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Sir Austen Chamberlain and the Italo-Yugoslav Crisis over Albania
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The famous British historian A. J. P. Taylor described Mussolini as a “vain, blundering boaster without either ideas or aims”. In respect of Mussolini’s foreign policy, however, this assessment can be disputed. Even Taylor himself goes on to add: “Fascist foreign policy repudiated from the outset the principles of Geneva.”¹ If there is a single area of Mussolini’s activities where he demonstrated ideas, aims and indeed consistency, it is to be related to Italy’s foreign policy from 1922 when he assumed power. He proved this very quickly, in 1923, when his fleet bombarded Corfu, blaming this incident on a completely innocent Greek government and showing utter contempt for the League of Nations which he was known to consider as an ‘academic’ organization. Among his bombastic early declarations stands out the one in which he argued that treaties were not eternal, that they were not irrevocable.

Mussolini’s early foreign policy aimed, somewhat implausibly given the awesome naval power of Britain and France (notwithstanding their rivalry), at making the Mediterranean Italy’s *mare nostrum*. But the ambition was real enough, founded as it was on Mussolini’s vision of creating “a new Roman Empire”, something which could only mean aggrandizement, peaceful or not, in Africa and the Balkans. As regards the Balkans, Mussolini’s policy was bound to bring Italy into an early dispute with the newly-established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, just across the Adriatic. Already referred to as “Yugoslavia” even before the official change of its name in 1929, the country had clashed with Italy at the Paris Peace Conference over the so-called “Adriatic Question” in which Italy had demanded from the Allies (in the secret Treaty of London) large chunks in the eastern Adriatic as a reward for her entry into the war in 1915. But President Woodrow Wilson, known for opposing secret treaties, would have none of that and Italy became, even before the advent of the Fascist regime,

¹ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1974), 85.

a revisionist power seeking to improve on its “mutilated victory”.² In 1920 France and Britain came up with a proposal that would form part of a general ‘compromise’ to resolve the Adriatic Question whereby northern Albania should become an autonomous province of Yugoslavia, Greece being rewarded generously in the south, with the remainder becoming Italy’s mandated area. But President Wilson predictably objected.³

The Adriatic Question dragged on for a while, but a significant achievement was reached in 1920 when Italy and Yugoslavia signed the Treaty of Rapallo which settled the frontier between the two countries, although the disputed city of Fiume continued to constitute a problem. This matter was solved in January 1924 when the Yugoslav prime minister Nikola Pašić signed with Mussolini the Pact of Rome by which Italy received Fiume and its port. But the Pact also contained an undertaking that Italy and Yugoslavia should in the event of international complications consult together before either country took measures likely to affect the interests of the other. This, as will be seen, was to prove a highly contentious issue between Italy and Yugoslavia. Another significant diplomatic development in the early 1920s was the establishment of what became known as “The Little Entente”, a series of Czechoslovak-Yugoslav-Romanian defensive conventions, concluded between August 1920 and June 1921, and aimed against the revisionism of the defeated Hungary and Bulgaria. This series of treaties was strongly backed by France.⁴ Italy, in fact, also had a good reason to support the Little Entente as it certainly did not wish to see a restoration of the Habsburg Empire, though its subsequent policy proved very different as it was to extend support to Hungary and Bulgaria.⁵ What brought Italy on a collision course with Yugoslavia, however, was the Albanian question.⁶

² For an early account of this question, see Edward James Woodhouse and Chase Going Woodhouse, *Italy and the Yugoslavs* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, The Gorham Press, 1920). See also Dragan R. Živojinović, *America, Italy and the Birth of Yugoslavia (1917-1919)*, (New York: Columbia University Press, East European Quarterly, Boulder, 1972); Ivo J. Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study in Frontiermaking* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963); and René Albrecht-Carrié, *Italy at the Paris Peace Conference* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1966).

³ See C. A. Macartney and A. W. Palmer, *Independent Eastern Europe: A History* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 133.

⁴ See Robert Machray, *The Little Entente* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1929).

⁵ See Vuk Vinaver, *Jugoslavija i Mađarska 1918-1933* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1971), and the same author’s *Jugoslavija i Francuska između dva rata* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1985).

⁶ Among contemporary British, almost uncritically pro-Albanian accounts, the following should be mentioned: J. Swire, *Albania: The Rise of a Kingdom* (London: Williams & Norgate Ltd., 1929); Ronald Matthews, *Sons of the Eagle: Wanderings in Albania* (Lon-

Now, just as Belgium had been seen historically by Britain as a country of the utmost strategic importance – as Napoleon had remarked, the city of Antwerp being a pistol pointed at the heart of England – “Albania has been defined as the Italian Belgium.”⁷ This actually made a lot of sense. With a highly indented eastern Adriatic coast, not to mention the unparalleled possibilities of stationing major naval forces in the Gulf of Cattaro, Italy had a legitimate strategic interest in preventing a major power establishing itself across the Adriatic with only so few nautical miles away from its practically defenceless eastern shores. It was thus not without reason that Italy had been against Austria’s attack on Serbia in 1914. For this was serious political and military business, entirely understood by the Italian politicians who negotiated the secret Treaty of London. Concerning Albania, Article 6 of the Treaty stipulated: “Italy shall receive full sovereignty over Valona, the island of Saseno and surrounding territory of sufficient extent to assure defence of these points.” Article 7 further stipulated: “Should Italy obtain the Trentino and Istria ... together with Dalmatia and the Adriatic islands ... and if the central portion of Albania be reserved for the establishment of a small autonomous neutralized state, Italy shall not oppose the division of northern and southern Albania between Montenegro, Serbia and Greece should France, Great Britain and Russia so desire. Italy shall be charged with the representation of the State of Albania in its relations with foreign powers...”⁸

don: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1937); J. Swire, *King Zog’s Albania* (London: Robert Hale and Company, 1937); and Nigel Heseltine, *Scarred Background: A Journey through Albania* (London: Lovat Dickinson Limited, 1938). To this should be added contemporary British pro-Fascist works such as that by Ion S. Munro, *Through Fascism to World Power* (London: Alexander Maclehose & Co., 1933). A pro-Yugoslav British work, which unfortunately stops in 1922, is that by Henry Baerlin, *A Difficult Frontier (Yugoslavs and Albanians)*, (London: Leonard Parsons, 1922). For a sympathetic contemporary Serbian view of Zogu, accompanied by a sharp criticism of Belgrade’s policy towards Albania, see Milosav Jelić, *Albanija: zapisi o ljudima i događajima* (Belgrade: Geca Kon, 1933). Most modern accounts understandably concentrate on Kosovo rather than Albania proper. Two useful works are Nicolas J. Costa, *Albania: A European Enigma* (New York: East European Monographs, 1995), and Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A modern History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995). See also Ramadan Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1975). Noel Macolm’s celebrated *Kosovo: A Short History* (London: Macmillan, 1998), which covers Albania to a considerable extent, is remarkable only by its grotesque distortions, presumably motivated by the author’s well-known anti-Serbian views. This “work” is best left to gather dust on bookshelves.

⁷ Maxwell H. H. Macartney and Paul Cremona, *Italy’s Foreign and Colonial Policy 1914–1937* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 96.

⁸ Quoted in George Slocombe, *The Dangerous Sea: The Mediterranean and its Future* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1936), 83.

Thus Italy cannot be accused of exaggerated greed regarding Albania: it merely sought to obtain there a small client state, a bridgehead for some future expansion in the region, while the rest of the country could be conveniently divided between its small Balkan neighbours precisely in order to keep any stronger powers out. What, however, the Italians failed to envisage in 1915 was that a potentially strong Yugoslavia would emerge at the end of the war. And if Italy had valid reasons to bring Albania into its sphere of influence, so did Yugoslavia, and especially Serbia. In the first place, since its creation in 1913, Albania proved Europe's most unstable country, something that Belgrade could not contemplate with equanimity. And second, the Serbian province of Kosovo, bordering on Albania, contained a large population of ethnic Albanians deeply hostile to the Serbs.⁹ Already in 1915, before they were forced to retreat in the face of the combined Austrian-German-Bulgarian onslaught, the Serbs had successfully invaded Albania where they received at least a partial welcome.

Hardly surprising, then, that Belgrade was always going to take a deep interest in the chronically chaotic affairs of Albania. The country had changed government no fewer than six times between 1920 and 1922.¹⁰ Its first head of state, the young and hopelessly incompetent Prince Wilhelm of Wied, abandoned his new country after only six months in September 1914, never to return again to such a hotbed of cloak and dagger politics.¹¹ The Serbs had, already during the First World War, an important ally in Albania. This was Essad Pasha Toptani who had declared himself President at Durazzo. His chief domestic rival was Ahmed Bey Zogu, a political oppor-

⁹ The Kosovo Albanians had established a "Kosovo Committee" with a military wing (the so-called *kaçak* movement), carrying acts of violence against the Serbs.

