain and 56,000 tons of gasoline monthly. Von Ribbentrop countered by demanding on Hitler’s behalf a military base on one of the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, while French Morocco could be eventually ceded to Spain, but without two cities where the Germans wanted to establish another two bases.[[520]](#footnote-520)

On the following day von Ribbentrop introduced Serrano Súñer to Hitler, who avoided even to mention the struggle against Communism as the main reason for his assistance to Franco during the 1936-1939 civil war, although he mentioned that there was a threat from the East and that Germany played a useful role as the eastern rampart of Europe. Yet the enemy was Britain, but the “Fuehrer” had abandoned the plans for a landing in England and intended to wage the war in other theaters, including Gibraltar. In view of the seizure of Gibraltar, Hitler needed a concrete engagement of Franco for an exact date of Spain’s entrance into the war. However, the German dictator was reluctant to satisfy the Spanish demands for weapons and war materials, while Serrano Súñer pointed out that, in case of an alliance between Germany, Spain and Italy, there wouldn’t be any need for special bases for the defense of the Canary Islands. Franco’s envoy made it clear that his leader and brother-in-law would not agree to German bases in the Canary Islands and French Morocco. For his part, Hitler insisted on the idea of a European Bloc, which had to include Africa as an integral part and which had to be raised against the bloc of North and South America. In the end the “Fuehrer” suggested a personal meeting with Franco at the Spanish-French border.[[521]](#footnote-521)

Hitler’s concern about the Atlantic coast of Africa could be only enhanced by the preparations for a joint British and Free French assault on Dakar. True enough, Churchill was ready to abandon the whole plan because of the six war ships, dispatched in Dakar by the Vichy regime, but de Gaulle insisted that the operation should be carried out and finally some additional British forces were put at his disposal. De Gaulle was encouraged by the fact that at about the same moment the French possessions in India and Oceania rejected the rule of Vichy and acknowledged the authority of Free France.[[522]](#footnote-522)

The ever more evident failure of the Reich to conquer Britain could only accelerate Stalin’s preparations for an assault on Hitler. On September 18, 1940, the Soviet war minister Timoshenko and the “Red Army” chief of staff Kiril Meretskov signed a plan for a two-front war against Germany and Japan. The military operations in the west were bound to include also Finland, Romania and Hungary and the first blow had to be delivered to the south of Brest-Litovsk (Brest or Brzesc), in order to cut Germany from the Balkans. 202 divisions had to be launched for the conquest of East Prussia and the heartland of Germany, while at least another 49 divisions were to annihilate Finland in less than two months. It was thought that the Reich would have some 230-240 divisions in all, while the Japanese would mobilize between 50 and 60 divisions.[[523]](#footnote-523)

On September 19 Hitler stopped by a formal order the amassing of vessels in the ports on the Channel for a landing in England, while his foreign minister von Ribbentrop was announcing to Ciano that in a couple of days Germany and Italy had to conclude a military alliance with Japan. That was a complete surprise for the Italians, but von Ribbentrop declared that the pact would guarantee the three powers not only against the United States, but also against Russia. Mussolini approved enthusiastically the idea, but he hurried to raise again his claims on Greece and Yugoslavia, by stating that Greece should be liquidated before the English would have time to look for refuge in the Greek ports after abandoning Egypt as a result of the Italian offensive. For his part, von Ribbentrop apparently didn’t even mention the Romanian request for a German military mission or, at least, Ciano failed to inform Mussolini about that, although in the same afternoon Hitler ordered the dispatch to Romania of a force, amounting to one motorized division, reinforced by tanks. The aim was to secure the defense of the Romanian oil fields against a possible attack by a “*third power*” and eventually to form bases for the German armed forces, in case a war against the Soviet Union became inevitable. Nevertheless, the “Fuehrer” thought that Stalin should be informed about the forthcoming presence of “Wehrmacht” units in Romania.[[524]](#footnote-524)

On the other hand, though, Germany intended to conceal from Russia the transit of German troops through Finland for the most northern part of Norway. In the afternoon of September 22 the Finnish minister to Berlin Kivimäki invited the state secretary of the German Foreign Ministry von Weizsaecker to a tea party, where the two men exchanged notes that formed the written agreement between Finland and Germany on the issue. Thus the transit of “Wehrmacht” units and war materials to and from Norway through Finland became officially permanent. Moreover, the Germans had to inform the Finns about each convoy only one day in advance. The Finnish premier Ryti was careful enough to warn the Americans at quite an early stage that Finland was going to allow the transit of German troops. Now the Finns hurried to notify also the diplomatic representatives of Russia, Britain and Sweden about the transit arrangement with Germany. As a whole, there was in Helsinki a feeling of relaxation, since the very presence of German troops provided Finland with a stronger position against the constantly growing Russian pressure.[[525]](#footnote-525)

On the following day the British and Free France forces tried at last to capture Dakar by peaceful means, but the local authorities remained loyal to Vichy and opened fire on the assailants. The battles continued until September 25, when general de Gaulle, who commanded personally the operation, decided to withdraw. The Vichy regime retaliated by two consecutive air raids on Gibraltar, but even Hitler seemed to be impressed by the assault on Dakar, despite its failure.[[526]](#footnote-526)

It was only on September 26 that von Ribbentrop instructed the German chargé d’affaires in Moscow Werner von Tippelskirch to inform Molotov that Germany, Italy and Japan were about to conclude a mutual assistance pact, which was not directed against Russia, but against Britain, the democracies and the warmongers. Von Tippelskirch had to stress that the Nonaggression Pact and the Treaty for Friendship and for the Border remained in full force and to inform Molotov that von Ribbentrop intended to address a personal letter to Stalin and to invite Molotov to a visit in Berlin for a reinforcement of the German-Russian friendship.[[527]](#footnote-527)

**IV.STALIN AND THE THREE-POWER PACT**

Their throat is

an open sepulcher;

with their tongues

they have used deceit;

the poison of asps is

under their lips.

(Rom. 3: 13)

On September 27, 1940, the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, his Italian counterpart Count Galeazzo Ciano and the Japanese ambassador to Berlin Saburo Kurusu signed in the German capital an alliance treaty between the three powers, directed against the Anglo-Saxon democracies. The preamble clearly left the door open for Russia by indicating “*the desire of the three Governments to extend cooperation to nations in other spheres of the world that are inclined to direct their efforts along lines, similar to their own for the purpose of realizing their ultimate object, world peace*”. True enough, Japan, Germany and Italy partitioned among themselves a significant portion of the Old World, but not the entire Eurasian area. According to Article 1 “*Japan recognizes and respects the leadership of Germany and Italy in the establishment of a new order in Europe*”, while Article 2 stipulated that “*Germany and Italy recognize and respect the leadership of Japan in the establishment of a new order in Greater East Asia*”. Apart from everything else it meant that Russia, which already held the eastern part of Europe and North Asia, might get also the Greater Middle East and India. Article 3 engaged National Socialist Germany, Fascist Italy and Japan “*to cooperate in their efforts on aforesaid lines*” and “*to assist one another with all political, economic and military means if one of the Contracting Powers is attacked by a Power at present not involved in the European War or in the Japanese-Chinese conflict*”. It is hard to determine whether at that moment the Soviet Union was or was not “*involved in the European War or in the Japanese-Chinese conflict*“, but the United States certainly wasn’t. In other words, this text reaffirmed the anti-American character of the Three-Power Pact, whereas Article 5 consisted of the following explicit statement: “*Japan, Germany and Italy affirm that the above agreement affects in no way the political status existing at present between each of the three Contracting Powers and Soviet Russia*”. The pact came immediately into force and was valid for a ten year period.[[528]](#footnote-528)

As a matter of fact, after the disaster, inflicted on them by General Zhukov in the Far East, the Japanese had abandoned completely their plans for the conquest of Siberia from Russia. This did not contradict the strategy of Hitler, who hadn’t given up the idea of reorienting the Soviet expansion from Europe and the Balkans toward the Greater Middle East. Anyway, in the summer and fall of 1940 the Germans encouraged the Japanese to expand further to the south and to capture Singapore, which was then a British colony, while Russia was not even mentioned.[[529]](#footnote-529)

Under the impression of the Three-Power Pact Serrano Súñer handed over to Ambassador von Stohrer in Madrid a memorandum or a secret protocol, which had to be considered as a first step toward the conclusion of a tripartite alliance between Spain, Germany and Italy. There was not even a hint at anti-Communism in the document. Thus it was declared that the 1936-1939 civil war had liberated Spain not from Communism, but from the democratic capitalist intrigues. The secret protocol reiterated the claims of Spain on French Morocco, on the region of Oran in Algeria, which was also a French territory at the time, and on some areas in Sahara, but at the same time it was pointed out that the secret protocol would come into force only after Spain completed her military preparations and procured the raw materials, fuel and food she needed.[[530]](#footnote-530)

Unlike Spain Hungary was the first country, which applied for membership in the Three-Power Pact, but Germany and Italy were quite reluctant in this respect, the more so as Budapest wanted in this way to earn a stronger position with regard to Romania. On the other hand, though, the Germans were quick enough to use the Hungarian enthusiasm about the pact for requesting the transit of “Wehrmacht” units for Romania. The Hungarians were warned on that occasion that the German troops in question would include some tank units as well.[[531]](#footnote-531)

The Hungarian government hurried to agree with the demand, while the Churchill Cabinet still hoped that the Vichy regime might side with the United Kingdom against Germany, despite general de Gaulle’s warnings to the contrary. That was the moment when the former Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who was fatally ill with cancer, sent in his resignation as Speaker of the House of Lords. He was replaced by Home Secretary John Anderson, whose position was taken, in its turn, by Herbert Morrison of the Labour Party. It was only at this point that Churchill became leader of the Conservative Party.[[532]](#footnote-532)

The conclusion of the Three-Power Pact only enhanced Britain’s efforts to stir up Stalin against Hitler and these endeavors were seconded at least by some American representatives. Thus the British ambassador to Moscow Stafford Cripps and his US counterpart Laurence Steinhardt apparently did their best to foment Stalin’s paranoia by claiming that Germany and Japan were encircling the Soviet Union, but this didn’t seem to affect the Russian dictator.[[533]](#footnote-533)

Indeed, Hitler had enough reasons for fearing a Russian attack, but he still hesitated about his attitude toward Stalin. On October 4 he summoned Mussolini, as usual, to a meeting at the Brenner Pass and shared his hopes for attracting Vichy France to an alliance against Britain. The “Fuehrer” didn’t conceal his strong “*anti-Bolshevik*” feelings either but, on the other hand, he won over the “Duce” to the idea of a “*continental coalition*” with the participation of the Soviet Union. According to the German dictator Russia had to be oriented “*toward India or, at least, toward the Indian Ocean*”. The meeting was not distinguished by a very high degree of frankness, though, since Hitler didn’t mention anything about the dispatch of German troops to Romania, although he had acknowledged the Balkans as an Italian “sphere of interest”, while Mussolini carefully avoided any talk about his intentions with regard to Greece.[[534]](#footnote-534)

On October 5 Stalin learned from his espionage network that back in July Hitler had ordered the elaboration of a plan for war against the Soviet Union. By that time, though, the Russian command had updated its own plans for an assault on Germany. Unlike the old plan of 1938, the new one precluded any offensive of the enemy and drastically shortened the time limit for the mobilization of the “Red Army”, which had to invade Germany as quickly as possible.[[535]](#footnote-535)

This was bound to affect fatally Finland and Romania as well, and the Romanians showed a keen interest in the relationship between Helsinki and Moscow. During a farewell visit the Romanian diplomatic representative to Helsinki George Lecca heard from the commander in chief marshal Mannerheim that the Russians raised constantly new claims, but the Finns satisfied them in order to avoid another Soviet aggression. The marshal was certain about an imminent Russian-German conflict, indicating the huge number of troops, amassed on the two sides of the border between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich. Mannerheim hoped that the clash would break out as soon as possible. In his opinion that was the only way of rescuing Europe from Bolshevism, because any delay would benefit the USSR that already had an enormous armed force at her disposal.[[536]](#footnote-536)

As before, the Soviet threat didn’t push Hungary and Romania closer to each other. On the contrary, relations between the two countries were exacerbated further by the excesses and even atrocities, committed both by the Hungarian authorities on ethnic Romanians in Hungary and by Romanian authorities on ethnic Hungarians in Romania. The Romanians had the idea to propose a joint German-Italian commission to investigate the cases of violence, but it was only on October 8 that Mussolini learned about the German military mission in Romania. His first reaction was to demand the dispatch of some Italian troops to join the Germans in Romania.[[537]](#footnote-537)

Hitler hardly had an information about Stalin’s concrete timing for an assault on Germany, but he apparently changed his mind about admitting new countries to the Three-Power Pact. On October 9 von Ribbentrop announced to the Hungarian minister in Berlin Stoyai that the “Fuehrer” would open the pact to friendly powers. At more or less the same moment the German foreign minister informed the Russian ambassador to Berlin Shkvartsev about the “*military mission*” of the “Wehrmacht” in Romania, trying to underestimate the whole affair.[[538]](#footnote-538)

On October 10, in a note to Italy, the Reich justified the dispatch of “Wehrmacht” units to Romania by the need to prevent the English from sabotaging the oil fields near Ploiesti. On the same day von Ribbentrop made a phone call to Ciano to disclose his approval of the admission of Hungary to the Three-Power Pact. Mussolini gave his accord reluctantly and pointed out that in such a case Romania had to join the pact too. Now it was the turn of the Germans to show some disappointment and von Ribbentrop met the idea of the Italian dictator “*with a very moderate enthusiasm*”.[[539]](#footnote-539)

At 6:30PM the German chargé d’affaires in Moscow von Tippelskirch mentioned to Molotov, as if among other things, about the “military mission” in Romania. Von Tippelskirch acted in full accordance with the instruction he had gotten from Berlin, but the Russian foreign minister asked with brutal frankness about the number of army corps the Germans were sending there and dismissed the English threat as justification, by saying that at the moment Britain would be happy enough to save her own life. He also repeated his question about the exact number of German military in Finland, but the only thing von Tippelskirch could do was to promise that at his return to Moscow Ambassador von der Schulenburg would provide the Russians with the required information.[[540]](#footnote-540)

The first “Wehrmacht” units entered Romania on October 11. At this very moment the Hungarian government also asked the Reich for a German-Italian committee to investigate the situation of the Hungarian minority in Romania and of the Romanian minority in Hungary. Von Ribbentrop readily agreed with the request and even appointed a head of the German delegation to the committee. Hitler kept therefore his efforts to maintain peace in Southeastern Europe and Berlin was no doubt worried also by the ongoing flux of refugees from Hungary to Romania, which could only increase further the tension between the two countries.[[541]](#footnote-541)

Russia also marked a point in the competition for influence on the surviving small European countries by imposing on Finland an agreement about the Aland Islands at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia. The Finns had to demilitarize the islands again and prohibit any use of them by some third power. Moreover, they had to permit the establishment of a Soviet consulate there, even though since the times of Lenin these consulates were in fact espionage and subversion centers.[[542]](#footnote-542)

On October 12, in a conversation with Ciano, Mussolini gave full vent to his rage with Hitler because of the “*German occupation of Romania*”. He complained to Ciano that Hitler constantly put him before a “*fait accompli*”, but this time the “Duce” decided to take revenge. He threatened that Hitler would learn about the Italian occupation of Greece from the newspapers, intending to launch the attack in two weeks. Ciano encouraged his father-in-law and thought that such an action would be easy and useful, but some of the Italian commanders were by no means enthusiastic about it.[[543]](#footnote-543)

On October 13 von Ribbentrop addressed a personal letter to “*My Dear M.Stalin*”, declaring the wish of Germany to reinforce further the political and economic cooperation between the two powers. To that effect the German foreign minister suggested a personal contact “*between the responsible persons of both countries*” because, in his opinion, such a contact “*is indispensable from time to time in authoritarian regimes such as ours*”. After a review of the events that had occurred since September 1939, he emphasized that the Three-Power Pact was directed against “*the congealed plutocratic democracies*”, but not against the Soviet Union. On the contrary, “*both friendly German-Soviet cooperation and friendly German-Japanese cooperation have a place side by side and undisturbed*”. Von Ribbentrop summed up that, “*in the opinion of the Fuehrer, also, it appears to be the historic mission of the four Powers – the Soviet Union, Italy, Japan, and Germany – to adopt a long-range policy and to direct the future development of their peoples into the right channels by delimitation of their interests for the ages*”. The letter ended with an invitation to Molotov to return the two visits of von Ribbentrop to Moscow by coming to Berlin to discuss with Hitler the future development of the Soviet-Nazi relations. The ironic thing was that on the following day Stalin instructed the Council of People’s Commissars to confirm the updated plan for an assault on Germany.[[544]](#footnote-544)

On October 16 the German minister to Sofia Herbert von Richthofen read to the Bulgarian foreign minister Ivan Popov a telegram by von Ribbentrop, who invited Bulgaria to join the Three-Power Pact. The German foreign minister pointed out that Hungary and Romania had already applied for membership in the pact. In fact it was an ultimatum rather than an invitation, since von Ribbentrop wanted an answer within two days.[[545]](#footnote-545)

For his part, Mussolini wrote a personal letter to Boris III, disclosing his intention to “*settle accounts with Greece*” before the end of the month. In this way, the “Duce” went on, Bulgaria was offered a historic chance to fulfill “*the old and just aspiration for the Aegean Sea*”. The Italian dictator explicitly stated that he did not demand Bulgarian assistance, but left to the King to make the decision in accordance with the interests of the Bulgarian nation.[[546]](#footnote-546)

This could only enhance the impression that the Three-Power Pact had provided Germany and Italy with a stronger position in Europe than that of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the German soldiers, supervising the transit of “Wehrmacht” troops through Finland to Norway, amounted to only 2,198 persons. Nevertheless, the very presence of German military in Finland was a clear infraction of the treaties with Russia, although representatives of the Reich had made it clear that the Finns could not rely on German support in another conflict with the Soviets. The Finnish minister to Berlin Kivimäki reported that Germany’s interest in Finland would be determined by the future development of German-Russian relations.[[547]](#footnote-547)

Significantly enough, on October 17 Franco suddenly replaced the Spanish foreign minister Beigbeder with his brother-in-law Serrano Súñer, who had the reputation of an enthusiastic admirer of Hitler and German National Socialism. However, Serrano Súñer’s appointment did not make Spain more favorable to the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. He was just more convenient to negotiations with Germany and he thought that under the circumstances Spain had to reach an agreement with Hitler.[[548]](#footnote-548)

Not less significant was the fact that at precisely the same moment the Belgian premier Hubert Pierlot and Foreign Minister Paul Henri Spaak, who had been until then under police surveillance in Barcelona, succeeded in escaping from Spain with the help of the British. Serrano Súñer was furious and he ordered the expulsion of the Belgian ambassador, but the Belgian embassy continued to function under the direction of a consul. With their escape from Barcelona to Britain Pierlot and Spaak gave no doubt a greater legitimacy to the Belgian government in exile in London, the more so as this government had a concrete territory at its disposal, since its authority had been acknowledged by the colonial administration of Belgian Congo in Africa.[[549]](#footnote-549)

On October 18 King Boris III received again Mussolini’s special envoy Filippo Anfuso, who had come to Sofia the previous day with the personal letter of the “Duce”. By that time Hitler had learned from his espionage services that Italy was about to attack Greece at any moment and the Bulgarian king sensed that there were some disagreements between Berlin and Rome, which provided Sofia with a space for maneuvering. So Boris III could decline both Mussolini’s offer and von Ribbentrop’s “invitation”, by pointing out that, unlike Romania and Hungary, Bulgaria was threatened by a considerable Turkish army from the east and also by a hostile Yugoslavia from the west. Under the circumstances, the monarch concluded, Bulgaria was much more useful to Germany and Italy as a “*nonbelligerent*”, but friendly country. The curious thing was that if Bulgaria justified her restraint by the “Turkish threat”, Turkey resisted the British pressure for an active engagement against Germany by referring to the “Bulgarian threat”. Eventually, Berlin gave up the two-day deadline for Bulgaria and postponed even the admission of Hungary and Romania to the Three-Power Pact.[[550]](#footnote-550)

Boris III’s maneuvering space was apparently enlarged by signs of growing difficulties between Germany and Russia that were known even to the Bulgarian minister in Berlin Draganov. Nevertheless, von Ribbentrop spared no efforts to avoid further frictions with Moscow, including the problem of the nickel concession at Petsamo. According to his instructions the Finns had to be left alone again in their dealings with the Russians on that issue.[[551]](#footnote-551)

On October 21 the Bulgarian king sent one of his secretaries to Berlin with a personal letter to Hitler. In the beginning Boris III reminded of the Bulgarian-German brotherhood in arms during World War I, but he warned at the same time that on the Bulgarian borders there were 23 Turkish and 7 Greek divisions and that the situation might become dramatically worse in case of a new rapprochement of Turkey with Russia. The monarch drew also Hitler’s attention to the fact that a general mobilization would result in a complete standstill of economic life and production in Bulgaria.[[552]](#footnote-552)

In fact Boris III had to fear much more an even closer alliance between Russia and Germany than a rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. Late in the evening Molotov handed over to von der Schulenburg Stalin’s short answer to the personal letter of von Ribbentrop. The Soviet dictator agreed that “*a further improvement in the relations between our countries is entirely possible on the permanent basis of a long-range delimitation of mutual interests*”. He accepted the invitation to his foreign minister to a return visit to Berlin around November 12, while Molotov orally demanded from von der Schulenburg a “*strict confidence for the time being*”.[[553]](#footnote-553)

The prospects of a new opening of the Soviet-Nazi relations were accompanied by new repression measures of the National Socialist regime. On October 22, 1940, 6,504 Jews from Baden and Saar in Southwest Germany were loaded on nine trains and deported to the “free zone” of France. The authorities in Vichy were not even notified about the action, while Hitler and von Ribbentrop were travelling by train for a meeting with Franco on the French-Spanish border. On the day of the deportation of the Jews, each of whom was allowed to take only 50 kilograms of personal belongings, the “Fuehrer” and his foreign minister stopped at the Montoire-sur-le-Loir railway station at some 120 kilometers to the southwest of Paris, where they were expected by the deputy premier of the Vichy government Pierre Laval. Laval was received by Hitler himself, but he had just the time to show his complete loyalty to Germany, whereas the Nazi dictator made it clear that France had to cede Alsace, Lorraine and some African colonies to the Reich. Yet if the French took part in the war against Britain, Hitler stressed, they could hope to be indemnified for these losses by new territories.[[554]](#footnote-554)

At the same moment, though, marshal Pétain had sent to London Prof.Louis Rougier as a special envoy to negotiate secretly a cooperation agreement between Vichy and London. Churchill eventually declined the offer, while members of his Cabinet protested against the use of Swiss banks by Germany and Italy for their deposits in New York. The German consulates in the United States received important sums also under the cover of Swiss banks.[[555]](#footnote-555)

On October 23 the train with Hitler and von Ribbentrop on board arrived at Hendaye on the French-Spanish border. Franco’s train was late by an hour, which could only make the German dictator more nervous in his ambition to attract Spain to the Three-Power Pact. In the beginning of the talks the Spanish leader thanked the Germans and the Italians for their assistance in the 1936-1939 civil war, but he carefully avoided to mention that at the time the common enemy of National Socialist Germany, Fascist Italy and Francoist Spain was the Communist “Popular Front” regime, controlled by Stalin. Franco was much more circumstantial, though, in explaining Spain’s economic difficulties and food shortages as a serious reason for delaying the entrance of his country into the war. Hitler responded by boasting about Germany’s military strength and by declaring that if Russia decided to be more active, she would do it on the side of the Reich. In his opinion the Americans would need for their rearmament between 18 months and two years and the least Spain could do was to attack Gibraltar on January 10, 1941. Franco saw the best way to avoid his participation in the war in raising a series of impossible demands, such as the annexation of all the African possessions of France. He was ready for an agreement with Germany, but without any concrete deadline. After an entire day of fruitless conversations Hitler lost his temper and shouted that further negotiations had to be left to the new Spanish foreign minister Serrano Súñer and his German counterpart von Ribbentrop, but their meeting ended only in a draft protocol, which needed further consultations and talks.[[556]](#footnote-556)

In the afternoon of October 24 Hitler and von Ribbentrop stopped again at Montoire-sur-le-Loir to meet with Marshal Philippe Pétain. The town was in the occupied zone of France and Hitler apparently wanted in this way to remind the marshal of his subordinate position, but Pétain was not easier than Franco. Indeed, he had to swallow up Hitler’s refusal to release the French prisoners of war, but he also declined the invitation to take part in the military operations against England on the ground that France had just gone through a very heavy war. Yet the two men reached an agreement, under whose terms Pétain had to provide the Germans with a limited assistance against Britain, while Hitler promised to indemnify the colonies France was going to lose in Africa by some of the overseas possessions of Britain.[[557]](#footnote-557)

The German dictator was quite disappointed both with Franco’s declining tactics and with Pétain’s refusal to take an active part in the war against the United Kingdom, but on his way back he suddenly became aware that Mussolini was about to attack Greece much earlier than anticipated. The “Duce” had become unavailable and the “Fuehrer” ordered von Ribbentrop to make a phone call to Ciano and to demand an immediate meeting between the two leaders. Eventually, Mussolini had to welcome Hitler in Florence on October 28, which was the day, fixed for the assault on Greece. Yet the Fascist dictator still lived with the illusion that the Italian invasion of Greece would be a total surprise to Hitler.[[558]](#footnote-558)

The whole situation offered Stalin a good opportunity to proceed unimpededly with his own aggression. At 2AM on October 26 “Red Army” units occupied three Romanian islands in the Chilia Branch of the Danubian delta. The Romanians thought that the Soviets intended to annex the whole branch, but general Ion Antonescu ordered the Romanian ships in the area to avoid even getting closer to the Russians. Nevertheless, some shooting occurred, apparently without casualties.[[559]](#footnote-559)

If Hitler didn’t pay enough attention to the aggressiveness of Stalin, that same aggressiveness could be only welcomed by Britain and her allies. One of these allies was the Free France leader general de Gaulle, but at that moment his efforts aimed at undermining further the positions of the Vichy regime. On October 27 de Gaulle established the Empire Defense Council, which was a major step toward the creation of an alternative French government to that of marshal Pétain. This was accompanied by an offensive of Free French forces from Cameroon in Africa for the conquest of the Gabon colony, where troops, loyal to Vichy, opposed a quite strong resistance.[[560]](#footnote-560)

At 3AM on October 28 the Italian minister to Athens Emmanuelle Grazi woke up the Greek premier and dictator Metaxas to hand him over an ultimatum, exacting permission for the occupation of Greece by the Italian army. The Fascist diplomat acted, therefore, after the Nazi model, but Metaxas rejected the ultimatum and pointed out that this was in fact a war declaration. At 5:30 AM the Italian troops, concentrated in Albania, crossed the Greek border. To the 200,000 Italian invaders, armed with 250 tanks and 400 aircraft, the Greeks could oppose only 27,000 troops with 20 tanks and 36 planes. Moreover, Yugoslavia, Romania and Turkey didn’t intend to wage a war for the sake of Greece, which put a definitive end to the Balkan Entente. The Yugoslav regent Prince Paul went even further, by suggesting to the government to sound about the prospects for ceding Salonica to Yugoslavia as a “*free port*”.[[561]](#footnote-561)

In the same morning Mussolini welcomed Hitler at the Florence railway station and proudly announced that the “*victorious*” Italian troops had already crossed the Albanian-Greek border. It was with a great effort that Hitler concealed his rage, due to the obvious failure of his attempt to restrain Mussolini from such a venture. Apart from everything else, the Italian invasion of Greece frustrated the plans of the “Fuehrer” to occupy the Iberian Peninsula in the fall or winter of 1940. Yet he promised to provide the “Duce” with a specially trained commando for the conquest of the island of Crete and complained of Franco, stating that he would have preferred having three or four of his teeth extracted to another meeting with the Spanish leader. Hitler even reiterated that Germany and Italy were “*natural allies*”, whereas “*the partnership with Russia*” was due to “*purely conjuncture motivations*”, but he still shared his hopes that he would be able to reorient Russia from the Bosphorus and the Dardannelles toward India.[[562]](#footnote-562)

Shortly before midnight on October 28 to October 29 the Greek minister to Berlin A.Rizo-Rangabe handed over to von Weizsaecker a copy of the Italian ultimatum and declared that Greece and Italy were in a state of war against each other. Von Weizsaecker denied this and claimed that Italy did not yet consider herself in a state of war against Greece. He pointed out that the problem had to be solved between Rome and Athens and that Germany had full confidence in the information, coming from her Italian ally.[[563]](#footnote-563)

On October 29 Boris III issued an official declaration that Bulgaria would be neutral toward the Italian-Greek conflict. A similar declaration was made also by Yugoslavia, but under the pressure of Italy the Germans stopped their deliveries of aircraft engines and materials to Belgrade despite the existing contract. For his part, the Turkish foreign minister Şükrü Saraçoglu warned the German ambassador to Ankara and former chancellor von Papen that Turkey would intervene only in case of a direct threat to Greek Thrace and Syria. On the other hand, though, the Turkish president Ismet Inönü and Hitler had just exchanged friendly telegrams on the occasion of the Turkish national holiday, while the Turkish ambassador in Berlin Hüsrev Gerede notified the Bulgarian minister Draganov that if Bulgaria was peaceful, then Turkey would remain peaceful too.[[564]](#footnote-564)

The only power that was ready and able to give some assistance to the Greeks was Britain, but this assistance could hardly be more efficient than in the case of Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and France. The only thing the United Kingdom could boast about was the fact that by that time the Royal Air Force had shot down 1,733 German aircraft against 915 British fighters. The problem was that the British command relied on the 24 Turkish and 15 Greek divisions, while Stalin was adding fresh “Red Army” formations to those already stationed against the Balkans and Asia Minor.[[565]](#footnote-565)

This was an obvious threat both to the German and to the Italian positions in Southeastern Europe, but Berlin kept encouraging the Japanese to conclude with Moscow at least a neutrality pact, if a nonaggression treaty proved impossible. As a matter of fact, the Russians were reluctant to conclude any kind of agreement with the Japanese, unless Japan returned to Russia the southern part of the Sakhalin Island in the Pacific, a portion of Russian territory, annexed by the Japanese after their victory over the Russians in the 1904-1905 war.[[566]](#footnote-566)

Despite the restricted possibilities of aiding the Greeks, the British succeeded in landing in Crete, as well as in the island of Lemnos, which was only at about 500 kilometers from the Ploiesti oil fields in Romania. However, the Royal Air Force could send to Greece only four squadrons, which was less than the 134 fighters, delivered by the Soviet Union to the Greeks under a contract, concluded long before the Italian assault.[[567]](#footnote-567)

