

Britain and the Belgrade Coup of 27 March 1941 Revisited

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The Belgrade *coup d'état* against the regime of the Regent, Prince Paul, has been examined in a variety of ways:

- (i) from the Yugoslav angle – examining how much the March coup was ‘a home grown affair’;¹
- (ii) by looking at British-Yugoslav relations from a bilateral diplomatic standpoint, or as part of a broad comparative study of British policy in South-Eastern Europe;²
- (iii) by examining Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the British input into the *coup* itself – what one might term its ‘micro-management’ – to attempt to allocate responsibility within the British political community in Belgrade;³

¹ See Frank Littlefield: *Germany and Yugoslavia, 1933-41, The German Conquest of Yugoslavia* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988); J. B. Hoptner: *Yugoslavia in Crisis 1934-41* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1962); Dragisa Ristic: *The Yugoslav Revolution of 1941* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966).

² Mark Wheeler: *Britain and the Struggle for Yugoslavia 1940-43* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, New York, 1980); Elizabeth Barker: *British Policy in South Eastern Europe in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

³ David Stafford: ‘Britain and the Belgrade Coup’, *Slavonic Review*, (1977) Vol. 36, No. 3, pp.399-419; Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance Movements* (London: Macmillan, 1980). See M. R. D. Foot: *SOE An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive 1940-46* (London: BBC, 1984); Stafford, ‘The Detonator Concept: British Strategy, SOE and European Resistance After the Fall of France’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.10, No.2 (1975), pp.185-217.

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(iv) from the point of view of the relative impact on German strategic planning – evaluating whether the *coup* did indeed crucially delay Operation Barbarossa.⁴

The aim of this article is to refine the existing historiographical debate, by placing the *coup* in the broader context of the formulation, execution and evolution of British policy towards Yugoslavia between the outbreak of the Second World War and the *coup d'état* on 27 March 1941. The events in Belgrade were seen as, and presented as, a remarkable propaganda victory for the British cause. The *coup* proved a tremendous, if ephemeral, boost to British morale, coming rapidly upon the victories against Italian forces in North Africa and The Sudan. Even provincial British papers printed the news from Belgrade as their banner headline.⁵ Prime Minister Churchill, above all, understood the value of gesture, and the *coup* was perceived as giving Nazism a bloody nose. Hugh Dalton, the Minister of Economic Warfare, in London, certainly basked in the reflected glory of his department’s perceived contribution.⁶ It was a much-needed fillip to the ‘upstart’ service Special Operations Executive [SOE] created by Dalton,

⁴ See Martin van Creveld, ‘The German Attack on the USSR: Destruction of a Legend’ in *European Studies Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan. 1972); and Creveld, *Hitler’s Strategy 1940-41: The Balkan Clue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Basil Liddell Hart: *The History of the Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1971), p.132. Also Dusan Biber: ‘The Yugoslav Coup d’État, 27 March 1941’ in John Erickson and David Dilks (eds), *Barbarossa: The Axis and the Allies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp.34-42.

⁵ For example, *The Bournemouth Daily Echo* and *The Bournemouth Times and Directory*, 28 Mar. 1941. I am grateful to Heather Williams, author of *Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans: The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia 1941-45* (Hurst & Company, London 2003), for this point.

⁶ Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years Memoirs 1931-45* (London: Frederick Muller, 1957); see also Ben Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985).

and precisely the sort of spectacular 'window dressing' that he craved.⁷

The synthesis of published material points to the inevitability of a *coup* in late-March 1941, given the strength of feeling within Yugoslavia. Even though the events in Belgrade were not just the product of British intrigue, the enduring myth is that the *coup* was a triumph for Britain. Certainly, it appears that Britain provided important encouragement and support.⁸ However, examination of the files at The National Archives at Kew, private papers and memoir literature points to the reality of the inconsistencies and paradoxes of British policy towards Yugoslavia before March 1941, and underlines the fact that the British endorsement of the *coup* was born of the failure of Britain's attempts to construct a Balkan front to withstand Axis encroachment. Therefore, the *coup* was indeed a crucial propaganda victory for the Allied cause – and Britain thereby succeeded in Churchill's aim of 'drawing Yugoslavia into the war anyhow'.⁹ However, for Britain the road to the *coup* was much bumpier than has been appreciated hitherto; indeed, British policy towards Yugoslavia between 1939 and 1941 can best be summed up as following the law of unintended consequences.

This article points to three main aspects of British policy towards, and activity in, Yugoslavia. Firstly, the severe constraints imposed on UK aims in Yugoslavia by British overall policy, its formulation and management. It was not

⁷ See The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA] PRO HS5/166, George Taylor Report to Dalton, 26 Feb. 1941.

⁸ Hoptner, pp. 253-6; Littlefield, pp.131-6. Hugh Seton-Watson: *Eastern Europe between the Wars 1918-1941* (London: Archon Books, 1962). Basil Sweet-Escott: *Baker Street Irregular* (London: Methuen, 1965), p.63. TNA PRO HS5/938, 'Some Notes on Yugoslav Politics since 27 March 1941', unsigned report, 10 June 1941.

⁹ TNA PRO PREM 3/510/11, Churchill to Eden, 22 Mar. 1941.

simply that Britain operated at a fundamental strategic, economic and political disadvantage in the country, given German economic domination, political influence and infiltration by the Axis, and Yugoslavia's increasing encirclement. In addition, there was, of course, also the reality of the UK's severely limited military resources which hampered attempts to bolster the Yugoslav General Staff's resolve. It appears that the inherent contradictions of the sum of British overall policy conspired to limit even further British influence in that country between 1939 and 1941: that is, to a degree, these disadvantages were also self-inflicted. British policy towards Yugoslavia can best be characterised as fragmented, inconsistent, indeed paradoxical.

Secondly, Section D/Special Operations Executive¹⁰ developed wider contacts within Yugoslav society than has been credited in the current historiography. But, although these contacts were more extensive than has been appreciated, they did not comprise greater leverage in Yugoslav politics. Not only was the UK one of several great powers seeking to extend its influence in Yugoslavia, SOE activities also exacerbated tensions with the British Legation in Belgrade and the Minister, Ronald I. Campbell.

Thirdly, Yugoslavia became crucial to British planning only by accident and oversight. The documents pointed to British efforts to bring all possible diplomatic means and political pressure to bear on Yugoslavia in February and March 1941. But this constituted an increasingly desperate attempt to salvage something from the wreckage of Anthony Eden's pursuit and London's vested hopes of a Balkan front. Thus, the British decision to support a *coup* at the

¹⁰ As it became after July 1940, with merger of Military Intelligence (Research) (MI(R)), Electra House, and Section D.

end of March should be seen as a product of the paradoxes in British policy and the failure of her political ambitions in the region, together with the power-political gamble of her decision to intervene in Greece.

There is a further paradox. From the available material it appears that Britain's encouragement, from the Legation, SIS (Special Intelligence Service) and SOE, was an important psychological prop to the *putsch*. But, by the same token, British activity in support of certain factions within Yugoslav politics and society inadvertently contributed to the destruction of London's hopes post-*coup* – namely, of Yugoslavia abandoning the policy of self-defence and attacking Italian forces in Albania. SOE operatives in Zagreb had recognised British political failings in Yugoslavia and the dangers of the choice of focussing on Belgrade and the Serbs, particularly the Serbian Peasant Party [SPP].¹¹ The *coup* 'misfired' in terms of British expectations and British policy had contributed to this outcome. In one sense only was British policy successful: the *coup* was seen as defiance of the Axis and did indeed precipitate a German invasion of the country, as Britain had foreseen – but this German attack took place before Britain had had the opportunity of fortifying her position in Greece.¹² Finally, George Taylor (the Australian deputy to Sir Frank Nelson, head of SO2 [Special Operations] in London) wrote to Dalton in April 1941, commenting that at least Britain would have excellent contacts with post-war

¹¹ See TNA PRO HS5/935, NERO Report on SO2 Activities in NW Yugoslavia, 27 Sept. 1941, 27 Sept. 1941; TNA PRO HS5/912, 'Report by Lieutenant Glen on his Relations with Yugoslavs', 17 Nov. 1941.

¹² TNA PRO FO371/30252 R2854/G, Campbell for Secretary of State, No. 654, 21 Mar. 1941. Campbell recognised this danger, and warned Eden that it was 'among the factors to be taken into consideration'. See TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2854/G, Belgrade to Eden, Cairo Tel. No. 171, 21 Mar. 1941.

Yugoslav politicians: as matters transpired, this, of course, proved to be flawed reasoning also. Overall, therefore, it was a highly qualified triumph for Britain.

Paradoxes of British Policy

British policy towards Yugoslavia, particularly between June 1940 and March 1941, was profoundly confused in practice. In her survey of British policy in South Eastern Europe, Elizabeth Barker pointed briefly to inconsistencies and 'the lack of any top-level decision on priorities'. However, she concluded, 'given human fallibility this was perhaps no great loss'.¹³ The pressures of war, manpower shortages, and the variety of government agencies involved are partial explanations. More cogent reasons include personal antipathies, political coteries, bureaucratic squabbles within departments, competing Government departments, each with its individual agenda, together with the overriding goal of defeating Germany at all costs.¹⁴ This meant that the variety of departments and actors involved in Yugoslavia worked at cross-purposes, and unwittingly conspired to limit further British material influence in Yugoslavia. This was on top of the disadvantages of Yugoslavia's strategic isolation, and economic dependence upon the Reich, and Britain's own inability to provide the armaments Yugoslavia desperately craved.¹⁵

¹³ Barker, p. 46.

¹⁴ Kenneth Young (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce-Lockhart, Vol. II* (London: Macmillan, 1980) pp.73-5, 85; Lord Gladwyn, *The Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972) pp.102-3.

¹⁵ With the Italian invasion of Albania, and German infiltration into Hungary, Yugoslavia faced potential enemies on five of her seven borders. Italy's declaration of war on Britain and France in June 1940 turned the Adriatic into an Italian lake. After the fall of France in June 1940, Britain's economic position in Yugoslavia looked even more perilous: a mere 4% of Yugoslav overall trade. See also Wheeler, p.246. TNA PRO FO371/30259 R3212/G, CAS

The strategic and economic disadvantages Britain faced were not the only handicaps. The British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] was the prime means whereby the UK could communicate with the broader Yugoslav population and foster the spirit of resistance to Axis encroachment.¹⁶ However, the story of the BBC in Yugoslavia before April 1941 was not an unalloyed success: it was limited by shortage of announcers and translators in London, as well as the number of radios per capita in the Yugoslav population.¹⁷ Most of the short-wave receivers were in cities, and Germany regularly jammed two of the three bands used. Also Germany possessed important advantages in medium-wave broadcasting: the occupation of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland increased the number of 'conveniently placed' stations at her disposal, for transmission and jamming.¹⁸

The totality of British policy, as practised in Yugoslavia, compounded these handicaps. The irony is that the UK did not suffer from lack of information about Yugoslavia: she possessed sound intelligence and good links with ruling circles and the Yugoslav service departments. The Section D/SOE and SIS networks were more extensive than historians have charted. Certainly, the Foreign Office's and Legation's reliance on the Yugoslav small governing elite was

symptomatic of Britain's own governing elite - this was still 'the world of the magic circle' in England. It was also a function of Britain's imperial outlook and practice. But knowledge of Yugoslav economic, political and military limitations did not lead to any modification or fine tuning of British overall policy: this was naturally dictated by the exigencies of fighting Germany and, from June 1940, Italy. Britain viewed Yugoslavia as part of the Balkan jigsaw, through the lens of British regional strategic imperatives. This imposed important constraints on British policy formulation towards Yugoslavia. Preoccupations in the War Cabinet, the Chiefs of Staff Committee, the Joint Planning Committee, the upper echelons of the Foreign Office and the Southern Department, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, the War Office and Air Ministry, the Ministry of Information, and even the Colonial Office meant all departments demonstrated institutional resistance to cool consideration of Yugoslav factors and interests.¹⁹ Despite structures of co-ordination through key committees, with hindsight there appears to be fragmentation and lack of cohesion of British policy, combined with personal prejudice at critical junctures.

What were these inconsistent attitudes and policy goals practised by rival departments, which further narrowed British options? Firstly, within the Foreign Office in London: despite the upsurge in interest in Yugoslavia since 1939, there remained a hangover of the implicit assumption of the inter-

(41) 97, 28 Mar. 1941, 'Committee for the Co-ordination of Allied Supplies. Yugoslavia: Statement of British Aircraft and Equipment supplied and quantities outstanding against previous releases. 1939-40.'