¹⁰ The French used to describe Albania thus: *Pays balkanique, pays volcanique*. For a massive documentary background to Serb (and Yugoslav)–Albanian relations, see Ljubodrag Dimić and Djordje Borozan, eds., *Jugoslovenska država i Albanci*, 2 vols. (Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ, vol. I, 1998, vol. II, 1999). See also Emilija Aleksić, ed., *Iz istorije Albanaca* (Belgrade: Zavod za izdavanje udžbenika SR Srbije, 1969); Djoko Slijepčević, *Srpsko–arbanasčki odnosi kroz vekove sa posebnim osvrtom na novije vreme*, 4th rev. ed. (Himmelsthür [W. Germany], 1983); Radovan Samardžić et al., *Kosovo i Metohija u srpskoj istoriji* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1989); Dušan T. Bataković, *The Kosovo Chronicles* (Belgrade: Plato, 1992); Djordje Borozan, *Velika Albanija: porijeklo, ideje, praksa* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut VJ, 1995); Miodrag Marović, *Balkanski džoker: Istorijska hronika nastajanja i razvoja albanskog pitanja* (Bar: JP Kulturni centar, 1995); Dimitrije Bogdanović, *Knjiga o Kosovu*, 4th ed. (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga and Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1999); and Sreten Draškić, *Evropa i albansko pitanje* (Belgrade: Mala biblioteka SKZ, 2000).

¹¹ The majority Muslim Albanian population harboured suspicions of this Protestant prince.

tunist of the first rank, a true “aficionado of the art of *realpolitik*”¹² who, just like Toptani, was not above offering his political services to Serbia. Toptani was in 1916 forced to flee to Italy, thus leaving Zogu to fill the gap which he did by ingratiating himself to the occupying Austrians who awarded him the rank of Colonel and apparently also gave him gold to finance battles against the Italians who had landed with their forces in the southern port of Valona in the south claiming compensation for the Austrian invasion of Serbia.¹³ But during the First World War, although Albania was formally neutral, the country had no government as such, and it was only in January 1920 that a provisional administration came into existence at the Congress of Lushnjë. Zogu became the interior minister and commander in chief of the army. In the same year Albania became a member of the League of Nations. In November 1921 the Conference of Ambassadors (Britain, France, Italy and Japan) made a curious but in any case pragmatic decision whereby it recognized that any violation of the frontiers or independence of Albania might constitute a danger for the strategic safety of Italy, and agreed that, should such a danger arise, it would instruct its representatives on the Council of the League of Nations to recommend that the restoration of the territorial frontiers of Albania should be entrusted to Italy. This, it has to be said, represented a major diplomatic triumph for Rome – for Italy’s protectorate over Albania had thus been explicitly acknowledged – and Mussolini later used this to good effect.

Toptani was in June 1920 assassinated in Paris by a fellow Albanian, something which could not have displeased Zogu. But the Yugoslavs then invaded northern Albania in August, reaching as far as Mati, Zogu’s home turf. An important result of this, it seems, was Zogu’s secret understanding with Belgrade not to meddle in Kosovo, something which the Kosovo Albanians described as an act of treason.¹⁴ Belgrade really meant business in Albania. In July 1921 it helped organize the secession from Albania of the northern province of Mirdita (inhabited largely by Catholics), and its “Republic of Mirdita” clients were by October 1921 within thirty miles of Tirana, causing Lloyd George to get considerably upset by the Yugoslavs who were forced to withdraw.¹⁵ Already in 1915 Zogu had established relations with the Serbs at Niš. After the assassination of Essad Pasha Toptani,

¹² E. Garrison Walters, *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1945* (New York: Dorset Press, 1990), 266.

¹³ By far the best, though not flawless, account of Zogu is the recent biography by Jason Tomes, *King Zog: Self-made Monarch of Albania* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2003).

¹⁴ See Tomes, *King Zog*, 42.

¹⁵ Tomes, *King Zog*, 46–47.

Belgrade was looking at Zogu as its next ally and helped him to establish himself in power towards the end of 1922.¹⁶ It did not know then that Zogu was the master in a policy of double-cross.

Britain's influence on Zogu was considerable at this time, especially through its minister Harry Eyres (Britain's representative in Albania since January 1921) who was recommending Zogu to develop closer relations with Italy to offset the pressure from the Serbs.¹⁷ But not even Eyres could help his friend Zogu to stave off a major rebellion against him in 1924 which forced him, in June, to seek refuge in Yugoslavia, the helms of power being now taken by Fan Noli, a controversial Orthodox bishop, Harvard-educated and known for his pro-Italian, anti-League of Nations and anti-British views, but more important, someone who was talked about as a politician not averse to seeking the help of the Soviet Union, which particularly irritated the intensely anti-Bolshevik Belgrade.¹⁸ In Belgrade, Zogu waited for his next opportunity to return to power. By late December 1924, thanks to Yugoslav arms and money (and to General Wrangel's White Russian forces based in Yugoslavia), Zogu managed to overthrow Fan Noli and thus acquired the reputation of Serbia's man.¹⁹ In January 1925 he became Albania's dictator-president. However, as C.L. Sulzberger wrote about Zogu: "Ambition is an infectious disease."²⁰ For Zogu lost no time in turning against his erstwhile allies, although, in fairness to him, he gave Belgrade the villages of St. Naum and Vermash in a display of not particularly exaggerated gratitude for being able to carry out his *coup de main* in Tirana. He had relied at this time on advice of Colonel Stirling, a British ex-officer, who saw Yugoslavia as Albania's obvious ally, a country that could help him consolidate power. But Belgrade failed to produce the necessary money (and Greece, in internal turmoil, was even less capable to

¹⁶ Živko Avramovski, "Akcija jugoslovenske vlade protiv Zoguovog režima u Albaniji preko Cena bega Kryziu (1926–1927.)", *Albanološka istraživanja* (Prishtina: Filozofski fakultet, 1965), 225.

¹⁷ Tomes, *King Zog*, 56. Competent studies dealing with Yugoslavia's interwar international relations include Desanka Todorović, *Jugoslavija i balkanske države 1918–1923* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga and Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1979); Dunja Hercigonja, *Velika Britanija i spoljnopolitički položaj Jugoslavije 1929–1933* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1987); and Enes Milak, *Italija i Jugoslavija 1931–1937* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1987).

¹⁸ Tomes, *King Zog*, 63–70. In Belgrade, Zog took up residence in Hotel Bristol where he quickly gained the reputation as "a lion with the ladies". Tomes, *King Zog*, 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71–73.

²⁰ C. L. Sulzberger, *A Long Row of Candles: Memoirs and Diaries 1934–1954* (London: Macdonald, 1969), 63.

help at this stage), so there is a sense in which Zogu really had no choice.²¹ “The loyalty of an Albanian Bey,” it has been so rightly observed, “was worth no more than the money with which it was bought, and lasted as long as the money.”²²

Given the permanent internal instability in Albania, Mussolini’s “new Roman Empire” could most easily begin to take shape in that country. But it was only in 1923, after viewing with suspicion Germany’s economic attempts to establish a foothold in Albania, that Italy took the decision to build a serious economic and political position in Albania, receiving concessions regarding the woodlands and seeking to obtain permission for oil exploration. The 1st Tirana Pact (November 1926) between Italy and Albania entailed an even greater economic penetration. And much more than that: Article I declared: “Italy and Albania recognise that any disturbance threatening the political, legal and territorial *status quo* of Albania is contrary to their common interest.”²³ Thus a new Italian protectorate over Albania had been de facto established (following the practically formal decision of the 1921 Conference of Ambassadors to give Italy a free hand in Albania), causing the resignation in Belgrade of foreign minister Momčilo Ninčić who correctly saw the Pact of Tirana as an essentially hostile measure against Yugoslavia, in flagrant contradiction to the Pact of Rome.²⁴ “Italy could now threaten [Yugoslavia] from her two frontiers, north and south, and also from across the Adriatic.”²⁵ In truth, however, Ninčić and Belgrade had also violated the Pact of Rome when they helped Zogu, in 1924, to return to power, timing this decision brilliantly as Mussolini had the Matteotti affair on his hands. But Zogu now dumped his former Yugoslav protectors and sought, perhaps not unwisely, but certainly treacherously, Italy’s support to develop his backward country economically. Already in January 1925 he addressed Mussolini with an offer of strengthening relations between Albania and Italy. And by September of that year Italian banks had provided capital for the „National Bank of Albania“.

²¹ M. W. Fodor, *South of Hitler* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1938), 102.

²² Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1953), 105.

²³ Quoted in Muriel Currey, *Italian Foreign Policy 1918–1932* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson Ltd, 1932), 189. For useful details on the Italian side, see Gabriele Paresce, *Italia e Jugoslavia dal 1915 al 1929* (Florence: R. Bemporad & Figlio, 1935). For a still useful contemporary French account, see Jacques Ancel, *Les Balkans face à l’Italie* (Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1928), 128.

²⁴ See Milak, *Italija i Jugoslavija*, 38–41.

²⁵ Doros Alastos, *The Balkans and Europe* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1937), 104–105.