The Italian invasion of Greece was accompanied by signs of an increasing aggressiveness in Germany toward Switzerland. On November 1, 1940, the Swiss minister Hans Frölicher reported from Berlin about rumors that the partition of the Confederation was only a “*question of time*”. Indeed, a lot of Nazis considered Switzerland an artificial country and denied the very existence of a Swiss nation. In their opinion Germany had to annex the German part of Switzerland, which was the largest, while Italy and France had to take the Italian and French part respectively. As for Hitler himself, he still didn’t have any concrete plans for the conquest of the Confederation, although he apparently thought to do it at some later stage.[[568]](#footnote-568)

Yet many Swiss had enough reasons to fear that with their regimes and with their “*command economy*” Germany and Italy threatened the freedom of the Swiss to make their own decisions. Hitler had in fact nationalized entirely the distribution. The emission of all sorts of securities was frozen with the only exception of government obligations. Profits, as well as the transfer of shares from one company to another were determined solely by orders of the Imperial Economy Ministry. The control was enhanced further through party channels, since in the management of each company there was at least one representative of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party.[[569]](#footnote-569)

Meanwhile the presidential campaign in the United States was entering its final stage. To the great disappointment of Hitler both major candidates intended to engage their country more actively in favor of the powers, fighting against Nazi and Fascist aggression. The Democratic Party nominee Franklin D.Roosevelt, who was running for a third term, promised to secure all possible material support to the nations that still opposed resistance to the invader. The Republican candidate Wendell Willkie proclaimed the belief of all, Republicans, Democrats and independents alike, that the English should be given assistance.[[570]](#footnote-570)

The problem was that such an assistance was needed ever more clearly by Italy as well. On 2:30PM on November 4 Hitler told his commanders that the Italian attack on Greece was a miserable mistake and urged them to work out plans for the conquest of Greece by ten German divisions, which were to be dispatched first to Romania and then to move through Bulgaria to Greece. The ultimate goal had to be the annihilation of the British forces in the Mediterranean by the capture not only of Gibraltar and the Canary Islands, but also of the Portuguese Azores and Madeira Islands, as well as of Portugal herself.[[571]](#footnote-571)

The “Fuehrer” thought that Russia would remain neutral, but Stalin obviously endeavored to secure Germany’s recognition of the right to free passage of Russian war ships through the Danubian delta. At the same time the Soviet dictator intended to take possession of the nickel deposits at Petsamo in Northern Finland. The Finns responded to the Russian pressure, among other things, by a discrete plan for union with Sweden. However, the Swedes feared that this might provoke strong reactions both in Moscow and Berlin. Indeed the Germans reacted in a reserved way, while on November 5 the Russian minister to Stockholm Madame Kollontai warned the Swedish foreign minister Günther that Moscow would interpret a closer cooperation between Finland and Sweden as a German intrigue and even as an act of hostility.[[572]](#footnote-572)

On November 5 Franklin Roosevelt won his third term, although with somewhat less support than during the previous election. Churchill was pleased, because he considered Roosevelt more experienced in international affairs. The curious thing was that even marshal Pétain allowed the newspapers in the “free zone” of France to publish approving comments about Roosevelt and the United States. The general belief was that now the President would be much less impeded in his foreign policy decisions.[[573]](#footnote-573)

Significantly enough, the American and British press began at that moment a campaign about Britain’s urgent need of the Irish ports. There were even appeals for taking these ports by force and the Irish had to persuade the Germans that there was no imminent danger of a British attack. Indeed, Eire’s neutrality seemed to be much safer than that of Switzerland, whose government decided to black out the entire territory of the Confederation each night after 10PM. The measure resulted from the pressure of Germany, but the Swiss military refused to obey insofar as they not only failed to intercept the British aircraft, flying over Switzerland for Germany and Italy, but also provided the Royal Air Force with navigation assistance.[[574]](#footnote-574)

All this was of little help for the Greeks, who kept fighting alone against the Italians. On the other hand, though, the Italian air force proved to be rather inefficient and twice Italian planes had bombed by mistake the Macedonian city of Bitola, which was near the Yugoslav-Greek border. The regent Prince Paul demanded an explanation from the war minister general Milan Nedić, who declared that Yugoslavia had to side resolutely with Germany even at the price of ceding some territories. The Regent was furious and he exacted the resignation of Nedić, who was replaced with General Petar Pešić. Later Nedić would head a puppet regime in Serbia under Nazi occupation and would start to build “people’s socialism”. Yet his removal from the War Ministry was not an obstacle to further discreet soundings by Belgrade about a possible annexation of Salonica.[[575]](#footnote-575)

At this very moment the Greeks, who had transferred a couple of divisions from the Bulgarian border to the Italian front, succeeded not only in stopping the Italians, but also in launching a counteroffensive and in penetrating into Albanian territory near the city of Korçë. That was the beginning of a disastrous reverse for the Italians. Germany decided to dispatch as many as 200 military experts to install a warning antiaircraft system on the Bulgarian-Greek border. The Bulgarians were to be told that, in order to preserve their neutrality, they had to prevent English aircraft from any flights over their territory and that they needed German experts to that effect.[[576]](#footnote-576)

The growing difficulties of the Axis could only encourage further Stalin in his own expansionist plans. On November 7 his war minister Timoshenko issued a special order, dedicated to the anniversary of Lenin’s coup d’état 23 years ago. The order praised, among other things, the engulfment of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as a shrinkage of the “*capitalist world*”, but “*we, the warriors of the Red Army, have no right to become proud and to calm down by what we have achieved*”. During a lengthy and abundant dinner on the same occasion Stalin himself put the accent on the need for modernizing the air force and pointed out that the Soviet army had to be equal to the armies of “*our enemies*”, which consisted of “*all capitalist states, including those presenting themselves as our friends*”.[[577]](#footnote-577)

This didn’t promise anything good to Germany. To make things even worse for the Axis, the Pétain regime suffered at the same moment another blow. On November 9 Free French forces, assisted by British planes, took Libreville, the capital of the French colony Cameroon on the Gulf of Guinea. Thus Vichy lost another strategic possession in Africa, but the forces, loyal to Pétain, had opposed this time a fierce resistance, which cost between 20 and 100 Free French lives.[[578]](#footnote-578)

Of course, Hitler was by no means idle in the face of Stalin. As the Soviet intelligence services reported to the Russian dictator, from July to the beginning of November 1940 the number of German divisions in Poland had increased from 27 to 85. However, Stalin was about to direct against Germany much more powerful “Red Army” formations. He summoned Molotov to instruct him to avoid any concrete agreements during the forthcoming visit to Berlin. Molotov had to inquire about the “New Europe”, planned by Germany and Italy, and about Japan’s “Greater East Asia”. He had to propose a delimitation of the “*spheres of interests of the USSR in Europe, as well as in Near and Middle Asia*”. According to Stalin the Soviet “sphere of interest” had to include a substantial part not only of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but also of Central Europe and the Middle East. Molotov had to require from the Germans the withdrawal of all their troops from Finland and to protest against the dispatch of “Wehrmacht” units to Romania, while Bulgaria, in Stalin’s opinion, would become “*the main problem of the talks*”. Molotov had to proclaim that Bulgaria and Turkey belonged also to the Soviet “sphere of interest” and to demand the agreement of Germany and Italy with the occupation of Bulgaria by “Red Army” troops. Similar arrangements had to be made about Romania, Hungary and Iran but, on the other hand, Molotov had to declare that Moscow backed the preservation of the British colonial empire, provided that Germany could regain immediately her former African possessions. As for the Far East, Japan could retain Manchuria and take possession of Dutch India (Indonesia), but the Japanese troops had to withdraw from the rest of China.[[579]](#footnote-579)

For its part, the German Foreign Ministry prepared a draft Four-Power Pact between the Reich, Japan and Italy, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. The draft released the Soviet Union from the obligation of the other three powers “*to assist one another with all political, economic and military means if one of the Contracting Powers is attacked by a Power at present not involved in the European War or in the Japanese-Chinese conflict*”. Apparently Hitler didn’t need Stalin for a war against the United States, but one of the draft secret protocols provided for a partition of the entire Old World by Germany, Italy, Japan and Russia, while according to another secret protocol Germany, Italy and Russia had to establish a condominium over the zone of the Bosphorus and the Dardannelles.[[580]](#footnote-580)

While Hitler was endeavoring to reinvigorate his alliance with Stalin, Italy didn’t seem to be entirely strange to the idea of distancing herself from Germany. On November 11 the Italian foreign minister Ciano was approached by an unofficial envoy of the Yugoslav regent Prince Paul with a proposal for a rapprochement and even for an alliance of Yugoslavia with Italy. Mussolini approved the idea, while Ciano hoped that such an understanding would be useful, if Italy were forced to adopt an anti-German and anti-Russian policy. In reality, Mussolini’s son-in-law was infuriated by the news about an anti-Italian propaganda, disseminated by the Germans in Greece, but in fact Hitler wanted at this moment to reinforce the Three-Power Pact by attracting both Stalin and Franco to it, in one form or another. To that effect Hitler invited the Spanish foreign minister Serrano Súñer to Germany again, but Franco and most of his closest collaborators remained quite reluctant to fixing a concrete day for Spain’s entrance into the war.[[581]](#footnote-581)

In the following morning, while waiting for Molotov and his delegation, Hitler ordered his commanders to continue their work on the plans for a war against Russia. The “Fuehrer” hadn’t abandoned the hope to reach an understanding with Stalin and in his opinion the aim of the talks with Molotov would be to make the Russian attitude clear. The problem was that until recently there had been no war plans at all about the Soviet Union and now the preparation of these plans was still at an initial stage.[[582]](#footnote-582)

The Russian delegation arrived in Berlin somewhat later on November 12 and at noon Molotov had his first conversation with von Ribbentrop. The German foreign minister made a lengthy discourse, claiming that Britain was about to surrender and that the Reich, Italy, Japan and Russia had to direct their expansion southward. In his opinion the most advantageous access of Russia to the southern seas might be the Persian Gulf, while the regime of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles had to be submitted to a radical revision, which would provide the Soviets with special privileges, including that of an unrestricted freedom of passage for both their war and cargo vessels. Von Ribbentrop was ready to go to Moscow again and he even proposed a conference in the Russian capital together with the foreign ministers of Italy (Ciano) and Japan (Matsuoka), but Molotov gave priority to a new delimitation of the “spheres of interests” between Russia and Germany. In his words, the previous Soviet-Nazi agreement had been already fulfilled, but in fact Stalin’s envoy kept his trumps for the forthcoming meeting with Hitler.[[583]](#footnote-583)

The “Fuehrer” received Molotov in the new building of the imperial chancellery at 3PM and pleaded for a settlement, “*which would lead to peaceful collaboration between the two countries beyond the lifespan of the present leaders*”. Molotov expressed his “*entire agreement*” with this declaration and appraised as “*quite correct*” Hitler’s statement that “*the Russian empire could develop without in the least prejudicing German interests*”. However, when it was the turn of Molotov to set forth Stalin’s views, he submitted his host to a series of unpleasant questions such as that about Germany’s intentions in Finland. He also inquired about “*the meaning of the new order in Europe and Asia*“, as well as about the role of the USSR in it. Moreover, Molotov pointed out that “*there were issues to be clarified regarding Russia’s Balkan and Black Sea interests with respect to Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey*”. He concluded that the participation of Russia in the Three-Power Pact “*appeared to him entirely acceptable in principle, provided that Russia was to cooperate as a partner and not be merely an object*”.[[584]](#footnote-584)

At this point the meeting was postponed for the next day. In the night of November 12 to November 13 Molotov reported to Stalin by a coded telegram the contents of his conversations with von Ribbentrop and Hitler and Stalin instructed him to decline Hitler’s proposal for partitioning the “*British inheritance*”. The talks, scheduled for the next day, had to be centered on Europe, where the Soviet interests stretched from Finland in the north to the Balkans, the Bosphorus and the Dardannelles in the south. The Russian dictator was ready to agree with a joint occupation and partition of these territories and of Turkey in particular. In his opinion Bulgaria had to acquiesce in “*the passage of Soviet troops for the protection of the entrances to the Black Sea*”.[[585]](#footnote-585)

The talks between Molotov and Hitler resumed at 3PM on November 13. This time the “Fuehrer” was more aggressive, reminding his guest that the Reich had strictly observed the delimitation of territories, provided for by the Treaty for Friendship and for the Border of September 1939, but the Soviet Union had failed to do so by annexing Northern Bukovina and the Mariampole region. Germany acknowledged that Finland belonged to the Russian sphere, but the Reich needed seriously nickel and timber from the Finns and was strongly against any new conflict in the Baltic Sea, because such a conflict would limit the freedom of navigation for cargo ships. Molotov reacted by demanding the withdrawal of the German troops that had occupied Finland. Hitler rightly pointed out that these troops had not occupied the country, but were only crossing its territory for Norway. He promised to withdraw even these troops in case of a new treaty with Russia, but Molotov was frank enough to admit that the USSR intended to annex Finland and all Hitler could do was to ask the Russians to postpone the annexation for about a year.[[586]](#footnote-586)

The two men started to raise their voices and von Ribbentrop, who attended the meeting, tried to calm them down by drawing their attention to the partition of the British colonial empire. Yet Molotov didn’t show any interest in the matter and directly declared that the German-Italian guarantee of the territorial integrity of Romania “*was aimed against the interests of Soviet Russia*”. He went further by asking Hitler “*what Germany would say if Russia gave Bulgaria… a guarantee under exactly the same conditions as Germany and Italy had given one to Romania*”. The “Fuehrer” immediately inquired “*whether Bulgaria herself had asked for a guarantee*” and Molotov had to admit that Sofia had not made such a request. Right after his second meeting with the Russian envoy, the German dictator decided to invite the Bulgarian king Boris III and his premier Filov to Germany in order to get their approval for the passage of the “Wehrmacht” divisions from Romania to Greece.[[587]](#footnote-587)

At 7PM Molotov invited the leaders of National Socialist Germany to a dinner in the Russian embassy, but Hitler was sufficiently exhausted by the talks and sent only his foreign minister. At 9:40PM, though, there was an alert because of another raid by the British Royal Air Force and all the guests, including von Ribbentrop and Molotov, had to look for refuge in the basement of the Foreign Ministry building. As Churchill later put it, Britain was not invited to the Berlin conference, but she insisted upon her presence. It was in that basement that von Ribbentrop acquainted Molotov with a draft of a Four-Power Pact, under which Germany, Italy and Japan, on the one side, and Russia, on the other side, were to establish “*in their natural spheres of influence in Europe, Asia, and Africa a new order serving the welfare of all peoples concerned*”. The four powers had to abstain from joining any combination, directed against one of them. According to the partition plan, contained in a draft secret protocol, Germany was to take some territories in Europe, as well as Central Africa. Italy was also entitled to some territories in Europe and to North and Northeastern Africa. The area to the south of the Japanese archipelago was assigned to Japan, whereas Russia could achieve her expansion to the “*south of the national territory of the Soviet Union in the direction of the Indian Ocean*”. Another secret protocol, proposed by the Germans, was to be concluded only between the Reich, Italy and the Soviet Union and it provided for the replacement of the existing convention about the Straits with the unlimited right of the three powers to a free passage of their ships through the Bosphorus and the Dardannelles. Apart from that, von Ribbentrop was eager to mediate for an understanding between Russia and Japan and he assured Molotov that the Japanese were ready to cede important territories to Russia in the Far East.[[588]](#footnote-588)

Stalin’s envoy reiterated the “interest” of Russia in Bulgaria, Turkey, Hungary and Romania, as well as in Yugoslavia and Greece. He responded to von Ribbentrop’s renewed attempt to draw the Soviet attention to the inheritance of the British colonial empire by making some sarcastic comments about the raid of the Royal Air Force, which had forced them to take refuge in the basement of the German foreign ministry. Molotov insisted again upon solving first the “minor” problems in Europe.[[589]](#footnote-589)

The Russian premier was by no means satisfied by the talks. In the morning of November 14 he made a farewell visit to Hitler in the building of the imperial chancellery. Yet on this occasion the “Fuehrer” told Molotov that he considered Stalin a “*remarkable historical personality*” and that he thought himself to make history. Hitler explicitly asked Molotov to transmit to Stalin his wish to meet him personally in the near future.[[590]](#footnote-590)

On the very day of Molotov’s departure von Ribbentrop asked the Bulgarian minister to Berlin Draganov whether there was a Russian influence on the government. Draganov denied this by pointing out that the Russian threat was both ideological and political, because it combined the spread of Communism with the traditional strategy of conquering the Straits by overrunning inevitably Bulgaria. After hearing this, the German foreign minister insisted that by joining the Three-Power Pact Bulgaria would regain her access to the Aegean Sea and requested from Sofia to admit an observation mission of the Reich for intercepting British aircraft on the Bulgarian-Greek border. Draganov replied that Bulgaria should not be forced on and that the Bulgarians themselves could organize an antiaircraft watch on the border with Greece, hardly needing more than one German expert. He inquired about the results of the meetings with Molotov, but von Ribbentrop gave an evasive answer, which left the Bulgarian diplomat with the feeling that the talks had been a failure.[[591]](#footnote-591)

Even the Portuguese premier and dictator Salazar was apparently worried about what the Reich intended further and he tried to assure the German representative to Lisbon that, after the reelection of Roosevelt, the United States would hardly enter the war and that there was no risk of an occupation of the Azores Islands by the Americans. At the same time Salazar claimed that Portugal and Germany had the same ideology, despite the fact that his regime was quite remote from the National Socialist totalitarianism.[[592]](#footnote-592)

For his part, the German minister to Dublin Hempel was unexpectedly successful in carrying out the instructions of Berlin to invite the Irish Prime Minister de Valera to a dinner to sound him about whether his government would accept from the Reich arms and war materials. De Valera was evasive, but this didn’t prevent him from expressing his fears that such a transfer of weapons might be interpreted by the English as a deviation from Eire’s neutrality.[[593]](#footnote-593)

As a matter of fact, Hitler began at that moment to think about some way of invading Eire which, in his view, might put an end to the war against Britain. He was still obsessed therefore with the Battle for England, even though he had no reason to be satisfied with the Russians either. Yet the “Fuehrer” instructed the German High Command to slow down the plans for the Russian campaign until Stalin gave his reply about joining the Three-Power Pact. On the other hand, Hitler was so infuriated by the British air raid on Berlin during Molotov’s visit that he ordered the annihilation of at least one English town. In the night of November 14 to November 15 German bombers attacked small civilian targets and destroyed the Coventry Cathedral, killing between 400 and 600 people, but the assault had no military significance at all.[[594]](#footnote-594)

On November 17 Boris III of Bulgaria flew incognito to Germany, accompanied by his foreign minister Ivan Popov. In a tête-à-tête talk at Berchtesgaden von Ribbentrop informed Popov that Romania, Hungary and Slovakia had already agreed to join the Three-Power Pact and that Bulgaria had to do the same thing on November 26. Popov replied that it would be advantageous to Germany herself, if Bulgaria remained outside the Pact, while in another tête-à-tête interview Hitler told Boris III that it depended entirely on the Bulgarians whether the German troops would come in Bulgaria as friends and allies or as invaders and occupiers. The King replied along the lines of his foreign minister, but he was more specific about the advantages to Germany, stating that Bulgaria would keep off the 24 Turkish and 7 Greek divisions more efficiently as a neutral country than as a belligerent and yet unarmed country. Boris III even declared his readiness to mediate for a peace between Germany and Britain.[[595]](#footnote-595)

Apart from Bulgaria, Hitler didn’t give up putting pressure on Spain for the same purpose. To that effect the Italian foreign minister Ciano arrived in Salzburg to confer with von Ribbentrop and their Spanish counterpart Serrano Súñer. In the early afternoon of November 18 it was the turn of the Spanish foreign minister to visit Hitler at Obersalzberg for a conversation, this time in the presence of von Ribbentrop. The “Fuehrer” tried to persuade their new guest that the Mediterranean could be closed to Britain only with the help of Spain, but Serrano Súñer replied that his country had just contracted 400,000 tons of grain from Canada, which would have been impossible without the permission of the United Kingdom. Moreover, Spain needed at least another 600,000 tons of grain. Otherwise, concluded Franco’s brother-in-law, Spain’s entrance into the war would be a madness.[[596]](#footnote-596)

At this point Hitler began to suspect that Spain apparently did not have enough power to contribute to the war, which automatically rose the price of Yugoslavia as a possible member of the Three-Power Pact. Later in the same afternoon the “Fuehrer” received Ciano and blamed directly the Italians for the occupation of Crete by the British and for compromising the Balkan positions of the Axis. Eventually Italy had to agree with a guarantee of Yugoslavia’s territory and with the cession of Salonica to the Serbs. Von Ribbentrop added that Bulgaria had to get a territorial access to the Aegean Sea, while Hitler reiterated the importance of Spain as member of the Three-Power Pact.[[597]](#footnote-597)

Of an entirely different character was the meeting of the German dictator with Leopold III of Belgium. The King had requested several times to be received by Hitler, who finally did him this favor, but only to consolidate further the positions of the Reich. He refused in fact to guarantee a restoration of Belgium’s sovereignty, although Leopold III repeatedly warned that the Belgians would sympathize with that power, which would respect their national independence. The King failed even in his efforts to persuade Hitler to release the prisoners of war of Walloon origin because, faithful to his racist doctrine, Hitler considered them less reliable than the Flemings. The only promise the “Fuehrer” made was that he would take no measures against the existence of the Belgian royal house.[[598]](#footnote-598)

At this moment Hitler was still confident that he was about to form a powerful alliance of Germany, Japan and Italy with Russia and to that effect he favored an understanding between Moscow and Tokyo as well. However, on November 19 Molotov reiterated to the Japanese ambassador to Moscow Tatekava that the Soviet Union could not conclude any nonaggression pact with Japan before retrieving Southern Sakhalin and before annexing part of the Kuril Islands. Somewhat later in the same evening the Russian premier told the Bulgarian minister to Moscow Stamenov that Sofia could rely on Soviet support for the claims on Eastern Thrace in exchange for a mutual assistance pact with the USSR.[[599]](#footnote-599)

On November 20 the Hungarian prime minister Pal Teleki arrived in Vienna to sign the Three-Power Pact. Thus Hungary became the first country to join the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, but Teleki successfully avoided signing an additional protocol, providing for control over the press and the propaganda. However, the Hungarian authorities had to close the Polish legation in Budapest, although as many as 50,000 Poles had taken refuge in Hungary. For his part, Hitler recommended Teleki and his foreign minister Csaky to seek for a reconciliation with Yugoslavia without abandoning the Hungarian territorial claims. On the other hand, the “Fuehrer” admitted that he hoped less for an understanding with Stalin and relied more “*on the instruments of real power*”.[[600]](#footnote-600)

In the late afternoon of November 21 the Bulgarian foreign minister Popov informed the German minister to Sofia von Richthofen about the renewed Soviet proposal for a mutual assistance pact, which reminded too much of the pacts imposed by Stalin on Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania before their destruction. Popov didn’t refer to the horrible fate of the three Baltic countries, but he asked von Richthofen whether it was not preferable under these circumstances to delay Bulgaria’s accession to the Three-Power Pact until the moment Spain would join it too. The German diplomat firmly replied, though, that only an immediate accession of Bulgaria to the Three-Power Pact would protect her from further Russian harassments.[[601]](#footnote-601)

In the morning of the following day the Romanian premier and dictator general Ion Antonescu arrived in Vienna to sign in his turn the protocol of his country’s accession to the Three-Power Pact. He brought with him a number of maps, indicating the predominantly Romanian character of Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia, but von Ribbentrop, who welcomed him, was almost hostile, blaming Romania for her attitude since the times of World War I. The German foreign minister also emphasized that the German-Italian commission, formed as a result of the requests of Romania and Hungary, had found out that atrocities were committed both by the Romanian authorities on the Hungarian minority and by the Hungarian authorities on the Romanian minority. In response Antonescu warned about the Soviet intention to eliminate Germany from the Danubian delta, but at the same time he gave free course both to his fears of Russia and to his anti-Semitism by stating that the previous, anti-German regime in Romania had been supported by the Soviets and by the Jews and that the Romanians could not trust “*the Slavs*” either.[[602]](#footnote-602)

In the afternoon of November 22 Antonescu was received by Hitler, who was obviously pleased with Romania’s entrance into the Three-Power Pact. The general availed himself of the opportunity to hand over to the “Fuehrer” the ethnic maps of Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia. He went even further by attacking the Second Vienna Award, but Hitler reminded him that without this award Romania would have been destroyed and engulfed by Bolshevik Russia. The German dictator even promised that the “Wehrmacht” would give back to the Romanians the territories they had been forced to cede to Russia, but Antonescu proudly stressed that the Romanians would fight with their own forces for regaining these territories.[[603]](#footnote-603)

It is not improbable that Hitler revealed his intention to wage a war against Stalin only insofar as to show to Antonescu that Romania’s accession to the Three-Power Pact was by no means a mistake. The founder and leader of German National Socialism had serious reasons to accelerate the enlargement of the Pact, since at this very moment the Greeks managed to capture Korçë and the Italians risked losing the entire southern one third of Albania.[[604]](#footnote-604)

On November 23 the TASS Soviet new agency published an official statement, which denied in harsh terms the reports about a Russian approval of Hungary’s accession to the Three-Power Pact. On the same day, though, von Ribbentrop received the Yugoslav journalist Danilo Gregorić, who acted as an unofficial envoy of the regent Prince Paul. The German foreign minister told the journalist that he would instruct the German diplomatic representative in Belgrade to invite the Yugoslav foreign minister Alexander Cincar-Marković for a visit to the Reich.[[605]](#footnote-605)

At 1PM the Bulgarian minister Draganov, who had just arrived from Sofia to Berlin by plane, was summoned by Hitler and told him that Bulgaria was ready to accede to the Three-Power Pact, but for a number of reasons she wanted to postpone the date of signature. Draganov pointed out, in particular, the Russian pressure for a mutual assistance pact and the introduction of a state of siege in Turkish Thrace. Moreover, he went on, if Bulgaria became member of the Three-Power Pact, the British would see no obstacle any more to flying over the Bulgarian territory to attack the Romanian oil fields. The Bulgarian diplomat emphasized that the very presence of 300 German officers in Bulgaria to build control stations against possible raids of the Royal Air Force was a proof of Bulgaria’s loyalty to Germany. At the end of the meeting Draganov presented a map to show the Greek territories, claimed by Bulgaria. Hitler promised to satisfy these demands and eventually left the Bulgarians free to decide when to join the Three-Power Pact.[[606]](#footnote-606)

After Draganov, who flew back to Sofia, Hitler received general Antonescu, who was still in Berlin after the signature of the Three-Power Pact. The Romanian leader reiterated his strong objections to the Second Vienna Award, but the “Fuehrer” blackmailed him by stating that Russia might also join the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. Antonescu tried in vain to persuade the German dictator that Britain and France were natural allies of the Reich in the struggle against Stalin.[[607]](#footnote-607)

On that very day, despite Hitler’s allegations, the Russian minister in Stockholm Madame Kollontai declared to her Bulgarian counterpart Nikola Antonov that she was “*concerned*” about the diplomatic action of Germany, which forced the small countries in Central and Eastern Europe to join the Three-Power Pact. In her view, this attitude was directed against the Soviet Union and she warned that Molotov’s silence on his Berlin visit might lead the small Central and Eastern European countries to erroneous conclusions.[[608]](#footnote-608)

At approximately the same moment the Turkish foreign minister Saraçoglu denied in his turn the Bulgarian fears of Ankara, by rejecting the suggestion of the British ambassador Knatchbull-Hugessen to make a joint declaration with Yugoslavia against Bulgaria. Saraçoglu went even further by disclosing that he would instruct the Turkish minister to Sofia Ali Şefki Berker to announce that Turkey and Bulgaria should avoid enemy camps, directed against each other. That was a bad surprise for the United Kingdom, which was, moreover, running out of money for purchasing arms and war materials in the United States.[[609]](#footnote-609)

On November 24 the first enlargement of the Three-Power Pact was completed by the signature of the Slovak premier Tuka, who was received on that occasion by von Ribbentrop. Unlike Hungary and Romania, Slovakia was incomparably more subordinated to Germany and Tuka apparently endeavored to be even more submissive, which didn’t prevent him from inquiring about the way the Slovak government should deal with Soviet agents and with the local Communists. In clear contradiction with the Soviet-Nazi alliance von Ribbentrop advised him to treat Communism ruthlessly. Tuka had suddenly the courage to claim for Slovakia some territories of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The German foreign minister remained silent on this issue and counterattacked by demanding the removal of some unreliable Slovak diplomats and by rejecting any form of “political” Catholicism in Slovakia, although the Slovak president Tiso was a Catholic prelate.[[610]](#footnote-610)

As if to justify von Ribbentrop’s resurgent anti-Communism, the Russian war minister Timoshenko and the chief of staff Meretskov sent to troops, concentrated on the Finnish border, a detailed directive for the forthcoming invasion of Finland. For his part, Molotov explicitly approved the Comintern tactics of demoralizing “*the German occupation troops in the different countries*”. He only recommended caution and advised the Communists to act “*quietly*”. That was the background of the replacement of Shkvartsev with Dekanozov as the new Russian ambassador to Berlin, which surprised the Germans and Hitler postponed for a while the ceremony of receiving Dekanozov’s credentials.[[611]](#footnote-611)

On November 25, 1940, the Russian deputy foreign minister Arkadij Sobolev arrived in Sofia. He was received consecutively by the Bulgarian foreign minister Popov, by Prime Minister Filov and by King Boris III, to whom he read out a proposal for a mutual assistance pact, but failed to leave a written copy. The proposal contained the obvious lie that Turkey would oppose the advance of Bulgaria toward the south “*with all available means*”. This was followed by the statement that “*in view of the community of interests of the Soviet Union and Bulgaria, the Soviet Union repeats its proposal of September 1939 to conclude a mutual assistance pact with Bulgaria, which would be helpful to Bulgaria in realizing her national aspirations not only in western but also in eastern Thrace*”. To that effect “*the Soviet Union undertakes to render every assistance, including military assistance, to Bulgaria in case of a threat of attack on Bulgaria by a third power or a coalition of powers*”. In exchange for that Bulgaria had to admit “Red Army” troops and naval and military bases in her three largest cities after Sofia, namely in Varna and Burgas on the Black Sea and in Plovdiv at about 150 kilometers to the southeast of the Bulgarian capital. In fact this meant that Bulgaria could retrieve the region of Adrianople (Edirne) and her territorial access to the Aegean Sea, but she had to disappear as a sovereign country, which was confirmed by the last paragraph: “*The objection of the Soviet Union to the accession of Bulgaria to the well-known Tripartite Pact will be dropped, on condition that the mutual assistance pact between the Soviet Union and Bulgaria be concluded. It is entirely possible that in that case the Soviet Union will join the Tripartite Pact.*”[[612]](#footnote-612)

In straight contrast to the Russian allegations about a “Turkish threat”, the minister of Turkey in Sofia Berker managed to notify the Bulgarian premier Filov in the same afternoon about the declaration of the German ambassador in Ankara von Papen that the Reich did not intend to attack Turkey. On behalf of his government Berker stated that in this case Turkey was ready to guarantee that she would not attack Bulgaria either. In fact he proposed a joint nonaggression declaration of the two countries.[[613]](#footnote-613)