¹⁶ BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park [hereafter BBC WAC] E2/206/1 Foreign General, European Service File 1A, 1940, 'The European Services: Proposal for Development of European Departments', 3 Aug. 1940.

¹⁷ Estimated 1:65. Vladimir Dedijer: *The History of Yugoslavia* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p.558.

¹⁸ BBC WAC E2/186/4, Foreign General: European Intelligence Papers. Intelligence Reports: Europe File 2B Nov. 1940 - Jan. 1941, 'The Transmitter War in Europe, 18.2.41, Supplement to Survey of European Audiences.'

¹⁹ TNA PRO FO371/20534 R/8664/G, Dixon, 30 Nov. 1940. In response to a lengthy telegram from the Military Attaché in Belgrade reporting Yugoslavia's increasingly precarious strategic position and her war plans, Pierson Dixon of the Southern Department minuted that the report 'confirms our supposition that political decisions will militate against the adoption of the right strategic plan in the event of invasion, i.e. the abandonment of Croatia and withdrawal to old Serbia.'

war period that Yugoslavia was a Balkan backwater. This only began to change after the capitulation of France in June 1940, and particularly with the Italian attack on Greece in October 1940, paralleled by growing German pressure on Romania and Bulgaria. In part this view was a function of geographic distance and isolation from London.²⁰ The Foreign Office's interest in Yugoslavia before June 1940 was as part of a neutral Balkan front (to deter any rash French projects of launching a Salonika front, as had been done in 1918). Thereafter, despite talk of 'setting Europe ablaze', or entangling Russia and Germany in the Balkans, the official approach was to avoid any premature explosion in the region, and to nurture the existing regime's pursuit of neutrality.²¹ This began to shift from November 1940 given the growing British concern at German pressure on Yugoslavia to join the Tripartite Pact. From this point, neutrality was no longer enough.

The Foreign Office's support for the neutral stance of Prince Paul's regime in practice clashed with the Ministry of Economic Warfare's pursuit of economic blockade of the German Reich; the British establishment believed that economic stranglehold would bring the inherent weaknesses of the Reich to the fore and it would collapse from within, with the minimum of material expenditure by Britain. This meant denying the export to Yugoslavia of any goods that could potentially be siphoned off to the benefit of the German economy. Great pains were taken with the policy of pre-emptive purchasing, to deny vital foodstuffs and strategic

²⁰ The diplomatic bag took up to three weeks to reach London; and after the Italian declaration of war on Britain and France in June 1940, the provision route was round the Cape of Good Hope.

²¹ TNA PRO FO371/24890 R6449/G, Nichols file note, 15 June 1940; R6703/G, Halifax to South Europe posts, Circular No. 126, 5 July 1940.

minerals to Germany.²² Britain sought to use the 1940 Anglo-Yugoslav Payments Agreement and denial of 'navicerts' (certificates of passage) as additional economic levers. However, the Treasury could be counted on to oppose the use of adequate sums to ensure any degree of success in the pre-emptive purchasing scheme.²³ Similarly, the Board of Trade refused to interfere with 'the liberty of private traders' to encourage Yugoslav purchase of British manufactured goods.²⁴

Barker has argued that diplomatic considerations took precedence over the goals of the Ministry of Economic Warfare. This was not the case in Yugoslavia. The resident Minister, Ronald Campbell, was alive to the political damage to the British cause that ruthless application of the economic blockade would cause, and regularly petitioned London to consider the suitability of this policy. However, the Ministry of Economic Warfare remained obdurate, backed by the Ministry of Information who used the BBC to 'sell' the British blockade to the enemy occupied and neutral countries.

The blockade might well be too costly to Britain if it were to cost her every friend in Europe, and whatever broadcasting can do to make peoples and governments endure shortage without asking

²² See, for example, TNA PRO FO371/25028 R6988, G P L Rose minute, 13 Aug. 1940; R7304/G, FO Tel. No. 473 to Belgrade, 24 Sept. 1940.

²³ Barker, p.31.

²⁴ TNA PRO FO371/25027 R5423/G, Shuckburgh file note, 29 Sept. 1940. 'This is ... typical of our war effort.' Vernon Bartlett, MP, put down a Parliamentary Question on 25 April 1940 asking why there was no British exhibitor at Zagrebski Zbor, the most important trade fair in Yugoslavia. Of 180 exhibitors, 120 of these were German. The Board of Trade had merely made a small announcement in its internal journal.

for concessions is a direct addition to Britain's fighting strength.²⁵

The paradox borne of this fixation on the ultimate benefits of economic blockade can be seen when compared to the pressing need for re-equipment of the Yugoslav Army. The War Office and Southern Department were well aware of the deficiencies of the Yugoslav forces. Under the leadership of Sir John Shea, MI(R) had conducted an extensive survey into the capabilities and requirements of the Yugoslav Army in December 1939. But Britain could not provide the armaments persistently requested by the Yugoslav Government.²⁶ The principal need was for anti-aircraft guns, anti-tank weapons and tanks. Much to the embarrassment of the Southern Department, the provision of £750,000 credit to Yugoslavia for armament purchases could not be taken up by British production.²⁷ UK failings were shown in sharper relief after the capitulation of France, Yugoslavia's traditional great power ally, and the loss of French war materiel. Two instances reveal the damaging nature of this policy when ruthlessly applied in Yugoslavia, seen in the apparently banal example of tyres and petrol. The Belgrade Military Attaché's office reported that satisfactory and rapid mobilisation of the Yugoslav Army required the provision of some 12,000 tyres. The Ministry of Economic Warfare objected as rubber was a scarce commodity in Germany and was determined to deny this; however, as 'a political gesture' some 650 tyres were

²⁵ BBC WAC E2/186/4, Foreign General: European Intelligence papers. Europe File 2B, Monthly Intelligence Report: Europe. Summary and Conclusions of the Monthly Surveys of European Audiences, 25 Mar. 1941.

²⁶ See TNA PRO FO371/30227 R1649/343G, Supply of arms and war materials to Yugoslavia, 18 Feb. 1941.

²⁷ TNA PRO FO371/25024 R5983/G, Talbot Price to Broad, 24 May 1940; R5993/G, From Nichols to Campbell, 8 May 1940.

sanctioned for delivery (that is, sufficient for approximately 180 vehicles, or 5 per cent of the required consignment).²⁸ Similarly, the British Air Attaché in Belgrade reported that the Yugoslav Air Force only had sufficient aviation fuel for a two-week conflict, and applied for provision from Britain's Middle Eastern supply. The Petroleum Department were able to arrange for the supply of this oil, but the Ministry of Economic Warfare objected, arguing that Yugoslavia already had enough for its peacetime needs; and that it was dangerous to accumulate stocks in Salonika, given the vulnerability of the port to German attack. If war erupted, then Britain would review whether to provide additional fuel from her Middle East store.²⁹ Therefore attempts by the Foreign Office to set up the rapid supply of aviation fuel and lubricating oil ran into the bureaucratic sand. The tale was the same over explosives: Britain herself faced a shortage, but was determined that Germany should be denied all possible stocks. London was prepared to grant a token amount of explosives and raw materials which, it was hoped, would reap political benefits

²⁸ TNA PRO FO371/30227 R1649/343/G, Supply of arms and war materials to Yugoslavia, 18 Feb. 1941.

TNA PRO FO371/30227 R686/G, Military Attaché, Belgrade to War Office, Tel. No. 00027, cipher 25/1, 25 Jan. 1941. This telegram demonstrated Clarke's keen realisation of the poor state of mechanisation of the Yugoslav Army, pointing out that on mobilisation all motor vehicles in the country would be commandeered; however, at least 30% were unserviceable from a military point of view. Campbell later telegraphed London estimating that nearly 20,000 tyres would be needed to refit all Army motor vehicles. R686/G, Campbell to London, no 174, 4 Feb. 1941. On 26 Feb. 1941 the Ministry of Economic Warfare finally authorised shipment of 12,126 tyres on the SS *Bosiljka* from New York. These of course had not reached Yugoslavia before the German attack on 6 April 1941.

²⁹ TNA PRO FO371/20534 R8321/G, Belgrade to London, Tel. No. 882, 7 Nov. 1940. See also TNA PRO FO371/30227 R1737/G, Sargent file note 5 Mar. 1941. TNA PRO FO371/30227 R1649/G, Supply of Arms, 18 Feb. 1941.

'help stiffen Yugoslav resistance' and Turco-Yugoslav co-operation.³⁰

The files demonstrate a sharp differentiation between the War Office's and the Foreign Office's assessment of Yugoslav capabilities, and their enduring faith in Serbian resolve. London possessed detailed knowledge of the shortcomings of the Yugoslav Army in terms of military personnel, armaments and strategic plans, etc. The extensive survey carried out by Shea's MI(R) mission of December 1939 was supplemented by a further report from the Belgrade Military Attaché, forwarded by Campbell to Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, in November 1940. This report pointed to the preferable strategic plan of retreating to defend Old Serbia, but recognised that this would not be accepted because of its political ramifications. After the dismissal of General Netic as Chief of Staff, Clarke reported to London that there was no change in Yugoslav strategic planning: it remained focussed on total peripheral defence.³¹ Campbell accepted that there was only very limited pressure Britain could bring to bear on the Yugoslav Government for change, and he was very reluctant to advise the Regent on this. This point was totally overlooked in the War Cabinet and Foreign Office in March 1941. These Departments appear to have fallen prey to their propaganda that the Yugoslav Army was the best in the Balkans – this was not a competitive field – and the enduring faith in 'gallant little Serbia'. Indeed, Clarke's report had concluded that, despite the deficiencies of the Yugoslav Army, Britain could rely on the traditional fighting spirit of the Serb

³⁰ TNA PRO FO371/30227 R1649/G, Supply of Arms, 18 Feb. 1941.

³¹ TNA PRO FO371/25027 R4906/G, Captain Davies, 12 Dec. 1939. FO371/25034 R8664/G, from Military Attaché, Belgrade, Despatch No 220, 13 Nov. 1940. Also, R8611/G Naval Attaché, Belgrade, to London, Tel Nos. 220 and 223, of 12 and 13 Nov. 1940.

nation. Therefore, despite the reports of equipment deficiencies, the knowledge of Yugoslav strategic planning, London's awareness of the strain of mobilisation on the Yugoslav economy, in March 1941 the British demanded a Yugoslav *volte-face* to an offensive strategy. The political preoccupations of London civil servants and politicians meant that they lost sight of logistical realities.

In brief summary, there is no appearance of high-level adjudication between diplomatic, military and economic priorities. The implementation of these myriad policies served to limit British influence, and conspire to narrow further her options. This underlined reliance on the British Legation in Belgrade, and Section D/SOE in the country.

SOE in Yugoslavia

Here too, British policy was working at cross-purposes. In the struggle for Yugoslavia between 1939 and 1941, as Elizabeth Barker has pointed out, Britain believed that she had several promising, if intangible assets. In addition to the conviction of the animosity of sections of Yugoslav society to German and Italian encroachment and London's enduring confidence in 'the traditional fighting spirit of the Serb nation', there were also the more concrete advantages. First there was the British Legation and its contacts within Yugoslav Government. Above all, London's hopes resided in the anglophile, Oxford-educated Regent, Prince Paul, friend and relation of the British establishment, confidant of the British Ambassador, 'Our Friend' in the telegraphic correspondence from Belgrade. The belief endured up to mid-March 1941 (20 March for the Minister and Legation; 24 March for Eden) that Prince Paul represented Britain's trump card. With the continued suspension of parliamentary democracy dating back to 1929, Yugoslavia was under a quasi-dictatorship. London expected

Paul to behave like an autocrat, and to think like an Englishman – despite the overwhelming body of evidence that Paul took his custodial tasks as Regent as his guiding principles, not adherence to British interests.³² The importance attached to Prince Paul was shown in the Ambassador's and Southern Department's requests for King George VI to write bracing letters to bolster the Regent's resolve: 'regal evangelism'³³ and monarchical solidarity were offered as political and psychological substitutes for military hardware.

Beyond the Prince, the Legation enjoyed excellent links with a small circle within the Yugoslav governing elite. The Ambassador drew upon three to four sources; the Legation as a whole regularly cited information from approximately ten. These contacts were within the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Yugoslav consuls in Berlin and Rome.³⁴ The Shadow missions enjoyed good links with the Yugoslav General Staff, Army and Air Force.³⁵ SIS also had established excellent networks of information and intelligence gathering throughout the country, using vice-consular and pro-consular cover in Zagreb, Split, Dubrovnik,

³² Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Chips. The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967) p. 285.

³³ Wheeler, pp.19-22.