Things with Zogu, however, were never as simple as that. Whilst seeking economic aid from Italy, he also played a parallel game with Britain. Harry Eyres was succeeded early in 1926 by Edmund O'Reilly. Also at this time a new Italian representative arrived in Albania. This was the notorious womanizer Barone Pompeo Aloisi, Mussolini's darling diplomat, but also the darling of the wives in the Tirana diplomatic corps – he had no problem in charming them. In any case, the other main preoccupation of Aloisi was to convince Zogu to accept an Italo-Albanian treaty, a task in which he succeeded in the end when the Pact of Tirana was signed. But Zogu had before then attempted to interest O'Reilly in an Anglo-Albanian commercial treaty. Lord Vansittart recalls perceptively in his memoirs: "O'Reilly said dryly that the Pact was incompatible with Albanian independence. The Duce was in turn furious and protested to Austen, who removed O'Reilly and got us a bad name."²⁶ When O'Reilly advised Zogu not to yield to Mussolini's pressure, the reaction in London was cool. Sir Austen Chamberlain, the new foreign secretary, saw no direct British interest in Albania except that he wanted to avoid Italo-French-Yugoslav complications and extricate Britain from any such possibilities. O'Reilly was soon succeeded by William Seeds.²⁷ What was certainly not the case, as will be seen, was that "Chamberlain had decided that stability in the Adriatic was best served by treating Albania as an Italian sphere of influence."²⁸ That is far too simplistic a way of describing Chamberlain's policy. And what Chamberlain could not have known at the time (August 1925) was that Mussolini had concluded with Zogu a secret military treaty which provided for cooperation in war with Yugoslavia, complete with a promise of Kosovo to Albania. In fact, both the Italian foreign ministry and Mussolini himself began to have second thoughts about this arrangement: why should Italy risk being dragged by Zogu into a war for Kosovo?²⁹

The position of Great Britain in the ongoing Italo-Yugoslav affair over Albania must be viewed primarily in political rather than economic terms. True, oil exploration was not a negligible factor. Already in 1921 Albania signed a preliminary agreement with D'Arcy Exploration, a subsidiary of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in which Britain owned a controlling stake. However, this paled into insignificance in comparison with Britain's political considerations. The British government was from November 1924 again headed by Stanley Baldwin, perhaps the dominant British politician

²⁶ Lord Vansittart, *The Mist Procession* (London: Hutchinson, 1958), 325. Vansittart was Stanley Baldwin's Principal Private Secretary.

²⁷ Tomes, *King Zog*, 83–88.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

in the interwar period, three times prime minister (1923–24, 1924–29, 1935–37) and Lord President of the Council from 1931 to 1935. Subsequently blamed for the failure of Britain to rearm in the face of the growing menace of Germany under Hitler, he was famous for not being interested in foreign affairs in the slightest. His knowledge of Europe “hardly extended beyond Aix-les-Bains, the French spa to which he and his wife were in the habit of resorting each year to take the waters.”³⁰ Just as well that his foreign secretary (1924–29) was the Cambridge-educated Sir Austen Chamberlain, a man with considerable previous government experience and a deep knowledge of European affairs.³¹

Chamberlain’s chief diplomatic achievement is generally regarded to be the conclusion, in 1925, of the Treaties of Locarno, which brought Germany back to the mainstream of European affairs and generally seemed to herald a new, prolonged era of peace. Of course, France’s Aristide Briand and Germany’s Gustav Stresemann were no less responsible for Locarno, but Chamberlain had demonstrated genuine interest in international cooperation. Signed by France, Germany and Belgium, Locarno was guaranteed by Britain and – significantly – Mussolini’s Italy, until then hardly treated as a first class power. But what did Locarno really mean? While it settled the Franco-German differences in the West, it left the frontiers of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria completely unguaranteed against Germany – “and herein lay the seeds of the Second World War”.³² Britain and Italy, as the guarantor powers, in effect guaranteed nothing, they only had “a moral obligation, a mere form of words”. They could not undertake to prepare for the fulfilment of their guarantees since the aggressor would not be known until he actually appeared.³³ And this was perfect for Britain – play the benevolent peacemaker, but make sure your own vital interests are not threatened. It was *realpolitik* of the first order. No wonder that Hughe Knatch-

³⁰ E. Royston Pike, *Britain’s Prime Ministers* (Feltham: Hamlyn Publishing for Odham Books, 1968), 388. According to Lord Home, Baldwin was “ill at ease with foreigners,” going so far as to contrive that he “need not sit next to them at meals”. In May 1936, Baldwin told Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary: “We must get nearer to Germany,” and when Eden asked him “How?” Baldwin replied: “I have no idea, that is your job.” Quoted in Frank Longford, *Eleven at No. 10* (London: Harrap, 1984) 24.

³¹ Austen Chamberlain was the son of Joseph Chamberlain, the famous British imperialist who became the Colonial Secretary in the Unionist government of 1895. Neville Chamberlain, the unfortunate British prime minister who succumbed to Hitler at Munich in 1938, was Austen’s half-brother. For a good biography of Austen Chamberlain, see David Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain: Gentleman in Politics* (Bolton: Ross Anderson Publications, 1985).

³² Richard Lamb, *The Drift to War 1922–1939* (London, 1989), 20.

³³ See Taylor, *The Origins*, 82–83.

bull-Hugessen, a Foreign Office diplomat, commented on Locarno that, whereas Chamberlain was jubilant, the “French were more matter-of-fact and more sceptical”.³⁴ Italy, too, was in fact somewhat sceptical as Mussolini wished the Franco-German problem to stay on the Rhine, fearing that Germany would next turn to Austria and the question of Alto Adige.³⁵

Even more important for an understanding of British postwar policy (and this would later be demonstrated by Chamberlain in his final handling of the Italo-Yugoslav crisis over Albania in 1927) is its rejection, before Locarno, of the Geneva Protocol which attempted to make more efficient the instruments of the League of Nations in preserving peace and deterring aggression or, broadly speaking, to make every member of the League guarantee the frontiers of Europe (in other words to commit itself to waging war), and this was meant to be done by means of compulsory arbitration of all disputes. Although the initiative for the Geneva Protocol lay with the Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald, the true guardians of British foreign policy were the Conservatives who returned to power in November 1924. The British Dominions were dead against the Geneva Protocol, but this only served the new foreign secretary Chamberlain as an excuse to reject it. Although he paid lip-service to Britain as a country “only twenty miles off the Continent of Europe” which should not engage in “short-sighted isolation”,³⁶ he was fully aware of the dangers of undesired foreign entanglements in which Britain had no interest whatsoever. He knew perfectly well that Britain was much more an imperial than a continental power: why accept something that would only increase the burden of its obligations?³⁷ Knatchbull-Hugessen again: “The Geneva Protocol was still-born: it was quite impossible for us to accept its liabilities. If German and Italian policy developed on the lines feared and if the League remained unarmed and powerless, France would be driven to something more practical. She already had her friends in the Little Entente, a system of alliances reminiscent of pre-war methods. Italy for her part showed signs of collecting all the malcontents under her wing.”³⁸

³⁴ Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, *Diplomat in Peace and War* (London: John Murray, 1949), 52.

³⁵ Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe 1918–1933* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976), 86.

³⁶ Quoted in G. M. Gathorne-Hardy, *A Short History of International Relations 1920–1939*, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 71.

³⁷ For this, see also A. P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and its Enemies: A Study in British Power*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1985), 288–289.

³⁸ Knatchbull-Hugessen, *Diplomat*, 59.

Indeed, this was the key to Chamberlain's subsequent Balkan policy. As F. S. Northedge has written, through the Geneva Protocol Britain "might be involved in conflicts which neither British opinion nor opinion in the Empire could regard as having as their issue the life or death of Britain". The Protocol, Northedge remarks, "was contrary to the approach to foreign policy to which Britain, by every inclination and interest, was committed and which she had followed at least since the French Revolution." And he quotes Chamberlain himself: "Only in the case where her interests are immediately at stake and where her own safety must be directly of any change has Great Britain ever consented to bind herself beforehand to specific engagements on the continent of Europe." The Protocol, according to Chamberlain, multiplied offences but did nothing to strengthen remedies.³⁹ In March 1925 Chamberlain formally informed the Council of the League of Nations that Britain would not accept the Protocol.

Italy and Yugoslavia had in the meantime worked hard on improving their relations. On 21 July 1925, after extensive previous negotiations, they signed at Nettuno (near Rome) a series of agreements dealing with matters financial, legal and political. However, the Croats (and especially the Dalmatians) considered that Belgrade had given away too much, and in the face of their opposition the agreements were not ratified in Yugoslavia.⁴⁰ This put an end to any hopes Chamberlain may have entertained of creating a "Balkan Locarno".⁴¹ There is no question that he had developed a certain fondness for the Italian dictator. But he was far from starry-eyed about him. He wrote in December 1926: "I am disposed to say that Mussolini needs ten years of peace before he undertakes any adventure [a remarkably correct prediction]. In five years I shall begin to watch him closely – which is not to say that I keep my eyes shut now."⁴² In fact, as things turned out, he had to begin to watch him very carefully only a few months later.