That was also the moment, when Stalin informed his apparatchik of Bulgarian origin and secretary-general of the Comintern G.Dimitrov about the proposal for a mutual assistance pact with Bulgaria. The Russian dictator also disclosed that there was a “*serious friction*” between Moscow and Berlin and that the Soviet Union demanded military bases in Turkey too. Stalin even threatened to drive the Turks out of Europe and claimed that the very number of Turks in Turkey was rather limited. He instructed Dimitrov to launch in Bulgaria a noisy propaganda campaign in favor of the mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union, but the efforts of the local Comintern network proved to be a failure, since the Communists directly appealed for the engulfment of Bulgaria by Russia. Anyway, Boris III and his ministers decided to reject the Soviet proposal, as tactfully as possible.[[614]](#footnote-614)

In the evening hours of November 25 Molotov told the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg that the USSR was ready to approve the Four-Power Pact, proposed by von Ribbentrop two weeks ago, on condition that Germany withdrew immediately her troops from Finland. Moreover, Bulgaria had to take example of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and to conclude a mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union and to provide the “Red Army” with land and naval bases on Bulgarian territory. Turkey had to do the same in the zone of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Under another term Eastern Turkey, Iran, Iraq and the whole area to the Persian Gulf had to be acknowledged as part of the Soviet sphere of interests and aspirations. Only after all that Turkey or, rather, what would remain of her, could also join the Four-Power Pact. Besides, Molotov envisaged a series of secret protocols. One of them had to be signed by Germany, Italy and Russia and it had to provide for a joint Russian-Italian military action in case Turkey refused to obey. Another secret protocol had to deal with Finland and by a separate protocol the Japanese had to abandon the exploitation of the oil fields and coal mines in Northern Sakhalin. Finally, in a special secret protocol Germany and Italy had to recognize that Bulgaria belonged to the Black Sea security zone of the Soviet Union and that the conclusion of a Bulgarian-Russian mutual assistance pact was a political necessity.[[615]](#footnote-615)

On November 26 the German High Command completed its plan for a war against Russia, giving a preference to an offensive by the shortest way to Moscow and Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). Only a couple of people knew about this plan and on the surface the Soviet-Nazi alliance remained intact. On the other hand, despite the warnings of the Romanian leader general Antonescu, the Legionnaires began to massacre all their more prominent opponents, killing among others the historian and former premier Nicolae Iorga. The National Legionnaire Party or the “Iron Guard” was seen as a fifth column of National Socialist Germany in Romania, although most representatives of the Reich strongly advised the Legionnaires to be moderate and to respect general Antonescu. Too many aspects of the Legionnaire terror reminded of the Bolshevik one, but this didn’t prevent the British Cabinet under Churchill from acknowledging the “provisional” Russian rule over Eastern Poland just to please Stalin, hoping that a Soviet-Nazi war might break out before the end of the year.[[616]](#footnote-616)

On November 28 the Yugoslav foreign minister Cincar-Marković paid a secret visit to Hitler at “Berghof” in Obersalzberg. The “Fuehrer” assured him that Germany didn’t urge Italy to take part in the war and that he had rejected the military assistance of Russia, since the Reich preferred acting alone, without coalition partners and allies. Nevertheless, a gigantic coalition was to be established from Japan to Spain and Yugoslavia had to make her choice. The German dictator declared that, in case of an understanding with Yugoslavia, he would make Mussolini respect it. He also promised that Berlin would not support the territorial claims of Bulgaria and Hungary on Yugoslavia. In his words the acquisition of Salonica by the Serbs would relax the tensions between Belgrade and Rome. Hitler invited Yugoslavia to join not the Three-Power Pact, but “*the European coalition*” and stated that the Reich would demand neither any troops from Yugoslavia, nor even free passage for the “Wehrmacht” through Yugoslav territory. He offered only a nonaggression pact between Germany and Italy, on the one hand, and Yugoslavia, on the other, although he made it clear that such a pact might evolve into something more binding. Toward the end of the meeting the “Fuehrer” stated that order in the Balkans would facilitate also an agreement with Stalin about the peninsula and that the Soviet expansion would be reoriented to other geographic regions. The only thing Cincar-Marković in fact did was to promise that he would report to the Yugoslav regent Prince Paul on the talks, while Hitler didn’t conceal his intention to invite him once more to Germany, possibly together with Prince Paul.[[617]](#footnote-617)

Meanwhile the German military assistance to the Italians in the Balkans became more urgent, after the Greeks resumed their offensive in Albania, advancing by another 40 kilometers. In a more or less hysterical mood Mussolini replaced Marshal Pietro Badoglio with General Ugo Cavalero as chief of staff of the Italian armed forces. Against the background of this new victory of the Greeks, von Ribbentrop instructed the minister of the Reich to Sofia von Richthofen to work not for a declaration, but for a pact of nonaggression between Bulgaria and Turkey. This apparently found a favorable echo in Ankara, since the Turkish foreign minister Saraçoglu told the Bulgarian diplomatic representative Sava Kirov that Turkey would not be satisfied by vague declarations. On the other hand, the German ambassador to Ankara von Papen tried to persuade President Inönü that in case of an intervention in the Balkans the Reich would respect the interests of Turkey and that the assurances Germany was ready to give Turkey would not contradict even Turkey’s obligations to Britain. No matter how convincing von Papen was, the Turkish government decided to begin negotiations about an agreement with the Reich.[[618]](#footnote-618)

Both Hitler during his talks with Cincar-Marković and von Papen during his meeting with President Inönü kept presenting Russia as a friend and ally rather than an enemy. Hitler left even his foreign minister von Ribbentrop with the impression that he was disposed to reach some compromise with Stalin about Finland but not about Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the Court of Summary Jurisdiction in Helsinki had the courage to ban the Communist Finland-USSR Association for Peace and Friendship on the ground that by its subversive activity it jeopardized the friendly relations between Finland and the Soviet Union.[[619]](#footnote-619)

Actually, Hitler saw by that time no alternative in his relations with Russia but war. He was scared to death by the prospect of a joint assault on Germany by Stalin from the east and by the United States and Britain from the west, but he was confident that he would be able to cope with the “Red Army” before that. However, the “Fuehrer” was aware that the attack on Russia had to be preceded by the elimination of any possible British presence in the Balkans, the more so as in the night of December 3 to December 4 the Greeks succeeded in capturing Pogradec on the Albanian coast of the Horrid Lake. Mussolini was so desperate that he thought at a moment to surrender, but eventually he nourished the hope to stop the Greeks at 150 kilometers to the north of the Greek border.[[620]](#footnote-620)

One of Hitler’s reactions was to grant the Romanians a loan under extremely favorable terms at an interest rate of only 3.5 per cent. In exchange for that Romania had to sign a ten-year economic agreement with Germany, providing for the restructuring of the country’s economy along National Socialist lines. On the other hand, the 3.5 per cent interest rate could be granted only by the national Reichsbank, which marked a further step toward eliminating the private banks, whose entire policy was determined by the regime anyway.[[621]](#footnote-621)

Moreover, the “Fuehrer” decided to try once again to win over Spain to his side by sending to Madrid the head of the Abwehr German military intelligence admiral Wilhelm Canaris. The mission of Canaris was to prepare Spain for entering the war and to contribute to the plans for an assault on the British colony of Gibraltar. A no doubt anti-British move was also the declaration that the Reich sympathized entirely with the national independence struggle of the Arabs, but in full accordance with Italy, although most Arab leaders mistrusted strongly the imperial Italian designs in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The German declaration was published by the Nazi press on December 5.[[622]](#footnote-622)

In fact Hitler intended to “ask” Franco to admit German troops in Spain on January 10, 1941. Some rumors about these designs of the Reich reached the Portuguese leader Salazar, who feared that Germany would conquer Gibraltar and the Canary Islands. He was worried by the prospect of a German invasion of Spain and he planned the dispatch of a military delegation to the United Kingdom to start secret negotiations with the British.[[623]](#footnote-623)

However, unlike Spain and Bulgaria, Hitler didn’t insist upon the admission of Sweden and Finland to the Three-Power Pact. At the same time he warned a special envoy of King Gustav V of Sweden that a Swedish-Finnish union would only provoke unnecessarily Stalin and went even further by stating that a similar provocation had led to the engulfment of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia by Russia. The problem was that Hitler’s plans for a war on Russia implied the participation of Romania and Finland, which in the case of the Finns would prove impossible if they concluded a union with Sweden.[[624]](#footnote-624)

Again on December 5, 1940, Hitler summoned the commander of the land forces marshal von Brauchitsch and his chief of staff Halder and told them that Gibraltar had to be occupied by the “Wehrmacht” on January 14, 1941, at the latest, but Halder pointed out that such an operation would need enormous transportation means. Both he and von Brauchitsch drew the attention of the “Fuehrer” to the crucial importance of the situation in the east, where Stalin had amassed at least half a million soldiers and 7,000 tanks with five divisions concentrated on the Romanian border only. Halder complained that Russia used every opportunity to weaken the positions of the Axis. Eventually Hitler approved the “Otto” plan for war against the Soviet Union, which made more urgent the implementation of the Balkan campaign against Greece, since Germany could not afford to wage a war against Stalin with the British threatening her southern flank. Some fragmentary information about the Soviet intention to launch an offensive to the west had reached also the Finnish government[[625]](#footnote-625)

Meanwhile the position of Italy became even more desperate, because on the following day the British launched a counteroffensive through the Sahara Desert. In less than 24 hours the British units, amounting to 50,000 people in all, advanced by some 50 miles without being even noticed by the Italians, whose troops in Libya were as many as 300,000. At 11AM on December 6 a special envoy of Hitler offered to Mussolini a substantial air force assistance against the United Kingdom in the entire Eastern Mediterranean area. At approximately the same time the German minister to Belgrade von Heeren demanded from the Yugoslav foreign minister Cincar-Marković the free passage of 1,000 trucks for Albania, but Cincar-Marković firmly rejected the demand and pointed out, among other things, that the Serbs had declined similar demands of the Greeks. This unwavering position was followed on December 7 by a lengthy written declaration of the Yugoslav foreign minister to von Heeren that Belgrade was ready to conclude a nonaggression pact with Germany and Italy on the basis of the Italian-Yugoslav friendship treaty of March 1937.[[626]](#footnote-626)

In fact Hitler wanted to see Yugoslavia in the Three-Power Pact and the same applied to Spain. At 7:30PM on December 7 his special envoy Canaris was received by Franco. The mission of the Abwehr chief was to persuade the Spanish dictator to join the pact. However, Canaris was an opponent to the National Socialist regime and he frankly revealed that Hitler planned to invade Spain on January 10, 1941. At the same time he warned Franco that the war in general would be long and hard and that it was in the interest of Spain to stay away from the conflict. Franco himself didn’t need much encouragement in this regard and he declared officially that Spain could enter the war only at the moment of Britain’s collapse. Eventually, Hitler abandoned altogether his plan for the conquest of Gibraltar and the Canary Islands.[[627]](#footnote-627)

The United Kingdom was, no doubt, in a critical position and in a letter to US President F.D.Roosevelt Prime Minister Churchill urged him to accelerate the deliveries of arms and war materials and even to intervene against the neutrality of Eire. He had to confess at the same time that the moment was approaching when Britain would not be able to pay for the deliveries. Yet on December 9 the British forces in North Africa engaged in their first direct clashes with the Italians and in a couple of hours they took back some settlements, which had fallen under Italian occupation in the previous months.[[628]](#footnote-628)

Three days later the Italian retreat from Egypt to Libya became already a stampede, which could only enhance Hitler’s efforts to attract Bulgaria and Yugoslavia to the Three-Power Pact. To that effect the Reich approved the “*eternal friendship*” pact, signed in Belgrade by the Hungarian foreign minister Csaky and his Yugoslav counterpart Cincar-Marković on December 12. However, Berlin was to some extent disappointed, because the pact limited the opportunities for pressuring the Serbs more brutally.[[629]](#footnote-629)

Meanwhile the British ambassador to Washington DC Lord Lothian passed away and Churchill decided to replace him with Foreign Secretary Halifax. The Foreign Office was taken over by Anthony Eden who, unlike Halifax, had not compromised himself with the appeasement strategy of Chamberlain, although his resignation in 1938 was due to the compliant attitude of the Cabinet not toward National Socialist Germany, but toward Fascist Italy.[[630]](#footnote-630)

A major and dramatic change occurred in Vichy too, where Pétain’s deputy Laval was not only removed from the government, but he was also arrested for conspiring against the head of state. Laval was known as Germany’s most faithful man in Vichy and his elimination couldn’t be interpreted but as an unfriendly gesture toward the Reich. He was replaced with Pierre-Etienne Flandin, who was a veteran politician of the Third Republic and premier for a brief period in 1934-1935. Yet Pétain hurried to demonstrate a compliance with the Reich in every other respect, while Hitler decided to use Laval as a means of pressure on Vichy without insisting upon his return to the government.[[631]](#footnote-631)

France was lost for Britain except the Free French forces of general de Gaulle, but, for the time being, the United Kingdom could rely on one more ally, namely Greece. On December 17, 1940, the Greek army captured the entire southeastern part of Albania between the Adriatic Sea and the Ohrid Lake, while US President Roosevelt had come to the conclusion that, instead of granting loans to the United Kingdom that probably would be never paid back, the Americans could simply lend ships and planes to the British: “*Suppose my neighbor’s home catches fire, and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away. If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out his fire. Now, what do I do? I don’t say to him before that operation, “Neighbor, my garden hose cost me $15; you have to pay me $15 for it.” What is the transaction that goes on? I don’t want $15—I want my garden hose back after the fire is over.*”[[632]](#footnote-632)

Both the American and British government still tried to figure out how to defend democracy against the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, but on December 18 Hitler signed the plan for an assault on Communist Russia and renamed it “*Barbarossa*” after the name of the medieval German emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1152-1190), whose drowning in Asia Minor led to the disintegration of the Third Crusade. According to the plan Russia had to be smashed before the end of the war operations against England. Yet Hitler did not intend to annihilate completely the Soviet state, but to establish a defense barrier from Volga to Arkhangelsk (Archangel) and to leave to Stalin a still immense territory to the east of that line up to the Pacific Ocean. The plan provided for the participation of Finland and Romania, but in case of necessity Sweden could be forced to grant a free passage for some German troops from Norway to Murmansk. The fatal flaw of this plan was the fact that it underestimated seriously the armed forces at Stalin’s disposal.[[633]](#footnote-633)

Both Hitler’s plan for war against Russia and Stalin’s plan for war against Germany were kept further in deep secrecy and the two dictators spared no efforts in preserving the image of a rather close alliance with each other. This impression was enhanced even more by the intervention of Berlin and Moscow in favor of the candidate they preferred for the next president of Finland. The incumbent president Kyösti Kallio had suffered from a strike immediately after the signature of the peace treaty on March 12, 1940, and by another strike somewhat later and at last he sent in his resignation. According to the Finnish Constitution the President was not elected directly by the people, but by an electoral college, chosen by the people. Because of the wartime conditions, the Finnish parliament decided to entrust the election of a new president to the electoral college, chosen a couple of years ago. This enabled not only Russia and Germany, but also Britain to intervene in favor of their preferred candidate. The interference did not remain without any effect on the Electoral College insofar that it chose the candidate, who was the least likely to provoke the anger of Hitler or Stalin. That was Prime Minister Risto Ryti, who got 288 votes out of 300 in all. His position as prime minister was taken over by Johan Rangel, who came from the financial circles and didn’t belong to any political party but who had collaborated closely with Ryti. As a whole the cabinet of ministers remained practically the same.[[634]](#footnote-634)

In his endeavors to put Stalin off his guards, Hitler gave free course to his anti-Semitism, when he finally received the new Russian ambassador Dekanozov. Stalin’s envoy had come to show his credentials, but Hitler staged a whole scene to reaffirm the impression of the Russians that Germany would undertake no other actions before eliminating the United Kingdom. At a moment the “Fuehrer” even started to shout that he would eradicate the British Isles, which were impregnated with Jews. He also reiterated his wish to meet Stalin personally.[[635]](#footnote-635)

The two dictators showed a remarkable solidarity also in their hostility to the idea of a union between Sweden and Finland. Both the Swedish and the Finnish government were fully aware of that and on December 21 the Swedish minister to Berlin Arvid Richert notified the state secretary of the German foreign ministry von Weizsaecker about the history of the talks between Stockholm and Helsinki and the negative reaction of Molotov. Richert declared that Sweden didn’t intend to take further steps in this regard, but he stressed that his government had a “*positive interest*” in the future fate of Finland.[[636]](#footnote-636)

On the following day, instructed by von Ribbentrop in a personal telegram, the German minister in Belgrade von Heeren tried to persuade the Yugoslav foreign minister Cincar-Marković that during his recent secret visit to Hitler in Obersalzberg the “Fuehrer” had directly invited Yugoslavia to join the Three-Power Pact, although this pact had not been even mentioned. Yet von Heeren stressed that a nonaggression pact between Germany, Italy and Yugoslavia was not enough for strengthening the ties of Yugoslavia with the Axis according to the views of Hitler and Mussolini. Cincar-Marković objected that the tripartite nonaggression pact was proposed by Hitler, but he added obligingly that his interpretation of the proposal for a nonaggression treaty did not preclude Yugoslavia’s accession to the Three-Power Pact.[[637]](#footnote-637)

Everything seems to indicate that Belgrade was still less aware of the real intentions and plans of Stalin, who summoned on December 23 all senior commanders of the “Red Army” to a conference in Moscow. The Russian dictator didn’t attend the conference personally, but he followed it closely and he decided to replace the chief of staff of the Soviet armed forces Kiril Meretskov with someone else, only because Meretskov suggested that the troops should be prepared not only for offensive, but also for defensive operations. Unlike Meretskov Zhukov, who was in charge of the Kiev Special Military District, based himself on his experience of annihilating an entire Japanese army in August-September 1939. In fact Zhukov was the first one to apply the blitzkrieg tactics on the battlefield and he recommended a breakthrough of the front line, wide from 400 to 450 kilometers, and a rapid destruction of the enemy. In his opinion such an assault needed between 85 and 100 infantry divisions, 4 to 5 mechanized corps, 2 to 3 cavalry corps and 30 to 35 air force divisions. Another general pointed out that wars should not be declared in the future and that the general mobilization and the deployment of the troops had to be carried out enough time before the beginning of the war. For his part the young general Pavel Richagov, who was in charge of the air force, praised the new decree that, among other things, deprived the pilots of parachutes, because, if hit in the air above enemy territory, they had to ram with their plane in any target of the enemy, including residences. Most commanders thought that the “Red Army” was able to conquer Germany within 17 days of battles.[[638]](#footnote-638)

By that time, thanks to his efficient spy network, Stalin was already acquainted with Hitler’s Barbarossa Plan in details. He knew, therefore, that the German dictator intended to throw the Reich into a two-front war by launching an attack on the Soviet Union before completing his campaign against Britain. Stalin was also informed that the Germans planned to concentrate their assault through Byelorussia. Even most German senior diplomats and commanders didn’t suspect how far Hitler had gone in his preparations for an invasion of Russia, but the Russian dictator still tended to believe that his German counterpart was bluffing, since the Reich was actually unprepared for a war against the Soviet Union.[[639]](#footnote-639)

The forthcoming gigantic clash between the two totalitarian powers forced even those countries, which had not yet become a victim of their aggression, to infringe further upon fundamental rights and freedoms. Thus on December 24 the Bulgarian National Assembly approved a Defense of the Nation Act, despite the protests of intellectuals, of professional associations and of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. According to the perverse National Socialist logic the act was directed both against the Jews and against the freemasons, although most ministers were freemasons, including Prime Minister Filov. Countries like Hungary and Romania had introduced anti-Semitic legislation back in the late 1930s, but until December 1940 it was an unknown practice in Bulgaria, although Bulgarians had not been totally immune to anti-Semitic outbursts. Nevertheless, up to that moment some 4,500 Jews of other countries had been permitted to cross the Bulgarian territory on their way to Palestine, which was under British administration. The aim of the law was to please Hitler and, as King Boris III put it, it was preferable that the Bulgarians themselves adopt such an act instead of waiting for the Nazis and their friends in Bulgaria to do the job and to impose a more drastic version. The Bulgarian Defense of the Nation Act deprived the Jews of their political rights, submitted their possessions and their right to work to a number of restrictions and prohibited granting Bulgarian citizenship to Jews in the future. However, unlike the National Socialist doctrine, the Jews were defined not as a “race”, but as a religious community, which left the door open to their release from this humiliating and precarious situation in case of conversion to Christianity.[[640]](#footnote-640)

Even at this point repression in Bulgaria was incomparably milder than that in the countries under Nazi or Soviet occupation. Thus in Poland the Russian authorities had deported by that time as many as 2,500,000 Poles, 1,500,000 of whom had already died in the concentration camps. Churches were closed both in the Soviet and in the Nazi occupation zone. On the other hand, the land forces of Russia had reached 4.2 million soldiers.[[641]](#footnote-641)

On December 31, 1940, Hitler wrote a personal letter to Stalin, who had asked him, also in a personal letter, why Germany was concentrating troops in Poland. Hitler replied by stating his firm intention to occupy the British Isles before the end of 1941. He readily admitted that there were 70 German divisions in Poland but he tried to persuade the Russian dictator that near the Soviet border they were out of reach of the British air force and could be therefore trained and reorganized at ease for the forthcoming landing in England. These divisions would stay in Poland probably until March 1941 and the “Fuehrer” obligingly warned Stalin that they might be replaced with new units for training. Some of the troops, sent to Poland, would be dispatched through Romania and Bulgaria to expel the English from Greece. Hitler appealed to Stalin to disregard the rumors about an imminent German assault on Russia in the same way as he, Hitler, disregarded the rumors about an imminent Russian assault on Germany. The German leader renewed his invitation to a personal meeting “*for consolidating the alliance of the socialist countries and for establishing a new world order*”.[[642]](#footnote-642)

On January 2, 1941, the commanders and chiefs of staff of the Soviet military districts, who were retained by Stalin in Moscow after the end of the senior commanders’ conference, began to study various options of the war against Germany, by playing map games. In the same evening two Russian torpedo boats penetrated into the Sulina Branch of the Danube. The Romanian coastal guard opened fire on them and the two Soviet vessels quickly disappeared in the darkness. The aim was most probably to provoke the Romanians to disclose their defense positions.[[643]](#footnote-643)

The Bulgarians were not yet submitted to such Russian raids, but they felt threatened anyway. In the morning of January 4 the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop welcomed the Bulgarian premier Filov in a railway carriage at the Salzburg station. The visit was arranged at the request of Filov and Boris III still hoped to postpone Bulgaria’s accession to the Three-Power Pact. However, in response to a declaration of Filov that Bulgaria was ready to fight against a Russian encroachment, von Ribbentrop reiterated that if Bulgaria had joined the Three-Power Pact, Russia would not have put her to trouble. The German foreign minister insisted that Bulgaria had to sign the Three-Power Pact before the intervention of the Reich in the Balkans.[[644]](#footnote-644)

At 4:30PM von Ribbentrop took Filov to Hitler, to whom the Bulgarian prime minister stated that he was in full agreement with the German foreign minister about Bulgaria’s accession to the Three-Power Pact and that only the day of accession needed some specification. Hitler assured Filov that Russia and Turkey would not intervene, promised again a territorial access for the Bulgarians to the Aegean Sea and stated that the Reich did not require troops from Bulgaria except the dispatch of some units to the Turkish border. However, similarly to von Ribbentrop, Hitler refused to discuss with Filov the problem of Yugoslav Macedonia and underlined his sympathy with the Serbs.[[645]](#footnote-645)

As for the intervention of Germany, it became even more urgent not only in the Balkans, but also in North Africa, because at 4PM British and Australian troops took Bardia in the Italian colony of Libya, at 25 kilometers to the west of the Egyptian border. The British and the Australians captured as many as 45,000 Italian soldiers and 462 artillery pieces. At the news about this catastrophe Mussolini tried to postpone once more the personal meeting, required by Hitler, but eventually he had to agree to see the “Fuehrer” in about one or two weeks.[[646]](#footnote-646)

On January 7, after returning from his talks with von Ribbentrop and Hitler, Prime Minister Filov told Boris III, that Bulgaria had no alternative but to join the Three-Power Pact. The King became almost hysterical, but Filov warned him that a victory of England and a disintegration of the German military power would lead to the Bolshevization of Bulgaria. Finally, after several hours of discussions, Boris III and Filov came to the conclusion that Bulgaria should demand that the problem of the return of Aegean Thrace be settled in advance, while the Pact had to be signed on the very eve of the entrance of German troops into Bulgaria for Greece.[[647]](#footnote-647)

National Socialist Germany was therefore seen as the only factor, capable of stopping Communist Russia, but on January 10 the two totalitarian powers concluded a large-scale commercial treaty, which went significantly further, although the exchange level between the Reich and the Soviet Union was already impressive enough. From February 11, 1941, to August 1, 1942, Russia’s exports to Germany were to reach the general sum of 620 to 640 million reichsmarks and the same applied to Germany’s exports to Russia. A secret protocol was also signed, by which Germany renounced her claims on the strip of Lithuanian territory around Mariampole. In exchange for that Russia had to pay to Germany 7.5 million dollars or 31,937,500 reichsmarks. Another two agreements dealt with the emigration of ethnic Germans from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to Germany. However, both for Stalin and Hitler the aim of all these agreements was to lull the vigilance of the other.[[648]](#footnote-648)

On January 12 Stalin suddenly replaced Meretskov with Zhukov as chief of staff of the “Red Army”. Zhukov was no doubt best suited to an assault on Germany and, significantly enough, on the following morning the TASS Soviet News Agency issued a declaration, rejecting the information that the eventual presence of German troops in Bulgaria was met with the approval of Moscow. According to the TASS statement Russia was not even informed officially about the issue, whereas the Soviet military attachés in Bucharest and Sofia directly warned their Bulgarian counterparts that the presence of German troops in Bulgaria might provoke a war between Germany and Russia and perhaps also between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union.[[649]](#footnote-649)

This reminder of the Soviet threat didn’t prevent the Bulgarian minister to Berlin Draganov from reiterating the territorial claims of Bulgaria in exchange for her accession to the Three-Power Pact. During a long conversation with von Weizsaecker Draganov even warned that after a cession of Salonica to the Serbs there would be no Bulgarian government, capable of pursuing further a friendly policy with regard to Germany.[[650]](#footnote-650)

For their part, the Italians were not quite sure about the attitude to follow toward Communist Russia in accordance with National Socialist Germany. On January 13 von Ribbentrop instructed von Weizsaecker to inform the Italian ambassador to Berlin Alfieri that the Reich preferred that Italy should protract her talks with Russia until the meeting between Hitler and Mussolini, scheduled for January 19. To make things even worse for the Italians, Britain spared no effort to reanimate her alliance with Turkey and offered her military assistance to Greece. However, the Greek premier Metaxas rejected the proposal, rightfully pointing out that a limited British assistance would only give the Germans the needed pretext for an assault from the north.[[651]](#footnote-651)

At that moment the German troops in Romania were rapidly increasing their number, but this worried by no means the Romanian leader general Antonescu, who was concerned above all about the ongoing terror of the Legionnaires. He didn’t even know to what extent this activity was backed by National Socialist Germany and that was the main reason for his request of a personal meeting with Hitler. The “Fuehrer” received him on January 14, 1941, in Obersalzberg. The general hurried to complain that the Legionnaires wanted to carry out their revolution at once, which was counterproductive and that their ranks were rapidly infiltrated by local Communists in accordance with the new tactics of the Comintern. Antonescu hinted that Romania could increase her production only if there were no Legionnaires in the state administration and he warned that he was ready to rule with the Legion, without the Legion and even against the Legion. Hitler responded by giving his assurances that Antonescu was the only person who could determine the future of Romania. For his part, Antonescu signaled the concentration of seven Russian army corps and five armored divisions, prepared to cross the Romanian border. Hitler declared that England would abandon the Balkans to Russia, while Germany would guarantee not only the Romanian-Russian border, but also the remaining borders of Romania. Antonescu left for Bucharest with the impression that Hitler gave him a free hand with regard to the Legionnaires.[[652]](#footnote-652)

Indeed Hitler was not very enthusiastic about exporting the National Socialist revolution, which made him relatively tolerant of the removal of Pierre Laval from the government in Vichy, the more so as Pétain had a reconciliation meeting with Laval. The marshal could compensate to some extent this clear sign of submission by reaching finally an agreement with the Swiss for the repatriation of 30,000 French soldiers, who had found refuge in Switzerland in June 1940. However, the same French unit included also 12,000 Poles and 600 Belgians, who had to remain interned on Swiss territory.[[653]](#footnote-653)

On January 17, 1941, Molotov notified the German ambassador in Moscow von der Schulenburg that Russia had not yet received a German answer to the Soviet terms of accession to the Three-Power Pact. He commented also the increasing military presence of Germany in Romania and reiterated that Bulgaria, the Bosphorus and the Dardannelles were part of Russia’s “*security zone*” and that the presence of any non-Russian armed forces in the area would be considered by the Soviet Union as an infringement upon the security interests of the USSR.[[654]](#footnote-654)

Yet Hitler didn’t have much choice, since at this very moment the Italians suffered another defeat in Albania by the Greeks, who destroyed an entire élite division. In the morning of January 19 he met Mussolini at the former Austrian-Italian border to talk about the forthcoming Balkan operation of the “Wehrmacht”. Bulgaria’s accession to the Three-Power Pact was taken for granted, despite the hesitations of Boris III. At the same time Hitler urged Mussolini to pressure personally Franco to join the Three-Power Pact and declared that Russia was a much more serious threat than the United States. The German dictator feared a possible Russian attack, while deploying the troops for the invasion of Greece and he planned to keep a sufficient military force on Romanian soil to counter such an attack.[[655]](#footnote-655)

The Soviet threat didn’t prevent the Romanian Legionnaires from launching a violent attack for taking all the power in their hands. They had been preparing their revolution for several months and in the same evening the interior minister Petrovicescu made a radio speech, directed against the leader of the country general Antonescu, although his name was not explicitly mentioned. Antonescu immediately removed him from office, but Petrovicescu refused to leave and barricaded himself in the building of the Interior Ministry, heavily guarded by armed Legionnaires. In the following morning the commander of the Legion Horia Sima directly appealed to the Legionnaires to march and within a short time they seized a number of government buildings, while the streets of Bucharest and other cities were filled with protesting activists and supporters of the National Legionnaire Party.[[656]](#footnote-656)

Churchill and de Gaulle seemed to be the least touched by the developments in Romania. Instead of that they obviously endeavored to combine the anti-Nazi struggle with the preservation of their countries’ imperial interests. Thus de Gaulle notified the British Cabinet that the Empire Defense Council lacked the resources to prevent French Indo-China from the Japanese invasion, but he didn’t object to a possible British assistance to Pétain’s colonial authorities there.[[657]](#footnote-657)

