The Balkan campaign of 1941, though strongly condemned after the event by most military experts, left the British convinced that they would return to South-East Europe one day. This belief persisted even after the Quebec conference of 1943 had demonstrated the determination of Britain’s closest and most powerful ally, the United States, to prevent any serious Anglo-American commitment in the area, and the Teheran conference had shown the even stronger determination of Russia to exclude the British so far as possible. At the very least, it lived on in the mind of Churchill who, whatever the scepticism of his own military advisers, and even though he had formally accepted strategic decisions which seemed to rule out any such return, still believed that the unexpected might happen, the opportunity might offer itself, to be seized and exploited eagerly.

As for Churchill’s motives, until the spring of 1944 these were clearly strategic: he believed that through the entry of Turkey into the war, the action of the Greek, Yugoslav and Albanian resistance movements, or the defection of the Axis satellites, Rumania, Hungary and Bulgaria, Germany’s collapse might be speeded and the war shortened. On the other hand, from the end of 1941 Eden and the Foreign Office saw a military return to South-East Europe as probably the only means of holding back post-war Soviet expansion into the area. In the spring of 1944, when the Russians were already poised on the Rumanian frontier, Churchill came to share this view. From then on he had a double interest – strategic and political – in a return to South-East Europe. But for Hitler’s fanatical obstinacy and the extraordinary staying-power of the German forces in Italy and the Balkans, the unexpected opportunity for which Churchill hoped against hope might have offered itself. As things turned out, it never did. All that the British could do was to return to Greece and hold it, by a hair’s breadth, at the end of 1944.

A SECOND FRONT – WHERE?

In the first months after the German attack on Russia, Stalin was willing and eager to take help from any quarter. He was quick to
demand the immediate opening of a second front. In September 1941 he urged Churchill that Britain should send a considerable number of divisions either to Archangel or through Persia to ‘the southern regions of the USSR’. Churchill replied encouragingly but non-committally: ‘... the two flanks, north and south, certainly present the most favourable opportunities ... In the south the great prize is Turkey; if Turkey can be gained another powerful army will be available ...’

The matter was left open for discussion when Eden first visited Moscow in December 1941. The British then said that a second front had been opened by their operations in North Africa; Stalin countered by asking whether the British would be able to open a second front in Europe by a landing in the Balkans. The British replied that a landing on the continent in the immediate future was not probable but that one objective of the Libyan campaign was to secure a base for an attack on Italy. Stalin then switched the discussion by suggesting British aid for a Soviet attack on Petsamo in the extreme north. It is unclear whether Stalin seriously wanted a Balkan front, or was merely probing British intentions, probably with the aim of diverting British energies elsewhere.

At this time, a Balkan front was certainly one of the options considered by the British military planners; and it had not yet been ruled out by the Americans. A memorandum by the U.S. and British Chiefs of Staff at the Washington war conference in December 1941 forecast that though no large-scale land offensives against Germany were likely in 1942, ‘in 1943 the way may be clear for a return to the continent, across the Mediterranean, from Turkey into the Balkans or by landings in Western Europe’. Meanwhile the main methods of wearing down Germany would be air bombardment, aid to Russia, the Blockade and ‘the maintenance of the spirit of revolt in the occupied countries, and the organisation of subversive movements’. (At this time almost the only resistance movement to have emerged was in Yugoslavia.)

During the early part of 1942 Soviet pressure for a second front continued to mount and took on unpleasant overtones. There was some speculation in London about the possibility of Stalin’s making a separate peace with Hitler. These were among the reasons why Britain pressed ahead with negotiation of an Anglo-Soviet treaty and why Roosevelt and Churchill agreed on the need to open a front in North Africa in 1942. In their directive to the Commander-in-Chief North Africa in August 1942, they set the aim—among others—of insuring communications through the Mediterranean and facilitating operations against the Axis on the European continent.

The North African operation had immediate repercussions on South-East Europe. It caused the undertaking in late November of the highly successful British-led destruction of the Gorgospotamos bridge on the main north–south railway by which the Germans could carry reinforce-