³⁹ F. S. Northedge, *The Troubled Giant: Britain Among the Great Powers 1916–1939* (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1966), 242–245.

⁴⁰ See Currey, *Italian Foreign Policy*, 152.

⁴¹ See Vuk Vinaver, "Engleska i italijansko 'zaokruživanje Jugoslavije' 1926–1928" in *Istorija XX veka*, Zbornik radova VII (Belgrade, 1966), 77–78. Vinaver's article, however, should be treated with a degree of scepticism as he cannot resist, without fully explaining, to lambaste what he sees as an essentially pro-Italian British policy. His use of Yugoslav, Italian, French, German and Russian sources considerably outweighs his British material which is in any case constituted by secondary sources (mainly newspapers) and worse still, he relies too heavily on Yugoslav diplomatic accounts from the legation in London. Primary British material is conspicuous by its absence in this article. For a more balanced account, see Živko Avramovski, *Balkanska antanta (1934–1940)*, (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1986), 14–29.

⁴² Quoted in Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain*, 293, n. 18.

The Foreign Office was alerted about the fast deteriorating Italo-Yugoslav relations over Albania towards the end of February 1927. Howard Kennard, the British Minister at Belgrade sent to London a despatch in which he drew attention to the fact that the Italian Legation were spreading the most alarmist reports for which, according to Kennard, there appeared to be “but slight justification”. Kennard noted that even General Visconti, the Italian military attaché, took a far moderate view than his colleagues. But it is clear that Kennard himself was far from sure about what was really going on. He allowed for the possibility that the Yugoslav military were about to spring a “coup d’état” in Albania since “in the Balkans one never knows what folly the soldiers may be up to”. His despatch to London, however, really amounted only to guesswork. Thus he speculated that General Bodrero, the head of the Italian Legation, who was quite keen to stay on in Belgrade, was deliberately sending exaggerated reports to Rome in order to contradict the view “which may be held in Rome” that he was too conciliatory towards the Yugoslavs. He also added that one could not judge Italian diplomacy by ordinary standards as the Italians often wished to “fare figura” (to make an impression) without there existing any Machiavellian plots. In truth, Kennard just had no idea, but he was in a pessimistic mood. While he noted that “poor little [Ninko] Perić”, the new Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs, seemed to be showing good sense, he also considered the Yugoslav press and public opinion to be so Italophobic that it was useless to try to control this tendency. And he feared that Rome-Belgrade relations were drifting to the channels existing between Vienna and Belgrade before the war.⁴³

Only a few days later, on 1 March, Chamberlain was personally told about the state of Italo-Yugoslav relations by Marchese della Torretta, the Italian Ambassador to London. The wider context of this meeting related to President Calvin Coolidge’s invitation to a conference which would negotiate a further treaty on naval disarmament, following the Washington Treaty of 1922. Mussolini’s position was that Italy should not participate unless the basis for discussions should be accepted whereby France and Italy would enjoy parity in regard of smaller naval craft. Chamberlain had no intention of supporting Mussolini on this, knowing that the French would never agree to the principle of parity, and he diplomatically discouraged Torretta. The latter, incredibly, argued that Yugoslavia, for example, had no navy for the time being, “but was showing indications of an intention to create a naval force to which Italy could not be indifferent”. Chamberlain

⁴³ Kennard to Sargent, 25 February 1927, in W. N. Medlicott, Douglas Dakin, and M. E. Lambert, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, ser. Ia, vol. III, “European and Naval Questions, 1927” (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1970; hereafter referred to as *DBFP*), No. 25.

used this opportunity to enquire whether there had been any improvement in Italy's relations with Belgrade since the appointment of Milan Rakić, the new Yugoslav Minister to Rome. Predictably, Torretta gave a negative reply, blaming "the military influences" which he claimed dominated the Yugoslav government, and which were "hostile to any accommodation and constituted a serious danger to peace". But Chamberlain was not going to swallow this without dissenting comment which, characteristically, he couched in assuaging language. He stated that he had never doubted Italy's peaceful intentions towards Albania, and yet at the same time it was "clear" to him that the suspicions and apprehensions entertained in Yugoslavia about Italian policy "were not a mere excuse". However ill-founded this was, he pointed out, it had taken possession of a large part of Yugoslav opinion, and this was something "which statesmen had to take into account". At the end, Chamberlain warned Torretta that it was dangerous to allow the Yugoslav suspicions regarding Italian aims to grow "until they became convictions which nothing could shake", something which placed other affected nations in a considerable dilemma.⁴⁴

Despite such admonitions to Italy by Britain, in the following days the tensions between Yugoslavia and Italy continued to increase. On 3 March Kennard telegraphed to Chamberlain that there were incidents off the Yugoslav coast regarding Italian fishing vessels, prompting the Italian Legation in Belgrade to practically issue an ultimatum threatening that fishing vessels would be escorted by warships. Kennard also reported that he was "favourably" impressed by Rakić, who was about to take up his post in Rome, and who assured him the Italian rumours about Yugoslav military activity were without foundation.⁴⁵ Indeed, Colonel Giles, the British military attaché to Belgrade, confirmed at this time his previous view that the rumours of Yugoslav offensive military action were "groundless".⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the Italians kept up the pressure relentlessly. On 18 March Torretta called on Chamberlain again, handing him a memorandum (presented also to the governments of France and Germany) which cited a number of measures ostensibly being taken by Yugoslav military authorities with the aim of preparing for early hostilities against Italy, with the bulk of forces concentrated on Albanian and Slovene frontiers. Torretta told Chamberlain that power in Yugoslavia had by now "passed wholly into the hands of the army and the King", and that Signor Mussolini wished to draw the attention of His Majesty's Government to the serious situation that was arising.⁴⁷ This,

⁴⁴ Chamberlain to Sir Ronald Graham (Rome), 1 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 30.

⁴⁵ Kennard to Chamberlain, 3 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 34.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 2.

⁴⁷ Chamberlain to Graham, 19 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 49.

however, was a view entirely dismissed by the British Legation in Belgrade. Kennard had been informed about Chamberlain's meeting with the Italian ambassador, and in the early hours of 21 March, he sent his comments to London, which, point by point, entirely dismantled Torrettta's memorandum on Yugoslav military preparations. And it was, Kennard thought, "hardly justifiable to say that power in Yugoslavia is chiefly in the hands of the army and the King. Present government is weak and the King no doubt exercises more influence under these circumstances." Kennard also emphasized that it would be natural for the Yugoslavs to endeavour to bring up their army to some standard of efficiency following the conclusion of the pact of Tirana, but that this army was "lamentably deficient" in everything except manpower to undertake military operations on a large scale.⁴⁸

Only a few days earlier Kennard had already recommended to London that the remedy for the Yugoslav-Italian mutual suspicion was to send experienced neutral observers who would inspect the frontier on both the Yugoslav and Albanian sides and produce an unbiased report.⁴⁹ The Yugoslav government thought along the same lines, and Chamberlain now welcomed the suggestion which J. T. Marković, the Yugoslav assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs, had made to Kennard, that various military attachés should be invited to proceed to the Albanian frontier with the task of rendering an objective report. Chamberlain therefore instructed Kennard to act on this matter in Belgrade.⁵⁰ He had already been very disturbed by reports that it was actually the Albanian government, not Yugoslav, that was concentrating troops on the frontier (the figure in circulation was 10,000 Albanian troops on the frontier towards Prizren) and had asked Seeds to investigate this matter. Seeds did so, informing Chamberlain that both the Italian claims about Yugoslav military preparations, and the rumours of Albanian troop concentrations were being exaggerated. But he also recommended that unless steps were taken soon to secure a "Serbian-Italian accommodation to put a mistrust arising out of Tirana treaty present situation is infallibly bound to result in an explosion".⁵¹ Chamberlain subsequently ordered Seeds to keep quiet in Albania pending further instructions. "The situation," he wrote to Seeds, "is engaging my serious attention."⁵²

Thus, since the very beginning of the Italo-Yugoslav crisis over Albania, the Foreign Office and all its representatives in the region genuinely

⁴⁸ Kennard to Chamberlain, 21 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 50.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 4.

⁵⁰ Chamberlain to Kennard, 21 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 51.