At noon on January 21 the Legionnaires seized the barracks of a Romanian army unit in Bucharest and surrounded the Council of Ministers building, where general Antonescu dwelt. The rebels went as far as to smash the windows in front of Antonescu’s office by a machine gun. The general ordered the dispatch of new army reinforcements and in the same evening the defense of the Government Palace was strengthened by a tank unit and by an infantry company. Meanwhile a number of former premiers, other politicians and industrialists, who had survived the Legionnaire massacres, found refuge in the same building.[[658]](#footnote-658)

Late in the evening Antonescu appealed on the radio for the restoration of order within 24 hours, but his appeal could not be published in the newspapers, because the Legionnaires had seized most printing houses. Shortly after midnight, on January 22, while new masses of armed Legionnaires, mostly students and workers, were moving toward the Government Palace, Horia Sima demanded in an ultimatum to form the next Cabinet of Ministers and rejected the invitation of Antonescu to a personal meeting. In the following hours the Legionnaires managed to occupy also the radio station, but they failed to cut the phone connections.[[659]](#footnote-659)

A civil war was the last thing Hitler wanted to see in Romania, the more so as on the same day the British took the Libyan city of Tobruk at about one hundred kilometers to the west of the Egyptian border. The operation resulted in the capturing of as many as 30,000 Italian soldiers and of 236 artillery pieces, while the total number of Italian war prisoners reached the figure of 113,000 people. That was the end of the Italian army, formed in the summer of 1940 for the conquest of Egypt. Against this background Berlin advised Rome once again to be reserved and careful in the contacts with Moscow.[[660]](#footnote-660)

Meanwhile at 2PM on January 22, 1941, the government troops in Bucharest were reinforced by some additional infantry and tank units and retook the barracks that had been captured by the Legionnaires the previous night in proximity of the Government Palace. The whole operation caused the death of two soldiers and not a single Legionnaire, but the rebels responded by sheer acts of bestiality, burning alive some of the soldiers, fighting for the legitimate power. The Legionnaires tried to make the Romanians believe that the fight was against “*the Jewry and the freemasonry*”, but their efforts to gain the support of the German military and security authorities in Romania were met with the declaration that a violent takeover of the whole power by the Legion did not suit the wishes of Berlin. Yet it was only toward the same evening that von der Ribbentrop instructed the German minister to Bucharest Fabricius to support Antonescu by all means and demanded from Ciano to send a similar instruction to the Italian diplomatic representative in Bucharest Ghiggi.[[661]](#footnote-661)

In the night of January 22 to January 23 Fabricius and the German economic plenipotentiary Hermann von Neubacher strongly advised representatives of the Legion to stop all street fighting. At 3AM on January 23 von Ribbentrop called Fabricius on the phone to tell him that after the bloodshed Antonescu had to arrest all the leaders of the rebellion and to proclaim himself leader of the National Legionnaire Party. The Marxists, who took part in the mutiny, had to be executed immediately, whereas the “idealists” might be granted a refuge in Germany. An hour later von Neubacher had a personal meeting with Horia Sima and reiterated his strong advice for the Legionnaires to stop all hostilities. The German representative went so far as to write down the text of an order that Sima had to address to his people to stop the fighting.[[662]](#footnote-662)

Sima’s order was simply disobeyed and the shooting continued. Particularly active were some combat groups of Legionnaires, who sniped from the roofs and who impressed even a veteran National Socialist revolutionary like von Neubacher as grim elements and Communists. The operation of cleansing Bucharest from the Legionnaires resumed at 8AM, while loudspeakers were broadcasting another appeal of Antonescu for solidarity of all Romanians with the army, the national banner and the King: “*Long live the King! Long live Romania!*”[[663]](#footnote-663)

This appeal was a clear denial of totalitarian radicalism and by noon the National Legionnaire revolution was put down not only in Bucharest, but all over the country. The number of soldiers, killed by the Legionnaires in the capital, amounted to 30 people. Some 4,000 Legionnaires were charged with criminal offences, but not with high treason and they were either sentenced to jail, or confined in concentration camps. As for Horia Sima, he found refuge in a “Wehrmacht” unit, where he was dressed in a German army officer uniform and crossed the border with Bulgaria for Germany. Many other Legionnaires did the same, but Antonescu himself told Fabricius that he accepted the idea of providing part of the rebels with the opportunity to leave for the Reich.[[664]](#footnote-664)

Once on German soil all rebels, including Sima, were immediately interned. Hitler had clearly sided with general Antonescu and he tolerated Sima and his followers only insofar as to use them as a reserve in case of bad surprises on the part of Romania. Preventing “bad surprises” from happening was also one of the tasks of the newly appointed German minister Manfred von Killinger, who had made a career in the Nazi secret services and who arrived in the morning of January 24 in Bucharest to replace Fabricius.[[665]](#footnote-665)

Hitler didn’t have a similar Hungarian reserve at his disposal although, unlike the Romanian dictator Antonescu, Miklos Horthy was really afraid of Germany. Horthy even thought of forming a government in exile in case the Reich raised demands, incompatible with the sovereignty of Hungary. On January 26, on the occasion of the sudden death of the Hungarian foreign minister Istvan Csaky, Horthy was quite circumstantial in informing the British minister to Budapest Owen O’Malley about this plan.[[666]](#footnote-666)

At this moment, though, Hitler turned most of his attention to the forthcoming Balkan campaign, as well as to developments in France. On January 28 he summoned his commanders and agreed with them that, because of the drift ice on the Danube, the “Wehrmacht” could cross the Bulgarian border only after February 20, if not as late as April. For these reasons the accession of the Bulgarians to the Three-Power Pact had to be announced just shortly before the entrance of the German troops into Bulgaria. As for France, Hitler stated that he did not insist any more upon the return of Pierre Laval to the government in Vichy, despite the latter’s reconciliation meeting with marshal Pétain. According to the “Fuehrer” Laval had to be kept in Paris as an option for forming a new government in case the North African colonies, controlled by Vichy, defected to Britain and to de Gaulle’s Free France.[[667]](#footnote-667)

The problem for Hitler was that various forms of anti-Nazi resistance became ever more noticeable not only in France, but also in other countries under German occupation. Thus the same morning the newspapers in the Netherlands published a letter of the Dutch episcopate, directed against the Social Democrats, the Communists and the National Socialists. Moreover, the Church refused to grant communion, funerals and weddings to the local Dutch Nazis.[[668]](#footnote-668)

The Dutch episcopate could by no means know that Communism and National Socialism would soon become life-and-death enemies again, but Mussolini apparently didn’t suspect it either, for the Italian ambassador in Moscow Augusto Rosso declared to Molotov that Italy acknowledged Russia’s special interests in the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Rosso went further by stating that his government was ready to agree with the closure of the Black Sea to the war ships of all non-Black-Sea powers. He even suggested a joint German-Italian-Russian action for forcing upon Turkey a revision of the navigation regime through the Straits.[[669]](#footnote-669)

In reality Italy was so helpless in the Balkans, that she was unable to make use of the sudden death of the Greek dictator and Premier Metaxas on January 29. King George II of Greece made an attempt to include some Liberals in the new government, but the army generals strongly opposed these efforts. Eventually the premiership was given to the governor of the National Bank Alexander Koryzis, who didn’t belong to any political party, but the Interior Ministry remained in the hands of K.Manyadakis, who had been in charge of the repressive measures against the opponents of the Metaxas regime.[[670]](#footnote-670)

The preparations for the German intervention against Greece ran parallel to Hitler’s efforts to maintain the impression that a landing on the British Isles was imminent, but on January 30 the chief of staff of the Finnish army general Erik Heinrichs visited Berlin to meet with the chief of staff of the German land forces Franz Halder. At first sight their talks had a purely theoretical nature, but they were distinguished by a rather detailed concreteness. Anyway Halder summarized in his diary that the Finns needed nine days after the beginning of their mobilization to achieve a “*war strength at the frontier*”. He noted also the direction of the assault on “*both sides of Lake Ladoga*” with “*five divisions to the south*” and “*three divisions to the north*” of the lake.[[671]](#footnote-671)

Stalin’s preparation for the assault on Germany was by no means less intense. While waiting for Zhukov to assume his new duties as chief of staff of the “Red Army”, Stalin pointed out to his commanders that the Soviet Union could launch an offensive, only if the Russian armed forces were as twice as powerful as the enemy armies. According to the Russian dictator, until that moment Moscow had to avoid all sorts of provocations, to accelerate the deployment of troops against Germany and to gain time.[[672]](#footnote-672)

The Turks had therefore all reasons for fearing a Soviet aggression, but the British prime minister Churchill made another effort to win over Turkey to the idea of joint war operations with the United Kingdom against Germany. In a personal letter, Churchill warned the Turkish president Inönü that within a couple of weeks the Germans would invade Bulgaria and that if Inönü did not promise to the Reich to refrain from an action against the Bulgarians, the Reich would launch air raids on Istanbul and Edirne. By occupying Greece, Churchill went on, the Germans would surround Turkey from three sides and isolate the Turkish armed forces and the British troops in Egypt, but the United Kingdom was unable to offer the Turks more than 100 antiaircraft guns, 10 fighters and those five bomber squadrons, which were stationed for the moment in Greece. Yet Churchill tried to encourage Inönü by stating that the very presence of Royal Air Force bombers would prevent Russia from assisting Germany. By that time the German troops in Romania had reached the figure of one million soldiers.[[673]](#footnote-673)

On February 4 the Russian newspapers published a denial by the TASS Soviet news agency of the reports about a secret agreement between Russia and Turkey, providing for Soviet assistance to the armament of the Turks in case of a German initiative in the Balkans. The ambassadors of Germany and Italy in Moscow, von der Schulenburg and Rosso, immediately appreciated the denial as an expression of loyalty of the USSR to the Axis powers.[[674]](#footnote-674)

This new demonstration of Soviet-Nazi solidarity could only enhance the feeling of a growing number of Bulgarians that accession to the Three-Power Pact was the only possible solution. Yet in a speech to the National Assembly the Bulgarian premier Filov emphasized that “*there can be no thought in Bulgaria either about Communism, or about National Socialism, or about Fascism*”. These words impressed the Polish minister Adam Tarnowski, whose presence in Sofia was still tolerated by the Bulgarian government and who told a Bulgarian politician that a lot of courage was needed for such a statement.[[675]](#footnote-675)

For their part, the Yugoslav regent Prince Paul and the premier Dragiša Cvetković sounded very discretely the prospects of an understanding with Germany. On February 5 the Yugoslav journalist Gregorić, who acted this time as an unofficial envoy of Cvetković, told von Ribbentrop that the prime minister wished to come to Germany together with Foreign Minister Cincar-Marković to discuss current political problems with the Reich’s foreign minister, and possibly also with Hitler.[[676]](#footnote-676)

For the “Fuehrer” these “current political problems” included also a somewhat awkward attempt to preserve at least some of the influence, exercised until recently by the National Legionnaire Party in Romania. To that effect the new German minister to Bucharest von Killinger asked Antonescu about his intentions with regard to the Legionnaires. The general replied that for the time being he didn’t want Legionnaires in the government, but that he would preserve the National Legionnaire Party. He also pointed out that the Legion had been infiltrated by a large number of Communist elements and that some of the rebel leaders had probably found refuge in the Soviet legation.[[677]](#footnote-677)

On the other hand, Hitler’s decision to give Salonica to the Serbs at the expense of Greece and to guarantee the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia was a highly undesirable prospect for the new Hungarian foreign minister Laszlo Bardossy, who had replaced the defunct Istvan Csaky. The problem was that Hungary had claims on Vojvodina and Banat, ceded to Yugoslavia as a result of World War I. By the way, the revisionist claims of Hungary had predetermined to a great extent her readiness for submission to Germany, but on February 6 the British foreign secretary Eden protested against the excessively pro-German attitude of the Hungarian press. He showed an understanding of the fact that Hungary was under strong German pressure, but he warned the Hungarian minister in London Barcza that there was a difference “*between coercion and voluntary disposition*”. At this particular moment the British became more confident of their power, since the Sixth Australian Division succeeded in capturing Benghazi in Italian Libya, at as many as 500 kilometers to the west of the Egyptian border.[[678]](#footnote-678)

On February 8 the Bulgarian premier Filov handed over to the German minister von Richthofen a declaration that practically Bulgaria was already a member of the Three-Power Pact. Yet the formal signature had to take place only after the entrance of the first “Wehrmacht” units into Bulgaria. Moreover, Sofia expected from Berlin a written confirmation that in exchange for acceding to the Three-Power Pact Bulgaria would get at least a territorial connection with the Aegean Sea.[[679]](#footnote-679)

Unlike Bulgaria, the Vichy regime didn’t want new territories, but similarly to Sofia marshal Pétain hoped to preserve his interests by a closer cooperation with Germany. He suddenly replaced Flandin with Admiral Darlan as his successor and deputy premier. On the other hand, though, the marshal put an end to the “national revolution” and intended to pursue a conservative policy of steadfastness and national unity, giving a priority to technocrats and professionals.[[680]](#footnote-680)

Marshal Pétain preserved his diplomatic relations with as many countries as possible, including Romania, despite a number of difficulties and misunderstandings. In this respect the United Kingdom seemed to be less flexible, because the Foreign Office decided to sever the diplomatic contact with the Romanians on the ground that from that moment on the legation in Bucharest could not be even a trustworthy observer any more. Yet the Hungarian minister to London Barcza was told that the reason for severing the diplomatic relations with Romania was the presence of German troops there and he was warned that Hungary would become a target of Royal Air Force raids, if German troops were installed on her territory too.[[681]](#footnote-681)

This was accompanied by some important changes of the Soviet propaganda in France. On February 11 the secretary-general of the Comintern G.Dimitrov instructed the “French Communist Party” to direct its activity not only against the regime of Pétain in Vichy, but also against the German occupation administration, whose headquarters was in Paris. According to the instruction the “*heavy fire*” had to be concentrated on Paris. Significantly enough, at the same moment the Russian war minister Timoshenko took measures for strengthening further the air force.[[682]](#footnote-682)

On the following day a German expeditionary corps under the command of General Erwin Rommel landed in North Africa, but Churchill still thought that the main task of the British Nile Army was to assist the Greeks and possibly the Turks. The prime minister of the United Kingdom had not abandoned even the idea of an anti-German Balkan barrier, consisting of Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia. On the other hand, he clearly underestimated the favorable role of Bulgaria’s neutrality for the Greek successes against the Italians.[[683]](#footnote-683)

On February 12 again the “Red Army” command adopted a mobilization plan, whose implementation had to start on July 1, 1941, with the completion of 303 divisions, grouped in 8 fronts and 29 armies. By January 1, 1943, Stalin’s armed forces had to reach the number of 8.9 million soldiers, equipped with 37,000 brand new tanks and 22,200 brand new combat planes. Special mountain units were to be formed for an assault on the Balkans and on the Greater Middle East.[[684]](#footnote-684)

At this point the “Fuehrer” hardly knew anything more concrete about this plan, but he spared no efforts to draw Spain and Yugoslavia in the Three-Power Pact. At Hitler’s urgent request Mussolini welcomed the Spanish leader Franco in the sea-side resort of Bordighera at some 15 kilometers from the French border. Shortly before that Franco had rejected a similar invitation by the Portuguese dictator Salazar because of the latter’s close relations with Britain. The “Duce” warned Franco that in case of a victory of the democracies Spain would be their first victim. As usual, Franco responded by indicating the disastrous economic situation in his country and stated that Spain would enter the war only if Germany provided her with enough grain, if all Spanish claims in Africa were fulfilled and if the reconquest of Gibraltar was carried out solely by the Spaniards without German participation. Because of his own African ambitions, Mussolini was not very enthusiastic about Spain’s accession to the Three-Power Pact and he didn’t put too much pressure on Franco. He even warned that the war might be long. In a personal letter to Hitler about the talks with Franco, Mussolini came to the conclusion that in the best case Spain might be a political ally of the Axis.[[685]](#footnote-685)

On their way back from Italy to Spain Franco and his foreign minister Serrano Súñer stopped at Montpellier for a brief meeting with marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan. The Spanish dictator was quite evasive about his talks with Mussolini, while Pétain hinted that the victory of Germany would not be complete, because England and America had enormous resources at their disposal and some compromise outcome was therefore possible. Darlan objected, though, that the British navy was ruined and that the American aid was coming too late, but Franco and Serrano Súñer preferred avoiding this topic either.[[686]](#footnote-686)

Anyway, Spain and Yugoslavia were totally absent from Hitler’s plan for the war on Russia, whereas Finland had a key role to play in this respect. To that effect the chief of staff of the German troops in Norway colonel Erich Buschenhagen came to Finland on an extremely secret mission. He met with the commander in chief of the Finnish army marshal Mannerheim, with his chief of staff Heinrichs and with another two members of the Finnish General Staff. This time again the German officer tried to give the talks a purely theoretical character, but he warned explicitly that the whole matter should be kept secret, especially with regard to the Swedes. Eventually, the Finns made it clear that their territorial claims on Russia did not go beyond the regions they had lost as a result of the 1939-1940 war. They also suggested that the defense of the Petsamo area in the Far North had to be entrusted to the Germans, while the Finnish troops had to be concentrated in the south, where the decisive battles were expected to take place.[[687]](#footnote-687)

Hitler was by all means firm in his intention to launch the attack on Russia before eliminating Britain, but he could not leave the Italians alone against the British. In view of the forthcoming German assault on Greece he kept urging the Serbs to join the Three-Power Pact. On February 14, the Yugoslav premier Cvetković and Foreign Minister Cincar-Marković arrived in Salzburg for another discrete meeting with the “Fuehrer” and von Ribbentrop. The German foreign minister declared that the previous meeting had led to some misunderstandings, because the Germans had explicitly proposed to the Yugoslavs to accede to the Three-Power Pact. Cincar-Marković tried to object that the talks were only about a German-Italian-Yugoslav nonaggression pact, but his German counterpart reiterated that Yugoslavia had to enter into the Three-Power Pact. Cvetković made in his turn an attempt to postpone this by suggesting that Yugoslavia could intermediate for a peaceful solution of the Italian-Greek conflict and for frustrating an English front in the Balkans.[[688]](#footnote-688)

A couple of hours later Cvetković and Cincar-Marković were received at “Berghof” by Hitler, who directly stated that Yugoslavia should join immediately the Three-Power Pact. The German dictator didn’t fail to point out the Communist threat, but at the same time he stated quite clearly that the Reich was ready to give Yugoslavia a territorial access to the Aegean Sea at Salonica. However, the Serbian premier refused to take more concrete engagements on the ground that he had to consult first the regent Prince Paul. This provided Hitler with the opportunity to address to Prince Paul an invitation to come to Germany for a personal meeting too.[[689]](#footnote-689)

Belgrade still hoped, therefore, to remain neutral, but for Hitler that was not enough. In his eyes the only Balkan country that could become neutral was Turkey. To that effect the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop watched closely the Bulgarian-Turkish negotiations for a nonaggression declaration to the point of specifying the very text of the declaration. On February 15 the Bulgarians and the Turks reached finally an agreement about the text, which was to be published two days later. According to the declaration Bulgaria and Turkey would refrain from any attack on each other. In conformity with the German wishes no mention was made whatever about the former neutrality status of Bulgaria.[[690]](#footnote-690)

Nevertheless, the Americans still hoped that Turkey and Yugoslavia might be encouraged to fight against the Reich and that even Bulgaria might at least preserve her neutrality, while Romania was considered to be under firm German control, although the Romanian leader Antonescu put a definitive end to the National Legionnaire regime. He transformed Romania from a “*National Legionnaire*” into a “*National Social State*”, which was approved at a referendum by more than 99 per cent of the vote. However, that was the only visible similarity to the totalitarian model, since the National Legionnaire Party was dismantled and Antonescu continued to rule as an authoritarian dictator of a nonparty system, allowing further the semi legal activity of the democratic opposition.[[691]](#footnote-691)

Spain was also getting away from totalitarianism, since Franco had restored the rights of Alfonso III to the throne. On February 15 Alfonso XIII abdicated in favor of his third son Juan de Borbon, Count of Barcelona, who took the name of Juan III. These changes strengthened further the position of the monarchists within the Franco regime, as well as of all those, who opposed the totalitarian tendencies. Significantly enough, the following day Hitler ordered his diplomats to cease any further initiative in attracting Spain to the Three-Power Pact.[[692]](#footnote-692)

Meanwhile the British took concrete measures for organizing at least a tough resistance to the expected invasion of Greece by the “Wehrmacht”. On February 22, 1941, Foreign Secretary Eden, Chief of the Imperial General Staff John Dill and Commander in Chief Middle East general Archibald Wavell landed in Athens to discuss with King George II, Prime Minister Koryzis and the commander in chief of the Greek army Alexander Papagos the joint defense against the aggression of the Axis. This time again the Greeks expressed their fears that the help, offered by the British, was sufficient only insofar as to accelerate the German assault, but eventually Koryzis and Eden reached a concrete agreement about joint military operations.[[693]](#footnote-693)

The British could dispatch troops to Greece only from their forces in North Africa, which would inevitably weaken their positions against Italy. Yet on February 25, with the assistance of South African units, they managed to expel the Italians from Kenia. At the same time motorized troops of the United Kingdom captured the capital of Italian Somalia Mogadishu, destroyed 21 Italian aircraft and found 400,000 gallons of petroleum.[[694]](#footnote-694)

At this very moment Stalin earmarked 70 million rubles for the armed forces. The sum amounted to one third of Russia’s available finances, but the British command was concerned mostly about the concentration of German troops under General Rommel in Tripolitania. London was also quite nervous about the imminent accession of Bulgaria to the Three-Power Pact and on February 27 the British minister to Sofia Rendel directly warned Prime Minister Filov that if “Wehrmacht” units marched in on Bulgarian soil, the United Kingdom would declare war on Bulgaria. However, the American minister Earl asked Rendel somewhat later what would have been the attitude of Britain, if she were separated from Germany not by the Channel, but by the Danube and if the population of the United Kingdom amounted to only 6 million people, like Bulgaria.[[695]](#footnote-695)

Both Stalin and Hitler continued their game of putting the other off his guard, which didn’t prevent the German dictator from taking new measures for strengthening his control over Scandinavia. Thus the Nazi occupation authorities in Denmark forced the coalition cabinet under Stauning to ban local elections and to plan an amnesty for Danish National Socialists, sentenced to jail for subversive activities. Another clear sign of the Nazi impact was the fact, reported by the German minister and plenipotentiary to Copenhagen Cecil von Renthe-Fink, that the leading Danish trade unionists “*gained the impression when visiting Germany that their socialistic aims are not jeopardized by the over-all political development and the prospects of a German victory*”.[[696]](#footnote-696)

The British had no way of knowing that Hitler had abandoned his plan for a landing in England and they directed their efforts to winning over Turkey for a joint defense of the Balkans. However, when Foreign Secretary Eden and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff general Dill arrived in Ankara on February 28, they only found out that the Turks did not intend to wage a war on Germany for the sake of Greece. Besides, the Turkish premier Refik Saydam and Foreign Minister Saraçoglu frankly disclosed their fears that if Turkey was engaged in a war against Germany, the Russians might attack the Turks.[[697]](#footnote-697)

It was on the same day that the German troops started to cross the Danube from Romania to Bulgaria. Many Bulgarians welcomed the Germans enthusiastically, while a special plane was dispatched to Sofia to take Prime Minister Filov to Vienna for the signing of the protocol of accession to the Three-Power Pact. In a telegram to the Bulgarian diplomatic representatives in Russia, Turkey and Yugoslavia, Foreign Minister Popov informed them about the forthcoming event and urged them to declare that Sofia was forced to join the Pact and that between the two evils, namely National Socialist Germany or Communist Russia, the Bulgarians had to choose the Reich as the lesser evil.[[698]](#footnote-698)

On February 28 again Hitler sent a personal letter to the Turkish president Ismet Inönü, reassuring him that the German troops were entering Bulgaria in order to eliminate the British influence from the European continent and that the Reich had neither territorial, nor political aspirations in the Balkans. Moreover, the “Fuehrer” went on, Germany intended by no means to harm the territorial or political integrity of Turkey. As a gesture of good will the “Wehrmacht” units would be kept as far as possible from the Turkish border. Hitler reminded also of the German-Turkish brotherhood in arms during World War I, but he didn’t fail to warn that the Turkish government should not take measures likely to make Germany revise her favorable attitude.[[699]](#footnote-699)

Late in the same evening Ambassador von der Schulenburg informed Molotov about the accession of Bulgaria to the Three-Power Pact. The Russian premier didn’t conceal his irritation and reiterated that Bulgaria belonged to the Soviet security zone, which, in his words, made Bulgaria different from the other countries that had already joined the pact, namely Romania, Slovakia and Hungary. Molotov pointed out that the developments that had occurred since November 26, 1940, when Russia gave her official accord with acceding to the Three-Power Pact, did not correspond to the Soviet wishes.[[700]](#footnote-700)

On March 1 at noon the Bulgarian premier Bogdan Filov arrived in Vienna to sign the pact, but Foreign Minister Popov refused to accompany him, pretexting illness, as usual. Filov was welcomed by von Ribbentrop, who had to admit that the Russians would be displeased with Bulgaria’s accession to the Three-Power Pact. Yet the German foreign minister was confident that Russia would not spoil her relations with the Reich for that reason.[[701]](#footnote-701)

Filov signed the accession act at 1:45PM in the Belvedere Palace and hastened to declare that Bulgaria would remain loyal to the friendship treaties with the neighboring countries, as well as to the “*further development of the traditionally friendly relations with the USSR*”. By that time Russian planes had made a series of infractions of the German airspace, but the declaration of Filov suited quite well Hitler’s cheating tactics. Anyway, von Ribbentrop and his Italian counterpart Ciano handed over to the Bulgarian premier two secret notes, acknowledging Bulgaria’s right to a territorial access to the Aegean Sea at the expense of Greece. Nevertheless, Filov declined the suggestion of some German officials to replace the censorship of the Bulgarian press with a system of direct control and instructions after the National Socialist and Communist model.[[702]](#footnote-702)

The United States government responded to the penetration of German troops in Bulgaria by blocking the Bulgarian accounts in American banks. At the same time the Americans warned the Russians that Hitler had signed a directive for an assault on the Soviet Union. In this way the Roosevelt administration seemed to join the efforts of the British Prime Minister Churchill in inciting Stalin to attack the Third Reich. As if to confirm the British and American hopes in this regard, the Soviet command ordered the air defense “Red Army” units to shoot down each German plane, penetrating illegally into the Russian airspace.[[703]](#footnote-703)

On March 3 at 12:30PM the German minister to Sofia von Richthofen told Filov that the diplomatic representatives of Poland, Belgium and the Netherlands should leave Bulgaria immediately. Official envoys of the governments in exile, formed after the occupation of the respective countries by the Nazis or by the Soviets, could not be tolerated any more on the soil of a member of the Three-Power Pact. On the other hand, though, the Russians told the Bulgarians in an official note that by acceding to the Three-Power Pact Sofia did not consolidate the peace, but contributed to the enlargement of the conflict and to the involvement of Bulgaria in the war.[[704]](#footnote-704)

On the following day it was the turn of the Yugoslav regent Prince Paul to pay a deeply secret visit to Hitler in “Berghof”. The German dictator renewed his promise about Salonica, but emphasized that the Serbs could annex the city only in exchange for their membership in the Three-Power Pact. However, Paul frankly pointed out that he could not go so far because of the Greek origin of his wife and because of his sympathies with England. Hitler went further by stating that he did not expect from Yugoslavia to take part in the war, but Paul remained apparently unimpressed and declared that if he accepted the German proposal, he would be overthrown from the regency in less than six months.[[705]](#footnote-705)

At noon the German ambassador to Ankara von Papen handed over Hitler’s personal letter to the Turkish president Inönü, who showed his satisfaction that the Germans would keep their troops far enough from Turkey and reassured von Papen that Turkey would avoid any clashes with Germany, despite the alliance treaty with Britain. Yet Inönü was quite reserved with regard to von Papen’s statements that an improvement of the Turkish-German relations was entirely possible and highly desirable.[[706]](#footnote-706)

Although the British were fully aware that Turkey would by no means intervene in favor of Greece, they began to transfer troops from Egypt to Greece. These included an armored British brigade, one division from New Zealand and two Australian divisions, as well as a Polish brigade. There were already 70 aircraft of the Royal Air Force in Greece. The British planned to form a front on the Aliakmon River in South Macedonia, but the Greek commander in chief general Papagos kept the bulk of his forces in Albania against the Italians.[[707]](#footnote-707)

On the other hand, the British still feared a possible German attack from Norway, the more so as the “Wehrmacht” was constantly increasing its forces there by using the territory of Sweden, despite the protests of the Swedish government that this troop traffic infringed the transit agreement, imposed by Berlin on Stockholm. On March 4 British units and forces of the Norwegian government in exile attacked the town of Svolvaer on the Lofoten Islands to the north of the polar circle. Significantly enough, the local population welcomed warmly the “invaders”.[[708]](#footnote-708)

On March 5 at 10AM the British minister in Sofia Rendel notified officially the Bulgarian premier Filov that the United Kingdom was “*withdrawing*” the legation from Bulgaria. The Polish, Belgian and Dutch ministers were to leave together with the British in a special train for Istanbul. Rendel protested against the arrest of a British citizen by the Bulgarian authorities and declared that in this way Bulgaria had proved that she was not a civilized country. As dominions of the United Kingdom Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa followed suit, while the British interests in Bulgaria were taken over by the US minister to Sofia George Earl.[[709]](#footnote-709)

At approximately the same time the Romanian leader general Antonescu had a long conversation in Vienna with Goering about the deliveries of oil to Germany. Antonescu insisted that the Romanian oil companies had to remain in Romanian hands, but he shared also his worries about the deficiencies of the antiaircraft defense. The general proudly stated that he was able to mobilize as many as 30 divisions, but he showed on maps how many Russian troops and airplanes were concentrated on the Bessarabian border and made it clear that he feared Soviet rather than British raids on the Romanian oil fields.[[710]](#footnote-710)

On March 6, after returning from Germany, Prince Paul summoned the Privy Council and insisted that Hitler had addressed in fact an ultimatum, demanding the accession of Yugoslavia to the Three-Power Pact. According to the Privy Council, in exchange for joining the pact Yugoslavia should be provided with written guarantees for nonparticipation in war operations, for her territorial integrity and for a possible territorial connection with the Aegean Sea. Moreover, Germany and Italy had to release Yugoslavia from any obligation to allow the transit of their troops through her territory.[[711]](#footnote-711)

Yet Churchill still didn’t lose his hope that Yugoslavia might join the efforts to stop the German aggression in the Balkans. On the other hand, though, the prime minister was aware that the United Kingdom simply lacked the forces, needed for the support of Greece and he even suggested that at a particular moment the Greeks had to be left free to decide whether to surrender to the Reich or not. The British minister to Athens Charles Michael Palairet was shocked and in a series of telegrams he reassured his government that the Greeks were ready to fight against the Germans all alone. This readiness was confirmed by Foreign Secretary Eden and eventually His Majesty’s Cabinet came to the conclusion that if the Greeks decided to launch a death struggle against the Germans, the British had to share their fate.[[712]](#footnote-712)