³⁴ Southern Department were regularly irritated by Campbell's convoluted system to protect the identity of his sources, and tried to persuade him to use a system of code words. However, as Pierson Dixon pointed out, Campbell was not even consistent in this as he 'would then let the cat out of the bag.' (TNA PRO FO371/30225 R296/G, Dixon file note, 9 Jan. 1941.) Subsequently a list was drawn up using alphabetical codes.

³⁵ See TNA PRO HS5/912, Glen Report, 17 Nov. 1941. German pressure on the Yugoslav Government curtailed Alexander Glen's weekly contacts with the Yugoslav military in the autumn of 1940. The resumption of these meetings was taken by Southern Department in the Foreign Office as an indication of a stiffening of Yugoslav resolve against German encroachment.

Susak, Ljubljana and Skopje.³⁶ Then there was the 'upstart' organisation, Section D/SOE whose interests and activities were in principle, and often in practice, diametrically opposed to the Minister Ronald Campbell's determination to support Prince Paul and Yugoslav strict neutrality; and SIS desire for tranquillity to ensure nothing interfered with the gathering of intelligence.³⁷ In reality, the greater tension arose between the Legation and Section D/SOE: the Stephen Clissold papers at the Bodleian Library show that in Yugoslavia at least there was remarkable co-operation and concord between SOE and SIS before April 1941.³⁸

A considerable amount has already been written on Section D/SOE in Yugoslavia before 1941, pointing to its propaganda work (the establishment and financial support of the *Britanova* news-agency, and the *Britannia* publication), as well as the systematic bribery of newspaper editors and political subversion; sabotage of Axis economic interests and strategic communications, through ambitious schemes to block Danube river traffic, thus denying the German war economy precious shipments of Romanian oil and wheat; and post-occupational planning for resistance and wireless networks.³⁹ SOE's contacts and activities in Yugoslavia went beyond this, and were more wide ranging than has been

³⁶ See TNA PRO FO *The Foreign Office List 1939, 1940 and 1941*. Reference 351.10.25.

³⁷ Sweet-Escott, p.24; Gladwyn *Memoirs*, p.106.

³⁸ Stephen Clissold Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, [hereafter Clissold Papers] MS Eng.C2683, see AC Lawrenson (D/H6) Report, 12 June 1945, London, ff/12-23. Also To AD from D/H6, Note on the Death of GS Frodsham, 5 June 1945.

³⁹ See Julian Amery, *Approach March: An Adventure In Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), p.171. TNA PRO HS5/204, SOE Danube River No 4, 20 Nov. 1940 and TNA PRO HS5/166, Philip Broad memorandum, 20 Mar. 1941. Also Barker, Wheeler and Stafford, 'SOE and Belgrade coup'.

appreciated hitherto. Lord Amery commented in 1991 when on a visit to Yugoslavia, '[T]here is stuff in the British archives that would make your hair stand on end.' Much of the original SOE material has been lost.⁴⁰ However, from memoirs, private papers, and a religious trawl through Foreign Office, War Office, Air Ministry, Cabinet, and PREM papers, it is possible to build up a more complete picture of this SOE network which was deemed to be the most promising in the Balkans, and which appeared to offer the advantages of a substantial base for subversive activity in neighbouring countries.

One aspect which must be stressed in any examination of SOE behaviour in the Balkans is the marked 'imperial' approach evident in SOE's dealings with their local contacts. Few UK personnel were needed: the collusion of the key members of the local population, directed by British operatives, was the means to further British strategic planning. In the mindset of the time considerable potential was attached to apparently insignificant numbers and limited contacts, especially by Dalton. SOE was at pains to try and establish links with all elements of the fragmented Yugoslav political spectrum, and Yugoslav society. However, as shall be seen, despite these attempts, the prime focus of the organisation's activity came to rest on a small element within the Serbian political spectrum which ultimately proved to be counter-productive in terms of satisfying British strategic and military objectives.

Deakin, in *The Embattled Mountain*, stressed British links with Yugoslav personalities and associations was exclusively Serb, nationalist and conservative in politics:

⁴⁰ Between 85%-87%, through poor filing, injudicious shredding, a convenient fire at Headquarters, unsystematic post-war culling of remaining material. See Introduction to The National Archives, HS5 series.

'[T]here were few similar contacts in other parts of Yugoslavia, though certain relations had been established with patriotic organisations in Slovenia'.⁴¹ Certainly, by early 1941, SOE was working 'very closely' with the Slovene Democratic Party led by Dr Cok and Professor Rudolph. SOE acknowledged that Cok's party, although the largest Slovene political party, enjoyed only a very small following, so did not exploit its contacts for political purposes. The SOE's view of the value of these Slovenes lay in their highly organised underground network and considerable experience in conspiratorial work. Yet another advantage of links with this small political party was its lines of communication with the Slovenes in Istria, (on the Italian border), and in Austria. In the eyes of SOE, this underground resistance had already proved its worth in small-scale acts of sabotage (such as destruction of rail freight and transports, attacks on warehouses and factories) as well as distributing British-produced propaganda against German influence in Yugoslavia itself. However, London was doubtful of this group's capabilities in regard to guerrilla warfare and destruction of infrastructure.

In addition to these demolition squads, SOE had also established contact with a loose organisation of Slovene irredentists, led by Dr Brezigar, who was also Editor-in-Chief of the Slovene liberal newspaper, *Jutro*. This group included exiled Czechs with experience of underground resistance and also, but only a few, Croats.⁴² The greatest advantage in

⁴¹ Frederick Deakin, *The Embattled Mountain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.124.

⁴² Through Terence Glanville (code name NERO), Lawrenson and McRogers who formed a 'triumvirate' working in the north, SOE established a small network of Croatian-sponsored saboteurs and organisations, using Slovene, Croatian and Czech agents. The Slovene head, Medven, organised teams of

Branko's organisation lay in its network of communications with other opponents of fascism in Hungary, Bohemia and Moravia, and in Austria. At the encouragement of SOE, Brezigar's organisation was in touch with Cok's group and both promised stout resistance to possible German attack and occupation.

There were other aspects of economic sabotage which Dalton valued highly in terms of propaganda value and maintaining resistance to fascism.⁴³ It must be said that this remained small-scale, and amateurish. However, it went further than the sabotage of antimony mines, to rail shipments of oil and coal, and the sinking of Italian shipping. Dr Alfred Becker,⁴⁴ a German Jew and Section D employee, attempted on at least one occasion to infect Yugoslav livestock bound for Germany with foot and mouth. Unfortunately the plan backfired when herds in the Yugoslav side of the frontier became infected instead.⁴⁵ Alan Lawrenson, the SOE officer responsible for Northern Yugoslavia, also learned that Brezigar's group was using British funds to finance the group's attempts to spread anthrax in cattle shipments to Germany and Austria. Lawrenson was not 'at any very great pains to discourage Brezigar's activities – more especially as to do so would have certainly taken the edge off his keenness in other respects.'⁴⁶ In November 1940, a memorandum entitled

communists and democrats in various parts of the country to carry out small scale industrial sabotage. TNA PRO HS5/166, Report on SO Organisation and Plans in the Balkans, Most Secret SC/44/12 Attachment. Taylor to Dalton, 26 Feb. 1941.

⁴³ TNA PRO HS5/166, Dalton to Churchill, 7 Mar. 1941.

⁴⁴ Amery, *Autobiography*, p.168. Becker was obliged to leave Yugoslavia in June 1940 with Julius Hanau and William ('Bill') Hudson

⁴⁵ Clissold Papers, MS Eng C2683, A. Lawrenson Report, 12 June 1945.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

'Functions and Organisation of D Section of Yugoslavia' effectively condoned such activity, as it noted

[P]oisoning water supplies, spreading bacteria and similar sabotage is ruled out, but introduction of foot and mouth disease, potato pests etc, are encouraged and naturally any attacks on communications, power stations or centres of production of important manufacturers.⁴⁷

The Croat community presented more of an obstacle to SOE's agenda. The leader of the Croatian Independent Democrats, Dr Srdjan Budisavlevic, was a firm friend of Alexander Glen, and this Party also received a British subsidy from January 1941.⁴⁸ The Party was deemed particularly useful in its determination to forge a bridge between the Serbian and Croatian communities. Attempts were made to establish communication with Dr Wilder's Croat Democratic Organisation, deemed to be valuable from a political standpoint. Through the Roman Catholic Bishop of Sibenik, who was judged 'a good friend to Britain', SOE maintained links with the small Andjolinovic Party, based in Split.⁴⁹ Overall, these small units appeared more promising from the point of view of launching occasional small-scale sabotage, rather than political influence. They also provided a good network of intelligence in Slovenia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Herzegovina and Bosnia.⁵⁰ SOE also had links with 'odd groups of communists in Croatia and Slovenia' who carried out small-scale sabotage, intelligence gathering and propaganda; however, 'SO2 never discovered the names of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ No record survives of the start date of this financial support, nor of the sums involved.

⁴⁹ TNA PRO HS5/935, NERO Report, 27 Sept. 1941.

⁵⁰ TNA PRO HS 5/912, Copy file, C General Information, 14 Aug. 1941.

the leaders.⁵¹ Julian Amery had put out feelers to the proscribed Yugoslav Communist Party, which was well-organised with 'apparently a large following in the schools and universities'. There was a difference of view among SOE personnel as to the value of this link. Writing in late 1941, Glen dismissed them as 'many [being] doubtless only enthusiastic youths, or the more disgruntled graduates turned out each year to find that the learned professions were already overcrowded.'⁵² Similarly, SOE neglected the Bosnian Moslem Party (by Glen's own admission). It was felt that this political party was more interested in 'the promotion of the interests of its adherents and apparently took little interest in foreign affairs.' The fact that the British Consulate in Sarajevo closed in early 1940 is indicative of London and the Belgrade Legation's lack of attention.

Terence Glanville (the SOE officer based in the Consulate in Zagreb) also developed links with the United Jugoslavs, an influential organisation of businessmen which formed the commercial and financial backbone of the country. Its members included a considerable number of Jews and many Christians. Its youth organisation, the Organisation of United Yugoslav students, printed and circulated propaganda for SOE. SOE specifically made use of Shell Company, Cunard White Star and Canadian Pacific. Ivan Ivanovic, the director of the Yugoslav Lloyds Shipping Company in Susak, was a known sympathiser of the British cause. SOE also maintained good contacts with the Croatian Trades Unions (CTU) – a 'powerful movement' comprised of employees of private enterprises in Croatia. The movement generally, as well as its

⁵¹ TNA PRO HS5/935, NERO Report, 27 Sept. 1941.

⁵² TNA PRO HS5/912, Report by Lieutenant Glen on his relations with Jugoslavs, 17 Nov. 1941.

newspaper, *Pravica*, was funded by SO2. Glanville knew the CTU leader, Basic, whom he regarded as 'a stout fellow'.⁵³

Of the Croatian political parties, the Croatian Peasant Party [CPP] was the most important, and represented the greatest challenge. SOE recognised the Party as being 'extremely well-organised, and with its influence extending deep into the lives of the people' – through propaganda, cultural and welfare activities in the villages, financing of agriculture and application of science, as well as its militia and armed guards.⁵⁴ In view of Glanville, the CPP was 'the only well organised and statesmanlike political party in Yugoslavia.'⁵⁵ Much to the suspicion of the Italian agents, the British Consul in Zagreb, Terence Rapp, hosted a fish and chip supper each Friday at Gaspic or Zenica for leading members of the Croatian Peasant Party and the Croat Independent Democrats.⁵⁶ However, the focus of British political activity and attention, both SOE and the Legation, was primarily on Belgrade. By his own admission, Glen only met representatives of the Croatian Peasant party 'on a few occasions, and [could] not claim any personal knowledge of them, except Dr Shutej and Emoljan.'⁵⁷ Attempts to foster British influence and consequent unified Yugoslav resistance to German political infiltration and economic domination

⁵³ TNA PRO HS5/935, NERO Report, 27 Sept. 1941.

⁵⁴ TNA PRO HS5/912, Report by Glen, 17 Nov. 1941.

⁵⁵ TNA PRO HS5/965, NERO Report on SO2 activities in NW Yugoslavia, 27 Sept. 1941.

⁵⁶ TNA PRO HS5/965, debriefing report by DH/4 on his questioning by Agents of the Counter-Espionage Department of the Italian Minister of War.

⁵⁷ TNA PRO HS5/912 Report by Lieutenant Glen on his Relations with Jugoslavs, 17 Nov. 1941.

encountered the obdurate realities of Yugoslav politics.⁵⁸ As successive reports from the Consulate in Zagreb confirmed, the *Sporazum* of 1939 had done nothing to mitigate enduring suspicions between the Serb and Croatian communities. London was repeatedly informed that different historical experience, religious attitudes and cultural influences rendered the Croat community more hostile to Italian ambitions than to growing German influence.