⁵¹ Seeds to Chamberlain, 21 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, n. 3.

believed that the whole affair amounted to a storm in a teacup, a totally manufactured crisis. It was especially sceptical about the Italian claims. But at the same time it was more than sensitive to the possible repercussions of a crisis which could easily slip out of control. And this was the essence of Britain's policy: to try to defuse a crisis which it had absolutely no interest in being sucked into. But now it was the turn of the Yugoslav government to be unhelpful. For Perić, faced with sharp parliamentary criticism over the proposal that a commission of military attachés should conduct an enquiry, explained to Kennard that it would be preferable to have this exercise conducted by the League of Nations. The British reaction was bordering on helpless impatience as Kennard suggested to the Yugoslav Foreign Minister that whatever the decision, it should be taken "at once".⁵³ The news of direct Italian-Yugoslav talks was also discouraging. Rakić had seen Mussolini in Rome on 17 March and Graham reported to London that no headway had been made.⁵⁴ This was a particular disappointment to Chamberlain who had hoped, perhaps naively, that the arrival of Rakić in Rome would lead to the resumption of friendly relations between Italy and Yugoslavia on the basis of the reaffirmation of the 1924 Pact of Rome. He therefore instructed Graham to seek an immediate interview with Mussolini, informing the Ambassador at the same time that sections of public opinion in Britain were already demanding that the British government should invoke Article 11 of the Covenant of the League of Nations.⁵⁵

Mussolini, however, was not at all keen that the crisis should be handled by the League of Nations, something which Gustav Stresemann in Germany was already hinting should be done. The Quai d'Orsay was informed that Mussolini considered such an action as "entirely inadmissible". The French position in this crisis, in fact, was infinitely more conciliatory towards Italy than Britain's. It can even be argued that there can be no comparison. Philippe Berthelot, the French General Secretary of Foreign Affairs, told the Marquess of Crewe, the British ambassador to Paris, that France had been counselling the Yugoslavs "extreme moderation". Indeed. Even the Marquess of Crewe was so shocked by the French that he felt it

⁵³ Kennard to Chamberlain, 22 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 58.

⁵⁴ *DBFP*, No. 59, n. 2.

⁵⁵ Chamberlain to Graham, 22 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 59. Article 11 of the Covenant stated: "Any war or threat of war, whether immediately affecting any Members of the League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League, and the League shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations." For the full text, see Arthur Berriedale Keith, ed., *Speeches and Documents on International Affairs 1918-1937* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), vol. I, 13-14.

necessary, in his telegram to Chamberlain informing him of his conversation with Berthelot, to italicize what the latter had told him about the French effort to convince the Yugoslavs to show the utmost restraint “*even in the event of an armed Italian landing in Albania*”. The French had even got the Czechoslovak foreign minister Edvard Beneš to urge moderation in Belgrade. Moreover, as Berthelot told Crewe, France had already informed Italy that it was not going to conclude the friendly treaty of understanding with Yugoslavia (March 1927) which had been initialled, but not signed, because it did not wish to raise Italy’s suspicions that such a treaty was directed against it, being desirous that beforehand Italy and Yugoslavia should sign their own treaty. Paris thought it advisable, and pressurized Miroslav Spalajković, the Yugoslav Minister in Paris, that Yugoslavia should ratify the 1925 Nettuno agreements with Italy. It was thus not a little contradictory of Berthelot to, admittedly correctly, identify the Treaty of Tirana as something “unfortunate”, in that Italy could intervene in Albania in the event of the political status quo being changed, “which in effect means”, as he told Crewe, “in the event of the forcible overthrow of the Albanians themselves of Ahmed Zogu”.⁵⁶ In other words, the French were blowing hot and cold.⁵⁷

Chamberlain was at this stage almost completely preoccupied by the Italo-Yugoslav affair. What he could still not understand was the reasoning behind Mussolini’s memorandum which Torretta had given him on 18 March, a document listing the Italian view of Yugoslav military preparations. Given that the Italian paper had also been sent to Paris and Berlin, Chamberlain naturally felt that he had been placed in an embarrassing position. He openly told Torretta on 22 March that he was “considerably perplexed” and “puzzled” by this formal communication of the Italian government. What exactly, he asked the Italian ambassador, had been in Mussolini’s mind? Sincerely or not, Torretta replied that he himself had no answer to this question. The British Foreign Secretary was subtle enough to point out to Torretta that the Italian government had not appealed to the League of Nations, something which suggested that it did not want this course to be adopted. At the same time, he praised Perić for using moderate language which appeared to him “entirely commendable”.⁵⁸

At long last Mussolini provided some answers. Graham saw him in the evening of 23 March. *Il Duce* explained that his memorandum to the

⁵⁶ Crewe to Chamberlain, 22 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 60.

⁵⁷ A commendable account of France’s international policy during this period is by J. Néré, *The Foreign Policy of France from 1914 to 1945* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975). The original French version was published in 1974.

⁵⁸ Chamberlain to Graham, 22 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 61.

governments in London, Paris and Berlin served the purpose of avoiding “an immediate explosion”. Without offering any hard evidence, he told Graham that the Italian government had known of Yugoslav aggressive preparations and organization of bands on north Albanian frontier for incursion during the spring. This, he claimed, was the work of the Yugoslav “military party”. But his communication to the three Powers had had the desired effect, and the danger, he said, was already diminishing as shown by press in both Rome in Belgrade. He further argued that, in this new context, there was no need to go the League of Nations, something that would merely entail undesired public debate and press polemics. Mussolini then revealed what he was essentially after. The best solution, he suggested to Graham, would be if the Yugoslavs made some friendly gesture, such as ratification of Nettuno conventions.⁵⁹ The British, however, were frankly sceptical, and indeed very realistic, about Mussolini’s proposal. On 25 March Graham reported to Chamberlain that he had alluded to Mussolini about “the feeling of nervousness in Belgrade”, pointing out to him that the Yugoslavs had had enough of a problem in the past presenting the Nettuno conventions to their parliament, a problem that was even greater now in the light of the current tension between the two countries. Graham bluntly told Mussolini that the government in Belgrade “could not be expected to give the appearance of yielding to Italian pressure”.⁶⁰

However, the Yugoslav government now began to soften up. Perić, who had previously expressed misgivings about a commission of enquiry made up of foreign military attachés to inspect the Yugoslav-Albanian frontier, succumbing previously to parliamentary pressure to favour the role of the League of Nations instead, surprised the British and Italian ministers at Belgrade by telling them that military experts could proceed with this task, thus catching the Italian minister in a state of “confusion”.⁶¹ But this was hardly Perić’s own initiative. In Paris the Marquess of Crewe found out from Aristide Briand, the French foreign minister, that it was France which had discouraged the Yugoslavs from pursuing their complaint against Italy at the League of Nations. Briand told Crewe that affairs had not reached the point at which such an action could properly be taken. Nevertheless, Briand reiterated what London had already known about the French view of the Treaty of Tirana. This treaty Briand assessed as a “danger point”, given that it could enable Italy to act not only in the event of an attack on Albania from outside, but also in the event of the existing regime being threatened internally. He took the view that the terms of the Treaty should in some way

⁵⁹ Graham to Chamberlain, 23 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 64.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 2.

⁶¹ Kennard to Chamberlain, 23 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 65.

be altered to arrive at its interpretation which would neutralize this danger. "Unless this is done," he told Crewe, "there must be perpetual unrest in that quarter of Europe."⁶² What Briand did not tell Crewe was that within the French government there were serious misgivings about Britain's policy towards the Italo-Yugoslav conflict. Sir Charles Mendl, the British press attaché in Paris, informed London, "in strict confidence", that Louis Barthou and André Tardieu, respectively Minister of Justice and Minister of Public Works, believed that British foreign policy was, "often without reason", running contrary to that of France. As the main example, Mendl reported the view held by Barthou and Tardieu that Britain had allowed without protest the signature of the Treaty of Tirana, which they believed had demonstrated London's favour towards Italy to lay hands on Albania.⁶³ But this was somewhat rich of the French who conveniently forgot that the November 1921 Ambassadors' Conference in Paris, which of course included France, had already practically given Italy a free hand in Albania, and that it was precisely this move which had given rise to subsequent tensions between Italy and Yugoslavia. For good measure, Mendl also reported about the French unhappiness over London's "uneasiness" over the Franco-German rapprochement, something which, according to the French, Britain now wished to offset by a new entente with Italy.⁶⁴

Upon reading this despatch, Chamberlain was furious to say the least. He protested that Mendl's note about the French view that Britain was seeking a new entente with Italy because of the Franco-German rapprochement was "so silly that it is really difficult to deal with it", and that Britain had in fact worked hard for that rapprochement. Writing about Britain's relations with Italy, he added bitterly: "They are not an off-set to a friendship with France, nor a counterpoise to the Franco-German *rapprochement*. They are a necessary consequence of the Treaty of Locarno, and but for them France would be in danger of seeing Italy fall once more under purely German influences." On the Italian-Yugoslav difficulties, he explained that his policy had been to exert influence steadily but quietly to press moderation on Italy. And he did not view the Treaty of Tirana in such alarmist terms as they were read in France. He emphasized that he never lost an opportunity to remind Mussolini of what the latter had told him already during their first meeting in December 1924, that Italy had no aggressive designs on Albania. "My influence," he explained, "was used towards securing friendly

⁶² Crewe to Chamberlain, 23 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 66.