At 4:00PM on March 10 the German minister to Belgrade von Heeren notified Cincar-Marković about the agreement of the Reich and Italy to guarantee the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, to refrain from demanding a transit of their troops through Yugoslav territory and to take into consideration Yugoslavia’s wishes about Salonica, provided that Yugoslavia joined the Three-Power Pact within a week. However, Germany could not release Yugoslavia from her military obligations altogether, since that would be incompatible with Article 3 of the Pact. The Yugoslav foreign minister insisted, though, that Article 3 was the main obstacle to the accession of Yugoslavia. He emphasized the risk of involving Yugoslavia in a war against the United States or even Russia, which would be contrary to the feelings of the people and to the very foundations of the peaceful policy of Belgrade.[[713]](#footnote-713)

The traditional Russophilia was no doubt a serious obstacle to the accession of Belgrade to the Three-Power Pact, but the ruling circles in Yugoslavia neither knew, nor did they even want to know that Stalin was preparing his own assault on Germany. On March 11 the “Red Army” was entrusted with the construction of four railways in the Russian part of Poland toward the German border. These railway connections had to be completed and ready for use by November 7, 1941. Yet according to the updated version of the plan for war on Germany, just finished by the “Red Army” chief of staff Zhukov and by the war minister Timoshenko, the assault on the Reich had to start on June 12, 1941.[[714]](#footnote-714)

As for the United States, it was also on March 11, 1941, that the Congress finally approved and President F.D.Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease Act, which permitted the President to “*sell, transfer title to, exchange, lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of, to any such government [whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States] any defense article*”. These governments included Britain in the first place, but also Greece, China and even the “Free French” Empire Defense Council of general de Gaulle, but not Ireland because of her neutrality. 8.3 billion dollars were earmarked for the United Kingdom only. 2 billion dollars out of this sum were set aside immediately for ordering 11,800 combat aircraft, whereas all the military orders of Germany in Europe under Nazi occupation amounted to 750 million dollars only.[[715]](#footnote-715)

The limited resources of the Reich might have been one of the reasons for the unusual flexibility of the Nazi diplomacy in the dealings with Yugoslavia. In the early afternoon of March 12 von Heeren informed the Yugoslav foreign minister Cincar-Marković that Germany and Italy had agreed to release Yugoslavia from the military obligations of the Three-Power Pact. However, the Germans insisted that the respective written reassurances should be kept secret, but Cincar-Marković objected that only the publication of such a declaration would calm down the situation in Yugoslavia and stop the hostile propaganda with regard to the Pact. Moreover, he requested that in the declaration about Salonica the words “*in a free access to*” be replaced by the words “*in a territorial connection with*” the Aegean Sea.[[716]](#footnote-716)

On the same day an envoy, sent by the commander in chief of the armed forces in Northern Greece General Georgios Tsolakoglou, contacted an employee of the German consulate in Salonica. The envoy carefully avoided mentioning the name of the man who had sent him, but he declared that the Greek army would cease hostilities on the Albanian front, if the Italian troops were replaced with German troops. He also hinted that South Albania should be annexed to Greece because of its predominantly Greek population, but at the same time he emphasized that if the Germans attacked the Greeks from Bulgaria, the Greeks would fight to the last man.[[717]](#footnote-717)

The Balkan drama became even more tragic thanks to a bomb explosion from one of the suitcases of the British diplomatic staff at the moment of their arrival from Sofia to Istanbul. One person was killed and another 22 were injured. The British put the blame on the Bulgarian secret services, but they did not preclude an initiative of Hitler’s subversive network. The Hungarian premier Teleki was incomparably more flexible, by sending a warning to the British that Hungary would never permit an infringement upon her sovereignty and that there was a serious risk of the invasion of Eastern Europe by the Soviets.[[718]](#footnote-718)

At approximately the same moment the Turkish president Inönü sent his reply to Hitler’s personal letter, by echoing the National Socialist dictator’s reminder of the German-Turkish brotherhood in arms, but by reiterating, on the other hand, that Turkey would not take any action against the Reich, if the “Wehrmacht” did the same. Inönü expressed the hope that there was absolutely no reason for Turkish-German clashes and that the two countries might maintain a contact of mutual understanding.[[719]](#footnote-719)

Unlike Turkey, Bulgaria and Hungary worried about the guarantees that Hitler intended to provide for the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia. On March 16 the Hungarian foreign minister Bardossy handed over a written declaration to the German diplomatic representative in Budapest von Erdmannsdorff that such a guarantee would affect the public opinion in Hungary. Hence Germany was requested to think over this question thoroughly. Yet Prime Minister Teleki endeavored to avoid a conflict with Yugoslavia, fearing that this might involve Hungary in a German-Russian war and bring his country in the face of a powerful coalition between the Soviet Union and the Anglo-Saxon democracies.[[720]](#footnote-720)

On the following day the Hungarian minister to Berlin Stoyai called upon von Weizsaecker and requested that Germany take into consideration the revisionist claims of Hungary on Yugoslavia at the moment of the latter’s admission to the Three-Power Pact. For his part, the regent Prince Paul summoned again the Privy Council, which came to the conclusion that Yugoslavia could accede to the Pact, provided that Germany guaranteed that no “Wehrmacht” units would cross Yugoslav territory and that no participation in the war would be required from the Serbs. Significantly enough, though, three ministers of the Cvetković cabinet decided to send in their resignation.[[721]](#footnote-721)

For the time being, Hitler did not intend to satisfy the revisionist demands of Hungary and Bulgaria to the prejudice of Yugoslavia, while Turkey, in his view, had to reaffirm her neutral attitude. When the Turkish ambassador to Berlin H.Gerede handed over to him President Inönü’s reply to his personal letter of February 28, the “Fuehrer” pretended that during the talks with Molotov he had rejected the idea of Russian military bases in the Balkans and in the zone of the Straits. However, Hitler went on, in exchange for that he was submitted only to personal insults by the Turkish press, although by this position the Reich had rescued the Balkans and Turkey from annihilation by Russia. The German dictator pleaded for sincere and close relations between Berlin and Ankara, while Gerede expressed his hope for a renewed friendship between Germany and Turkey.[[722]](#footnote-722)

Hitler kept deceiving Stalin by demonstrating further a firm intention to attack Britain, but this could only enhance the feeling of the British and the Irish that a German landing in England was imminent. Under these circumstances the Irish command went as far as to reach a concrete agreement with the British for establishing a reliable liaison between the two armies. Naturally, the British forces could intervene only at the request of Dublin and only after a German assault on Eire, but as many as four British divisions were installed in Ulster and these divisions were under the direct command of the War Ministry in London and not of the North Irish government.[[723]](#footnote-723)

Hitler’s deception tactics with regard to the Soviet Union didn’t seem quite efficient, because on March 20 the chief of the “Red Army” intelligence service Filip Golikov presented to Stalin a detailed version of the German assault plan. Golikov even named the commanders of the three army groups that were to invade Russia and to capture Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), Moscow and Kiev respectively. The invasion had to start on May 20, but Golikov still believed that the Reich would attack Russia only after defeating Britain and that the rumors and documents about a German assault in the forthcoming spring were a forgery by “*the English and may be even by the German intelligence*”.[[724]](#footnote-724)

Some hints at a forthcoming Soviet-Nazi clash had reached also the Swedes and on March 21 the Swedish foreign minister Günther proposed to the Germans to transport an additional number of 10,000 “Wehrmacht” soldiers through Sweden’s territorial waters on would-be cargo ships, which could not be contrary to the country’s neutrality. Günther expressed his worries about the orientation of Finland to his Finnish counterpart Witting, who came to pay an official visit to Stockholm and who reassured the Swedes that, in case of a Soviet-Nazi war, Helsinki firmly intended to maintain a neutral position between Germany and Russia.[[725]](#footnote-725)

To make things even worse for Hitler, the Japanese diligently followed the original idea of the Three-Power Pact to reach a friendly agreement with Russia. This was incompatible with the planned German assault on the Soviet Union but, because of his outmaneuvering tactics toward Stalin, the German dictator could by no means reveal to the Japanese his intention to attack the USSR as soon as possible. On March 22 the Japanese foreign minister Matsuoka stopped in Moscow on a long trip to Europe. His hope was to conclude a nonaggression or, at least, a neutrality pact with Russia, but when he suggested personally to Stalin to sell Northern Sakhalin to Japan, the Russian dictator rejected the idea in his usually brutal way. Matsuoka decided to resume the talks on his way back from Europe to Tokyo.[[726]](#footnote-726)

On March 25 the Yugoslav premier Cvetković and Foreign Minister Cincar-Marković left almost secretly for Vienna to sign the protocol for accession to the Three-Power Pact. Cvetković, Cincar-Marković and the regent Prince Paul, who remained in Belgrade, feared not only protests against the Pact, but even an abduction. On that same day Russia and Turkey proclaimed officially that they would observe a benevolent neutrality toward each other, if one of the two countries were attacked by a third power. At first sight the declaration suited perfectly the efforts of the Soviet-Nazi alliance to keep Turkey neutral, but in fact Stalin warned in this way Hitler that in case of a Soviet-Nazi war the Reich could not rely on the Turks.[[727]](#footnote-727)

Meanwhile Cvetković and Cincar-Marković signed at the Belvedere Palace in Vienna the act of joining the Three-Power Pact. They were rewarded by two official notes, signed by the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop. The first note promised that the Axis would demand from Yugoslavia no transit for its troops, that no military assistance would be required from Belgrade, and that Yugoslavia could get a territorial access to the Aegean Sea, including the city of Salonica. The second note engaged Germany to guarantee the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia. The Italian foreign minister Ciano gave the Serbs similar written reassurances.[[728]](#footnote-728)

Although Yugoslavia was the only member of the Three-Power Pact with such privileges, the news about the accession to the Axis caused immediately mass protests mostly among the Serbs and the Montenegrins. A number of Yugoslav diplomatic representatives in the foreign capitals, including the minister to Moscow Milan Gavrilović resigned from their posts, while another group of ministers withdrew from the government.[[729]](#footnote-729)

For his part, Stalin mobilized most of the recruits, born after September 1, 1921, who amounted to about 300 to 400 thousand people. The measure was kept in deep secrecy, but it was only at this moment that Hitler told his commanders that he feared a “*preventive*” blow to Germany by Russia. However, the chief of staff of the land forces Halder didn’t believe in a Russian initiative and thought that the Germans should not be liable to hasty measures.[[730]](#footnote-730)

**V.WHO/WHOM?**

Their feet are swift

to shed blood…

(Rom. 3: 15)

In the night of March 26 to March 27, 1941, most commanding officers of the Yugoslav army, who were ethnic Serbs anyway, carried out a coup d’état and overthrew the regent Prince Paul and the government of Cvetković-Maček. The leader of the coup was General Dušan Simović, who became the new premier, while the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party Vlatko Maček preserved his position as deputy premier according to the Serbian-Croatian compromise agreement of August 1939. However, Maček preferred remaining in Zagreb, although he permitted four representatives of his party to assume positions in the new Cabinet of Ministers. The Yugoslav diplomatic representative in Moscow Gavrilović, who had just resigned from his position, became minister without portfolio, but he was probably a double agent of the Russian and British secret services. The plotters had won over to their side the young king Peter II as well. In the morning of March 27 a rally of as many as 100,000 people protested against the Axis. In reality, agents of the Soviet intelligence services were involved both in the coup and in the mass rallies in Belgrade.[[731]](#footnote-731)

Before noon the new foreign minister of Yugoslavia Momčilo Ninčić told the German minister to Belgrade von Heeren that the coup had resulted from the weak support for Prince Paul and for the former premier Cvetković among the Serbs. He tried to persuade von Heeren that he guaranteed the further cooperation of Yugoslavia with the Axis and, above all, with Germany, but he failed to be more specific about the attitude of the new regime toward the Three-Power Pact. Moreover, Ninčić was unable to conceal the fact that the coup d’état was also due to a violent reaction of the chauvinistic Serbian circles against the accession to the Pact and that his government was likely to return to the previous neutrality line. At the same moment some infuriated Serbian protesters assaulted and slightly injured the German deputy military attaché and broke the windows of the German tourist agency.[[732]](#footnote-732)

One of Stalin’s first reactions was to concentrate a lot of new “Red Army” units on the western border of Russia. General Fedor von Bock of the “Wehrmacht”, who had watched closely the behavior of the Soviets, requested from the German High Command to order the defense of the Reich’s eastern border, by moving new German units at the very boundary with the USSR. Yet even von Bock precluded an intention of the Russians to attack Germany, although he was no doubt impressed by the concentration of “Red Army” troops in Poland.[[733]](#footnote-733)

The German foreign minister von Ribbentrop couldn’t conceal his nervousness about Russia and Yugoslavia, when he finally received his Japanese counterpart Yosuke Matsuoka in Berlin. Von Ribbentrop apparently went beyond Hitler’s instructions by boasting that in case of a German-Russian conflict Russia would cease to exist within six months but, on the other hand, he admitted that the “Red Army” was the only opponent of the “Wehrmacht” in Europe. Anyway, the German foreign minister was much more insistent upon trying to persuade Matsuoka that Japan should attack both the Philippines, which were then under the supremacy of the United States, and the British colony of Singapore.[[734]](#footnote-734)

Von Ribbentrop could not proceed with his monologue, because he was summoned by Hitler, who was practically hysterical with regard to Yugoslavia. At 1:10PM he had told the Hungarian minister Stoyai that he was preparing an attack for the destruction of Yugoslavia and urged him to go to Budapest to inform Regent Horthy that Germany would not restrict any more Hungary’s revisionist claims on Yugoslav territories. The “Fuehrer” added that Croatia should become independent, but somehow aligned with Hungary and that he was ready to agree to a territorial access of Hungary to the Adriatic Sea, although this problem was delicate because of Italy. However, the Hungarians had to permit the transit of German troops through their territory and to take part themselves in the military operations against Yugoslavia. Hitler promised to the Hungarians also Banat together with Vojvodina.[[735]](#footnote-735)

About an hour later the German dictator declared to the Bulgarian minister Draganov in the presence of von Ribbentrop that Bulgaria could take Macedonia. Immediately after seeing Draganov off the Chancellery Hitler conferred with von Ribbentrop, Goering, Halder, Keitel and a number of other high ranking army officers. The firm decision of the “Fuehrer” was to avoid any negotiations with the new government in Belgrade and even ultimatums were not planned. Yugoslavia had to be destroyed both as a state and as a nation. Italy and Hungary were expected to give their military support, while Romania and Bulgaria had to secure a cover with regard to Russia and Turkey respectively. To that effect the Bulgarians were to be assisted by an armored division of the “Wehrmacht”. However, Hitler was forced to postpone the assault on the Soviet Union for four weeks from May 15 to June 22 and to redirect toward the Balkans some of the German troops, concentrated on the Russian border. The invasion of Yugoslavia had to be carried out simultaneously with the conquest of Greece.[[736]](#footnote-736)

It was only in the afternoon that Hitler had the time to receive Matsuoka. He also urged the Japanese to capture Singapore, but he emphasized his confidence that Stalin would not have the courage to challenge 170 German divisions. Matsuoka duly informed the “Fuehrer” about his Moscow talks and went as far as to claim that from a moral viewpoint the Japanese were also Communists, but the Japanese ideal had been destroyed by the liberalism, individualism and egoism of the West. In the words of the Japanese foreign minister Japan was fighting not against the Chinese, but against the British and against capitalism in China.[[737]](#footnote-737)

On March 28 von Ribbentrop had another talk with Matsuoka, who asked about the possibility of a Russian-Japanese-German alliance. The German foreign minister flatly denied such an option and emphasized the incompatibility between the Reich and the Soviet Union, which had not given up the intention to conquer the planet. He advised Matsuoka to avoid even raising the question of a nonaggression and neutrality pact with Russia, while in Moscow again on his way back to Tokyo. Yet neither von Ribbentrop, nor Hitler could reveal their plans for the forthcoming invasion of Russia and Matsuoka was unable to grasp the seriousness of the German foreign minister’s warning that the situation was not any more appropriate for such a Japanese-Russian agreement.[[738]](#footnote-738)

Meanwhile the coup in Belgrade made Turkey visibly more reluctant to give Berlin a formal promise of benevolent neutrality. True enough, the general secretary of the Turkish foreign ministry Numan Menemencioglu thanked Ambassador von Papen for the way Hitler had rejected the Russian claims on the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, but he rightfully pointed out that Germany herself had a strong interest in the Turkish control over the Straits. Moreover, he tried to persuade von Papen that any conclusions about the foreign policy of the new Yugoslav regime would be premature, but he warned that Turkey, Iraq and Iran were ready to fight, if any of the belligerent powers showed an excessive interest in the oil fields of the Middle East.[[739]](#footnote-739)

For his part, the Hungarian regent Horthy was quite enthusiastic about the prospects of taking part in the action against Yugoslavia, although Prime Minister Teleki threatened to send in his resignation. In his reply to Hitler Horthy stated that the Belgrade coup had resulted from some influences of Soviet Russia and that Moscow intended to make use of the common Slavic origin. Yet the Hungarian regent didn’t fail to mention the hostile attitude of the Romanian leadership as well.[[740]](#footnote-740)

On March 29 Mussolini, who was obligingly informed by the Germans about Hitler’s intention to destroy Yugoslavia, received the leader of the “Ustasha” (“Rebel”) Croatian terrorist organization Ante Pavelić. After the end of World War I Pavelić had been fighting by way of reckless terrorist attacks for the complete independence of Croatia and, naturally enough, he had eventually found refuge in Italy, since Mussolini had based his strategy with regard to Yugoslavia on the inevitable disintegration of that multinational country. Now the “Duce” wanted to make sure that if the Croats finally got their sovereignty, they would respect the dominating Italian positions in the area.[[741]](#footnote-741)

At approximately the same moment the Hungarian minister in Moscow Kristofi reported that “*the Soviet government would be very glad, if the new Yugoslav regime would really mean a total change of direction and would initiate such a development as to complicate the stability of the Balkan situation*”. Similarly to the Hungarian regent Horthy, von Ribbentrop considered that Russia endeavored to penetrate into the Balkans, as he told Matsuoka before the departure of the Japanese foreign minister for Rome. According to von Ribbentrop these Russian efforts could be seen in the most recent developments in Yugoslavia, where there was an increase of Communist activity. The German foreign minister was more or less certain that Stalin’s tactics consisted in prolonging the war as much as possible in order to exhaust Germany and Britain, but he obviously overestimated the Reich’s capacities in boasting that if the Russians assailed Japan, the Germans would attack immediately the Soviet Union and that in such a case the “Wehrmacht” would liquidate the USSR within a couple of months.[[742]](#footnote-742)

As if to attenuate these feelings, Molotov instructed the secretary-general of the Comintern G.Dimitrov to order the Communists in Yugoslavia to refrain from organizing street protests, because the policy of Moscow was still “*unhostile*” toward Berlin. Yet on March 30 Hitler reminded his commanders once again that the aim of the Russian campaign was to overthrow the Communist regime and to establish “*true socialism*” in Russia, by destroying the Bolshevik commissars and the Communist intelligentsia.[[743]](#footnote-743)

However, Prime Minister Churchill still hesitated about the real intentions of Hitler and Stalin, which didn’t prevent him from writing another “warning” letter to the Russian dictator. Churchill appreciated the coup in Belgrade as a slap in the face of Germany, but at 11AM the Yugoslav foreign minister Ninčić made an official declaration to the German diplomatic representative von Heeren that the new government under general Simović remained loyal to the accession of Yugoslavia to the Three-Power Pact. Ninčić frankly reiterated Yugoslavia’s interest in the annexation of Salonica, but von Heeren didn’t believe him because of the statement of Simović the previous day that Yugoslavia would not tolerate to be besieged by the Axis armies. It was only at this moment that von Heeren got the instruction to cease all contacts with the Yugoslav government and to leave immediately for Berlin, whereas von Ribbentrop was about to send two special envoys to Zagreb to accelerate the separation of Croatia from Serbia.[[744]](#footnote-744)

Stalin apparently decided to incite further Hitler against Yugoslavia, because on April 1 the central party newspaper of Communist Russia “Pravda” (“Truth”) denied vehemently the reports that the “*Soviet Government*” had sent an official congratulation telegram to the new Cabinet under Simović. Probably to the same effect Stalin ordered his commanders to stop all shooting at German planes, penetrating illegally into the Soviet airspace, but merely to force them to land down on Russian soil.[[745]](#footnote-745)

At approximately the same time the special envoys of von Ribbentrop, Edmund Veesenmayer and Walter Malletke, arrived in Zagreb and urged the Croatian leader Maček to refuse any participation in the Simović government, while the Chief of the Imperial General Staff of the United Kingdom general Dill was dispatched to Belgrade to persuade the Serbs to attack the Italians in Albania. He invited Prime Minister Simović to pay a visit to London, but Simović declined the proposal on the ground that he wanted to avoid any provocation with regard to Germany. As a matter of fact, the Serbian command was fully aware that the Yugoslav army was totally unprepared for war.[[746]](#footnote-746)

Yet according to some rumors the Yugoslav minister to Moscow and member of the new Simović cabinet, Milan Gavrilović, offered the Russians the concrete text of an alliance treaty despite his declarations to the German ambassador von der Schulenburg and to the Italian representative Rosso that the new regime in Belgrade had decided to acknowledge the accession to the Three-Power Pact. Apparently Stalin was not very enthusiastic about a formal alliance with Yugoslavia, but he instructed the Communists in Bulgaria to launch a careful campaign against the anti-Serbian demonstrations there, without succumbing to “*provocations of the enemy*”.[[747]](#footnote-747)

However, at 8:30PM on April 2 Serbian units responded to the German reconnaissance flights from Bulgaria by capturing the Bulgarian checkpoint at Kalotina, which was and still is at only 57 kilometers to the west of Sofia. For Prime Minister Filov the attack offered a good opportunity to blame Belgrade for the outbreak of a conflict between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, but the war minister Daskalov rightfully predicted that it would mean a “*war of two years and the Bolshevization of Bulgaria*”.[[748]](#footnote-748)

Meanwhile a growing number of German troops were entering Hungary for the assault on Yugoslavia, but in the night of April 2 to April 3 the Hungarian premier Teleki committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. He had no doubts any more that Hungary was heading toward a disaster. In a suicide note to Regent Horthy, Teleki criticized in fact his master, by emphasizing that Budapest denounced treacherously the eternal friendship treaty, just concluded with Yugoslavia: “*We broke our word, - out of cowardice [...] The nation feels it, and we have thrown away its honor. We have allied ourselves to scoundrels [...] We will become body-snatchers! A nation of trash. I did not hold you back. I am guilty.*”[[749]](#footnote-749)

Horthy tried in vain to conceal Teleki’s suicide and hastily replaced him with Foreign Minister Laszlo Bardossy. The rest of the ministers preserved their positions, while the government was desperately looking for arguments to justify the imminent Hungarian incursion into Yugoslavia. The British minister to Budapest O’Malley had no illusions in this respect and even lost his temper by warning that if Hungary joined Germany like a jackal in the attack on Yugoslavia, she could not expect any mercy not only from the United Kingdom, but also from the United States.[[750]](#footnote-750)

Yet O’Malley’s menacing behavior didn’t seem to be confirmed by the developments in North Africa, where the German corps under Rommel succeeded in pushing the British out of Benghazi and in launching a counteroffensive with the aim of reaching the Nile in Egypt. The Commander in Chief Middle East Wavell reported to London that he could not dispatch the Seventh Australian Division for the defense of Greece and this reduced considerably the anyway weak chances of the Greeks.[[751]](#footnote-751)

The tragic irony was that even Romania, despite her former alliance obligations toward Yugoslavia, became eager to take a piece of the Yugoslav legacy. On April 4 the Romanian minister in Berlin Constantin Greceanu transmitted personally to von Ribbentrop the wish of general Antonescu that, in case of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, he would have preferred that the Serbian part of Banat be occupied by Romanian instead of Hungarian troops.[[752]](#footnote-752)

That was, no doubt, another bad Balkan surprise for Hitler, but it didn’t seem to diminish his self-confidence, because he told the Japanese foreign minister Matsuoka on his way back from Rome that in case of an armed clash between Japan and the United States Germany would immediately take part in the conflict on Japan’s side. Yet at this very moment another unpleasant surprise came from Moscow, where Molotov announced to Ambassador von der Schulenburg that the Soviet Union was about to conclude a friendship and nonaggression treaty with Yugoslavia.[[753]](#footnote-753)

The Russian-Yugoslav pact was signed in Moscow by Molotov and by the Yugoslav minister Gavrilović in the early morning of April 5. The treaty was far less engaging than the original text, proposed by Gavrilović. The Soviet Union simply agreed to respect “*the independence, sovereign rights and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia*” and to adopt a benevolent attitude, if Yugoslavia was attacked. The Yugoslav minister had warned Stalin about an imminent German assault on Russia, but the Soviet leader replied by the following declaration: “*We are ready. If the Germans want to come, let them come.*”[[754]](#footnote-754)

Anyway, Yugoslavia was doomed and the same applied to Greece. At 10:30AM von Ribbentrop instructed the German ambassador to Ankara von Papen to notify the Turkish foreign minister Saraçoglu again that in case of penetrating into Greece the German troops would be kept at a sufficiently remote distance from the Turkish border. However, the Turks were expected to do likewise with their troops in Thrace in order to avoid all sorts of incidents.[[755]](#footnote-755)

Yet Turkey had to face another problem on her southeastern borders, since the former Iraqi prime minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, who had been removed from office two months ago because of his pro-German attitude, staged a coup d’état and returned to power. The result was a growing pressure on Turkey both by Germany and Britain for a free passage of their military assistance to the respective factions in Iraq, but Ankara had the firm intention to refuse such a passage both for the Reich and the United Kingdom.[[756]](#footnote-756)

For his part, the Yugoslav foreign minister Ninčić humiliated himself to the point of paying two consecutive visits to the German legation in Belgrade. He claimed that the Russian-Yugoslav pact had been signed without his knowledge and that he was ready to go immediately to Berlin. Ninčić tried to persuade the German chargé d’affaires that he, Ninčić, wanted an understanding not with Moscow, but with Berlin and that he was an unwavering supporter of the Three-Power Pact. In fact, the Germans were working out the last details of their invasion of Yugoslavia and they promised to the Romanians that no Hungarian troops would be allowed to the east of the Tisa River and that Banat would remain in this way free from any Hungarian military presence.[[757]](#footnote-757)

At 5:30AM on April 6 the German armed forces invaded simultaneously Yugoslavia and Greece from Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and the former territory of Austria. Belgrade, which was deprived of any antiaircraft defense, was literally smashed by the German bombers, causing the death of 17,000 people. Nineteen German divisions moved from Bulgaria toward Nish and part of them headed for Belgrade, while the rest advanced toward Skopie and Salonica. Another twelve German divisions moved from Austria toward Zagreb and Bosnia. Greece was invaded in her turn by 15 German divisions, while the troops Britain, Australia and New Zealand had dispatched in support of the Greeks, amounted to 55,000 men in all. To the might of 52 motorized and armored German divisions the Serbs could oppose only 31 incomplete and badly equipped divisions. The Yugoslav resistance was weakened further by the local Communist network, which spread false rumors and excelled in defeatism. Yet some Serbian and probably also British planes managed to bomb Szeged in Hungary and Kyustendil in Bulgaria.[[758]](#footnote-758)

In the same morning the Russian press published a series of photographs with Stalin all smiling in the company of Gavrilović, while signing the Soviet-Yugoslav friendship and nonaggression treaty. The comment was that the wish of Belgrade to defend its interests could be met only with sympathy. Everything seems to indicate that the aim of Stalin was to make it clear that the medium and small European countries could join the Three-Power Pact only with the consent of the USSR and that he definitely disapproved of the new German action. Significantly enough, the Russian deputy foreign minister Vyshinski dispatched a telegram to the diplomatic representative in Belgrade, informing him that the very word “*neutrality*” had been removed from the text of the Soviet-Yugoslav treaty in order to show that, in case of an attack on Yugoslavia, Moscow would not remain indifferent.[[759]](#footnote-759)

Meanwhile the Serbs launched another air raid, hitting this time a residential area of Sofia and killing eight civilians, mostly women and children. At the same moment the Nazi intelligence services reported that Russia was engaged in “*large-scale military preparations on the whole front from the Baltic to the Black Sea*”, while the German ambassador von der Schulenburg notified Molotov about the beginning of the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece. The Soviet premier and foreign minister expressed his regrets about the enlargement of the conflict to the Balkans, but neither Moscow, nor Berlin made any mention about the Russian-Yugoslav friendship and nonaggression pact.[[760]](#footnote-760)

In the night of April 6 to April 7 the German air force assaulted the Piraeus port at Athens, destroying as many as 11 British and Greek vessels at the moment of the landing of fresh troops from Egypt for the defense of Greece. The situation was even more difficult for the United Kingdom, since the German air raid coincided with a rapid withdrawal of the British troops from Italian Libya. General Wavell and his staff decided to stop Rommel at least at Tobruk, just about 100 kilometers to the west of the Egyptian border.[[761]](#footnote-761)

Most British still feared a German landing in England and this nervousness was no doubt one of the reasons for the decision of London to sever the diplomatic ties with Budapest on the ground that Hungary had allowed the “Wehrmacht” to invade Yugoslavia from Hungarian soil. Even less adequate was the reaction of the United States, whose diplomatic representative in Budapest could warn the Hungarian government only at this point to refrain from taking part in the aggression against Yugoslavia.[[762]](#footnote-762)

On April 7 von Ribbentrop pushed the Bulgarian minister Draganov to leave Berlin for Sofia in order to transmit the wish of Hitler for three Bulgarian divisions to occupy the Yugoslav part of Macedonia. On the following day the German foreign minister instructed the representatives of the Reich in Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria to urge the respective governments to sever their diplomatic relations with Belgrade, but this did not make the position of Berlin much easier.[[763]](#footnote-763)

Among other things, Japan still insisted upon some form of agreement with Communist Russia. On April 8 the Japanese foreign minister Matsuoka stopped for the second time in Moscow on his way back from Berlin to Tokyo. He was received again by Stalin and Molotov but, as before, Tokyo’s wish to purchase the northern part of the Sakhalin Island seemed to preclude any agreement. The curious thing was that at precisely the same moment the Russian minister in Budapest Sharonov was ordered to leave immediately the Hungarian capital for Moscow together with his family and with another two ladies of the staff.[[764]](#footnote-764)

That was also the instant when the Germans took the important city of Bitola in Macedonia, managed to pass around the Metaxas defense line of the Greeks and advanced rapidly toward Salonica. The commander of the Greek East Macedonia Army general Bakalopoulos got the permission to ask the Germans for a cease-fire, while the population of Vardar Macedonia, that is the Yugoslav part of the historical province, met the forthcoming disintegration of Yugoslavia with obvious relief. The Macedonians of Bulgarian origin, mobilized in the Yugoslav army, refused to fight further and surrendered to the Germans, but the Serbian officers retaliated by executing Macedonian soldiers as deserters. On the other hand, the victories of the “Wehrmacht” in Yugoslavia and Greece enhanced the fears of the Turks that the Reich might become another great power with claims on Constantinople and on the Straits. In view of these apprehensions, the German ambassador in Ankara von Papen suggested to discuss with von Ribbentrop the idea of a possible nonaggression pact between Germany and Turkey.[[765]](#footnote-765)

