1 Occupation and Reaction

At the start of 1941 the European situation appeared grim for much of the continent’s population. The war which had broken out in 1939 had seen a succession of Nazi victories which had crushed some states and frightened others into the Axis fold or a condition of precarious neutrality. Only Britain, virtually impotent, and Greece, tenaciously resisting Mussolini’s Balkan adventure, remained to oppose the Fascist war machine. In the Balkans Yugoslavia had adopted a cautious position calculated to preserve independence and domestic tranquility amongst her disparate populace, but found herself coming under increasing pressure to declare for one side or the other. At the start of March, when Bulgaria acceded to the Tripartite Pact and German troops entered Rumania, this pressure intensified still further, and on 25th March the Yugoslav government too reluctantly cast in its lot with the Axis.

The British had held out great hopes of drawing Yugoslavia’s Anglophilic regent (Prince Paul) and his government into their own camp, and were deeply disappointed that their efforts had apparently come to naught. They were, however, aware of the plans already drawn up in certain Yugoslav circles for a coup d’état, and the signing of the pact removed any diplomatic objections to encouraging their implementation. On the morning of 27 March 1941 British prayers appeared to be answered when a group of Serbian officers overthrew the government, removed Prince Paul from power and installed the 17-year-old King Peter II on the throne. However, the expectation that the Yugoslavs might immediately declare for the cause of truth and freedom and fall on the rear of the Italians in Albania was rapidly dashed. The new government of sundry generals and politicians procrastinated and prevaricated, offering the Germans statements of loyalty to the pact while doing little to organise the country for the blow which even they regarded as inevitable.

The German reaction was swift and devastating. With an operation of enormous complexity planned for imminent execution against the Soviet Union, Hitler and his generals were in no mood for negotiating with a putsch government, and they resolved within hours of the coup to rid themselves of this nuisance once and for
Demonstrating their usual flair for improvisation, forces were rapidly brought together for an assault against an enemy whose reputation suggested that the struggle might be sanguine and prolonged. At 6.40 a.m. on 6 April Operation ‘Punishment’ was delivered. Without any prior declaration of war Belgrade and other towns came under heavy air attack, while units of Field Marshal von List’s Twelfth Army crossed the Bulgarian border into southeastern Yugoslavia. The German war machine functioned as efficiently as at any time during the war. The Yugoslav Air Force was bombed on its aerodromes or shot out of the skies as it desperately attempted to stem the enemy tide, while the semi-mobilised divisions of the army were herded into captivity as their positions were overrun or cut off by the onrush. As the speed of the German advance threatened to capture their airfields the remnants of the air force were destroyed on the ground or, where the weather permitted, flown out of the country. The navy fared equally badly, its vessels being scuttled (in a few instances) or captured intact as the Italian advance overran the Adriatic ports.

The military collapse was immediate and absolute. In the southeast the Third and Fifth armies, which were relied upon to hold open the line of communications, supply and retreat to Salonika, offered bitter but short-lived resistance before being overwhelmed, Skoplje falling on 7 April and Niš two days later. On the northern front Colonel General von Weichs’ German Second Army was still concentrating in Carinthia and southern Hungary when the order to launch the attack was given, and was unable to commence operations until 10 April. The few extra days of preparation, however, did not apparently benefit the defenders, for the Yugoslav armies deployed in this area (Seventh, Fourth, Second and First) disintegrated as fast as their comrades in the south. Zagreb was taken on 10 April while the Italians, who at least had the courtesy to declare war first, occupied Ljubljana on 12 April. Belgrade was surrendered on the morning of the 13 April, and on that day General Simović, the Yugoslav Prime Minister, handed over command to General Kalafatović, authorising the latter to negotiate an armistice while preparing to flee the country himself. King Peter escaped to Athens by air on 14 April, followed by his cabinet two days later. The next day the armistice, which was de facto an unconditional surrender, was signed, and Yugoslav resistance was officially brought to an end.