⁶³ Mendl to Gregory, 23 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 70.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* For the November 1921 Ambassadors' Conference in Paris, see E. H. Carr, *International Relations Between the Two World Wars 1919-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 69-70.

explanations of the terms of the Treaty." Chamberlain was left wondering, in the end, whether the French actually realized what the true interests of their policy were.⁶⁵ It has to be said that, far from wishing to establish any new friendly relationship with Italy, as the somewhat paranoid French seemed to be implying, the British foreign secretary was displaying remarkable firmness in not giving an inch away to Mussolini, and in particular so over Yugoslavia. He regarded Mussolini's suggestion that the Yugoslavs should at once prepare for ratifying Nettuno Conventions as "impossible". The proposed ratification, he wrote to Crewe in Paris, was unobtainable by itself, but might be secured by Italian friendly explanations to the Serbs that the Treaty of Tirana was not merely a veiled protectorate over Albania designed to maintain Ahmed Zogu both against external and internal threats to his rule.⁶⁶

Thus, the most that can be said about Chamberlain's attitude towards Mussolini is that he was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt, whilst at the same time he not only clearly understood Yugoslav fears and apprehensions, he actually actively defended them. And not just Chamberlain, but the British ministers on the ground held practically identical positions on this question. From Durazzo Seeds reported to Chamberlain that even the Albanian government was not so much preoccupied with any Serbian military preparations. He suggested that the scare about those preparations in fact emanated from Italian sources in Yugoslavia and from Rome itself, anxious as it was to demonstrate to world in general and to Albanian public opinion the benefits of an Italian protectorate over Albania. Seeds agreed with Kennard in Belgrade who had "rightly minimized" the alleged Serbian military activities. And he added that Zogu himself had told him the Serbian main attack would not develop before August.⁶⁷ Kennard was also in total agreement with Chamberlain. He thought it "impossible" at this juncture to secure ratification of Nettuno Conventions unless Yugoslavia received adequate compensations. He considered that the Yugoslav government was "too weak", adding that public opinion in the country was angry about Mussolini's attack not only against the government, but also against the King personally. And Kennard also took the view that, in the circumstances, "friendly gesture should come from Rome in the first instance rather than from Belgrade".⁶⁸ His personal view was that the existing and clearly troublesome Pact of Tirana should be scrapped, to be replaced by a new one.⁶⁹ Similarly, Graham in Rome, in frequent contact with Rakić,

⁶⁵ Memorandum by Chamberlain, 24 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 75.

⁶⁶ Chamberlain to Crewe, 24 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 73.

⁶⁷ Seeds to Chamberlain, 25 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 76.

⁶⁸ Kennard to Chamberlain, 25 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 77.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

described the situation to Chamberlain as “a vicious circle”: Mussolini was prepared to offer satisfactory explanations of the Tirana pact, but only if Belgrade ratified Nettuno Conventions. “No doubt with truth,” Graham observed, the Yugoslavs were saying that immediate ratification was impossible.⁷⁰ But Graham also warned Chamberlain that Kennard’s private idea of doing away with the pact of Tirana was a non-starter since Mussolini was in the habit of using his foreign policy to enhance his prestige for purposes of internal affairs: “He will not contemplate anything in the nature of a climb-down.”⁷¹

Towards the end of March, however, Chamberlain’s attitude towards Yugoslavia began to shift, certainly not dramatically, but a shift was nevertheless clearly evident. In a letter marked “Private”, he confessed to Kennard that he was more concerned about what was happening in Yugoslavia than in Italy. “I am convinced,” he wrote, “that Mussolini contemplates no aggression on Albania, but I would not be answerable for the consequences if another revolution broke out there and above all if it started from Yugoslavian territory.” In part, there was a sense in which Chamberlain was merely stating the obvious: no reports, no intelligence reaching the Foreign Office had suggested that Italy was about to go into Albania with military force. There was simply no reason for such an action given the pro-Italian policy of Ahmed Zogu. For the time being, it did not even suit Mussolini to resort to arms given that he had been declaring to the world his peaceful intentions. Of course, what the Treaty of Tirana had given Mussolini was the option to use force if and when he deemed such action necessary. Realistically, this could only take place in the event of an interventionist course adopted in Belgrade towards Albania. But all the information that Chamberlain had been receiving was precisely that Belgrade was not contemplating an intervention. What, then, was his latest thinking? The only explanation, such as it was, that he offered to Kennard was that he had certain reservations about the intentions of King Alexander I, and this only from his “memory” about a conversation the King had with Kennard back in December 1926, when the King, according to Chamberlain, had used “very ominous language”. The question thus arises: had the British foreign secretary fallen for the recent Italian propaganda identifying the King as falling prey to the so-called Yugoslav “military party”? The answer must be a cautious no. As Chamberlain elaborated to Kennard: the weakness of the government in Belgrade “make them difficult people to help, but I do not wish you to think that I have thrown myself unconditionally into the Italian camp and am pursuing an Italian policy to the detriment of Yugo-Slavia.

⁷⁰ Graham to Chamberlain, 25 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 79.

⁷¹ Graham to Chamberlain, 29 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 88.

On the contrary, I have steadily sought to bring Mussolini to a conciliatory and reasonable frame of mind." And he also made the following important point to Kennard: "My capacity for usefulness depends upon my retaining Mussolini's confidence and friendship."⁷²

During the month of March there had been much talk in the triangle London-Paris-Berlin about sending to the Yugoslav-Albanian frontier a commission of enquiry made up of British, French and German officers (joined by an Italian and Serbian officer). This was essentially Chamberlain's idea. Mussolini was against, Belgrade would rather have nothing to do with it, but the French government accepted the proposal, and the Germans had nothing against it, either. Nevertheless, Paris was rightly sceptical about what this could achieve at all. Thus the diplomatic initiative passed on to the French who suggested to Chamberlain that the proposed commission "would not be solution of real cause of Italian-Serbian differences i.e. provisions of treaty of Tirana". And so, while the government of France had no objection that the commission should proceed with its work, this would "not in any way prevent direct conversations between Italy and Serbia with a view to reaching a permanent agreement". The government in Paris at the same time acknowledged that Britain was best qualified to speak to Rome on this subject, while for its part it promised to use its influence in Belgrade "in order to bring about firstly the ratification of Nettuno conventions and secondly desired interpretation of treaty of Tirana".⁷³ It can be observed that, apart from the suggested order of priorities (first the Nettuno Conventions, and only then the Treaty of Tirana), the French had got it exactly right, for they addressed the substance of the Italo-Yugoslav problem, rather than its manifestations.

Chamberlain liked Briand's proposal and informed Graham in Rome to that effect. He also sent him a personal message to pass on to Mussolini, authorizing the British ambassador to make at his discretion any modifications to the message if he considered it necessary. In this message he frankly informed Mussolini that as long the existing strained relations between Italy and Yugoslavia continued, there could be no guarantee that further incidents could not occur at any time. He was convinced, he continued, that the obvious and indeed the only cure was an "unconditional" dialogue between Italy and Yugoslavia, including the clarification of "the ambiguous provisions of the treaty of Tirana".⁷⁴ And not only did Chamberlain urge Mussolini that these conversations should begin "as soon as possible",

⁷² Chamberlain to Kennard, 29 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 90.

⁷³ Crewe to Chamberlain, 26 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 82.

⁷⁴ Chamberlain to Graham, 31 March 1927, *DBFP*, No. 95. Graham felt free to change Chamberlain's assessment of "the ambiguous provisions of the treaty of Tirana",

he also suggested that Italy should be the country “to take the initiative in opening the discussions without imposing preliminary restrictions or conditions”. This, of course, constituted potentially a big favour to Belgrade on the part of Britain, as Mussolini had consistently insisted that Yugoslavia should first ratify the Nettuno Conventions. Indeed Chamberlain pressed this point. He argued that Yugoslavia should not be asked to make any preliminary gesture with regard to the Nettuno Conventions which, as he correctly observed, “deal with matters entirely foreign to the question at issue”. To sweeten this bitter pill for Mussolini, Chamberlain undertook to ask the French to advise Belgrade to give Italy an undertaking that the Conventions should be submitted to the Parliament “*as part of a general settlement*”. Beyond this, Chamberlain wrote to Mussolini, “it would be unreasonable to press the Yugoslav government”.⁷⁵

In other words, within days Chamberlain had reverted to his previous position of defending the Yugoslav case, and now more so than ever. The fact that the French had played a role in this makes little difference. They had not written his personal message to Mussolini, they had merely identified the main problem, leaving it to Chamberlain to articulate it most eloquently. Moreover, Chamberlain had thrown out Briand’s recommendation that the Nettuno Conventions should be made the starting point of discussions.