On April 9 the Germans took Salonica, while general Bakalopoulos signed a cease-fire agreement on behalf of the East Macedonia Army. The British units in Greece were forced to withdraw to the south with the hope to oppose a resistance at the Thermopylae. Yet the “Wehrmacht” High Command issued an order, providing for a much better treatment of the Greek prisoners of war in comparison with the Serbs. The Greeks could go home on condition that they handed over their weapons to the Germans, whereas the Serbs were immediately confined in prison camps.[[766]](#footnote-766)

At 9:30AM King Boris III of Bulgaria agreed to send three divisions in Vardar Macedonia. However, he insisted that these troops should not be dispatched as an occupying force, but as a force for the maintenance of “*order and calm in the territories, taken over by the Germans*”. The German offer caused another round of dramatic debates among the members of the Bulgarian government, but the Hungarians were even more reluctant to sever their diplomatic relations with Belgrade, claiming that they could intervene militarily only in case of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the proclamation of the independence of Croatia. In a conversation with the German minister to Budapest von Erdmannsdorff, the Hungarian premier Bardossy disclosed also his fears of a possible Romanian attack. These worries were enhanced further by a phone call from the chief of staff of the Hungarian armed forces Henrik Werth, who warned about the huge concentration of Russian troops on the Hungarian border.[[767]](#footnote-767)

Similarly to Britain, the United States didn’t seem to be concerned about a possible Soviet aggression, but endeavored to check the Nazi expansion. To that effect State Secretary Cordell Hull signed with the Danish minister to Washington DC an agreement, under whose terms “*the people of Greenland*” remained loyal to King Christian X of Denmark, but accepted the protection of the USA until the international situation became normal again. The Danish representative apparently acted at his own initiative, but the Greenlanders were by all means relieved to see how the American occupation rescued them from the Nazi threat.[[768]](#footnote-768)

In the morning of April 10 von Ribbentrop’s special envoy in Zagreb Veesenmayer met the deputy leader of the “Ustasha” (“Rebel”) terrorist organization Slavko Kvaternik, who was eager to proclaim the independence of Croatia. Yet Veesenmayer thought that this could be done only when the German troops came close enough to Zagreb. Meanwhile the “Wehrmacht” units cut all connection between the Greek and the Serbian troops, defeated the Serbs in Southeastern Yugoslavia and attacked the Greek, British and New Zealand positions at the Aliakmon River in South Macedonia.[[769]](#footnote-769)

At 3PM, at the insistence of Veesenmayer, the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party and deputy premier in the Simović government Maček sent in his resignation and handed over the power in Zagreb to Kvaternik. Veesenmayer persuaded Kvaternik, instead of going to greet the German troops approaching the Croatian capital, to radio the proclamation of Croatia’s independence, which Kvaternik did at 5:45PM on behalf of Ante Pavelić. Thus the Croatian State came into existence before the arrival of the German troops and it appeared, at least formally, as an independent action of the Croats.[[770]](#footnote-770)

Yugoslavia was about to disappear from the political map of Europe, while the British were pushed toward the Egyptian border, but they managed to stay in Tobruk. Under the command of Rommel the Germans had succeeded in killing 2,000 British soldiers, including three generals, and some commanding officers of the Royal Navy wondered whether the United Kingdom would be able to retain the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet at this very moment an American destroyer attacked a German U-boat, which became the first officially registered incident between the navies of the United States and the Reich in the Atlantic Ocean, but Hitler thought that it was too early for involving the USA in the war and refrained from retaliation.[[771]](#footnote-771)

Both the German and Russian dictator kept cheating each other about their real intentions, but Stalin seemed to be more convincing, since the military intelligence of the Third Reich reported that the concentration of Soviet troops on the German border was of a defensive character. The Germans informed the Hungarians that the Russians did not intend to undertake any action against Hungary, but on April 11 four Russian reconnaissance planes entered the German airspace in Poland.[[772]](#footnote-772)

At the same moment Hungarian troops crossed the Yugoslav border and took about 11,000 square kilometers in the most northern parts of Serbia and Croatia with a population of about one million people, only 40 per cent of whom were ethnic Hungarians. The move was justified by the establishment of the “*Independent State of Croatia*” the previous day. In a special proclamation Regent Horthy acknowledged the independence of Croatia, but the Croatian territories, occupied by the Hungarian army, had been promised by the Germans to the Croats. Hitler responded by declaring that Banat would remain within the boundaries of Serbia, while the first days of the Hungarian occupation were marked by the massacre of 2,300 human beings, mostly Southern Slavs and Jews. Nevertheless, Britain refrained from declaring war on Hungary, whereas Russia condemned Hungary for the denunciation of the friendship treaty with Yugoslavia.[[773]](#footnote-773)

The relative German leniency with regard to Hungary as an ally contrasted with the sharp reaction to Denmark for allowing the occupation of Greenland by the Americans. The Reich plenipotentiary to Copenhagen von Renthe-Fink demanded from the Danish foreign minister Scavenius not only to disavow and remove the Danish minister in Washington DC from his position, but to deprive him of Danish citizenship and to confiscate all his property. Von Renthe-Fink wanted the same punishment for those Danish sailors, who kept serving in the ships, taken over by the US coastal guard.[[774]](#footnote-774)

Meanwhile Stalin accompanied his protests against Hungary by disciplining the Soviet air force and by starting the transfer of another four armies to the western border. These were to be reinforced by three more armies. The total amount consisted of 77 divisions, which had to form the Second Strategic Echelon. The concentration of that force on the border with Germany, Finland, Hungary and Romania had to be completed by July10, 1941.[[775]](#footnote-775)

Late in the evening of April 12, 1941, Stalin received the Japanese foreign minister Matsuoka, who had been staying in Russia for several days without much success. This time again the Russian dictator stressed that no agreement was possible, if Japan did not renounce her concession in Northern Sakhalin, which left Matsuoka with the impression that the negotiations were a total failure. This feeling was apparently confirmed by the official announcement that the Japanese foreign minister would leave Moscow for Tokyo on the following day.[[776]](#footnote-776)

In the next morning the Russian foreign ministry publicly reiterated Moscow’s threat that, because of her own national minorities, Hungary risked an assault, similar to that on the Serbs. This didn’t prevent the Hungarians from capturing Novi Sad in Vojvodina, while German and Hungarian units entered into what was left of Belgrade. For their part, the Italians managed to take Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. The young king Peter II, who had been just proclaimed of full legal age, and Prime Minister Simović found refuge in Montenegro. They intended to leave for Egypt, but Churchill tried to encourage them to remain further in Yugoslavia, thinking that the mountainous character of the area offered good opportunities for a longer resistance. Actually Yugoslavia did not exist anymore. Serbia was put under direct German occupation in her borders from before World War I without Macedonia.[[777]](#footnote-777)

At noon on April 13 again Matsuoka was suddenly instructed by a telegram from Tokyo to give up the concession in Northern Sakhalin, but to reach an agreement with Russia. At 2PM he finally signed with Molotov a friendship and neutrality treaty. The two powers undertook to respect each other’s territorial integrity, including that of the respective puppet states, namely Mongolia under Soviet occupation and Manchukuo under Japanese occupation. In case of a conflict of one of the contracting parties with a third power, the other contracting party had to observe strict neutrality. During and after the signature ceremony Stalin spared no efforts to demonstrate his loyalty to the alliance with Hitler and his hostility to the Anglo-Saxon democracies. In fact the Russian dictator was so pleased with the treaty that secured his rear with regard to the imminent assault on Germany that, in an unprecedented way, he saw off personally Matsuoka to the railway station.[[778]](#footnote-778)

It was only at 9PM that the “poglavnik” (“leader”) of the newly proclaimed Independent State of Croatia Ante Pavelić was able to reach the town of Karlovac in Central Croatia, where he was welcomed by Veesenmayer. The rapidly growing claims of Italy on Dalmatia and of Hungary on Northeast Croatia apparently made Pavelić stake entirely on Germany. Thus he entreated Germany to acknowledge the sovereignty of Croatia as soon as possible and promised to renounce a foreign policy of his own, leaving it to Hitler. Pavelić even declared that “*the Croatians were not Slavs, but profess themselves, in the last analysis, as being German by blood and race*”.[[779]](#footnote-779)

In the night of April 13 to April 14 British and Yugoslav bombers made another air raid in the proximity of Kyustendil and Sofia, but Prime Minister Churchill had to admit that the United Kingdom could not provide more aircraft in assistance to the Serbs. The British were unable to dispatch even ships to the north of Valona (Vlorë) in Albania, because the German air force could easily destroy them. The only thing Churchill could promise was to send a submarine toward the Montenegrin port of Kotor to rescue King Peter II and the government in case of urgency.[[780]](#footnote-780)

At the same time, though, the British forces in Tobruk kept resisting successfully the German attacks and Churchill even suggested an assault on Tripoli in order to impede the further landing of German troops in North Africa. Together with the continuing flights of Russian spy planes in the German airspace, including over East Prussia, and of German spy planes in the Russian airspace these developments made an agreement with Turkey even more urgent in the eyes of the Nazi leadership. On April 15 von Ribbentrop summoned the German ambassador in Ankara von Papen for consultations in Berlin.[[781]](#footnote-781)

In the course of the same day the leader of Croatia Pavelić sent two notes on his behalf to Germany and Italy, asking for the official recognition of Croatia’s independence. Berlin and Rome replied also by notes that the two powers acknowledged the Independent State of Croatia, but its borders had to be determined in future “negotiations”. The text of all the four notes was written in the German foreign ministry after some consultations with Rome, which only showed the total submission of Croatia to the will of Hitler and Mussolini.[[782]](#footnote-782)

For their part, King Peter II of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav premier Simović with some of the ministers were taken by a British plane from the Kotor Gulf to Athens, but the situation in Greece was also becoming rapidly untenable. That was the moment, chosen by the Bulgarian government, to sever the diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, although the German minister to Sofia von Richthofen had advised the Bulgarians to be less precipitous in this respect. Late in the same afternoon Sofia severed the diplomatic ties with Belgrade on the ground that the Yugoslavs had attacked Bulgarian border checkpoints and bombed several times the civilian population in Bulgaria.[[783]](#footnote-783)

In the night of April 15 to April 16 the Germans undertook another devastating raid in Northern Ireland (Ulster), hitting this time Belfast and killing more than 700 civilians. As before, one of Hitler’s aims with these assaults was to make both Stalin and the British believe, that a landing in England was imminent, but at the news of the attack the prime minister of Eire de Valera ordered the dispatch of several firemen squads to assist the Northern Irish, despite the risk that Germany might accuse Eire of transgressing her neutrality.[[784]](#footnote-784)

Meanwhile Italian units had occupied the city of Ohrid in Southwest Macedonia. Back in the early 11th century AD Ohrid had been for a brief period the capital of medieval Bulgaria and it had also played an important part in the 19th century Bulgarian national revival. Most Bulgarians were, therefore, shocked that the city was captured by the Italians, while Berlin still delayed its permission to the Bulgarian government to dispatch troops in Vardar Macedonia. This made King Boris III ask for a personal meeting with Hitler.[[785]](#footnote-785)

In the afternoon of April 16 German motorized units took the capital of Bosnia Sarajevo, while Slovakia also acknowledged the Independent State of Croatia. Von Ribbentrop instructed the German diplomatic representative in Zagreb to urge Pavelić to ask officially Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania for the same favor. In their turn, the legations of the Reich in Budapest and Sofia had to notify the respective governments that Berlin would highly appreciate a quick recognition of Croatia’s sovereignty by Hungary and Bulgaria. However, it was only at this point that Pavelić formed his own government, assuming the leadership of the country, the premiership of the Cabinet and the Foreign Ministry, whereas Kvaternik, promoted to the rank of general, was appointed deputy prime minister in charge of the armed forces and the police.[[786]](#footnote-786)

In the night of April 16 to April 17 German bombers made another murderous raid on London, killing more than 2,300 people, injuring more than 3,000 and damaging even the Saint Paul Cathedral. A number of shipyards and ports were also severely hit and under these circumstances Stalin could interpret the British warnings about an imminent German invasion of the Soviet Union only as a desperate attempt of the Churchill Cabinet to get Russia involved in the war. The Russian dictator thought that it was still too early for an assault on Germany, but to that end the Soviet command began the transfer of another number of “Red Army” divisions to the western borders.[[787]](#footnote-787)

On April 17 Mussolini was badly surprised by the intention of Germany to annex the entire part of Slovenia to the north of Ljubljana. In Hitler’s view, the Reich would take in this way the regions that had once belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I. It meant, among other things, that the Italian troops had to withdraw from some territories they had already occupied. The Italian foreign minister Ciano was invited to Vienna to discuss with von Ribbentrop the partition of the rest of Yugoslavia.[[788]](#footnote-788)

At 9PM the last 28 Yugoslav divisions surrendered around Sarajevo. The Germans had lost only 151 killed and 392 injured, while there were as many as 254,000 Yugoslav prisoners of war. Significantly enough, only 31 out of the 230 Yugoslav generals were not Serbs. After a careful screening the German authorities released the war prisoners of Croatian, German, Hungarian and Bulgarian ethnic origin. However, some Serbian units refused to lay down their arms and under the command of colonel Dragoljub (Draža) Mihajlović they headed from Northern Bosnia to Central Serbia, which marked the beginning of the Serbian armed resistance against Nazi and Fascist occupation.[[789]](#footnote-789)

In the night of April 17 to April 18 the German foreign minister von Ribbentrop sent a telegram to Sofia, stating that the Bulgarian army was finally permitted to occupy the Greek part of Thrace between the railway from Svilengrad to Alexandroupolis in the east and the Struma River to the west. The Bulgarians could also take Macedonia, but initially only to the east of a line, stretching from Pirot through Vranja to Skopie and from the Vardar River to the Greek border. Yet the German minister in Sofia von Richthofen had to declare explicitly that this was only a provisional solution pending further negotiations on the issue.[[790]](#footnote-790)

On April 18 Stalin decided to display openly a more hostile attitude toward the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece. The Communist Parties in these two countries were instructed to emphasize that “*the war of the Greek and the Yugoslav people against imperialist aggression is a just war*”. This didn’t prove to be an obstacle to the signature of a protocol in Berlin for the delivery of German goods to Russia up to May 11, 1941, amounting to the sum of 310,300,000 reichsmarks.[[791]](#footnote-791)

In another development, which was definitely disagreeable to the Reich, British troops landed at the Iraqi port of Basra. As a former colonial power the United Kingdom had secured a privileged position for herself at the moment of granting the independence of Iraq back in the 1930s. On the other hand, though, the landing didn’t cause any resistance despite the open anti-British rebellion under al-Gaylani, who had explicitly asked the totalitarian powers for help.[[792]](#footnote-792)

The British were greatly relieved also by the official announcement of the US government that the entire area of the Atlantic Ocean from the American coast to the longitude of 26 degrees west should be considered part of the United States territorial waters. This enabled the Royal Navy to concentrate against the Germans most of the warships, used until then for accompanying the cargo vessels with weapons, raw materials and food from America to England. The American security zone included the Azores Islands as well, but State Secretary Hull reassured the Portuguese ambassador to Washington DC that the United States would occupy the Azores only in case of a German assault.[[793]](#footnote-793)

Unlike the Iraqis toward the British, Vardar Macedonia was incomparably more favorable to the entering Bulgarian troops. Yet the Bulgarian journalist Danail Krapchev reported to Prime Minister Filov that, indeed, the enthusiasm was noticeable in Bitola and Prilep, but he complained that the long years of Serbian propaganda in Skopie and Kumanovo had had its effect. Nevertheless, Krapchev added, there were nowhere in the area either manifestations, or “*demands for an independent Macedonia*”. As a matter of fact more alienated was the younger generation of the Macedonians of Bulgarian origin. This alienation could by no means be counteracted by the ethnic cleansing, perpetrated by detachments of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization toward the Serbian colonists, installed by the Belgrade government in the early 1920s. Most of these people were simply expelled from their homes, but a not negligible number of them were cold-bloodedly killed.[[794]](#footnote-794)

That was the moment, when the commander in chief of the Greek army general Papagos notified his government that a significant part of the Greek troops were on the verge of disintegration and that the British would be unable to hold the Thermopylae. There were reports, coming from everywhere, about the desperate situation of one or another unit and even about mutinies in the army. A growing number of generals, including Tsolakoglou, became involved in a plot to demand an immediate cease-fire with the “Wehrmacht” and eventually to overthrow the government altogether. Prime Minister Koryzis hardly knew about the plot, but he was fully aware of the desperate situation on all fronts and in the same evening he committed suicide. King George II replaced him with Emmanouil Tsouderos, but the interior minister Manyadakis preserved his post.[[795]](#footnote-795)

Meanwhile Northern Greece between the Struma and Evros Rivers was also occupied by Bulgarian troops but, unlike Macedonia, this region had been almost entirely cleansed from Bulgarian elements. Only a couple of the surviving ethnic Bulgarians had the courage to wave the Bulgarian national flag in Alexandroupolis, for instance. Yet the Bulgarian military presence in Greek Thrace enabled the German troops to advance quickly toward the city of Ioannina in Epirus.[[796]](#footnote-796)

On April 20, 1941, King Boris III flew to Hitler at the German dictator’s invitation, and declared to him that if Ohrid was handed over to the Italians, Bulgaria should receive Salonica. The Bulgarian monarch pointed out, on the other hand, that it would be a mistake to allow the Romanians to annex the Serbian region of Negotin to the south of the Danube, although that area was actually populated by ethnic Romanians. Moreover, Boris III advocated a Croatian access to the Adriatic Sea and, as if by chance, at this very moment Bulgaria acknowledged officially the Independent State of Croatia. For his part, Hitler refused even to speak of Salonica, but he instructed von Ribbentrop to talk with his Italian counterpart Ciano about Ohrid.[[797]](#footnote-797)

As for the Croatians, they were not only forced to cede large territories to Italy, but they also turned out to have growing difficulties with the Hungarians. Yet a chance for Zagreb was no doubt the fact that Hitler was infuriated by reports about a bad attitude of the Hungarian troops toward the ethnic Germans in the newly acquired Yugoslav territories. In fact, the rumors about a brutal treatment of ethnic Germans by the Hungarians were based on just one isolated incident, when two ladies of German descent were killed in a village during a random shooting between Hungarian soldiers and Serbian snipers.[[798]](#footnote-798)

While Boris III was laying his claims before Hitler, the Germans took Ioannina and thus the Third Greek Army Corps under general Tsolakoglou was surrounded by the “Wehrmacht” from the south and by the Italians from the north. Churchill ordered the British troops in Greece to begin to evacuate for Egypt, whereas Tsolakoglou looked for a contact with the Germans in order to ask for an immediate cease-fire. Hoping that surrender to Italy could be avoided, he managed to sign a few hours later, in a village close to Ioannina, a cease-fire agreement with Sepp Dietrich, commander of an elite SS division. After handing their arms over to the Germans, the Greek soldiers were allowed to go home, but even the officers could keep their personal pistols.[[799]](#footnote-799)

However, in the morning of April 21 Tsolakoglou had to sign another cease-fire agreement in Larissa with the chief of staff of the 12th German Army general Hans von Greiffenberg, because the army commander marshal Siegmund Wilhelm List had annulled the previous arrangement. The clauses of this agreement were much harsher, since both the officers and the soldiers had to be confined in camps, but List agreed that the Italians should not be permitted to enter from Albania into Greece and he even sent some units to prevent this from happening.[[800]](#footnote-800)

While Tsolakoglou was signing his second surrender to the Germans, the Italian foreign minister Ciano engaged in tough talks with Hitler and von Ribbentrop about the partition of Yugoslavia. Like many times before, the final agreement reflected above all the viewpoint of the German dictator. The Reich had already determined the border line with Croatia, but as long as Serbia remained under direct German administration, the Germans would hold a strip of former Yugoslav territory from the northwest to the southeast in order to secure the communications with Serbia. Von Ribbentrop apparently refrained from granting a formal approval of the Italian plan for a personal union between Croatia and Italy, but he agreed that Dalmatia, that is the entire Adriatic coast of Croatia, would become an Italian possession. The Drava River was to form the boundary between Croatia and Hungary, but the Croatians were awarded with the territories between the Danube and the Sava rivers, as well as with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Slovenia was partitioned between Germany and Italy with some degree of “autonomy” in the Italian part, but this “autonomy” consisted in the right to use the Slovenian language together with Italian. Montenegro became formally independent, but in personal union with Italy. Kosovo, as well as parts of Montenegro, Macedonia and Greece were added to “*Great Albania*”, but Albania herself had been annexed by Italy back in April 1939. The rest of Vardar Macedonia, as well as the three border areas, ceded by Bulgaria to Serbia as a result of World War I, were entrusted to the Bulgarians. Hungary received some areas in Northern Yugoslavia and was promised a free port on the Adriatic Sea, but Serbian Banat remained under German occupation in order to avoid clashes between the Hungarians and the Romanians. Last, but not least, Italy could annex immediately the Ionian Islands.[[801]](#footnote-801)

Yet Mussolini was furious that the Greeks had not asked explicitly the Italians for a cease-fire as well. Hitler was ready to tolerate the capriciousness of the “Duce”, but it was only at 2AM on April 23 that the Greeks addressed a cease-fire offer to the commander of the Italian forces in Albania general Ugo Cavallero. About an hour later another act of surrender was concluded, this time with the participation of an Italian representative, but this did not mean the end of hostilities, since King George II and Prime Minister Tsouderos were evacuated to the island of Crete, which was in British hands.[[802]](#footnote-802)

Eventually, at 3:15PM general Tsolakoglou had to sign a third, definitive act of surrender, this time with Alfred Jodl on behalf of the German High Command and with general Alberto Ferrero on behalf of Italy. The suicidal irony was that, despite the total catastrophe of Yugoslavia and Greece and despite the ongoing concentration of Russian troops on the eastern border, the Romanian dictator Antonescu lost by no means his appetite for new territories. He asked the German minister to Bucharest von Killinger for a personal meeting with Hitler, in order to lay his claims on Serbian Banat, as well as on a long and narrow strip from the Danube to Salonica.[[803]](#footnote-803)

Antonescu was seemingly not aware that an armed resistance was emerging both in Yugoslavia and Greece. On April 24 Serbian regular soldiers and volunteers assaulted a Bulgarian unit in Macedonia to the north of the Greek border on the railroad from Skopie to Salonica. The Bulgarians shot five of the assailants on the spot and imprisoned the remaining 40 people. At approximately the same time Bulgarian units in Northern Greece at the Paranesti (Buk) railway station were attacked by three machine guns. The Bulgarians managed to capture the machine guns, but not the men who had opened fire on them. The problem was that Greece became the victim of rapidly increasing food shortages and that the forthcoming famine was going to result not from the Nazi occupation policies, but from the British blockade.[[804]](#footnote-804)

In the night of April 24 to April 25 the forces of Britain, New Zealand and Australia began to evacuate from the most southern part of Greece, while US President F.D.Roosevelt proclaimed that Bulgaria was an aggressor. In view of all this the “Wehrmacht” High Command issued a directive for the conquest of Crete, but this operation was bound to delay further the assault on Russia. Yet the Swedish military had no illusions that the Nazi-Soviet war was inevitable and let the Germans know that the Swedes would fight for the Finns, provided that Finland would not attack Russia first.[[805]](#footnote-805)

Quite peculiar in this regard was the position of marshal Pétain, who apparently presumed that the “new order” in Europe would be established by Hitler and Stalin together. Thus Pétain instructed the new ambassador of the Vichy regime to Moscow Gaston Bergery to declare that he intended to incite neither Germany against Russia, nor Russia against Germany, but to encourage Russia, as a basically European power, to take part in the “new order”, which should not be directed against any power but which should preclude the predominance of any particular great power in Europe. Ironically enough, at this very moment Stalin and his apparatchiks took measures for the transfer of 27 prominent Communist activists of French origin from France to Russia through America.[[806]](#footnote-806)

Similarly to France, Greece was also torn between those, who were joining the armed resistance to the occupying powers, and those, who were willing to cooperate with them. On April 26 general Tsolakoglou, who had signed the act of surrender in Salonica, proclaimed his readiness to serve the “Fuehrer” and the German people and he tried to reassure the “Wehrmacht” command that a government under his leadership would be supported by almost all Greek generals. For Hitler that was a gift from heaven, because he thought that after six years of Metaxas dictatorship he could hardly find a Greek politician apt to cooperate with the Germans. The German leader immediately saw the advantage of signing a definitive act of surrender with a more or less “legitimate” Greek government, but Mussolini was considerably less enthusiastic in this respect. Eventually, Rome had to accept this time again the viewpoint of Berlin and an Italian representative took part in the signature of the act of surrender of Greece. Thus Italy was forced to acknowledge the government of Tsolakoglou.[[807]](#footnote-807)

At 8:10AM on April 27 the first “Wehrmacht” units entered Athens and soon after that the red Nazi flag with the swastika was hoisted on the Acropolis. Some Athenians also hurried to wave the same flag, while the surviving British troops were leaving Greece from the Piraeus port under the constant air raids of the Germans. Deeply shocked by the triumph of the Third Reich in Southeastern Europe, Prime Minister Churchill proclaimed again in the House of Commons that Hitler was about to invade Russia.[[808]](#footnote-808)

Among other things, these developments encouraged further the Romanian leader Antonescu to reiterate his demands for part of the Yugoslav booty. He told the German minister in Bucharest von Killinger that he, Antonescu, “*felt aligned with the Fuehrer’s policy until his death*”. Right after these words the general emphasized “*the danger of a union of the Slavs*” and pointed out that the Romanians had been for centuries a barrier “*against the Slavs and the Turks*”. As a countermeasure against the Slavic threat he proposed “*a German connection with the Black Sea*” and the “*establishment of a condominium along the line Belgrade-Salonika* [Salonica] *which is not dominated by Slavs*”. Such a solution, Antonescu claimed, would achieve a “*separation of the Bulgarians and the Serbs, who, as Slavs, would otherwise very soon gravitate toward Bulgaria*”. These statements were completely out of touch with reality, since most of the wars, waged by modern Bulgaria, were directed against the Serbs, whereas many Serbs were convinced that the Bulgarians were not Slavs, but “Tartars” or, in the best case, Huns.[[809]](#footnote-809)

Antonescu was somewhat more realistic only insofar as he tried to persuade von Killinger that, instead of attacking Egypt from Greece, the Germans should strike at the Soviet Union. Romania was, no doubt, threatened directly by Communist Russia, which, according to the general, had concentrated as many as 140 divisions. However, the Romanian leader thought that the “Wehrmacht” would need only a month for defeating the Russians.[[810]](#footnote-810)

The very fact that Antonescu was advocating an assault on the Soviet Union suggests that he was still not very familiar with Hitler’s plans, but the sad thing was that, as a former ally of Yugoslavia, he didn’t seem to be too much touched by the rapidly increasing terror in occupied Serbia. On April 28 the commander in chief of the Second German Army general Helmut Voerster ordered the shooting of all men, capable of bearing arms in the immediate proximity of an armed resistance detachment. To that effect hostages were to be taken as soon as possible and as many as possible in order to execute them immediately after an attack of Serbian guerrillas.[[811]](#footnote-811)

In the night of April 28 to April 29 the British, the New Zealanders and the Australians completed the evacuation of their troops from Greece. Up to that moment 11,840 had died in the battles out of 53,051 men, but the Royal Navy managed to rescue 50,662 people, including a couple of thousands of Cypriots, Palestinians, Greeks and Serbs. 18,850 men of the evacuated forces were dispatched to Crete, while the rest were sent to Egypt. During the whole operation the British and their allies lost 26 ships, but one Greek cruiser, six Greek torpedo boats and four Greek submarines managed to find refuge in the Egyptian port of Alexandria and were left at the disposal of the Royal Navy command. However, on April 29 the Germans reached South Peloponnese and completed the conquest of Yugoslavia. On the following day Hitler gave his personal accord to the start of negotiations between the German and the Finnish military commands.[[812]](#footnote-812)

For their part, the Bulgarians kept underestimating the Soviet threat, while enjoying what seemed to be the completion of their national unification. On May 2, while touring incognito Vardar Macedonia, Prime Minister Filov was met almost everywhere by enthusiastic crowds, but he noticed that all Macedonians were using a lot of Serbian words in their everyday speech, while a whole class of high school girls didn’t know Bulgarian at all. This led Filov to the pessimistic conclusion that another 20 to 30 years of Serbian rule would have resulted in the total oblivion of the Bulgarian language.[[813]](#footnote-813)

While Filov was worrying about the future of Macedonia, Hitler suddenly decided to be generous in his way toward the Greeks. He ordered the release of all Greek war prisoners and it was the first time that this privilege was accorded to a country, occupied by the Nazis. However, the Greeks had to pay a high price for that, because a large part of their country was to fall under the occupation of Fascist Italy, something even Tsolakoglou wanted to avoid by all means.[[814]](#footnote-814)

At this point Germany succeeded in gaining ground in the Middle East as well, since the Iraqi premier al-Gaylani opened fire on the British troops, stationed there, and renewed the diplomatic relations of Baghdad with Berlin. He urged the Reich to deliver the promised weapons and war materials, boasting that he could mobilize as many as 100,000 men against only 8,500 British soldiers. More significant was the fact that Stalin hurried to acknowledge officially al-Gaylani’s regime.[[815]](#footnote-815)

On May 4, 1941, the Russian leader summoned the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) to make it vote for his appointment as Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars or Prime Minister. Of course, Stalin preserved his exclusive position of secretary-general of the Communist Party Central Committee, because within the Soviet system the Party was above the State and its leader made all crucial decisions without bearing any responsibility for the government acts. At the same time he promoted the party boss in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) Zhdanov to the rank of deputy secretary-general. For his part, Molotov became deputy premier and remained at the head of the Foreign Affairs Commissariat (the Foreign Ministry).[[816]](#footnote-816)

The change was just a new step toward the assault on the Third Reich but, despite Hitler’s firm intention to attack Russia, the German ambassador to Moscow still hoped that it was possible to save the Soviet-Nazi alliance. To that effect he invited his Soviet counterpart Vladimir Dekanozov to his residence in the Russian capital for a breakfast. The idea of von der Schulenburg was to hint at the forthcoming German invasion and to appeal to the Russians to start negotiations with the Germans and to deprive in this way Hitler of any pretext for a war against Stalin. Dekanozov was unable even to imagine that the breakfast was a personal initiative of von der Schulenburg, without the knowledge of his superiors, and he only reminded his host of the terms, presented by the Soviet Union in November 1940 for joining the Three-Power Pact. Eventually, Dekanozov and von der Schulenburg agreed to meet “unofficially” again.[[817]](#footnote-817)