Therefore British attempts to infiltrate and second Croats were limited by the Croatian suspicions of Serb-dominated Yugoslav foreign policy, and hampered by the pervasive attitude that German influence would be less pernicious than Italian encroachment. British attitudes seem also to have been coloured by the conviction of their Serb contacts that 'Croatia should be considered lost'.⁵⁹ However, SOE still managed to maintain contact with a number of Croat military officers; the news that they were in touch with 'the major commanding the Sapper battalion which [was] responsible for demolition along the frontier, especially the bridges over the river' was of particular interest to London, and the reports that junior and middle-ranking officers were more robust in their opposition to Germany, and more inclined to take a strong stand than the generals and politicians in Belgrade.⁶⁰ The files also point to a possible link between SOE agents and the Zagreb head of police, Vikert.⁶¹

⁵⁸ See entire file TNA PRO FO371/30211 'Yugoslav-German Permanent Economic Commission' for details of German economic links with Yugoslavia between 1940 and 1941.

⁵⁹ TNA PRO HS5/938, Weekly report, 22 Oct. 1940, AH/G to DH2.

⁶⁰ TNA PRO HS5/166, George Taylor report, 26 Feb. 1941.

⁶¹ See TNA PRO HS5/912, Copy File, 14 Aug. 1941 C. General Information.

SOE links with the Jewish community in Yugoslavia are harder to chart.⁶² Although there remains no hard evidence in the Yugoslav country files for SOE and the Foreign Office, there are indications in the other SOE country files in the Balkans (particularly Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey). With hindsight it seemed likely that the Yugoslav Jewish community would have been potential natural allies of the British war effort leading up to 1941.⁶³ However, as SOE had discovered in its attempts to recruit Romanian Jews in its Danube schemes, this was not necessarily the case and local Jews were 'afraid to compromise themselves by engaging in belligerent activities'.⁶⁴ Given that Germany and German-occupied Europe controlled almost the totality of trade with Yugoslavia, and the prominence of the Jewish community in the banking and commercial sector of the Yugoslav economy, there was a powerful disincentive. However, Peter Boughey, SOE agent in charge of financial transactions in Belgrade, was particularly effective in securing favourable rates for British pounds on the black market in his project of building up a local currency war chest, and considerable sums of money ended up in the Anglo-Palestine Bank in Tel Aviv.⁶⁵

Elizabeth Barker states that the scheme proposed by Chaim Weizmann, President of World Zionist Organisation and President of the Jewish Agency, in 1940 to use Jewish Haganah personnel to help with the sabotage plans for the

⁶² Amery points to Jakob Altmaier and Alfred Becker's contribution to SOE activities in 1939-40. See Amery, *Autobiography*, p.168.

⁶³ See Paul Benjamin Gordiejew: *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ TNA PRO HS5/195, 'Report 15.4.41, dictated by W H Burland, signed T F Walton'.

⁶⁵ See entire file TNA PRO HS5/177 'SOE Bulgaria' for further details of these transactions.

Romanian oil fields was nipped in the bud.⁶⁶ This is not the case. Both Sweet-Escott and Amery point to SOE using the Jewish Agency's illegal visa network in Central and Eastern Europe for their sabotage network in August 1940.⁶⁷ This link was clearly well-established by January 1941, when SOE prepared a paper on the assistance which SOE should be able to call upon from other departments in pursuit of its plans to destroy Romanian oil shipments: this should include 'the same Foreign office, Home Office and Colonial Office facilities in the way of passports, travelling documents and visas for our (Yugoslav) associates as in the case of Roumania [sic]'.⁶⁸ (At the time SOE was also proposing to establish a centre in Palestine 'from which our friends whom we are evacuating from the occupied and likely to be occupied Balkan countries can work back into this area'.⁶⁹ This led SOE into direct conflict to the Colonial Office's determination to limit immigration into Palestine, and determination to stop all illegal immigrants.)⁷⁰ In January 1941 the Bucharest Legation sent a series of urgent telegrams to London requesting authorisation for transit papers and visas for 51 Jews (the list comprised Romanians, two Poles and one German Jew); the

⁶⁶ Barker, p.36.

⁶⁷ Sweet-Escott, p.26 and Amery, *Autobiography*, p.189. The Jewish Agency used Romanian shipping from the Danubian ports, and Greek shipping. *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter *FRUS*], 1940, Vol. III, Consul General at Jerusalem to Secretary of State, 24 Jan. 1940.

⁶⁸ TNA PRO CAB 80/56/COS (41)3(0) 'Interference with German Oil Supplies', Memorandum by the Special Operations Executive. The prime route for Jews fleeing fascism was through Romania and Greece. The pre-war Jewish population in Yugoslavia had swelled to 85,000 (from 71,000), but at present, this connection between SOE and the Jewish community in Yugoslavia remains speculation.

⁶⁹ TNA PRO HS3/206, SOE Palestine to CD from AD, 12 Mar. 1941, Athens.

⁷¹ It was estimated that between 14-15,000 Jews entered Palestine illegally in 1939. See *FRUS*, 1940, Vol. III, pp.832-4.

Colonial Office erupted as the list included two known visa traffickers and others who were known or suspected to have purchased illegal visas.⁷¹ SOE was summoned to a meeting with the Deputy Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office. The upshot was a *diktat* that on no account were subsequent SOE applications for emergency transit papers from the Balkans to include Jews.

The other tantalising reference in the documents refers to Section D/SOE attempts to use the Yugoslav Freemason network and contacts as a means of augmenting British influence. This idea emanated from the Foreign Office in the summer of 1940, and was passed on to the new SOE organisation. The Freemasons formed the backbone of the Serbian business community and had prominent political overtones; the network was also prominently represented in the Civil Service and the Orthodox Church.⁷² However, it is impossible to evaluate the importance of these links – under German pressure, the Masonic lodges closed down in July 1940. Germany had complained that they represented the centres of British intrigue and anti-German activity; this echoed German policy to close Masonic lodges in other occupied countries (for example, in the Netherlands) at the same time.⁷³

However, while these SOE contacts were more extensive than previously detailed, this was not translated into important and controlling influence. SOE officers in Yugoslavia regarded SOE's failure to develop an effective infiltration programme within the Croat community as an

⁷¹ TNA PRO HS3/210, SO2/096, Bucharest, 9 Jan. 1941 XCG 70 and telegrams which immediately follow.

⁷² TNA PRO FO371/29967 R7069/G, From Yugoslavia, Tel. No 559, Fortnightly Report, 14 Aug. 1940.

⁷³ Amery, *Autobiography*, p.171.

important hindrance. Glanville in Zagreb, in particular, felt that this meant that the organisation was unable to counter the propaganda of the Croatian Peasant Party 'on the rights and claims of Croatia (which) undoubtedly weakened the Yugoslav idea in Croatia'.⁷⁴ Secondly, what comes through is the degree of improvisation and amateurish approach. In London, many members of the Foreign Office were intensely suspicious of SOE, 'first of all as a joke, then as a menace.'⁷⁵ Thirdly, there are general file references to Yugoslav politicians, newspaper editors and contacts in the pay of several foreign powers.

As the Southern Department appreciated, all the great powers were 'devilling' in Yugoslavia.⁷⁶ In addition to Germany and Italy's political and economic contacts and pressure on the Belgrade Government, Italy was concentrating on her imperial ambitions in Croatia and Dalmatia. Mussolini had provided long-standing support of Macedonian insurrectionists and the Ustashi. There was the advantage of Ante Pavelic, exiled in Italy. Mussolini had offered to fund Macek and his Croat Peasant Party before the *Sporazum* of August 1939). Jesuit priests were reportedly intriguing in Croatia against the central government in support of Pavelic, and in favour of Italy. There was also Italian support of the Francovici (essentially anti-Serb and pro-Axis), who had clandestine members in 'many strategic posts in the administration of Croatia and at the Headquarters of the

⁷⁴ TNA PRO HS5/935, NERO Report.

⁷⁵ Gladwyn, *Memoirs*, p.103.

⁷⁶ TNA PRO FO371/24890 R6597/G, Clutton file note 12 June 1940. Hoptner concluded that whereas the prime concern for Yugoslavia in 1940 was Italian pressure, by early 1941 it proved a battle between Britain and Germany. Littlefield concentrated on Germany and Italy, and is dismissive of British activity.

CPP'.⁷⁷ Germany sought to build up her own espionage network, through the German Tourist Office in Belgrade, and infiltration of the Croat community (in Army headquarters, at political and administrative level) in Zagreb; there was also the advantage of the sizeable German minority in Voivodina (approximately 450,000), the establishment of the *Kulturebund* as a focus of German organisation and propaganda, the research and investment of large sums of money into radio broadcasting to Yugoslavia, and transmission jamming; SIS and SOE in Zagreb were convinced that Germany engineered the assassination of the SOE agent, G. S. Frodsham, in September 1940.⁷⁸ There was also the question of traditional French contacts within Yugoslav politics and commerce, now compromised by the defeat of France in June 1940 and the establishment of the Vichy government. Finally, although there are frequent references in the files to British appreciation of the importance of Russian attitudes and behaviour on Slav opinion,⁷⁹ the documents do not show any awareness of Russian activity. In addition to the establishment of a Soviet mission in Belgrade following the commencement of diplomatic relations in May 1940 between Belgrade and Moscow, the Soviet Union was developing her own intelligence network (through left-wing journalists,

⁷⁷ TNA PRO HS5/912, Glen Report, 17 Nov. 1941.

⁷⁸ Clissold Papers, MS Eng C.2683, D/H6 to AD, 5 June 1945: Note on the death of G. S. Frodsham. The British received regular information from Prince Paul, their own contacts with the Yugoslav police and authorities, and from within wider Yugoslav society. This information was passed on to the Yugoslav authorities.

⁷⁹ For example, TNA PRO FO371/30223 R173/G, Palairet, Athens to London, Tel. No. 30, 6 Jan. 1941.

newspaper editors, such as Vladislav Ribnikar, Director of *Politika*, and academics at the University of Belgrade).⁸⁰

SOE Activity and Tensions with the British Minister

The lack of detailed co-ordination and outlook between Section D/SOE and the British Legation in Belgrade further conspired to limit British influence. Indeed, the tensions between Section D/SOE and the British Legation, particularly, the Minister, Campbell, point again to the inconsistencies and paradoxes of UK policy in Yugoslavia. Given the predominance in Yugoslavia of Serbs in government, administrative and military positions, it is not surprising that Britain focussed its attention primarily on the Serb section of the population. SOE's concerted policy was designed to bolster the Serbian opposition, and to develop a united Serbian Front against any concessions to Germany and Italy.⁸¹ All commentators have noted the subsidy offered to the Serbian Peasant Party, and the anglophile outlook and passionate anti-German views of its leader, Milan Gavrilovic (the Yugoslav representative in Moscow from June 1940), and Milos Tupanjanin, his Deputy.

SOE officials⁸² at the Legation were assiduous in developing their relationship with these politicians. Glen knew Milan Gavrilovic well, and regularly spent one afternoon a week visiting his wife and family in Belgrade after Gavrilovic's departure to Moscow as Yugoslavia's first

⁸⁰ See Milovan Djilas: *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, translated by Drenka Willen (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), and Gabriel Gorodetsky: *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999). Russian influence was inhibited by the Trotskyist struggle within the Moscow Soviet Party; and Comintern did not enjoy close relations with the Yugoslav Communist Party. Djilas, p.370.

⁸¹ TNA PRO HS5/938, Weekly Report, 22 Oct. 1940.

⁸² The SOE Officials were Alexander Glen, Julian Amery, and John Bennett.