Most predictably, Mussolini did not embrace Chamberlain’s message with any enthusiasm – to say the least. During the night of 1 April Graham communicated Chamberlain’s missive to Mussolini. “His Excellency,” Graham telegraphed to his foreign secretary, “was in a difficult mood. I did not expect him to relish message and he read it with ill concealed irritation.” In a dark mood indeed, *il Duce* told Graham that if the expectation existed that Belgrade should be offered an explanation regarding the Pact of Tirana, “he would do nothing of the kind”, since the Pact was perfectly clear and required no explanation. But the British ambassador was not having any of this nonsense: “I said this was to put it mildly an exaggeration.” Graham even put this to Mussolini: there were points in the Pact of Tirana “which no one understood”, for example to what extent the provision to uphold Albania’s political, juridical and territorial status quo committed Italy to support Ahmed Zogu “personally in all circumstances?” Under attack, Mussolini produced an answer – of a kind. He said that in a country like Albania the chief of state meant the state itself; if Zogu were overthrown, his suc-

substituting this with words “including all outstanding between the two countries”, on the grounds that Mussolini had never seen anything ambiguous in the Treaty. See Graham to Chamberlain, 2 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 105.

⁷⁵ *DBFP*, No. 95.

cessor would probably denounce various pacts, conventions, etc., between Italy and Albania, and this Italy could never tolerate. But Mussolini was also quick to say that if a successor to Zogu recognized the existing arrangements, "that would be quite a different matter". This was, it has to be admitted, opportunism of a very high order on the part of Mussolini. And then he played on British strategic sensitivities: Albania, he said, was as a vital point for Italy as were Gibraltar and Malta for Britain, and Italy could never allow Albania to fall into the hands or under the influence of potentially hostile powers such as Yugoslavia or Greece. In good measure, Mussolini tried to impress Graham with his statesmanship. Not so long ago, he told Graham, the former Yugoslav foreign minister Ninčić had proposed to him a partition of Albania, whereby Italy would get Valona, and Yugoslavia Scutari. He, Mussolini, claimed that he had rejected this proposal.⁷⁶ He also boasted that it was only his recent "pull of alarm bell" which had prevented an immediate European conflagration caused by Yugoslavia.

But Graham was far from convinced by the Italian dictator's statesmanship. He openly told him that his attitude would cause Chamberlain "much disappointment": the Yugoslavs sincerely desired the restoration of better relations, but if things were left as they were, there existed the danger of an incident at any moment. Mussolini did admit to Graham that the Albanian government had taken "meagre defensive measures" on the frontier against Yugoslavia, but was it really serious, he asked, that Albania would attack Yugoslavia? Equally, how could one believe that Italy contemplated aggression against Yugoslavia? In what was possibly a moment of carelessness, Mussolini said that, if Italy unfortunately did have to attack Yugoslavia, it would choose "a very different line" for such an attack, leaving the rugged and inhospitable terrain of the Albanian-Yugoslav frontier well alone. What Graham also discovered was that Mussolini was absolutely furious with the French, complaining about the "virulent" French press, and about France concentrating large numbers of troops and tanks on the Italian frontier. "France," he thundered, "endeavoured to thwart Italy at every turn." Graham protested that Briand was doing all he possibly could at Belgrade, but privately concluded that it was this Mussolini's irritation with France which may well have caused him, at least partly, to be difficult over Yugoslavia. He then told his host in no uncertain terms that there seemed no alternative to the Italo-Yugoslav problem over Albania except to bring

⁷⁶ Graham to Chamberlain, 2 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 105. In fact, the Central Department of the Foreign Office had recorded that Ninčić "had flatly denied this." *Ibid.*, n. 7. According to a different account, it was in fact Mussolini who had (probably in 1924 according to *DBFP*, No. 105, n. 7) offered Ninčić a division of Albania, but Ninčić refused this. See C. F. Melville, *Balkan Racket* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, n.d.; ca 1942), 25.

the whole question to the League of Nations. Evidently getting fed up with his British guest, Mussolini now produced a characteristic outburst: "His Excellency replied," Graham reported to Chamberlain, "that Albania was of such vital importance to Italy that not even the League of Nations could prevent her from defending legitimate interests there and if League attempted to do so so much the worse for the League."⁷⁷

So much for Mussolini's view of the new world order. Nonetheless, this important meeting left Graham satisfied – up to a point. For he relentlessly kept pressing Mussolini on the question of the Pact of Tirana, being careful enough to emphasize that the immediate ratification of the Nettuno Conventions "was not in the field of practical politics". Obviously tired, Mussolini finally gave in to this British diplomatic assault. He declared that if Rakić came to him with instructions from Belgrade asking either in a written note or verbally for explanations regarding the Pact of Tirana, he "was perfectly ready to give them". Moreover, Mussolini added, if Rakić's enquiry were couched in friendly terms, the answer would be in a similar spirit. Graham could hardly believe what he had just heard and jumped at this: was it the case, he asked Mussolini, that he "no longer insisted on a friendly gesture from Belgrade in the first instance? Signor Mussolini replied in the affirmative". This was, Graham reported modestly, all the result he could achieve, "but it may be a first step".⁷⁸

Not only in Rome, but also in Belgrade things appeared to be moving in a positive direction. Kennard informed Chamberlain on 3 April that Perić thought the ratification of Nettuno Conventions "could be secured", and also that, following Graham's talk with Mussolini, he would send requisite instructions to Rakić in Rome.⁷⁹ Moreover, there was now agreement between Italy and Yugoslavia that military officers (British, French and German) could inspect the Yugoslav-Albanian frontier if the occasion arose. Chamberlain himself defined such an occasion: "(a) unrest on the frontier, or (b) allegations regarding military movements made by any of the governments concerned."⁸⁰ At the same time, clearly very encouraged by Graham's recent account of his encounter with Mussolini, Chamberlain asked Kennard to tell Perić that Rakić should be given early instructions to approach Mussolini verbally on the lines suggested. Possibly lacking com-

⁷⁷ *DBFP*, No. 105.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* Graham strongly recommended to Chamberlain that, should Rakić approach Mussolini on lines suggested, he should do so verbally and not in writing.

⁷⁹ Kennard to Chamberlain, 3 April 1927, *DBFP*.

⁸⁰ Chamberlain to Crewe, 5 April 1927, *DBFP*. On 8 April Kennard reported that he and his French and German colleagues had already constituted a committee and were examining the question of procedure. *Ibid.*, n. 4.

plete confidence in Rakić's diplomatic skills, he wanted Kennard to strongly urge the Yugoslav foreign minister that his man in Rome "should be guided by Sir R. Graham as to the time and manner of his representations".⁸¹ What now complicated matters, however, was the panic that had set in Albania, or to be more precise, the fear that had gripped Ahmed Zogu himself. From Durazzo, Seeds informed Chamberlain that Zogu and his advisers were extremely unhappy at the prospect that Italian-Serbian conversations could redefine the Treaty of Tirana in a way that could weaken the force of words "political and juridical *status quo*". But Seeds was no fool. He explained to Chamberlain that the real meaning of these words was "support thereby given to Ahmed Bey personally". The regime of Zogu, as the latter had openly confessed to Seeds, "might end rapidly" should Italy's support be withdrawn, or even if the impression gained ground, especially among his political opponents, that this was going to happen.⁸²

In Rome, Graham shared the thinking of Seeds, which he passed on in a despatch to Chamberlain. He had talked to A. C. Bordonaro, the Secretary-General of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the man whom Mussolini was about to send to London as the new ambassador. Bordonaro told Graham that Mussolini "was considerably upset" over Chamberlain's message to him of 31 March – a piece of information that could hardly have been news to Graham. But Bordonaro also said to Graham that any weakening of Italy's support to Zogu "meant that latter would lose not only his position but probably his life". Typically, the British diplomat was not going to shed tears over such a possibility. In the same despatch, Graham notified Chamberlain that Rakić had got the necessary instructions from Belgrade and therefore asked Mussolini whether he would be ready to begin conversation with the Serbian minister. *Il Duce*, however, replied that he was taking a holiday and would not be ready until after Easter. And he could not resist telling Graham that, according to the information he had, Belgrade was already celebrating a diplomatic victory, but he was going to disillusion the Serbs. Very coldly, Graham commented that he would much regret "if His Excellency approached discussions in this frame of mind", adding that the Yugoslav government seriously desired to arrive at a friendly understanding. Far from being overawed by Mussolini, Graham merely displayed polite contempt for a second-class power which Italy, despite all its pretensions under a Fascist dictator, had been and still remained.⁸³

⁸¹ Chamberlain to Kennard, 5 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 114.

⁸² Seeds to Chamberlain, 6 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 119.

⁸³ Graham to Chamberlain, 9 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 136. In Belgrade, Kennard disagreed about Mussolini's claim about a Serb diplomatic victory. *Ibid.*, n. 2.