Dekanozov informed immediately Stalin and Molotov about his breakfast talks and the Russian dictator decided to publish another denial of the rumors about an imminent armed conflict between the USSR and the Reich. Yet before the end of the breakfast the Russian war minister Timoshenko had instructed the Kiev Special Military District to be prepared for “*impetuous blows for the defeat of the enemy*”. According to the instruction the “Red Army” had to make use of “*the favorable conditions for taking the strategic initiative at the beginning of the war*”. At approximately the same moment, though, the Russian military intelligence reported to Stalin that toward the end of the Balkan campaign the Germans had increased again the number of their divisions on the Soviet border from 37 to 70 and may be even to 107. On the other hand, just like Hitler and his commanders, the German deputy military attaché to Moscow Hans Krebs fatally underestimated the Russian combat power, informing the chief of staff of the “Wehrmacht” land forces Halder that Russia was ready even to yield territories to the Reich and that she needed at least 20 years to “*rise to eminence again*”.[[818]](#footnote-818)

On May 5, 1941, the Russian minister in Helsinki Orlov suddenly hinted to the Finnish foreign minister Rolf Witting that the Kremlin would not be any more opposed to an alliance between Finland and Sweden, which was an obvious attempt of the USSR to frustrate Hitler’s tactics of keeping Finland and Sweden away from each other. Considerably more embarrassing for the Axis, though, was the fact that on the same day the British forces and the Ethiopian insurgents completed the liberation of Ethiopia from Italian rule, by taking the capital Addis Ababa and by capturing or expelling all the Italian occupation units. After five years of exile Emperor Haile Selassie was restored to the throne, but the Italian garrison at Addis Ababa refused to surrender.[[819]](#footnote-819)

As if in response to that loss, the government in Vichy notified the Germans that it was ready to transfer German weapons and war materials to Iraq from Syria, which was still under the authority of marshal Pétain. In exchange for that the Vichy regime demanded a permission for rearming seven French submarines and for a relaxation of the border regulations, imposed by the Nazis between the occupied and the “free zone” of France.[[820]](#footnote-820)

However, the crucial, although initially hardly noticed event, was the speech that Stalin made to the cadets of the Soviet military academies at 6PM on May 5 in the Kremlin. From the very beginning the Soviet leader stressed that Russia had already 300 divisions, one third of which were motorized, while two thirds were tank divisions. He stressed that the war with Germany was inevitable but, most probably for security reasons, he claimed that the war against the Reich would start only in 1942. Yet the Russian dictator explicitly pointed out that everybody should be ready for the “*unconditional defeat of German Fascism*” and that the “*war would be waged on the territory of the enemy*”. He didn’t fail to touch upon his favorite theme about the “unjust” and “just” wars to proclaim that as long as the Germans fought against the Versailles system, they fought a “just” war, but now they had hostile masses and territories in their rear, which exposed them to great risks. Stalin left no doubts that the only purpose of the Soviet “*peaceful policy*” was to gain time for launching an offensive the moment the Russian armed forces became ready for that and he rightfully predicted that the United States and the USSR were the only two powers, which would “*predetermine the outcome of the struggle*”.[[821]](#footnote-821)

According to the director of the Swedish Foreign Ministry Political Department Söderblom, the assumption of the premiership by Stalin was another clear signal that the armed clash between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union was imminent. Söderblom frankly declared to a German diplomat that if Russia attacked Finland, Sweden would fully support the Finns and if a war broke out between Germany and Finland, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, Sweden would back up all measures for the complete defeat of Russia.[[822]](#footnote-822)

Despite all the evidence, the Finns tried to dissipate the suspicions of the Swedish foreign minister Christian Günther about a forthcoming Nazi-Soviet war. During his visit in Helsinki Günther was told by the Finnish president Ryti that there would be no war between Germany and Russia within the current year. The Finnish war minister Rudolf Walden went even further by claiming that a Nazi-Soviet conflict could not be expected in the next couple of months, although he obviously was aware of the German preparations for an assault on Russia.[[823]](#footnote-823)

The chief of staff of the Hungarian armed forces general Werth was also certain that Germany was bound to invade Russia. In a memorandum to the Hungarian government he pointed out that the Reich had to square accounts once and for all with the USSR in order to avoid a bad surprise on the part of Russia, while fighting a decisive battle against England. For the time being, though, Werth thought that the concentration of German troops on the Russian border didn’t mean that the Reich intended to attack the Soviet Union immediately, but, in his opinion, in case of war Finland, Hungary and Romania would inevitably take part in it. The liquidation of Yugoslavia and the weakness of Romania made Communist Russia the greatest and most direct threat to Hungary and Werth recommended the conclusion of a mutual assistance, guarantee and military alliance treaty with Germany, because Germany, he emphasized, was the only great power, capable of counterbalancing the Soviet menace.[[824]](#footnote-824)

Yet the German ambassador to Moscow von der Schulenburg saw in Stalin as chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars a new opportunity for advocating the improvement of Nazi-Soviet relations. In a report to Berlin von der Schulenburg claimed that, by assuming the premiership, Stalin wanted to take part personally in the preservation and development of good relations between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich.[[825]](#footnote-825)

Unlike von der Schulenburg, the Hungarian minister to Moscow Kristofi rightly observed that, by assuming the premiership, Stalin had abandoned his “*quite comfortable position of deciding the affairs of the Soviet Union from the background and leaving the responsibility to the others*”. In Kristofi’s view this change did not alter the Communist way of government, but he considered that Stalin had made the system closer to *“the “Fuehrer” principle of the National Socialist regime*”. This could by no means decrease the Soviet threat to the Hungarians, although, before his return to Budapest, the Russian minister Sharonov promised to Kristofi to work for friendly relations with Hungary.[[826]](#footnote-826)

According to the Hungarian chief of staff Werth, the Hungarians didn’t have any reason to fear either Slovakia, or Croatia. In the morning of May 7, 1941, Mussolini and Ciano met with the Croatian leader Pavelić in a waiting room of the Monfalcone railway station, which is today at the very border between Italy and Slovenia, but at the time it was in the Italian part of Slovenia. The “Duce” “generously” agreed to some small territorial changes in favor of Croatia, but a considerable part of the Dalmatian coast was annexed to Italy. Yet the Croats didn’t lose their territorial access to the Adriatic Sea altogether.[[827]](#footnote-827)

Everything seems to indicate that Stalin intended to transform the entire continent of Europe into a Soviet dependency, but he endeavored to dissipate the suspicions of Hitler in this regard. On May 8 the TASS Russian news agency denied the reports of a Japanese news agency that the USSR was amassing troops on the western border. Yet at this very moment the Soviet command was transferring another three divisions to the west, while the “Red Army” units on the Romanian border were ordered to prepare their combat equipment for “*immediate use*”.[[828]](#footnote-828)

On the same day the Germans permitted the Bulgarians to put under their administration not only the Greek part of continental Thrace, but also the islands of Thasos and Samothrace in front of Kavala. The Bulgarians apparently decided to take revenge of the former two decades of violent assimilation, murders and mass expulsions of ethnic Bulgarians from the area. The Bulgarians, who had been expelled from Greek Thrace after World War I, were encouraged by Sofia to return to their homes and the same applied to their descendants. In exchange for that the ethnic Greeks, who had been installed in Greek Thrace after their expulsion from Asia Minor as a result of the 1922 catastrophic defeat, inflicted on Greece by the Kemalist national revolution in Turkey, were submitted by the Bulgarian authorities to a drastic ethnic cleansing. In consequence, within a short period of time as many as 100,000 Greeks sought refuge in the lands under Nazi occupation to the west of the Struma River.[[829]](#footnote-829)

It goes without saying that the German administration was hardly less brutal and so were the ongoing air raids on Britain. Late in the night of May 8, 1941, the Nazi aviation completed a destructive operation that had lasted eight days and left 76,000 homeless and 3,000 dead and injured. However, the radar system of the Royal Air Force was rapidly becoming more and more efficient. On the other hand, the British began to disperse the German radar signals and the bombers of the Reich missed important military and industrial targets more and more frequently.[[830]](#footnote-830)

Moreover, it became ever more evident that the United States was going to enter the war as an ally of the United Kingdom and Stalin had all reasons to believe that Hitler would not throw Germany into a suicidal war against Russia. On May 9 the Communist Party central newspaper “Pravda” (“Truth”) published another, somewhat lengthy denial of the information about a concentration of the “Red Army” on the western border. As if to reaffirm the Soviet Union’s friendly attitude toward the Third Reich, the Russian foreign ministry ordered the closure of the legations of Norway, Belgium, Greece and Yugoslavia. In this way Stalin seemingly refused to tolerate any more the diplomatic missions of countries under Nazi occupation, but a Russian diplomat flatly rejected the idea of Vichy about a participation of the USSR in Hitler’s “new order”. Not less significant was the fact that the Yugoslav minister and member of the Simović government, Gavrilović, remained in Moscow and would stay there even after the beginning of the German invasion on June 22, 1941.[[831]](#footnote-831)

The truth was that in Soviet Europe, as planned by Stalin, there could be no “bourgeois” governments in exile, but von der Schulenburg kept endeavoring to rescue the Nazi-Soviet alliance. In the same morning of May 9, 1941, it was the German ambassador’s turn to be invited to a breakfast by Dekanozov, who proposed a joint German-Russian declaration, denying the rumors about a deterioration of the relationship between Berlin and Moscow. Von der Schulenburg went even further by suggesting a personal meeting between Hitler and Stalin, but Dekanozov was quite reluctant to accept the idea.[[832]](#footnote-832)

At this very moment the “Wehrmacht” command discussed the details of the assault on Russia and fatally underestimated again the war capacity of Stalin. This feeling of superiority made no doubt easier the decision to dispatch German and Italian combat airplanes in Syria to support the anti-British al-Gaylani government in neighboring Iraq, but Churchill ordered the United Kingdom forces in the area to take Baghdad and to overthrow al-Gaylani. Churchill recommended the participation of “Free France” units in the operation as well.[[833]](#footnote-833)

If von der Schulenburg was one of those Germans, who favored a closer alliance with Stalin, prominent Nazis like Rudolf Hess supported peace with England. Hess was the second man in the National Socialist Party after Hitler, but all of a sudden he decided to fly personally to Britain with a peace offer. At 6PM on May 10 Hess, who was no doubt a good pilot, escaped first from the German air defense and then avoided successfully its British counterpart. In about four hours later he ran out of fuel and parachuted in Scotland.[[834]](#footnote-834)

In the night of May 10 to May 11, as if to disavow him, the Germans made one of the most devastating and murderous air raids on London, killing and injuring another 3,000 people and destroying, among other things, the Westminster Palace. Hitler declared to his henchmen that Hess had become insane and replaced him with Martin Bormann as deputy party leader, but at the same time the “Fuehrer” ordered the immediate execution of Hess, if he fell by chance in German hands. For his part, Churchill decided to keep the whole affair in deep secrecy and to isolate totally Hess, so that the British supporters of peace with Germany could not contact him either.[[835]](#footnote-835)

Before noon on May 12 Dekanozov reported to Stalin and Molotov about his second conversation with von der Schulenburg. The Russian dictator agreed to the idea of exchanging personal letters, but “*only between Germany and the USSR*”. Since Dekanozov was to leave for Berlin the same day, von der Schulenburg had to specify the text of the joint Nazi-Soviet denial of the rumors about an imminent German-Russian war. Shortly before his departure Dekanozov came again in the residence of von der Schulenburg, but the German ambassador had to admit that he acted on his own behalf, without any powers of his government. Nevertheless, von der Schulenburg suggested that a “*spontaneous*” message of Stalin to Hitler might do a good job, but he also had the stupidity to declare that Germany and Britain had to reach an understanding in the foreseeable future. The Soviet leader could interpret this only as a German maneuver to secure better trumps with regard to London, after achieving a rapprochement with Moscow.[[836]](#footnote-836)

At 8PM the Berlin radio announced the flight of Hess and attributed it to his insanity. The British reacted immediately and in this way they revealed that Hess was in their hands. During the interrogations Hess denied in fact the intention of the Reich to attack the Soviet Union. Yet the whole affair could make an anyway suspicious Stalin even more suspicious, but it slowed by no means down his preparatory measures for the assault on Germany and Europe. On May 13 another four Soviet armies were transferred to the western border and, as planned, within a month there had to be 170 “Red Army” divisions against the Reich. These 170 divisions formed the First Strategic Echelon, but a Second Strategic Echelon was already under preparation. The German military intelligence reported alarmingly about the concentration of Russian troops in Southern Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina and the “Wehrmacht” command saw in this a possible Russian offensive toward the Balkans and the Romanian oil fields.[[837]](#footnote-837)

Hitler was not less eager to carry out his own attack on the Soviet Union, but he needed as many German troops as possible to that effect. Hence, the “Fuehrer” decided to leave the “protection” of Greece in the hands of the Italians, despite the warnings that such an attitude would turn the feelings of the Greeks against the Germans. This undermined further the authority of general Tsolakoglou, who could form his puppet government only with the approval of Berlin and Rome and who remained until the very end without a foreign minister and without international recognition.[[838]](#footnote-838)

The Reich was also interested in the benevolent neutrality of Turkey, but the Turkish foreign minister Saraçoglu told the German ambassador to Ankara von Papen that his government could not reach an agreement with Germany to the detriment of the obligations toward other powers. Yet Saraçoglu hinted that Turkey could allow the transit of German arms and war material for some Middle East countries. At the same time he advocated peace between the Reich and Britain, claiming that Germany would do a great service to mankind by destroying the Communist regime in Russia, but that she could do this only after an armistice with the United Kingdom. In the opinion of the Turkish foreign minister a German-Russian clash, without a preliminary understanding between Berlin and London, would lead to the Bolshevization of Europe.[[839]](#footnote-839)

On May 14 Stalin approved detailed instructions to the mass media, which were to publish propaganda materials under the “*slogan of offensive war*”. The command of the western military districts was reminded again to be ready for striking the enemy on his own territory. The preparation of the attack on Germany inevitably led to another deportation of “unreliable” elements from the western regions. Thus some 86,000 human beings were deported to the Siberian death camps, but a large number of them died during the journey and this figure did not include the victims from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.[[840]](#footnote-840)

On the same day the General Staff of the Russian armed forces completed the updating of an even newer and more detailed version of the plan for war on Germany. It was estimated that the Reich could hardly mobilize more than 240 divisions against the Soviet Union, but the “Red Army” was to strike before the Germans and their allies had the time to deploy their troops. It was also considered that without her allies Germany was able to launch just 180 divisions against the USSR, whereas only the land forces of the “Red Army” consisted of 295 to 303 divisions. The Soviet offensive had to be carried out through Poland with an “*active defense*” on the remaining sections of the state border. Within 30 days the Russian units had to reach the prewar German territory and beyond, but even before that they were to cut the “Wehrmacht” from the allies of the Reich. An “*active defense*” was planned initially against Finland, East Prussia, Hungary and Romania, but the “Red Army” units were to be ready for a blow to Romania, as soon as the situation became more favorable to that effect.[[841]](#footnote-841)

On May 14 again Ambassador von Papen handed over another personal message of Hitler to the Turkish president Inönü. On that occasion Inönü repeated the words of his foreign minister that in case of a German-Russian war Turkey would be on the side of Germany. He went even further by declaring that he was ready to reach an agreement with the Reich. In his words, if Germany refused to take any obligations against Turkey with a third power, Turkey would pledge herself never to come into conflict with Germany. The negotiations for such an agreement were to be conducted by Foreign Minister Saraçoglu and by von Papen.[[842]](#footnote-842)

On May 15 the Russian war minister Timoshenko and the “Red Army” chief of staff Zhukov presented to Stalin the updated version of the plan for war on Germany and her allies. The only objection of the Russian dictator was that the assault still needed to be secured materially, but most of the preparatory measures had to be completed by June 1. To that effect the Soviet command began the transfer of another four armies and of as many as four air divisions from east to west and installed them at 20 to 80 kilometers from the western borders. Everything was to be organized in such a way as to enable Stalin to order the attack any day after July 10, 1941.[[843]](#footnote-843)

Curiously enough, the Soviet diplomats became more and more sincere about the rapidly increasing “Red Army” troops on the border with the Reich. Thus the Russian minister to Stockholm Madame Kollontai stated that such a concentration of armed forces on the Soviet-Nazi border had never been seen before. Despite the reports of the British intelligence service that a German-Russian armed conflict was unlikely, Churchill was aware of the fact that Hitler was amassing troops against Stalin and hoped to smash the Reich from the rear in case of a Nazi-Soviet war.[[844]](#footnote-844)

The British prime minister kept, therefore, staking on Stalin against Hitler and, as if accordingly, some members of his Cabinet shared strong anti-Bulgarian feelings as well. Thus the State Secretary for India and Burma (now Myanmar) Leopold Amery directly proposed to Foreign Secretary Eden the annihilation of Bulgaria as a sovereign country. Amery was of the opinion that Bulgaria should become part of a Yugoslav federation, while the Coburg House had to be removed, although King George VI of Great Britain and Northern Ireland belonged to the same dynasty.[[845]](#footnote-845)

Most Bulgarians saw in the monarchy an additional guarantee for their national sovereignty, which was not the case of the Croatians. On May 18 the leader of Croatia Pavelić signed in Rome a series of treaties with Italy. One of them designated Duke Aimone di Spoleto as King of Croatia under the name of Tomislav II. The duke was a cousin of the Italian monarch Victor Emmanuel III, but the very fact that he was a different person from the King of Italy clearly indicated that Mussolini had given up the idea of a personal union, which would have reduced Croatia to the status of a mere Italian dependency like Albania. The royal title of the Duke of Spoleto gave him no political rights and no concrete date was fixed for his possible coronation.[[846]](#footnote-846)

However, another treaty provided for negotiations for a customs and financial union between Italy and Croatia. Moreover, the Croatian territorial access to the Adriatic Sea was restricted to Dubrovnik (Ragusa) and the surrounding coast, but another treaty reaffirmed the cession of Bosnia to Croatia. In this way Croatia got a territory of 115,130 square kilometers and a population of 6,500,000 people, but the ethnic Croatians amounted only to 3,300,000 people against 2,200,000 Orthodox Serbs, 800,000 Bosnian Muslims, more than 100,000 ethnic Germans and 18,000 Jews. Pavelić and his “Ustashas” intended to solve the problem with the Serbs by what amounted to a genocide and planned to shoot 50 Serbian hostages for each Croatian or Muslim victim.[[847]](#footnote-847)

The overall situation in Southeastern Europe was also far from peace and calm, since 42,000 British, New Zealanders, Australians and Greeks still held the Island of Crete. In the morning of May 20, though, the Germans attacked them with their 11th Air Corps, consisting of two mountain divisions, of a landing force of 16,000 men and of 1,280 combat aircraft. Within a couple of hours some 5,000 parachuters engaged in a hand-to-hand fighting with the New Zealanders in the northwestern part of Crete.[[848]](#footnote-848)

On that same day a special German envoy, Karl Schnurre, who had played a crucial role in the conclusion of the Soviet-Nazi alliance in August 1939, transmitted to the Finnish president Ryti the wish of Hitler to discuss with Finnish military experts the alarming situation in the world. Although Schnurre denied that a war would break out soon between Germany and Russia, Ryti knew only too well what the matter was and he asked directly whether a Soviet assault on Finland would be considered by the Reich as a casus belli against Stalin. Schnurre answered in the affirmative and President Ryti, marshal Mannerheim, Prime Minister Johan Rangel and the rest of the ministers unanimously decided to send to Berlin not one or two experts, but a whole military delegation.[[849]](#footnote-849)

On May 23, 1941, when the Germans were rapidly gaining ground in Crete, the Italian garrison at Addis Ababa finally surrendered to the British and South African troops and to the Ethiopian insurgents. The British captured 1,100 Italian and 5,000 colonial soldiers, as well as 2,000 women and children. At the same time US President Roosevelt ordered the formation of a special unit for the occupation of the Azores Islands, although the American government had repeatedly declared to the Portuguese that it did not have such intentions.[[850]](#footnote-850)

On the following day Hitler ratified the treaty for the new Soviet-Nazi border line at Lithuania. However, the state secretary of the German foreign ministry von Weizsaecker warned the Hungarian minister to Berlin Stoyai that the German-Russian situation was very serious, although the Germans had taken some measures in response to the ongoing concentration of Russian troops on the western boundary of the USSR. Weizsaecker was no doubt right in pointing out that by assuming the premiership Stalin aimed at securing an unconditional and prompt implementation of his decisions and orders.[[851]](#footnote-851)

On May 25 the “Pravda” (“Truth”) newspaper published a denial of all rumors about German-Russian negotiations. Thirty minutes past noon of the same day a Finnish military delegation under the chief of staff general Axel Erik Heinrichs was welcomed in Salzburg by the “Wehrmacht” high commander in chief marshal Wilhelm Keitel and by most of the leading German officers. The visit was kept in deep secrecy, although the Germans insisted again that their talks with the Finns had a purely theoretical character. In fact the two sides worked out a detailed plan for a preemptive assault on the presumably 140 divisions that Stalin had amassed, but in fact the “Red Army” units on the western Russian border were rapidly surpassing that number. Yet the Germans were careful enough to limit themselves with the operations on the northern front and with the participation of the Finns in these operations. It was agreed that the first German troops would land in Finland on June 8, whereas the “Wehrmacht” armored units were to be expected between June 10 and June 15.[[852]](#footnote-852)

The sad irony was that in Greece at least some of the German soldiers behaved like their “Red Army” counterparts. According to the reports of an American diplomat, the Germans took away from the houses, in which they had been installed, not only objects of art, but also sheets, blankets and cushions. German soldiers were seen to stop people in the street and to dispossess them of their watches. However, the German minister and plenipotentiary to Athens G.Altenburg warned about the catastrophic situation of the food supplies and appealed to the “Wehrmacht” to start to import foods in Greece instead of exporting them.[[853]](#footnote-853)

On May 27 the Germans took the city of Chania, which was one of the largest ports in Crete. This time King George II of Greece and Prime Minister Tsouderos were evacuated from Crete to Egypt, where the Yugoslav king Peter II and the premier Simović had already found refuge too. The “Wehrmacht” landing troops besieged Heraklion, which was the administrative capital and the largest city of Crete. The New Zealanders, Australians and British decided that the best thing to do was to withdraw to the southern coast of the island.[[854]](#footnote-854)

The victorious German landing in Crete was seen by many, including by Stalin, as a rehearsal for an operation against England on a much larger scale. Hence the Russian dictator still had reasons to believe that Hitler would not attack him before eliminating the United Kingdom. Yet not only Britain, but also the United States assessed National Socialist Germany as the main threat and the US government openly declared that it would assist all countries, fighting against the Nazi aggression. On May 28 the American minister to Sofia Earl warned the political director of the Bulgarian foreign ministry Ivan Altûnov that the preservation of normal diplomatic relations between Washington DC and Sofia would be a guarantee for the very existence of Bulgaria. However, Altûnov irresponsibly underestimated the warning and thought that Earl was worried by the prospect of a rupture of the diplomatic ties between the United States and Bulgaria.[[855]](#footnote-855)

In the night of May 28 to May 29 the British and their allies began to evacuate the defenders of Crete. The Germans attacked quite a lot of the ships, transporting the New Zealanders, the Australians and the British to Egypt, and doubled their pressure on Turkey to allow the transit of German weapons and war materials for Iraq. Yet the Turks resisted the pressure and this became a major obstacle to the conclusion of a political agreement between Ankara and Berlin.[[856]](#footnote-856)

Moreover, on May 30 the British took Baghdad and the anti-British premier al-Gaylani had to look for refuge in Iran, together with his ministers. The Iraqi capital was abandoned also by the German and Italian diplomatic representatives. The British needed only a day for putting all the strategic points of Iraq under their control and in a telegram to the Commander in Chief Middle East general Wavell Churchill urged him to proceed with the conquest of French Somalia, which was under the administration of the Vichy regime.[[857]](#footnote-857)

In the night of May 31 to June 1 the British, the New Zealanders and the Australians evacuated from Crete their last forces, but 6,000 people remained on the island. General Wavell ordered them to surrender, but many of them refused to do so and joined those Greek forces, which intended to continue the fight as guerrillas. Crete, as well as most of the remaining Aegean Islands were occupied by the Germans, who held also the western part of Greek Macedonia together with Salonica and the Chalcidice Peninsula, but the bulk of continental Greece was left to the Italians. Unlike the Bulgarians, though, the Germans and the Italians did not intend to annex directly their occupation zones in Greece and preserved the communications with the puppet government of Tsolakoglou in Athens.[[858]](#footnote-858)

On June 1 Stalin decided to reinforce the troops, already stationed at the Romanian border, by another 25 divisions, specially equipped for mountain operations. Additional units were transferred from the Far East to Ukraine, including 370 tanks, whereas in the Baltic region only there were as many as 650,000 “Red Army” soldiers. The Russian dictator was no doubt facilitated by the fact that instead of concentrating all his efforts for the assault on Russia, Hitler had to withdraw quickly his aircraft units not only from Iraq, but also from Syria, because the Pétain government feared that their presence in Syria might provoke an attack by British and “Free France” forces.[[859]](#footnote-859)

On the following day Hitler ordered the withdrawal of all German troops from Syria as well. The British victory in Iraq removed, among other things, the reason for pressuring Turkey to permit the transit of German weapons and war material for Iraq. In its turn, this made much easier the negotiations about a formal agreement between Berlin and Ankara and diminished the importance of the Vichy regime in the eyes of Berlin, at least as far as the Middle East was concerned.[[860]](#footnote-860)

France was not even mentioned during the talks between Hitler and Mussolini, who was summoned by the “Fuehrer” at the Brenner Pass, as usual. The two dictators decided to leave without any response the unlimited state of national emergency, proclaimed by US President Roosevelt about a week ago. They were satisfied by the declaration of the Japanese that they would remain loyal to the Three-Power Pact to the very end and thought that in such a case the United States would never enter the war. Hitler was evasive about his plans with regard to Russia, Turkey and Spain, but at the same moment the Nazi authorities forced all those, living at less than 20 kilometers from the Russian border, to move to the interior of Germany.[[861]](#footnote-861)

For his part, the Finnish president Ryti conferred with the foreign minister Witting, with the war minister Walden, and with the commander in chief marshal Mannerheim. Mannerheim was worried by a question of the Germans about the wishes of the Finns in case of taking part in a German-Russian war, because if the Finns presented their demands, it would mean that they agreed to participate in such a conflict. It was eventually decided that, as for the readiness to take part in a war against Russia, Finland should answer in the negative.[[862]](#footnote-862)

Just a day later, though, the attitude of the Finns left the Germans with quite a different impression. On June 3 a German delegation, headed by the chief of staff of the German army in Norway colonel Erich Buschenhagen, arrived in Helsinki to work out the last details of Finland’s participation in the war on Russia. Later Buschenhagen reported to the High Command of the “Wehrmacht” that “*Finland is now ready for full cooperation within the framework of the conversations of Salzburg*”. Yet the Finnish chief of staff general Heinrichs warned most earnestly the German guests “*against any attempt to set up any kind of Quisling government which would immediately paralyze any further cooperation between Finland and Germany*”.[[863]](#footnote-863)

Mussolini was not quite certain about Hitler’s intentions toward Stalin either, but he instructed his son-in-law and foreign minister Ciano to write another letter to his Spanish counterpart Serrano Súñer, inviting Spain to join officially the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. In his letter Ciano mentioned Croatia as an example to be followed and informed Serrano Súñer that the Croatians would accede to the Three-Power Pact within a couple of days. As before, Franco decided to proclaim his readiness to join the Axis, provided that Germany fulfilled her promise of a large-scale economic assistance, but Hitler intended to grant such an assistance only after the accession of Spain to the Three-Power Pact.[[864]](#footnote-864)

Meanwhile, in the morning of June 4 the Hungarian premier and foreign minister Bardossy arrived in Rome to plead for an Italian support of Hungary’s territorial claims on Croatia. Mussolini stated, though, that for the Hungarians the port of Fiume (Rijeka) was the same thing as Genoa for the Swiss. In other words, Hungary could use the port for her foreign trade needs, but without annexing it and without a territorial access to the Adriatic Sea.[[865]](#footnote-865)

Hitler also made efforts to settle the territorial disputes between his European allies. On June 6 he received King Boris III, who had requested the meeting. The monarch was reassured that Germany would not support any attempts of Romania to retrieve Southern Dobruja or even parts of the region. On the other hand, the “Fuehrer” didn’t conceal his hostility toward Russia and declared that Stalin would never pardon him for supporting Romania, Finland and Bulgaria. Hitler went even further, by making some sarcastic comments about the Italians, but he approved the intention of Boris III to pay a visit to Mussolini.[[866]](#footnote-866)

Hitler apparently didn’t know that at this very moment Stalin ordered the ministers in charge of the industry “*to prepare all enterprises for possibly switching over to working on the mobilization plan after July 1, 1941*”. At the same time the repression and intelligence services under Beria spread among the Nazis the disinformation that Stalin intended to move his government to the city of Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg) in the Ural Mountain between the European part of Russia and Siberia. In fact the Russian dictator had envisaged two probable provisional seats of the government. The one was to be established close to the city of Kuybyshev (Samara) at about 700 kilometers to the east of Moscow, but this place was supposed to serve the needs of the formal Soviet head of state Kalinin and of the diplomatic corps only. The High Command post was to be set up far to the west, near the city of Vilnius. Moreover, a special train was prepared to serve as a mobile high command post.[[867]](#footnote-867)

Thus the Swedes were sandwiched between two greedy dictators, ready to begin at any moment a devastating fight against each other. In a speech Prime Minister Hansson talked quite a lot about the country’s foreign policy, but he carefully avoided even mentioning the word “neutrality”, knowing that the frequent insistence upon Sweden’s neutrality infuriated the Nazi leaders. This didn’t prevent the Swedish minister to Berlin Richert from protesting in the German foreign ministry against the increasing number of death cases among the Dutch inmates in the sinister Buchenwald concentration camp near Erfurt.[[868]](#footnote-868)

Hitler not only followed closer and closer the murderous practices of Stalin, but he also encouraged his allies to do the same. On June 7 the “Fuehrer” received the leader of the Independent State of Croatia Pavelić, who had come to look for German support against the claims of Italy and Hungary. The German dictator explicitly stated that if Croatia wished security, she had to conduct an intolerant national policy for the next fifty years, but he declared at the same time his satisfaction with the Croatian-Italian agreements and thus rejected in fact all pleas of Pavelić for Dalmatia. On the other hand, though, Hitler seemed to be somewhat more disposed to curtail the Hungarian claims on Croatia.[[869]](#footnote-869)

Anyway, the efforts of the “Fuehrer” were entirely centered on the imminent assault on Russia and this inevitably made him neglect the Middle East situation, but on June 8 Syria was invaded by British, Australian, Indian and “Free France” forces from the British mandate of Palestine. The British and the Gaullists advanced quickly toward Damascus and some of the Vichy troops, stationed there, defected to their side, but the rest remained loyal to marshal Pétain and opposed a strong resistance to the assailants. This could only encourage further general de Gaulle in his decision to promise national sovereignty to the Syrians and the Lebanese in the foreseeable future.[[870]](#footnote-870)