Ambassador to the Soviet Union. From July 1940 until the German invasion, Glen was 'at least in daily contact with Tupanjanin and also in frequent touch with many of the leading politicians in the Serbian Peasant Party'.⁸³ By March 1941 SOE had also developed close links with the leaders of the Radical (Momcilo Nincic) and Democrat Parties (Dr Groll, Boka Vlaic and Dr Radjoe Knesevic). Also SOE established contact, initiated originally by Julian Amery, with Djonovic and the Yugoslav Nationalist party; but Amery's successors perceived that political support for this organisation was 'limited to property-owning bourgeoisie and pensionaries of the Jeftic Government' which was largely discredited.⁸⁴

For Britain, the advantages of the Serbian Peasant Party were fourfold. Unlike the larger Radical and Democratic Parties (the largest Serbian political parties in Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro), the SPP was represented in the Yugoslav Government, whereas the other Serbian parties stood determinedly aloof from Prince Paul's regime. Thus, the SPP minister, Branko Cubrilovic, (and his allies – Mihailo Kostantinovic and Budisavlevic) through Tupanjanin, provided a valuable insight into the machinations of the Council. SOE also believed that unlike the other Serb Ministers – who were regarded as 'merely yes-men willing to do the Prince's bidding' – as the SPP ministers represented a political party, this would increase these ministers' influence in British attempts to modify and reverse the trend of the Regent's foreign policy. Secondly, as SOE agents saw, they were able to collaborate with the British because of the

⁸³ Confusingly, in his report, Glen refers to it as the Agrarian Party. TNA PRO HS5/921, Report by Lieutenant Commander Glen on his relations with the Yugoslavs, 17 Nov. 1941.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

'greater immunity which they enjoyed as participants in the Cvetkovic Government.'⁸⁵

Thirdly, as the party representing a section of the Serbian peasantry – this class comprised 80 per cent of Yugoslavia – it possessed vital grass roots support in Bosnia and Montenegro, and the potential to appeal to the strategically important region of Old Serbia, should Prince Paul falter. The Serb Peasant Party also provided another conduit to Moscow, through Gavrilovic. And, finally, under Tupanjanin's leadership, the Serbian Peasant party was also preparing for action in secret – another attraction as far as SOE was concerned (hence their advocacy of a subsidy from the UK in July 1940). As other commentators have pointed out, SOE's contacts with the Serb community extended to the nationalist organisations' leader, Ilija Trifunovic, well known as 'a leader of men... and with great influence in all sections of Yugoslav life'.⁸⁶ This represented potentially a very influential network throughout Serbia, some 200,000 strong, with associations in every Serbian town.

The combination of SOE sabotage activity, contacts with opponents of Prince Paul's regime, the advocacy of funding and arming paramilitary organisations, and the proposal to fund a minority political party drove the tensions between SOE and the Legation into the open. In the literature occasional references appear to the British Minister in Sofia Sir George Rendel's dislike of SOE operations in Bulgaria, and pointed contrasts are drawn to Ronald Campbell's supposedly more relaxed approach to SOE activities in Yugoslavia. This is

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ TNA PRO HS5/938, SOE Yugoslavia 99, Report to D/H2 from A/HG, 2 Aug. 1940, Belgrade. The nationalist organisations comprised the *Narodna Odbrana*, the Chetniks, the Veterans Associations, the Order of the White Eagle with Swords, and other World War I resistance associations.

an exaggeration. Campbell barely tolerated SOE activities; and at various points in the files there appear flares of irritation and dislike towards the 'amateur assassins' and their political naivety. Section D's activities in Yugoslavia evolved piecemeal, and following the expulsion of Julius Hanau, Becker and Hudson in April 1940, there was an unhappy period when a quartet of Glen, Amery, Lawrenson and Glanville attempted to co-ordinate activities. Bill Bailey, head of SOE in Istanbul, later likened the atmosphere in Belgrade to that of 'a bear garden'.⁸⁷ SOE in Belgrade believed that it was 'clear that the Balkan countries are not an end in themselves to HMG, and their interests are subordinate to the intention of HMG to attempt to provoke a state of war between USSR and Germany'.⁸⁸ This ran directly counter to Campbell's conception of British policy.

The conflict between SOE and the Legation came to a head in August 1940. SOE schemes of blocking the Danube to German-bound freight had fizzled out in that summer, as they conflicted with the aims of other British Departments. It was argued in Belgrade that any attempt to block the Danube would have a 'somewhat bad effect on Yugoslav military opinion, since they would feel that their last connection to the seas controlled by the Allies was gone'. Such schemes raised issues of major strategy: 'the potential value of Yugoslavia as an ally against the possibility, the chance daily becoming more remote, of making an effective block in the Danube for the purpose of stopping the oil'.⁸⁹ The parallel suggestion to subsidising the SPP, transmitted via the veteran politician and

⁸⁷ TNA PRO HS3/244, to DHS from DH2, Istanbul, 19 Sept. 1950.

⁸⁸ TNA PRO HS5/938, AHA to HM Min., Belgrade, quoted in Report to D/H2 from A/HG, Belgrade, 2 Aug. 1940.

⁸⁹ TNA PRO HS5/199, SOE (unsigned) to J. C. F. Holland, MI(R), War Office, 22 July 1940, SOE Danube River, No. 3.

journalist, Jovan Djonovic and Voivoda Ilija Trifunovic, was that the patriotic groups led by Narodna Odbrana, and the Serbian Church would support a *coup d'état* – and that leading members of the Serbian Peasant Party, important sections of the Army and the peasantry were sympathetic to such ideas.⁹⁰ Julian Amery was one of the principal contacts in this proposal which, it was hoped, would lead to the establishment of a pro-English-Russian-Government in Yugoslavia. The Ambassador's outrage at the activities of SOE's agents boiled over with the discovery of Amery's unilateral mission to sound out leaders of the Bulgarian Peasant Party as to whether there would be the chance of co-ordinated *coup d'états* in Sofia and Belgrade, followed by the establishment of a Balkan Front with the aim of setting up a pan-Slav federation and overt opposition to Germany.⁹¹

Galvanised by the possibility of being inadvertently but actively involved in the overthrow of what he deemed to be the legitimate government – if necessary by violence – Campbell was stung into declaring that, while he would support a subsidy of up to £5,000 per month, he could not condone a *coup d'état*.⁹² In a flurry of telegrams, Campbell

⁹⁰ TNA PRO HS5/938, SOE Yugoslavia 99, Report to D/H2 from A/HG, Belgrade, 2 Aug. 1940; TNA PRO HS5/935, Tel. No. 482, Campbell, Belgrade to SOE London, 25 Jul. 1940. Apparently, not the acting leader, Tupanjanin, but Milan Gavrilovic was clearly sympathetic to such ideas; see HS5/827, Belgrade to Hopkinson, 30 Aug. 1940.

⁹¹ The idea was certainly being considered (see TNA PRO HS5/872, C/D to Major Davis, 19 Sept. 1940) in SOE but a gloomy view was taken of the likelihood of Foreign Office support for such a notion at the moment. (manuscript note by P(hilip) B(road), 23 Sept. 1940). See also Amery, *Autobiography*, pp. 176-85.

⁹² TNA PRO HS5/938, Tel. No. 482, Campbell, Belgrade to SOE London, 25 July 1941. Campbell had suggested the idea of the formation of a South Slav *bloc*, including Bulgaria, as a barrier against Germany and Italy, 'in some degree associated with Russia.' 'But both the USSR and Yugoslavia seem far

begged London to put an end to such behaviour: 'the whole thing [is] clumsy and amateurish', and described Section D operatives as a collection of 'bomb happy parvenus', compromising official diplomatic channels with Prince Paul and the UK Government's express policy of preserving 'peaceful conditions' in Yugoslavia.⁹³ This reflected Campbell's fears that any action by Britain 'might definitely provoke Germany to overrun Yugoslavia'.⁹⁴

The expressed policy of HMG is (a) to maintain the status quo in the Balkans and (b) to embroil Russia with Germany. I believe the two are dependent upon each other, and in fact the accomplishment of the first is essential to the successful timing of the second and more important.⁹⁵

The Foreign Office in London temporised, equally intent on their policy of embroiling Germany and Russia in eventual conflict via the Balkans, and painfully aware of the paucity of British aid that could be offered to a Yugoslav war effort should such an abrupt change of government precipitate a German attack. 'It is by no means certain that the Chiefs of Staff would now recommend anything calculated to "set the Balkans in a blaze".' But London did not dismiss the idea out of hand:

from ready to take the risk, and I presume HMG and the Turkish Government would view any such development with a certain amount of misgiving.' TNA PRO FO371/24890 R6433/G, Campbell to London Tel. No. 443, 11 July 1940.

⁹³ TNA PRO HS5/938, Tel. No. 494, Campbell, Belgrade, to London, 30 July 1940, and Tel. No. 541, Campbell to London, 10 Sept. 1940.

⁹⁴ TNA PRO HS5/938, File note unsigned, 17 Aug. 1940.

⁹⁵ TNA PRO HS5/938, Memo by AHA to HM Min., Belgrade, 2 August 1940.

We cannot possibly give any support to these elements in Yugoslavia for the moment but we must be careful not to give them too much of a cold douche with the result that they do not come back to us later when the time is riper for an attempt of the kind discussed here.⁹⁶

However, growing pressure from Germany against British personnel 'made establishment [of a] shadow organisation of immediate importance'. The subsidy of £4,000 was finally authorised in October 1940, with the stipulation that funds did not reach the SPP 'through anyone connected with Legation.'⁹⁷ The consciences of the opponents at the British Legation and in London who opposed the notion of supporting a *coup* against Prince Paul, were soothed by SOE's view that Tupanjanin and the Serbian Peasant party 'had nothing whatever to do with the larger scheme'.⁹⁸

Although London poured cold water on the notion of supporting a *coup d'état* in the summer, and again in the autumn of 1940 when the idea was mooted again by Serb dissidents, it was agreed that SOE's aim of setting up and equipping resistance to the anticipated German occupation should be implemented. Campbell reluctantly agreed. The Legation remained acutely aware of the anomalies of this proposal of paying a subsidy to a political party and its supporting paramilitary organisation – and the potential for conflicting policies, which would place the Legation in an invidious position in its role as His Majesty's representative to the recognised, neutral Yugoslav Government. The Minister was mollified by the recall of Amery to London, and the

appointment of Tom Masterson as SOE head in Belgrade in October 1940 – with the express instruction of reining in SOE enthusiasm, and concentrating on political work.⁹⁹ However, the Minister remained deeply unhappy at the policy of equipping potential opponents of the Prince Regent (without his official knowledge). Regular consignments of detonators, explosives, fuses, limpets, wicks, knuckledusters, rifles and grenades were sent to Belgrade by courier from London and, from late 1940, from the British Military Mission in Athens.¹⁰⁰ These 'toys and chocolate', as they were coyly referred to in the telegrams, were stored in Masterson's office in the Legation annex, before being distributed to Serb contacts and buried in arms caches in the hills. The intention was to build up a large resistance network in the countryside, together with specific plans for demolition and sabotage.¹⁰¹

Amery was to accuse London and the Legation of missing a golden opportunity in the summer/autumn of 1940 in not being bold and supporting a *coup*.¹⁰² Glanville agreed

⁹⁹ As part of the reorganisation of Section D, Yugoslavia was brought under the remit of Istanbul Office. It was arranged that SOE Yugoslavia would be housed in a separate building from the British Legation, although the head of SOE station would be under diplomatic cover in the Legation. 'Previously it was both expedient and desirable that the diplomatic missions in the various countries in which D was operating should know as little as possible about their activities. Now the position is radically changed, since it is obvious that HM Representatives must be fully advised of all political activities in their countries, even though these are to be carried out by agents not completely under their control.' TNA PRO HS3/217, Most Secret, Memorandum on the Reorganisation of D Activities, Istanbul, 29 Nov. 1940.

¹⁰⁰ Sweet-Escott, pp.22-24.

¹⁰¹ General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, took a great interest in these plans which he wished to supplement British intervention in Greece. See HS5/928, Report by Colonel Taylor and T S Masterson on Certain SO2 Activities in Yugoslavia, undated.

¹⁰² Amery, *Autobiography*, p.183.

⁹⁶ TNA PRO HS5/872, Philip Broad minute, 30 July 1940. TNA PRO HS5/872 Belgrade to London, for D/HS from A/HG 19 Aug. 1940, Origin G8D CXG 32.

⁹⁷ TNA PRO HS5/872 A/HG to D/HS 23 July 1940.

⁹⁸ TNA PRO HS5/872 Belgrade to Hopkinson, 30 Aug. 1940.

with him, that the opportunities of 1940 were squandered at a time when Yugoslavia's strategic position was not so enfeebled. It has to be said that *coup* plots appear to have been endemic in Yugoslavia.¹⁰³ General Simovic 'had for some time been considered by elements hostile to the Government of the Prince Regent as a possible "sword" to further its ambitions.'¹⁰⁴ He had been involved in two *coup* attempts in early 1938 (prompted by the question of the Concordat with the Vatican) and again in December 1938 after the General Election. In May 1940 three retired Serbian Generals, who represented one of the Army clubs, concocted a scheme in Zagreb to assassinate Prince Paul the following month.¹⁰⁵ (SOE soon learned when members of the opposition made another approach to the General in October 1940, asking him to lead a *coup d'état*. The General's answer was non-committal.)¹⁰⁶ It was certainly evidence of the Minister's and the Foreign Office's caution; but given Britain's diplomatic isolation and the threat of imminent invasion of Great Britain in 1940, it was seen, not unnaturally, as an unacceptably reckless gamble. Eden, both as Secretary of State for War, and from December 1940, Foreign Secretary, set little store by SOE projects and proposals,¹⁰⁷ and only turned to them in desperation in March 1941.