Yet Hitler’s main concern was Russia, the more so as the Russian legation in Bucharest disseminated a “secret” declaration of the TASS Soviet news agency that an alliance between the USSR and the USA would be “*the greatest military and economic power in the world*”. To one of his closest aids Hitler finally admitted that the “Red Army” had organized on the Russian-German border “*the greatest deployment of troops in history*”. Von Ribbentrop hurried to instruct the German minister in Bucharest von Killinger to invite the Romanian leader Antonescu to an unofficial visit to Germany within two days.[[871]](#footnote-871)

On June 10 the command of the “Wehrmacht” land forces issued a directive, specifying that the assault on the Soviet Union would start on June 22 at 3:30AM. Yet the United Kingdom Joint Intelligence Committee still hesitated whether there would be war or agreement between Germany and Russia in the second half of June, but Churchill preferred proclaiming again in the House of Commons that the clash between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union was inevitable and imminent.[[872]](#footnote-872)

The Italian foreign minister Ciano was among those European leaders, who were not at all sure about an easy German victory over the Russians, while Mussolini gave free course to his hatred for the Reich and for Hitler, in particular. He complained to Ciano that he was fed up with the way Hitler summoned him like a master, summoning his servants. The “Duce” went even further by ordering the building of fortifications on the border with the Reich. In his words these fortifications might be “*useful some day*”, but publicly he had hardly any alternative except praising further the Germans.[[873]](#footnote-873)

In the morning of June 11 Hitler welcomed in Munich Antonescu, who reiterated that Romania was ready to go with Germany to the very end because of the Slavic threat. This time again the Romanian leader didn’t fail to point out that he could not give up the ethnic, political and historical rights of his country, meaning Transylvania in the first place, but he repeated his promise to refrain from raising any demands until the end of the war. The important thing now was to march to the east. For his part Hitler warned that Russia was decided to use the opportunity for an assault on Finland and Romania, but an attack on these two countries would mean an attack on Germany herself. The “Fuehrer” admitted that the Reich was unable to undertake offensive operations on both the western and the eastern front but to combine a defense on the one front with an offensive on the other. He didn’t disclose that he had already fixed the day of the invasion of Russia, but he pointed out, nevertheless, that the explosion might occur at any moment, mentioning, among other things, the increasing frequency of infractions of the German airspace by Russian planes. Hitler boasted that Germany was able to cope with Russia all alone, but he reassured Antonescu that after the conflict Romania would get unlimited territorial compensations. He also asked his guest whether Romania would take part in the campaign from the very first day and Antonescu proudly answered in the affirmative. Toward the end of the meeting the Romanian dictator emphasized that any postponement of the conflict with Russia would jeopardize the victory of the Axis. Similarly to Hitler, Antonescu tended to underestimate the Soviet military power, but unlike Hitler he saw the weakness of Russia in the hopes of her population for a liberation from Communism.[[874]](#footnote-874)

Neither Hitler, nor Antonescu were aware of the real forces at the disposal of Stalin. On June 12 the Soviet command ordered the formation of another 60 divisions to be added to the already existing 295 divisions. By that time Russia had one million well trained parachuters against 4,000 Germans only. The Russian parachuters were grouped in four airborne corps and learned intensely the German language, while many of their commanders had Soviet subjects of German origin for orderlies or drivers. Under these circumstances Romania began to mobilize, while Finland intended to do it soon.[[875]](#footnote-875)

Yet Mussolini seemed to be by no means enthusiastic about the forthcoming German attack on Russia. He complained to the Bulgarian king Boris III, who had come in the meantime in Italy, of Germany’s opposition to the Italian intervention in the Balkans and claimed that he had tried to persuade Hitler to avoid a conflict with Stalin. In his wish to prevent the war from spreading to the Balkans, the “Fuehrer” had granted Yugoslavia too much concessions, but Yugoslavia was a “rotten state” and Serbia had to be reduced to a country with four million inhabitants. The “Duce” shared also his discontent with Romania because of the ongoing territorial disputes with Hungary and because of the Romanian militancy with regard to Bessarabia. He even promised to support the Bulgarian demands for Salonica, but was evasive as for delineating the border between Bulgaria and Italy in Macedonia.[[876]](#footnote-876)

On July 13 the German military intelligence reported that the Russians would have a defensive attitude, but this information became rapidly known to Stalin’s spies as well. Thus the “Red Army” chief of staff Zhukov could be confident that the Germans did not expect a Russian attack and at 7PM the TASS Russian news agency published an official declaration, accusing personally the British ambassador Stafford Cripps, who was at this moment in London, of spreading rumors about an imminent clash between the Third Reich and the USSR. The rumors were estimated as a clumsy propaganda of the German and Russian enemies, interested in enlarging and fomenting further the war. It was claimed that there were no negotiations between Berlin and Moscow for a closer cooperation, but Germany observed the clauses of the Soviet-German nonaggression pact as steadfastly as the Soviet Union did. It was also contended that neither the transfer of German troops from the Balkans to the northern and northeastern parts of the Reich, nor the summer muster of reservists in Russia had anything to do with the Soviet-German relations.[[877]](#footnote-877)

While the text of the TASS declaration was broadcasted by loudspeakers at each more important intersection in Moscow, another five Russian armies, forming the Second Strategic Echelon, were moving toward the borders with Germany and Romania. The First Strategic Echelon consisted of 177 divisions and 3.5 million soldiers, while the Second Strategic Echelon had 77 divisions, most of them tank and motorized divisions.[[878]](#footnote-878)

By that time the Germans had amassed on the Soviet boundaries 135 divisions only, but the High Command of the “Wehrmacht” planned an offensive from an unprecedentedly long front line, amounting to 2,400 kilometers. Much grimmer was the fact that on June 14 Hitler required from the regular troops to behave in the same exterminating way as the murderous SS elite corps, usually recruited among the most fanatical National Socialists. Thus the “Wehrmacht” units were ordered, while advancing on Russian territory, to carry out mass executions and to treat the local population in a most bestial way.[[879]](#footnote-879)

Stalin did not yet have allies, but Hitler’s allies in Europe were deeply divided and even hostile to each other and this could be by no means compensated by the accession of Croatia to the Three-Power Pact. On that occasion Ciano welcomed his German counterpart von Ribbentrop in Venice in the afternoon hours of the same day. According to the Italian foreign minister “*the political value of the event was almost zero*”.[[880]](#footnote-880)

Indeed, Hitler could not rely on any other major power except Japan and Italy, whereas on June 15 Churchill telegraphed to Roosevelt that the German assault on Russia was inevitable and that in such a war the British would offer the Russians all the available support, because Hitler was the enemy to be defeated. The British prime minister was confident that there wouldn’t be any hostile reactions in the United Kingdom to such an assistance and expressed the hope that the German-Russian conflict would not create difficulties for the Roosevelt administration.[[881]](#footnote-881)

The Croatian leader Pavelić signed the act of accession to the Three-Power Pact at noon, but the numerous delegations of the other Axis powers could not conceal the absence of Mussolini and Hitler, although Pavelić had hoped for a personal meeting with the “Duce”. On the other hand, it was the first enlargement ceremony that did not take place in Germany, but in Italy and by this gesture Hitler obviously tried to demonstrate that Croatia belonged to the Italian “sphere of interest”. Significantly enough, though, the Croatian war minister Kvaternik complained to the Bulgarian minister in Italy Dechko Karadzhov about a guerrilla activity that, despite Kvaternik’s optimism, was bound to increase in the future.[[882]](#footnote-882)

Pavelić had the time to meet with some Italian industrialists and claimed that the land was to be given to the peasants, while the industry should be prepared for expropriation by the state. That was too much even for the Fascist form of government control over the economy and the Italian industrialists were shocked. One of them refused to believe that Pavelić was talking seriously and even predicted that in ten months the Croatian leader would be liquidated.[[883]](#footnote-883)

Von Ribbentrop left Venice before schedule and admitted to Ciano that the reason for his precipitated departure was the expected “*crisis with Russia*”. Indeed, Finland began to mobilize too, but it was only at this point that von Ribbentrop instructed the German minister in Budapest von Erdmannsdorff to suggest to the Hungarians to take some measures for guaranteeing the security of their borders. However, von Erdmannsdorff had to point out that his suggestion was due to the uncertainty of Hitler about the result of his attempt to clarify the German-Soviet relations by way of negotiations.[[884]](#footnote-884)

The “Fuehrer” still underestimated the Russian military power and thought that Stalin had mobilized hardly more than 180-200 divisions. Hitler was confident that the Russian campaign would last four months, but he admitted to his propaganda minister Goebbels that it was the aggression, planned by Stalin, that made him opt for a war against the Soviet Union: “*Russia will attack us, if we become weak and then we’ll have a two-front war, which we avoid by this preemptive action.*” Apparently no one in Berlin even guessed that Stalin didn’t intend to wait another year or two, but to assault Germany imminently.[[885]](#footnote-885)

The same ignorance was more or less characteristic of London as well, where the Churchill Cabinet expected above all a German invasion of Russia. Hence the British handed over to the Russian ambassador Ivan f a detailed intelligence information about the German troops, concentrated on the Soviet border. Moreover, on June 16, in a note to the Finnish government the British minister in Helsinki Vereker informed that the Finnish cargo ships, sailing for Petsamo, were detained in the ports of the United Kingdom, as long as Finland did not clarify her position. If Finland joined Germany in a war against Russia, the note continued, Britain would apply trade sanctions to the Finns, but President Ryti and the Council of Ministers endeavored to preserve somehow the diplomatic relations with London.[[886]](#footnote-886)

The nervousness of the British was further enhanced by the successful completion of the German-Turkish negotiations for a friendship and nonaggression pact. The pact was signed in Ankara on June 18 by the Turkish foreign minister Saraçoglu and by the German ambassador von Papen for a period of 10 years. It engaged Germany and Turkey to respect each other’s territorial integrity and inviolability of the borders and to renounce direct or indirect attempts at hostile activities against each other. Yet these engagements could not affect the obligations of the two contracting parties with regard to third powers, which meant that Turkey could formally preserve her alliance treaty with Britain.[[887]](#footnote-887)

The factual neutralization of Turkey was, no doubt, a diplomatic victory of the Third Reich, but Hitler didn’t seem aware or didn’t have the choice to be aware that Germany was not ready for a war against Russia. In a letter to the Romanian leader Antonescu, the “Fuehrer” was quite frank to reveal that the constantly increasing preparations of Russia for an attack forced him to use the “Wehrmacht” in the immediate future for eliminating this threat for Europe. The German dictator made a series or precisions about the joint command with the Romanians and about the coordination between the two armies. Thus the orders of the German High Command, concerning the Romanians, would be issued on behalf of and signed by Antonescu.[[888]](#footnote-888)

Antonescu himself was inspecting at this moment his troops in Moldova. The situation was very tense, since “Red Army” units were frequently crossing the border and even opening fire on the Romanians and on the Germans. Soviet spies were also penetrating regularly into Romania. Two Romanian and one German army had the task to repulse a Russian attack. Most Romanian officers were certain that Hitler would not throw Germany in a two-front war, but the Russians began to dismantle the barbed wire entanglements on their side of the border, to replace the frontier guards with regular army troops and to send reconnaissance units in German, Finnish and Romanian territory on an orderly basis. A Third Strategic Echelon was about to be completed. It consisted entirely of NKVD men, whose task was to exterminate and deport “*the reactionary classes*” from the newly acquired territories and to shoot each “*deserter*” on the spot.[[889]](#footnote-889)

Unlike the Romanian officers, Churchill was positive on the imminent German assault and saw the military advantages of it for the British positions in North Africa and the Middle East. On June 21, after three days of fierce battles, the Fifth Indian Infantry Brigade and the “Free France” forces entered Damascus. However, neither general de Gaulle, nor the British had expected that as many as 25 thousand out of the 35 thousand French troops in Syria would remain loyal to the regime of marshal Pétain and oppose such an obstinate resistance. The battles for that French mandate continued even after the fall of Damascus.[[890]](#footnote-890)

On June 21 again Stalin summoned the Politburo of the Communist Party to a session that was going to last the whole day. In the beginning the chief of the military intelligence general Golikov reported about the huge concentration of German troops on the Soviet border, but he pointed out that the “Wehrmacht” soldiers were not equipped with fur coats, whereas the lubricants for their vehicles, tanks and weapons could not withstand the low winter temperatures, typical of Russia. Golikov concluded that the Germans had not yet begun to prepare themselves for an assault on the USSR. However, he was fatally wrong, because he was unable even to guess that Hitler was almost deliriously self-confident in his power and intended to eliminate Russia before the next winter.[[891]](#footnote-891)

Yet the “Fuhrer” decided to involve also Slovakia in his Russian campaign, although he was not quite certain about the combat value of such a participation. In the afternoon the German minister to Bratislava Hanns Ludin directly asked State President Tiso and Prime Minister Tuka whether they would agree to the engagement of Slovak troops in the future campaigns of the “Wehrmacht”, as required by Hitler. Tiso and Tuka hardly had any choice but to answer in the affirmative, although Ludin did not disclose what kind of operations he had in mind.[[892]](#footnote-892)

Later in the afternoon Hitler moved to his new command bunker in East Prussia and wrote a long letter to Mussolini about the “*hardest decision of my life*”. According to the German dictator it was only after the liquidation of Poland that “*there is evident in Soviet Russia a consistent trend, which, even if cleverly and cautiously, is nevertheless reverting firmly to the old Bolshevist tendency to expand the Soviet State*”. The Reich could cope with England only if it was certain that it would be not attacked from the east. That was why he, Hitler, “*reached the decision to cut the noose before it can be drawn tight*” and “*to put an end to the hypocritical performance of the Kremlin*”. The “Fuehrer” admitted that the war against Russia would “*surely be difficult*”, but he did not “*entertain a second’s doubt as to its great success*”. Hitler concluded by claiming that thus he had regained his spiritual freedom: “*The partnership with the Soviet Union, in spite of the complete sincerity of the efforts to bring about a final conciliation, was nevertheless often very irksome to me, for in some way or other it seemed to me to be a break with my whole origin, my concepts, and my former obligations. I am happy now to be relieved of these mental agonies.*”[[893]](#footnote-893)

Somewhat later Hitler addressed a letter to the Hungarian regent Horthy as well. He recalled the Russian occupation of half of Poland, of the Baltic countries and of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, but carefully avoided mentioning the Nazi contribution to the Sovietization of this Eastern European area. Yet he was right in emphasizing that the attempt of Russia “*to penetrate into the Balkans would have led to a dangerous threat not only to German vital interests but to those of the whole of Europe*”. After Molotov’s visit to Berlin “*the military threat to the German eastern frontiers grew increasingly stronger*”, but “*since this morning extensive defense measures have been taking place along a front that extends practically from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea*”. The “Fuehrer” pretended also that he was acting “*in the spirit of the whole of European civilization and culture in trying to repel and push back this un-European influence*”.[[894]](#footnote-894)

In the evening Prime Minister Churchill invited for dinner US Ambassador John Winant, who carried a message of President Roosevelt. In his message the President stated that, in case of a German invasion, he would publicly support any declaration of Churchill, welcoming Russia as an ally. The British prime minister was quite frank about his tactics, by pointing out that if Hitler attacked hell, he, Churchill, would speak well of Satan in the House of Commons. Thus the inexorable game of geopolitics provided Stalin in advance with the two strongest powers in the world as allies, with the United States having become a superpower as far back as the end of the 19th century.[[895]](#footnote-895)

By 9:30PM the first German sabotage units began to penetrate into Russia, dressed in “Red Army” uniforms. One such unit even marched in the streets of Brest (Brzesc) and nobody apparently noticed that these were not Russians, but Germans. At the same moment the Soviet army officers at all levels received sealed envelopes with instructions that could be opened only by a special order from above. These instructions didn’t even admit the option of a German assault, but they were destined for the invasion of the Third Reich through Poland, Hungary and Romania.[[896]](#footnote-896)

It was only at a later hour that a new German defector opened the eyes of the Russians, by informing them that the “Wehrmacht” units were already taking up their starting position for an attack. The Soviet chief of staff Zhukov didn’t hesitate to call Stalin, who summoned him to the Kremlin together with the war minister Timoshenko and the Politburo members. A directive was issued to set the “Red Army” ready for action. The document began with the declaration that a possible attack might be launched by the Germans in the next two days, namely on June 22 and June 23.[[897]](#footnote-897)

In the night of June 21 to June 22, 1941, the German ambassador in Moscow von der Schulenburg received the text of a war declaration of the Reich on the Soviet Union to be handed over to Molotov immediately. In sharp contrast to the language, used during the honeymoon of the Soviet-Nazi alliance, the document began with the allegation that there was a “*contradiction between National Socialism and Bolshevism*”, which Germany had to overcome in order “*to arrive at an understanding with Soviet Russia*”. The “*friendly attitude*” of Germany “*brought the Soviet Union great successes in the field of foreign policy*”, but soon after the conclusion of the treaties of August 23 and September 28, 1939, “*the Comintern resumed its subversive activity against Germany, with the official Soviet Russia representatives giving assistance*”. It was falsely claimed in the declaration that, at the moment of the signature of these treaties, the USSR had stated the absence of any wish to “*to Bolshevize and annex the countries falling within her sphere of influence*”. That was obviously an attempt to conceal the active support National Socialist Germany had given to Communist Russia in her Sovietization strategy. Most important and true was the accusation that after Molotov’s visit to Berlin in November 1940 the Soviet Union began to concentrate her “Red Army” on the entire front line from the Baltic to the Black Sea: “*Reports received in the last few days eliminated the last remaining doubts as to the aggressive character of this Russian concentration and completed the picture of an extremely tense military situation.*” Because of all that the “Fuehrer” had “*ordered the Wehrmacht to oppose this threat with all the means at its disposal*”.[[898]](#footnote-898)

At 2AM on June 22, 1941, the Romanian leader and commander in chief general Antonescu summoned his staff in a town close to the Romanian-Russian border to announce that the hour had come to start a “*just and holy fight*” for restoring the territorial integrity of Romania. The Romanians had the honor to be together with the most victorious army in the world. Antonescu was certain that the war would end with the triumph of light over darkness.[[899]](#footnote-899)

By that time Stalin had 24,488 aircraft at his disposal against only 5,000 German planes. Hitler had formed 11 motorized corps, but the Russians has as many as 29. The Russian tanks amounted to 25,886, whereas the Germans had only 4,500 tanks. The “Red Army” consisted of 5,774,000 men, grouped in 303 land and 16 airborne divisions, but according to some sources Stalin had mobilized as many as 8 million men. At the Soviet-Nazi border there were only 148 German divisions with 3.1 million men against 255 or 256 Russian divisions with 4.9 million men.[[900]](#footnote-900)

Back in 1921, after eliminating or, rather, exterminating all the opponents of his regime, the founder and first leader of the Soviet State Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin proclaimed that who/whom was the fundamental question of politics: Who will dominate whom, who will kill and who will die, etc. He could by no means imagine, though, that twenty years later Stalin and Hitler would face the same question. The German invasion of Russia transformed the war in what it really had started for, namely, a life and death struggle for the conquest of Europe and, later, of the planet.[[901]](#footnote-901)

**CONSLUSIONS AND LESSONS**

However, we speak wisdom

among them that are perfect;

yet not the wisdom of this

age, nor of the princes of

this age, that come to nothing;

But we speak the wisdom

of God in a mystery,

even the hidden wisdom,

which God ordained before

the ages unto our glory…

(1 Cor. 2: 6-7)

The Soviet-Nazi alliance lasted for a relatively short time and during that period the two parties were on a constant lurk with regard to each other. Neither Stalin stopped the subversive activity of the Comintern network, nor did Hitler give up supporting émigré structures like the Ukrainian National Organization and even the former head of the state of Ukraine Pavlo Skoropadskyi. There can be no doubt, though, that Stalin acted on a much larger scale than his German counterpart. It goes without saying, that the espionage and sabotage activities of the two dictators toward each other preserved entirely their vigor. It was another problem that Hitler had in this respect incomparably less opportunities in Russia than Stalin in Germany.

However, long before coming to the idea of an alliance with Stalin, Hitler had abandoned two basic postulates of his book “Mein Kampf” (“My Struggle”). The “bible” of National Socialism was written as far back as 1924, the year of the death of the founder and leader of the Soviet State Vladimir Ulyanov-Lenin, and in the eyes of Hitler Russian Bolshevism was just the 20th century attempt of the “inferior” Jewish “race” to conquer the world. In those years the National Socialist leader was also positive that Germany had to renounce the struggle for colonies and to reorient her expansion to the east, at the expense of Russia. To that effect, according to Hitler, Germany had to look for an alliance with England and Italy, but in the second half of the 1930s he became bitterly disappointed with the Anglo-Saxon democracies. From the viewpoint of his own dogma he considered that Britain was conquered by the Jews, whereas the United States was just a “Judeo-Masonic” product. On the other hand, he began to appreciate Stalin as a national leader, who was as irreconcilable toward the “rotten western plutocracies” as himself. At the same time the “Fuehrer” resumed the struggle for German colonies in Africa. Even the Three-Power Pact, whose conclusion on September 27, 1940, deepened the crisis of the Soviet-Nazi cooperation, assigned Southeastern Asia to Japan and Europe and Africa to Germany and Italy, but it left to Russia the whole vast area from China to the Middle East.

The Soviet-Nazi alliance marked also a rather serious step toward making uniform and closer the social and political systems and the ideologies of Stalin and Hitler. Anyway, the two doctrines and regimes were close to each other from the very beginning and, like before, the two dictators apparently influenced each other. Stalin justified his invasion of Poland by the need to “liberate” the “brotherly Slavic” peoples, namely the Ukrainians and the Byelorussians, which was obviously closer to the racist and nationalist dogmas of National Socialism rather than to the class and party approach of Communism. On the other hand, many influential military and party circles in the Third Reich saw in Hitler a “liberator” from the “yoke” of “English capitalism”, which was in harmony with the class doctrine of Engels, Marx, Lenin and Stalin rather than with the racist abstractions of de Gobineau and Hitler. Moreover, the two regimes came very close to each other by the extermination of the Jews, although from a formal viewpoint Stalin based himself on class instead of race criteria.

Yet the Soviet-Nazi alliance was sometimes covered by a “neutral” rhetoric. In a number of instances official German documents referred to Italy, Russia and Japan as to “neutral”, although “friendly countries”, probably meaning that these powers were actually neutral with regard to the war actions of the Third Reich, such as the assault on Denmark and Norway in April 1940 and on Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, France and Britain in the next two months. From such a viewpoint National Socialist Germany was also neutral with regard to Communist Russia, when the “Red Army” invaded Finland in November 1939 and when Stalin ended with devouring Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the summer months of 1940. More important was the fact that the words about the “neutral friendship” of Italy, Russia and Japan revealed Hitler’s self-deception, which lasted for quite a while, that the Nazi-Soviet aggression on Poland put the beginning not of the Second World War in Europe, but of a series of small “blitzkrieg” campaigns. Stalin was totally immune to such illusions. He knew that this was a new world war and carefully calculated the moment of his own intervention. True enough, these calculations proved to be wrong, although not entirely.

From a purely formal viewpoint Italy was neutral toward Germany from September 1, 1939, to June 10, 1940, despite her alliance treaty with Germany, whereas Communist Russia was an accomplice of Germany in the aggression on Poland, although Russia’s treaties with Germany were less binding than the treaty between Italy and Germany. Moreover, in the fall of 1939 Mussolini tried to create a neutral bloc, while Stalin didn’t conceal that in his eyes the neutrality of a particular country was only a preparatory phase toward its engulfment by the Soviet Union. From the beginning of the Nazi invasion of Poland to the entrance of Italy into the war against France and Britain on June 10, 1940, the contradictions between Mussolini and Hitler were frequently considerably more acute than those between Hitler and Stalin. Besides, German-Italian controversies broke out periodically after June 10, 1940, as well. However, there was a fundamental difference: Hitler was right in his certainty that Italy was helpless in front of Germany and, for his part, Mussolini was fully aware that he could do nothing either against, or even without Germany, whereas one planet turned out to be too small for Hitler and Stalin. Indeed, until June 22, 1941, the two totalitarian leaders pondered over other possible directions of their expansion. Thus Hitler coveted also North and West Africa, as well as Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, while Stalin showed an interest in the Greater Middle East, including Iran. Yet from the very beginning Germany was the central objective of Communist aggression, while Russia became eventually again the main target of National Socialist aggression at a somewhat later stage. Both the Russian and the German dictator had the power and the resources to destroy the other and that was precisely what predetermined the provisional character of their alliance, unlike the relative durability of the alliance between National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy. Furthermore, despite the efforts to internationalization in the 1930s, Italian Fascism was unable to go beyond the borders of Italy and it remained until 1943 a Southern European authoritarian dictatorship, trying in vain to reach the totalitarian “perfection” of Russian Communism and German National Socialism.

The behavior of the Danes is usually given as an example of the “symbolic rifle shot” against the aggressors that was enough to save the dignity of a small nation. What is omitted, though, is the incredible loyalty of the Danes to the foundations and institutions of parliamentary democracy. The pressure of National Socialist Germany on Denmark was by no means less intense than that on France, bearing in mind that, unlike France, Denmark was occupied entirely by the “Wehrmacht”. Nevertheless, the French abandoned their democracy themselves and approved a regime that was becoming ever more oppressive and ever less humane, whereas even under Nazi occupation the Danes kept observing the rules of multiparty representative government, as if to show that a stable constitutional and parliamentary monarchy can often guarantee democracy more reliably than a permanently sick republic. One may also ask whether the famous French democratic traditions were much stronger than those of the Balkan and Southern European countries.

One should by no means underestimate likewise the fact that precisely Scandinavian countries like Sweden were too sensitive about individual rights and aid to human beings, whose life is under threat. It is more than obvious that if not all, at least most of those nations and governments, which reacted quickly and efficiently against the cases of brutal violation of fundamental human rights during World War II, are nowadays the most prosperous democracies.

Until the conclusion of the Three-Power Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan on September 27, 1940, the military operations in Europe were practically isolated from those in the Far East. Furthermore, what was going on in Europe was a series of “blitzkrieg” campaigns rather than a continuous war, namely the Nazi-Soviet conquest of Poland in September 1939, the occupation of Denmark and Norway by National Socialist Germany in April 1940, the overrun of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg and the defeat of France by the Third Reich in May and June 1940, the annexation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia by Communist Russia in the summer of 1940 and the annihilation of Yugoslavia and Greece by Hitler in the spring of 1941. It was only Stalin’s north war against Finland in the 1939-1940 winter and the pathetic assault of Italy on Greece in the fall and winter of 1940-1941 that had the character of more lasting wars, but even they were somehow isolated from the rest of the operations. After the elimination of France, Germany’s battle for England consisted mainly of naval and air force operations, while the battles in Africa and the Middle East took place rather in the periphery. Only the Three-Power Pact established a direct link between the European, African and Far East theaters and provided the war with truly world dimensions. However, one may talk about a real, continuous and extremely devastating war only after Hitler’s preemptive blow to Stalin on June 22, 1941. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, completed the formation of the two belligerent coalitions, namely the Three-Power Pact, on the one hand, and the United Nations, headed by the Anglo-Saxon democracies and the Soviet Union, on the other.

According to a saying of the ancient Jews each human being is as complex as the entire universe. The assessment of a particular political system should be based on the number of human beings, exterminated by that system. From this viewpoint Russian Communism was by no means less murderous than German National Socialism, whereas during the Soviet-Nazi alliance Stalin’s victims were even significantly more numerous than the victims of Hitler.

Totalitarian aggression was at the origin of World War II, but with its brutal methods it tempted even the most sincere democrats to resort to equally merciless retaliations. The British Prime Minister Churchill was hardly an exemplary democrat, but the indiscriminate raids of the Nazi aircraft made him impulsively look for a revenge, by redirecting the Royal Air Force to target on the civilian inhabitants of the German cities. Only the disagreement of the other members of the Cabinet prevented him from the immediate implementation of these murderous intentions. The grim history of World War II disclosed the sad fact that evil-minded people might assume responsible positions not only under a dictatorship, but also within the framework of a democracy. The difference was and still is that in a multiparty representative government even murderous ambitions are under some control, whereas under a dictatorship the most villain person is usually at the head and there is practically no one who can stop him.

The embarrassing thing is that the conspiracy and subversive methods of a great democratic power remind a lot of the way a totalitarian state acts, although a democracy can never reach the large-scale terrorist actions of the agents of Hitler and, still less, of the agents of Stalin. Was not the guilty conscience of the West one of the reasons for the leniency toward the demands and often ultimatums of Stalin with regard to Eastern Europe?

By June 22, 1941, Hitler and Stalin were still formal allies, but in fact they were already two beasts, ready to tear each other to pieces. The paradox was that by preparing the blow to the other, Hitler was as certain that Stalin could not and would not attack him, as Stalin was certain that Hitler could not and would not attack him. The tragedy was that Eastern Europe, which was between the two dictators, could expect nothing else but annihilation. Yet the fate of the Eastern European nations depended to a great extent on whether they were united by fundamental human values or they were ethnic nations without common values.

On June 22, 1941, Hitler repeated the move the German command had been forced to do in early August 1914, namely to strike Russia before the Russian command had the time to throw its armies against Germany. However, Stalin had won in advance at least two powerful allies, namely Britain and the United States, with the United States being the strongest great power from the end of the 19th century. For his part, Hitler was unable and would be unable to coordinate efficiently his action with the only serious ally he had: Japan. Italy had already demonstrated more than once that she was militarily helpless. The remaining European partners not only lacked any significant combat value, but they also deeply mistrusted and even hated each other. At least until June 22, 1941, Hitler was obviously inefficient in his control over the countries he had conquered or put under his influence. Even most officials of the German ministries, no matter of their National Socialist indoctrination, behaved according to the “business as usual” formula rather than like Nazi zombies.

All this predetermined the victory of Stalin over Hitler. With Stalin’s assistance the USA and Britain removed the threat of totalitarianism and Japanese militarism from their borders, but Communist Russia eliminated Britain as a great power. Incomparably more tragic was the fact that in the next half a century a totalitarian regime could be overthrown only with the help of another totalitarian regime and that the western democracies would act according to the formula: “The enemies of our enemies are our friends.” They were “friends” despite the brutal oppression of fundamental rights and freedoms and despite the mass exterminations. Democracy could not retrieve even those territories that had been under democratic rule before the National Socialist takeover in Germany. True enough, Mussolini’s Fascism in Italy came to an end, but Stalin got not only half of Germany, but also an exemplary prewar democracy like Czechoslovakia, as well as Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia and Latvia, which were in 1933 also democracies, although not stable enough. Being imposed as a response to Communist aggression, Franco’s dictatorship in Spain was preserved too.

Without the Soviet-Nazi alliance, established by the Nonaggression Pact of August 23, 1939, the Second World War would have never broken out in Europe. This alliance predetermined the planetary power balance for the next 50 years. The immediate winner of World War II was Stalin. Yet the strategic winner was the United States, but democracy could accomplish fully its victory only after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communism in Eastern Europe.

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