Thus, the sum of British policy towards Yugoslavia appears to be fragmented and inconsistent, reflecting a lack of overall supervision and a failure of co-ordination and

¹⁰³ See Hoptner, pp.247-50.

¹⁰⁴ TNA PRO HS5/938, 'Some notes on Yugoslav Politics since 27th March 1941', unsigned Report, 10 June 1941.

¹⁰⁵ TNA PRO HS5/935, NERO Report, 27 Sept. 1941

¹⁰⁶ TNA PRO HS5/938, 'Some notes on Yugoslav Politics since 27th March 1941', unsigned Report, 10 June 1941.

¹⁰⁷ Papers of the 1st Earl of Avon, University of Birmingham Library [hereafter Avon Papers], Eden Diary, AP20/1/17-23 1937-1943, 15 Jan. 1941.

cohesion – ultimately, a failure of leadership. In Yugoslavia, by the end of 1940, there was apparent concord of outlook between the various actors, but conflicting objectives and beliefs underpinned this. At best, an uneasy truce had been established between the British operating in Yugoslavia. Throughout the second half of 1940 SOE worked to build up a Serbian front among the Serbian opposition, with the Serbian Peasant Party the spearhead of their attack. SOE also concentrated efforts to develop relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church (although this organisation was officially outside politics) and those church leaders 'who are working for Serb unity and resistance to German or Italian demands'. Although London was inclined to view optimistically apparent signs of Yugoslavia's stiffening resolve against the Axis advance into the Balkans, SOE agents took an increasingly sceptical view of the value of Prince Paul to the British cause, and by December 1940, were reporting to Istanbul HQ that 'there is a real possibility Prince Regent ultimately being obliged to play role analogous to King Carol', and by implication 'to ensure [Yugoslavia's] entry into war if and when her government makes any dangerous concessions to Germany'.¹⁰⁸

Yugoslavia at the Centre of British Strategic Planning

As Barker has pointed out, the evolution of British policy towards Yugoslavia between early November 1940 and March 1941 was driven by her concerns for her ally, Greece, and by the deteriorating situation in the Balkans.¹⁰⁹ With the fall of

¹⁰⁸ TNA PRO HS5/938, Memo AH10 to DH2 and DH/R, 9 Nov. 1940.

¹⁰⁹ Barker, p.87. John Colville Diary, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, CLVL1/4, 12 Feb. 1941. Dill became convinced that the only way to stop the Balkans 'being devoured piecemeal (was) to go to Greece with all that (Britain could) find as soon as it (could) be done. The risks are admittedly

France in June 1940, Britain had nominally adopted the attitude of seeking to entangle Germany and the Soviet Union in the region, but in reality supported Prince Paul's pursuit of neutrality to keep the Balkans quiet.¹¹⁰ Enigma decrypts from November 1940 onwards revealed that this was no longer a viable policy. Hence Britain changed tack from late 1940 to pressing Belgrade not to adhere to the Tripartite Pact; pursuit of neutrality was no longer enough.¹¹¹ Therefore, UK policy towards Yugoslavia and ultimate support for the *coup* was defined by British strategic and power-political aims in the spring of 1941, and determination to resist the anticipated German attack on her ally, Greece – either through Bulgaria, or Yugoslavia.

The fragmentation and inconsistencies of British policy and activity in Yugoslavia, the inherent flaws *versus* the political expectations of British policy, came to repose in the new Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, who had his own particular agenda.¹¹² In his critical biography of Eden, David Carlton attributes the resulting military fiasco in Greece to Eden's own lack of critical judgement.¹¹³ Eden has been heavily criticised, both in the House of Commons on his return in April 1941, and by subsequent writers, for his role in the disastrous Greek campaign. Certainly, the Foreign Secretary was a politician who relied heavily upon his civil servants and, in his peripatetic tour of the Near East between

considerable but inaction would in my view be fatal.' CIGS Sir John Dill message to Gen. Haining, VCIGS, quoted in Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Part Three, The Reckoning* (London: Cassell, 1965), p.198.

¹¹⁰ Hopes of transforming the Balkan Entente into a Balkan front had foundered on Bulgarian revanchism.

¹¹¹ Wheeler, p.29-30

¹¹² TNA PRO CAB 65/22 WM(41)27, Concl. Minute 6, 10 Mar. 1941.

¹¹³ See Carlton: *Anthony Eden, A Biography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p.170-82.

February and early-April, he was accompanied only by Pierson Dixon of the Southern Department, and Sir John Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. This naturally enhanced the importance of Eden's own perceptions and decisions. While this policy of pursuing a Balkan front, and then endorsing a *coup* in Belgrade, was clearly a highly personal one for Eden, the Foreign Secretary was acting on Churchill's instructions and was in close contact with the War Cabinet in London. Eden was in essence holding the ring between the Prime Minister – who desired to wear the Germans down in every theatre – and the Mediterranean Commanders-in-Chief who only reluctantly accepted the political arguments for the Greek campaign. Eden also had the vital backing of Jan Smuts, the South African Premier, who was present in Cairo at the crucial meetings between Eden, Dill, Wavell and his area commanders. Smuts' endorsement of the political and diplomatic arguments for intervening in Greece, had a powerful influence upon both Churchill and Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister.¹¹⁴

Overall, Eden's ultimate decision to authorise UK involvement in a *coup d'état* against Prince Paul's regime was to save Britain's Greek venture, to bolster Turkey's resolve against the German advance into the Balkans, and because of the associated perceived benefits in the United States, Vichy France, Spain and the Soviet Union.¹¹⁵ Yugoslavia was thus part of a complex pattern of elements that Britain was attempting to forge into a bulwark against German advance. 'The best way of ensuring that Turkey would fight would be to give effective help to the Greeks. If we failed in this, we should lose all hope of facing Germany with the Balkan front,

¹¹⁴ TNA PRO CAB65/22 WM(41) 27 Concl. Minute 6, 10 Mar. 1941.

¹¹⁵ John Colville Diary, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, CLVL1/4, 12 Feb. 1941.

we should probably lose our safe communications with Turkey, and we should lose Yugoslavia.¹¹⁶ The problem now confronting London was to give diplomatic reality to these military and political decisions.

At the outset of his tour of the Near East, Eden was instructed by Churchill 'to deal directly with the Yugoslav and Turkish Governments, with the object of making both countries fight at the same time or do the best they could'.¹¹⁷ The Foreign Secretary's mission was paralleled by SO2 Deputy Director George Taylor's tour of the Near East to establish post-occupational wireless networks and sabotage and resistance, to support the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, General Wavell's plans and General Wilson's operations in Greece.¹¹⁸ In Eden's tour of the Near East from 22 February to 6 April 1941, the Foreign Secretary attempted to bring the wider world to bear upon Yugoslavia. In this, Eden adopted a four-fold approach. Initially the War Cabinet's idea was to boost Yugoslavia's resolve by aiding Greece. Failure to help Athens would mean 'there is no hope of action by Yugoslavia'.¹¹⁹ This was Churchill's view too.¹²⁰ However, under Eden, this policy was turned on its head, and Yugoslavia and Turkey were to save Greece.¹²¹ Secondly, Eden sought to use Turkey as the means to draw Yugoslavia into

¹¹⁶ Eden in Defence Committee (Operations) minutes, 10 Feb. 1941, quoted in Martin Gilbert (ed.) *The War Papers of Winston Churchill: The Ever Widening War*, Vol. III (London: Heinemann, 2000), p.200.

¹¹⁷ *Eden Memoirs*, p.193. See TNA PRO PREM3/294/1, for record of Eden's mission.

¹¹⁸ TNA PRO HS5/166, Report to Dalton from Taylor, Istanbul, 10 Feb. 1941, and Dalton/Taylor, Athens, 11 Mar. 1941.

¹¹⁹ *Eden Memoirs*, p.197

¹²⁰ Churchill to Ismay, for Chiefs of Staff Committee, 7 Jan.1941, quoted in Gilbert, p. 43-44.

¹²¹ See Wheeler, p.33.

regional military planning and diplomatic defiance. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill, conceived Turkey as being more important strategically than Greece. 'Yugoslavia will not fight unless Turkey fights and the converse is very likely true.'¹²² Thirdly, Eden attempted to use American, Greek and Soviet channels to bolster Yugoslav resistance. And, fourthly, Britain was to exert pressure on Prince Paul's Government to resist German pressure, and Italian enticement to join the Axis, using British diplomatic contacts, and SOE's illicit network.

Through this complex policy, London hoped to revive the notion of ideas of a Balkan *bloc*.¹²³ Through his own personal contacts and persuasion, the Legation staff in Belgrade, and the Washington and Moscow Embassies, Eden tried to draw the threads together. Prince Paul had already made abundantly clear his opposition to the idea of reinforcing Greece.¹²⁴ Yet Eden was convinced that he could pull it off: 'that Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia would all eventually come into the fight, but there would be a lot of slipping and slipping before that happens.'¹²⁵ At the critical meeting at Tatoi on 23 February 1941 between Greece and British personnel, Yugoslavia inadvertently became the strategic epicentre of British plans in the Balkans. However, the importance General Papagos attached to the Yugoslav response to Greek and British overtures, combined with the Greek determination to defend Salonika, escaped both Eden

¹²² Dill to Gen. Haining, VCIGS, quoted in *Eden Memoirs*, p.197.

¹²³ These had been circulating since April 1939. Britain originally had hoped to use this to underpin Balkan neutrality, and had firmly opposed French ideas of opening a Salonika front 1939-40. See Barker, pp.11-20.

¹²⁴ TNA PRO FO371/30089 R278/G, Campbell to London, Tel. No. 61, 12 Jan. 1941.

¹²⁵ *FRUS* Vol. II, 1941, Min. in Greece to Secretary of State, 2 Mar. 1941, p. 654.

and Dill. Only in the final stages did Yugoslavia become the prime focus of British attentions – that is, after the failure of Eden's mission to Turkey, Bulgaria's accession to the Tripartite Pact on 1 March, and the awful realisation on 5 March 1941 that the Greeks had not withdrawn to the Aliakmon line as Eden and Dill had anticipated.¹²⁶ Thereafter, British policy became a desperate race prevent Yugoslavia's signature of the Tripartite Pact to protect Britain's exposed flank in Greece, comprising Commonwealth troops (from Australia and New Zealand, which was politically very sensitive in itself, given the theatre of war.)¹²⁷

Eden stressed repeatedly – in his memoirs, in correspondence with Churchill, and in telegrams to London – that Turkey was the key to the whole Balkan situation, and did his best to promote a Balkan *bloc* to withstand Germany's advance.¹²⁸ At the UK's instigation – through the Southern Department, the Ankara Legation, and then the Foreign Secretary – in mid-January and early-February there had ensued an elaborate dance between Yugoslavia and Turkey, as British diplomats and the military painstakingly attempted to nudge Turkey and Yugoslavia closer together.¹²⁹ The bait offered to each side was that a German threat to Salonika would constitute a *casus belli* for the other: but neither Belgrade nor Ankara responded. The Southern Department fumed over the 'typical Balkan muddle' of the misunderstanding of instructions despatched to the Turkish

¹²⁶ TNA PRO PREM3/309, Athens to Foreign Office, Tel. No. 313, from Secretary of State and CIGS for Churchill, 5 Mar. 1941.

¹²⁷ Churchill to Eden, 5 Mar. 1941, quoted in Gilbert, p.311.

¹²⁸ Eden Diary entry 29 Jan. 1941, quoted in Eden *Diaries*, p.188. Also AP/20/8/406, Eden to Churchill, 8 Feb. 1941.

¹²⁹ TNA PRO FO371/29802 R1995/G, Orme Sargent minute, 24 Feb. 1941 (summarising HMG efforts to induce Turkey and Yugoslavia to enter the war on Britain's side.)

Ambassador in Belgrade and his *demarche* to the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹³⁰ However, the plan for concerted action between Turkey and Yugoslavia remained 'a most important part of [British] policy in the Balkans.'¹³¹ Eden attempted again by direct discussions with the Turkish Foreign Minister in Ankara at the end of February 1941 – his 'jaunty telegram' enraged the War Cabinet, as there was clearly no substance underpinning his hopes of Turkish action.¹³² The Legation and military staff in Angora were profoundly dubious about Eden's policy, and their Government's attempts 'to hustle the Turks faster than their temperamental and technological situations would justify'.¹³³ On 18 March Eden tried again at a meeting with Cyprus with Sarajoglu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, and Greek representatives. He finally managed to extract the statement that an attack on Salonika would constitute a 'mortal danger' (but not the desired '*casus belli*') for Turkey; as he telegraphed Campbell in Belgrade, this was the best he could do.¹³⁴ To the immense frustration of the Foreign Secretary, the Turkish Government subsequently refused to send new instructions to their Belgrade minister because of the Cabinet crisis in

¹³⁰ TNA PRO FO371/30231 R557/G, R. Bowker file note, 29 Jan. 1941. See R685/G for summary of exchange of telegrams and hesitant response of Angora and Belgrade. The American Ambassador in Angora reported that the Germans had broken the Turkish diplomatic codes and speculated that the instructions from Angora to the Turkish Mission in Belgrade had been distorted. *FRUS*, 1941, Vol. III, Ambassador MacMurray to Secretary of State, 21 Mar. 1941, p.835.

¹³¹ TNA PRO FO371/30231 RR685/G, Clutton file note, 4 Feb. 1941.

¹³⁴ *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (Cassell, London 1971), 28 Feb. 1941, p.359.

¹³³ *FRUS*, 1941, Vol. III, Ambassador MacMurray, Angora, to Secretary of State, 25 Feb. 1941, p.825.

¹³⁴ TNA PRO FO371/30231, R2893/G, Eden, Angora, to Belgrade, Tel. No. 150, 23 Mar. 1941.

Yugoslavia – precipitated by the resignation of three Serb politicians on 20 March. (It is ironic that this was the work of SOE in close co-ordination with Tupanjanin.).¹³⁵

Eden and London had much more success co-ordinating their Balkan policy, and consequent pressure on Prince Paul's regime, with the Roosevelt Administration. Historians have pointed in general terms to the 'common law marriage' that developed between the United States and Britain following the offer of Lend Lease in December 1940. Yugoslavia was one of the first manifestations of the evolving partnership. Therefore, those historians such as Mark Wheeler, who concentrate exclusively on the London/Belgrade angle, miss the vital dimension of British policy towards Yugoslavia, and indeed the Balkans as a whole. Building upon Colonel Donovan's tour of the Balkans,¹³⁶ and Harry Hopkins's extended visit to London,¹³⁷ there was increasing co-ordination of policy and diplomatic activity with the United States.¹³⁸ Eden attempted to use American diplomatic

¹³⁵ *FRUS*, 1941, Vol. III, Ambassador MacMurray to Secretary of State, 25 Mar. 1941, p.837. See TNA PRO FO371/30231 R2937/G, Philip Nichols file note, 24 Mar. 1941.

¹³⁶ See entire file TNA PRO FO371/29292 'Colonel Donovan's Visit'. Donovan stayed at the British Legation in Athens at the same time as General Wavell in Jan. 1941, and 'was able to have a first hand account of the negotiations with the Greek Government from the Commander in Chief'. (Palairot, Athens to London, Tel No 2 Saving, 18 Feb. 1941). On 6 Feb. Donovan raised the issue with Eden of what action Pres. Roosevelt could take to assist British diplomacy in the Balkans. (Avon Papers: AP/20/8/407 and 407A, Eden to Churchill, 8 Feb. 1941.) Donovan also sat in conference with Eden, Dill and Wavell in Cairo on 20 Feb. 1941 See Bradley Smith: *The Shadow Warriors: the OSS and the Origins of the CIA* (New York, NY: Basic, 1983), pp. 48-51.

¹³⁷ See Robert E. Sherwood: *The White House Papers of Harry L. Hopkins*, Vol. 1 *Sept. 1939-January 1942* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1948), pp.231-63.

¹³⁸ See entire file TNA PRO FO/371/29792 'Colonel Donovan's visit'; and FO371/29795, R1005/G, GOC, Palestine and Transjordan, to War Office,

support and pressure upon both Turkey and Yugoslavia. He also approached the American Ambassadors in both capitals to request that the State Department in Washington try and persuade the President to offer Lend-Lease material to each, rather than channelling it through Britain.¹³⁹ Eden was earnestly hoping that Turkey would realise that 'American industry would tip the balance in the war.'¹⁴⁰ The American Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, had already instructed the American Minister in Belgrade, Arthur Bliss Lane, to emphasise to the Belgrade Government 'the position of the United States ... with regard to the present European conflict. Particular emphasis is laid on American aid to Great Britain and Greece.'¹⁴¹ London continued to urge Washington to encourage Turkey and Yugoslavia 'to work together in resisting outside aggression.'¹⁴² This had the wholehearted support of Lane, who used all opportunities to reinforce the message; the lure of American support for post-war political and geographical readjustments was extended.¹⁴³ Eden met Colonel William Donovan on 20 February 1941 and asked him to convey a message to Roosevelt requesting help with British

Immediate HP/MS/4502 Cipher 5/2 Secret, Personal from GIGS from Colonel Dykes. Dykes was the British officer accompanying Donovan on his tour.

¹³⁹ TNA PRO FO371/29792 R1005/G, Eden to Churchill, 8 Feb. 1941; *FRUS*, 1941, Vol. II, British Embassy to Department of State, Aide Memoire, 4 Feb. 1941 p.940; Vol. III, Memorandum of Conversation by Secretary of State, 3 Mar. 1941. p.828.

¹⁴⁰ *FRUS* 1941, Vol. III, Ambassador in Turkey to Secretary of State, 27 Feb. 1941, p.826.

¹⁴¹ *FRUS* 1941, Vol. II, Secretary of State to Minister in Yugoslavia, 29 Jan. 1941, p.940.

¹⁴² *FRUS* 1941, Vol. II, Memorandum of Conversation by Secretary of State, 5 Feb. 1941, p.941.

¹⁴³ *FRUS* 1941, Vol. II, Minister in Yugoslavia to Secretary of State, 11 Feb. 1941, p.943.

overstrained shipping resources in the Mediterranean.¹⁴⁴ Churchill similarly pressed Roosevelt, when informing him of Britain's decision to aid Greece:

At this juncture the action of Yugoslavia is cardinal. No country ever had such a military chance. If they will fall on the Italian rear in Albania there is no measuring what might happen in a few weeks. The whole situation might be transformed, and the action of Turkey also decided in our favour. One has the feeling that Russia, though actuated mainly by fear, might at least give some reassurance to Turkey about not pressing her in the Caucasus or turning against her in the Black Sea. I need scarcely say that the concerted influence of your Ambassadors in Turkey, Russia, and above all Yugoslavia, would be of enormous value at the moment, and indeed might possibly turn the scales.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, there was close co-ordination of policy with Lord Halifax, Ambassador in Washington, and the US State Department. Both the Foreign Office and the US Treasury Department were disturbed by Yugoslavia's request to transfer her financial holdings – both London and Washington wished to prevent these funds from being transferred 'out of reach', to Brazil.¹⁴⁶ As Yugoslavia's acceptance of the Tripartite Pact seemed imminent, Halifax was instructed to get the American Government 'if possible to send further instructions to their Minister in Belgrade with a view, *inter alia*, to ensuring

¹⁴⁴ Eden *Dairies*, p.195l.

¹⁴⁵ *FRUS* 1941, Vol. II, Churchill to Roosevelt, 10 Mar. 1941, p.951.

¹⁴⁶ *FRUS* 1941, Vol. II, Sec of State to Minister in Yugoslavia, 15 Mar. 1941. Eden Diary, AP20/1/1-24 – AP/3/1-11 Pocket Diaries 1921-1976, entry 17 Mar. 1941, AP20/3/2, Greece.

that if Yugoslavia signs anything that instrument shall include an assurance by Germany that she will not attack Salonika.'¹⁴⁷ The US State Department responded by instructing the American Minister in Belgrade to inform the Yugoslav Government that 'the US Government would freeze all Yugoslav assets should Yugoslavia make any agreement with Germany which affected Yugoslavia's independence', gave military facilities to Germany, or affected the security of British military forces.¹⁴⁸ The BBC monitored Serb radio broadcasts in the US, and highlighted them on the BBC.¹⁴⁹ However, there was not complete unity of approach between London and Washington. Disappointingly for Britain, this American support did not extend to suggesting Yugoslavia take offensive action. Similarly, American offers of support remained deliberately vague – promises of material and moral support to maintain her independence, rather than the specific offer of armaments from American production. America looked to Britain to promise to lend 'material military aid with air force and ground force'.¹⁵⁰ And, once the Yugoslav Government had offered assurances about her policy towards Germany and the stiffening of Belgrade's attitude against German pressure, Washington permitted the transfer of half the Yugoslav Government funds held in the USA.¹⁵¹ However, American diplomats on the spot did what they could to lend Britain all possible moral support. During the final frenetic

¹⁴⁷ TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2778/G, File Note by Philip Nichols, 21 Mar. 1941.

¹⁴⁸ TNA PRO FO 371/30253 R2824/G, Campbell, Belgrade, for Secretary of State, Tel No 654, 21 Mar. 1941.

¹⁴⁹ BBC WAC E2/186/4, Note 188, BBC Monthly Intelligence Report, 21 Jan. 1941.

¹⁵⁰ *FRUS* 1941, Vol. II, Secretary of State to Roosevelt, 12 Mar. 1941, p.953.

¹⁵¹ TNA PRO FO371/29781 R2681/G, From Halifax, Special to Eden, Tel. No. 1205, repeated to Cairo and Belgrade, 18 Mar. 1941. The original sum mentioned had been US\$29m.

days in the lead up to the *coup*, to London's immense satisfaction, Halifax reported that America was putting 'all the pressure they could upon Yugoslavia in the same direction as ourselves, but that [they] would certainly consider if they could do more'.¹⁵² Campbell saw Lane at least once a day and the two exchanged information and co-ordinated their diplomatic approaches and pressure on the President of the Council and Government. The Americans in Belgrade were also aware of the extent of British subversive activities in the Balkans. After the abrupt departure of the British Legation on 12 April 1941, the American Consul in Belgrade, Rankin, visited the Legation Annex to ensure that all the 'toys and chocolate' had been removed.¹⁵³

This marked (if not total) British success in co-ordinating policy and diplomatic pressure in the Balkans, and on Yugoslavia in particular, with the Americans was in direct contrast to UK's efforts to recruit the Soviet Union. It was initially hoped that 'the best way of gaining Russia is a good throw in the Balkans'.¹⁵⁴ As well as trying to cajole the Soviets into a stout declaration of support for Yugoslavia (Sir Stafford Cripps and Gavrilovic co-ordinated their activity in Moscow), London was also pressing the Soviet Union to give a formal assurance that it would not attack Turkey in the event of a German attack.¹⁵⁵ The Soviet Union finally announced this formally on 19 March. However, British hopes that the USSR could make good Yugoslavia's armaments deficiencies came

¹⁵² TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2802/G, Halifax to London, Tel No. 1272, 21 Mar. 1941.

¹⁵³ See TNA PRO HS5/912, Tel. GCB SO2/004 to ACSS only, Cipher Telegram from Istanbul, Immediate, 19 Sept. 1941.

¹⁵⁴ Churchill to Eden, 23 Feb. 1941, quoted in Gilbert, p.255.

¹⁵⁵ *FRUS*, 1941, Vol. III, Ambassador MacMurray to Secretary of State, Ankara, 19 Mar. 1941, p.832.

to nothing. The Soviets refused to be drawn into a commitment to support the neutrality and independence of the Balkan states.

Finally, there is the bilateral relationship and the pressure that Britain sought to exert on Prince Paul, and Prime Minister Cvetkovic between January and March 1941. Wheeler, Stafford and Barker have all reviewed this, pointing to the established method of monarchical missives, and visits from trusted British friends (such as Henry 'Chips' Channon).¹⁵⁶ As Yugoslavia's decision seemed to hang in the balance, there were repeated requests for audiences and increasingly frenetic messages from Eden; the despatch of Terence Shone, the former First Secretary at the Belgrade Legation and a close friend of the Prince Regent; Churchill's personal appeal to the President of the Council, Cvetkovic; exhortations from the Minister, Campbell; offers to consider Yugoslavia's ethnographic claim to the Istrian Isthmus and islands in Adriatic in the post-war peace settlement. (Britain did not think it necessary to tell the Americans that this had been proposed.)¹⁵⁷ Official diplomatic channels were backed by SOE efforts to orchestrate particularly Serbian dissatisfaction with the pro-German drift of the Regent's Government, through nationalist petitions, co-ordinating the resignation of three Serb ministers with Tujanjanin; and increased broadcasts by the BBC designed to bring 'all possible pressure' to bear in the Serb-Croat programmes,¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Although R. A. Butler's (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office) Private Secretary, Channon was not briefed about the importance of Yugoslavia's attitude given the decision to aid Greece, nor SOE's activities in the country. TNA PRO FO371/24892 R8860/G, Sir G. Thomas to Broad, Ministry of Economic Warfare, PJD 23 Dec. 1940.

¹⁵⁷ TNA PRO FO371/30240 R1949/G, Cadogan to Churchill, 28 Feb. 1941.

¹⁵⁸ TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2916/G, Nichols, 24 Mar. 1941.

which culminated in Leo Amery's call to Serbian resistance on 26 March – attributed mistakenly by his colleagues to tipping the balance.¹⁵⁹

None of this co-ordinated diplomatic activity and pressure succeeded in preventing the Yugoslav Government's signature of the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941. The Foreign Secretary's decision to agree to a *coup* in March therefore marked the failure in the Foreign Office's and the British Legation's preferred approach of reliance upon Prince Paul to 'do the right thing'. This had been perceived as Britain's trump card in Yugoslavia since 1939. It is clear that Tujanjanin had believed that the resignation of three political allies, and the ensuing Cabinet crisis, would either precipitate the fall of the government, or a radical change of foreign policy. This did not happen, and the Turkish Government, much to Eden's frustration, used the political crisis in Belgrade as the excuse not to make a new approach to Yugoslavia: the Turkish Ambassador in Belgrade was instructed to act only 'if he finds the occasion suitable'.¹⁶⁰

The diplomats' faith in Prince Paul died hard: even after the meeting between SOE, SIS and Legation staff on 19 March (which has been pointed to by historians as the crucial point whereat diplomats and British personnel on the spot looked to the formation of an alternative government), the following day Campbell was recommending to Eden that all should be done to minimise the importance of the Pact, if Yugoslavia signed, 'and to keep the Yugoslavs in play'.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ John Barnes and David Nicholson (eds), *The Empire at Bay: The Diaries of Leo Amery 1929-45* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), p.677.

¹⁶⁰ *FRUS* 1941, Vol. III, Ambassador in Turkey to Secretary of State, 25 Mar. 1941, p.837.

¹⁶¹ TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2778/G, Campbell to Secretary of State, No 461, Immediate, 20 Mar. 1941. The following morning (at 5.00am) Campbell sent a

Eden's telegram to Belgrade on 24 March urging the Minister to point out that Prince Paul could still step back from the brink, demonstrates the Foreign Secretary's preference, since on 22 March he had given the Belgrade Legation authority to pursue all means possible, including a *coup d'état*.¹⁶² Now SOE/SIS contacts were perceived to be an alternative card (Eden was particularly fond of bridge analogies), but an uncertain one. Eden himself was very sceptical about Dalton's organisation and its schemes: Southern Department in the Foreign Office in London¹⁶³ – and Eden, judging by the tone of his frenetic telegrams from Cairo¹⁶⁴ – did not believe the *coup* could be pulled off. The earnest hope was that a new Yugoslav government, either a civilian one (which was expected to be overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, Serb), dominated by the military, or – preferably – an authoritarian regime, would reject Prince Paul and his Government's defeatist posture and adherence to the Tripartite Pact, and go on the offensive in Albania. But the Foreign Office was very pessimistic about the chances of success; Tujanjanin's positive reports had been repeatedly discounted on the grounds that he and his party were financed by Britain.¹⁶⁵ Southern Department was already devoting considerable thought of

further message to Eden pointing to 'the possibility of more drastic action.' R2854/G. Tel. No. 654 for Secretary of State, 21 Mar. 1941.

¹⁶² TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2916/G, Eden, Cairo to Belgrade, Tel. No. 709, 24 Mar. 1941;

TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2873/G, Eden, Cairo to Belgrade, Tel. No. 122 (London Tel. No. 659), 22 Mar. 1941.

¹⁶³ TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2871/G, Nichols file note 23 Mar. 1941: 'We must be very careful indeed not to support a *coup d'état* which goes off half cock, and is unsuccessful.'

¹⁶⁴ See TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2871/G, Belgrade from Secretary of State, No 650, 22 Mar. 1941.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, TNA PRO FO371/297799/R2331/G, P. Nichols file note, 12 Mar. 1941.

how best to manage Yugoslavia's adherence to the Tripartite Pact: either by maintaining relations with Prince Paul's Government, or by seeking to foster a separatist regime in southern Serbia with the support of the strategically key Southern Serb Army. The British Minister in Athens, Sir Michael Palairet, had already been instructed to co-operate with General Papagos in a joint effort to 'bring about the secession of the Yugoslav Southern Army.'¹⁶⁶ There was no contingency planning for the actual outcome of the *coup*: namely, a military figurehead and a government of national unity based on all political parties.

Historians have made great play of the fact that Britain ignored the fact that Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact on 25 March without the military clauses. However, the documents made it abundantly clear that for London the prime importance of Yugoslavia's continued resistance to joining the Axis was the uncertainty that this was believed it would engender. No reliance could be placed upon Germany's word – something with which Prince Paul agreed.¹⁶⁷ Image therefore was all: Yugoslavia was the last remaining neutral on the frontiers of the Reich, and there was the strategic importance of proximity to the Struma Valley

¹⁶⁶ TNA PRO FO371/30243 R3288/G, Orme Sargent Aide Memoire, 25 Mar. 1941. British policy on this point, again, was confused. The previous day Eden telegraphed from Cairo to report that he, Dill and Wavell were 'agreed there need be no question of disintegrating Yugoslav armies at present. But it is of the first importance to secure maximum Yugoslav forces to defend territory of southern Serbia against German forces and in particular to protect Vardar and Monastir gaps.' He urged Sir Michael Palairet to co-ordinate with General Papagos and General Heywood (head of BRITMILMIS in Athens) to 'get in touch with Yugoslav military commanders in southern Serbia and to co-ordinate plans'. TNA PRO FO371/30253 R3032/G, Eden, Cairo to Athens, Tel. No. 146, 24 Mar. 1941.

¹⁶⁷ TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2915/G, Philip Nichols file note, 24 Mar. 1941.

(the invasion route through Bulgaria to Greece); the Monastir and Vardar gaps within Yugoslavia itself offered the shorter route to attack Britain's ally.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, those historians who introduce a value judgement into their analysis of British policy – that it was irresponsible, cynical, asked too much of Yugoslavia – are arguing from a flawed hypothesis.¹⁶⁹ Naturally, the United Kingdom, as an imperial great power, in the grip of total war against fascism, looked to her own national interests and was guided by her own geostrategic imperatives. The fundamental flaw in this policy, from the point of view of the successful achievement of British aims in, and through Yugoslavia, therefore is that policy was dictated by London's political preoccupations and Britain's wider strategic imperatives, with insufficient attention to the local Yugoslav dynamic. That the UK entertained expectations before the *coup*, only to have these rudely disabused, was a product of the great power mindset of the London political and bureaucratic elite.

Given lack of British investment in Yugoslavia in terms of arms, war material, economic links and broader political ties, the immediate success of the *coup* – as a striking gesture of defiance against Nazi Germany – should be seen as a fortunate coincidence of UK strategic imperatives and Yugoslav (predominantly, but not exclusively, Serb) domestic and international concerns. Britain's support was borne of her desperate attempts to salvage something from the wreckage of her Balkan policy: failure to equip Balkan states with sufficient arms and consequent confidence to withstand German pressure; failure to establish any sort of economic and financial leverage in Yugoslavia, in part because of the

¹⁶⁸ TNA PRO FO371/30253 R2871/G, Secretary of State to Belgrade, No 650, 22 Mar. 1941.

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, Littlefield and Wheeler.

fixation of the Ministry of Economic Warfare with the efficacy of economic blockade; failure to broker a Balkan front against Germany's relentless advance; failure to reinforce adequately and in good time their ally, Greece; failure to persuade Russia to come to the aid of fellow Slavs. For Britain the aftermath of the March *coup* proved a bitter irony: it was the triumph of Yugoslav democracy, whereas the immediate interests of democratic Britain would have been better served by an authoritarian separatist regime in Southern Serbia – one of the options the Foreign Office was contemplating. In part British policy and inflated expectations were to blame for the *coup* 'misfiring': SOE's attempts to co-ordinate Serb opposition to the foreign policy of Prince Paul's Government ran into the realities of Yugoslav/Serbian politics. The Serbian Peasant Party challenged the economically powerful interest groups and established Serbian political parties, the Radicals and the Democrats. The SPP's foreign policy agenda was more overtly pan-Slav and anti-German, than these larger parties, and there appears no awareness or assessment in the British files of the extent to which the SPP were using British political encouragement and financial aid for their own ends. Nor was SOE apparently aware that Tupanjanin was also on the Soviet NKVD payroll.¹⁷⁰ In addition, SOE's policy of reliance and support upon the small Serbian Peasant Party severely irritated these other Serbian political groups. SOE in Belgrade warned that Tupanjanin was regarded with suspicion because of the SPP participation in the Regent's Government and 'probably on the grounds of being too close to the Prince Regent.'¹⁷¹ The fact that they had not been the recipients of British largesse was another source of grievance among other

¹⁷⁰ Gorodetsky: *Grand Delusion*, p.139.

¹⁷¹ TNA PRO HS5/938, Weekly report AH/G to DH2, 22 Oct. 1940.

Opposition politicians.¹⁷² General Simovic had originally intended to form an authoritarian government but, within hours of the successful overthrow of the Regent's Government, was persuaded by Radnoje Knezevic (a fervent Serb nationalist and leading Democratic Party politician who was in close touch with SOE) to form a multi-party government, which included the Croat Peasant Party, to ensure Yugoslavia's continued cohesion.¹⁷³ After the events of 27 March, the Southern Department complained that the *coup* had been hijacked, and Campbell lamented the reappearance of yesterday's men, but there was no appreciation of the extent to which British policy had contributed to this outcome.

The immediate image of the *coup* was a triumphant rejection of the Axis. Certainly, unlike in every other Balkan country which had succumbed to German pressure, Britain did contribute to a flare of defiance against fascism. However, this should not detract from the reality of the outcome of the *coup* as a defeat for British policy. British policy had been hoist on its own petard in using a minority Serbian party, to further London's ambitions. Therefore the 'detonator concept'¹⁷⁴ on which London (and Dalton) had pinned so much, was revealed to be unstable ordnance. The fact that the *coup* 'misfired' revealed the limits of British contacts within broader Yugoslav society – in part a product of the legacy of the 1930s, also of the conscious political decision to focus on Belgrade, and failure to build up contacts within wider

¹⁷² TNA PRO FO371/30243 R3210/G, Athens to London, Tel No. 519, 26 Mar. 1941. The British Minister's source was the King of Greece, Prince Paul's brother-in-law, and to whom the Regent had been speaking daily and at length since Jan. 1941 (over an insecure land line, much to the horror of British diplomats).

¹⁷³ TNA PRO HS5/938 'The *Coup d'état* in Yugoslavia, Belgrade 27 March 1941', Report by 'Daddy' (Trifunovic), and Report by D/HY (Masterson).

¹⁷⁴ Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance*, p.29-49.

Yugoslav political society. Thus London's political expectations had been attached to unstable local factors.

Conclusions

This article has sought to point to an alternative interpretation to British policy towards Yugoslavia, leading up to the events of 27 March 1941, underlining the inconsistencies of policy making in London, expanding upon the SOE angle and to highlight the tensions between British actors in Yugoslavia, and placing the *coup* in its broader context of Eden's vain pursuit of a Balkan front. Archival material, not available to historians such as Barker or Wheeler, reveals a more nuanced picture of the extent to which British policy makers were working at cross purposes in Yugoslavia. Britain was at considerable disadvantage in terms of Yugoslavia's strategic isolation, gradual encirclement post June 1940 by Axis powers, the legacy of the interwar period and lack of economic ties. However, important political choices were also made, with inherent contradictions, and which were to have important consequences for British policy objectives in the Second World War. In the trenchant words of Terence Glanville, in Yugoslavia's defeat in April 1941, Britain paid the price of her appeasement of Germany politically and commercially in the 1930s, in her lack of influence in Yugoslavia and failure to establish sound links with the Croatian political community, the minute proportion of trade between the two countries, and her inability to remedy the glaring deficiencies of the Yugoslav military in the early 1940s.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ TNA PRO HS5/935, NERO Report, 27 Sept. 1941.