By now Graham had taken Rakić completely under his wing. It can even be argued that it was British diplomacy that was in important ways shaping Yugoslavia's troublesome relations with Italy. Graham had convinced Rakić to drop the idea of commencing talks with Mussolini by delivering a note – this, as has been seen, had already been agreed between Graham and Chamberlain. To start proceedings with a note would be “fatal” according to Graham: the only result “would have been an exchange of mutually unsatisfactory notes which would have rendered further conversations difficult if not impossible”. Graham noted with evident pleasure that, happily, no one was more persuaded of this than Rakić who had managed to obtain from a reluctant Belgrade government permission to proceed along the line suggested by Britain. Graham also gave Rakić a pep talk on the Italian position: (1) Italy had secured by the Pact of Tirana a privileged position which it would not readily surrender; (2) whilst the Italians would probably give satisfactory general assurances regarding the Pact, it would be difficult to induce them to offer detailed explanations; (3) the interests of the Italians were bound up with Ahmed Zogu, and they would never willingly agree not to intervene on his behalf before he had been comfortably disposed of; and (4) the Italians would not consent to bring the question of Albania to the League of Nations, and although this could actually be forced on them, the result would put an end to all hope of friendly relations between Italy and Yugoslavia.⁸⁴

The interesting thing here was that France, generally believed to be Yugoslavia's greatest ally, seemed in fact to be almost totally out of the picture. However, true gentleman that he was, Chamberlain had sent a private letter to Briand via De Fleuriau, the French ambassador to London, commenting on aspects of French policy. Briand replied in the same informal and confidential manner, addressing his main points to Italo-Yugoslav relations. He wished to inform Chamberlain that the Yugoslav government were “in a state of great nervousness and were particularly suspicious of British policy. They thought that the British Government was helping and encouraging Signor Mussolini in an unfriendly policy to Yugo-Slavia”. Briand's views were either hopelessly ignorant or malicious. This was not a comment on what Belgrade actually felt, it was a thinly disguised attack on the Foreign Office. Predictably, Chamberlain was less than impressed by this message, but kept his calm. For throughout the Italo-Yugoslav crisis, he made sure to keep Paris informed about British policy. He told De Fleuriau, who had communicated to him Briand's thoughts, that, surely, he, De Fleuriau, should know how he had spoken to him “with such frankness” about his communications with Italy, and that he should also know “how

⁸⁴ Graham to Chamberlain, 11 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 141.

unjustified these suspicions were and how hard I had worked to help Yugoslavia. I had in fact strained whatever influence I possessed with Mussolini to the very limit".⁸⁵

Apart from not being able to resist pricking Chamberlain, the French were nevertheless seriously alarmed about the developments in the Balkans. Nikola Uzunović's government in Belgrade resigned on 16 April, to be succeeded by that of Velja Vukićević, with Vojislav Marinković as the new Foreign Minister. Two days earlier Italy issued an official communiqué which stated that there could be no question of negotiations respecting the Treaty of Tirana, as this did not concern the Serb-Croat-Slovene state.⁸⁶ Clearly, the Italian position was hardening, and Mussolini had evidently and shamelessly lied to Graham during their conversation in Rome on 1 April when he promised that he would give Milan Rakić a friendly interpretation of the Treaty of Tirana. Now De Fleuriau hastened to see Orme Sargent in the Foreign Office, bringing along a fresh telegram from Briand. The latter believed that the change of government in Belgrade was due to the King who "intended that the new government, representing a definite Serbian bloc without admixture of Croats or Slovenes, should adopt a firmer and bolder foreign policy than its predecessor". De Fleuriau also told Sargent that, according to French reports from Belgrade, there were in the new government "elements" opposed to avoiding a war with Italy "on the ground that Italian military operations in Albania would be so unpopular as to undermine and possibly bring about the collapse of the whole Fascist regime". Briand, according to De Fleuriau, trusted that the Yugoslavs would not really embrace "the fantastic belief" that the régime in Italy could in any way suffer by a war over Albania. And Briand felt that Chamberlain was "the only person" able to influence Mussolini. He expressed the belief that, if Chamberlain threatened Mussolini by telling him that Britain would not countenance an Italian policy in Albania which could at any moment lead to war, Mussolini would back down.⁸⁷

However upset Chamberlain may have felt about the recent French criticisms of British policy, it did not really matter what Briand and the French thought or believed about London's handling of the Italo-Yugoslav question. And Chamberlain could now feel the satisfaction that Paris was

⁸⁵ Record by Sir A. Chamberlain of a conversation with the French Ambassador, 14 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 151. Apart from French ignorance about British efforts to help Belgrade, at this time Chamberlain also had a grievance towards Paris concerning lack of French support for British policy in China. *Ibid.*, n. 1.

⁸⁶ Chamberlain to Graham, 19 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 155, n. 1.

⁸⁷ Record by Mr. Sargent of a conversation with the French Ambassador, 19 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 156.

frankly investing all its hopes in the Foreign Office, implying that its influence in Rome was practically non-existent. In the end it turned out that it was not a great power like France, nor indeed Chamberlain himself, but rather a relatively minor British diplomat who proved decisive in determining the final outcome of the crisis. This was William Seeds. He wrote, on 18 April, what must be seen as a most important letter to Chamberlain, although the Foreign Office received it as late as 2 May. Seeds discussed the internal situation in Albania, amusing himself in particular with observations on Fan Noli, the former head of the Albanian government. "Fan Noli," he reported to Chamberlain, "would be justified in adding the title of Prophet to his highly irregular dignity of 'Bishop' as he is apparently not without honour save within the frontiers of his own country." Noli had given an interview to a newspaper in Vienna, in which he said that the Pact of Tirana was imposed on Albania by Italy and Britain, and that in the event of a war between Italy and Yugoslavia the Albanians would be fighting on the side of Yugoslavia. Ahmed Bey, Noli added correctly, was thoroughly unpopular, maintaining his position only thanks to Italy. The existing situation in Albania, Seeds noted, was such that ambitious politicians anticipated the forthcoming Italo-Serbian conversations weakening, "or of some more violent event wiping out, the regime of Ahmed Bey". And this was precisely what worried Seeds. He was himself convinced that Italy would support Zogu "through thick and thin", but there always existed the danger that some accident would deprive Albania of its present head. In this connection, Seeds referred to an unsuccessful plot against Zogu towards the end of March. And since, Seeds argued, Zogu's enemies may believe that this was the time for action, "it is advisable to consider at any rate the possibility of Ahmed Bey's disappearance, and its consequences".⁸⁸

Seeds did not even try to hide his "warm regard" for Zogu, but placed his entire letter to Chamberlain in the context of "a serious calamity" that would be entailed by Zogu's downfall. Ahmed Bey, he declared, was "irreplaceable", no one else was fit to step into his shoes. The only alternative person whom Seeds could identify was Musa Bey Juka, the minister of public works and previously the interior minister, but he thought that Juka's personal unpopularity was a fatal obstacle. "Consequently," Seeds wrote, "hopes of finding a suitable successor to Ahmed Bey – given Albanian methods of régime-changing – must be founded on the mere possibility that out of the inevitable chaos and turmoil some outstanding though hitherto unrecognized personality may in time emerge. But parturition will be difficult, and Albania would not be given useful help by her Italian and Serbian midwives whose efforts will most probably result in the produc-

⁸⁸ Seeds to Chamberlain, 18 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 154.

tion of twins cursed with a grievous incompatibility of temper and with no very sound constitutions.” In the past, Seeds observed, Albanian régimes alternated regularly between the adherents of Italy and Serbia. But now, he argued, conditions had completely changed: it was no longer a question of what Italy or Yugoslavia may hope to gain from a new president, “but quite definitely of what Italy may be almost certain to lose”. In Seeds’ view, the advantages that Zogu had promised the Serbs in return for returning him to power at the close of 1924 were “paltry” in comparison with what Italy had since gained “and must preserve at all costs”. He thought that the action which Italy would take in the event of a revolution against Zogu was “too obvious to discuss”. Seeds concluded his letter thus: “In Ahmed Bey the Italians have now a valuable and unique instrument; for no other man ... possesses those personal qualities which can keep him in power without an unduly provocative display of Italian force. Should he disappear, there seems no present chance of either the Italians or the Serbians finding any candidate who would be much above puppet rank. The struggle between these puppets and their foreign supporters may, or may not, result in the extinction of Albania as an independent State, but bids fair in any event to mean the success of an individual dependent for his existence on very obvious alien bayonets.”⁸⁹

The impact of Seeds’ latest thinking on Chamberlain was truly considerable and is examined below. But on 25 April Signor Bordonaro handed Chamberlain a major memorandum by Mussolini on the subject of Italo-Yugoslav relations, dated 20 April. In this document *il Duce* accused Belgrade, for the umpteenth time, of “a decidedly anti-Italian tendency”, evident, he claimed, by “an intense military preparation”. He wrote, most vaguely, of “certain political and military circles in Yugoslavia possessing great influence, both open and secret”, something which constituted a grave danger to peace – but he named no one in particular. He went to contradict himself immediately, as “it now seems improbable ... that Jugoslavia desires to persist in stimulating the proposed spring invasion of Albania”. And he persisted that any discussion concerning the Pact of Tirana was “absolutely inadmissible”. Staying on this subject, he wondered why Chamberlain attached so much attention to the clause in which Italy declared its interest in the maintenance of the political status quo in Albania, a clause, he observed, interpreted “as an obligation to support the present internal régime”. He added cynically: “Italy has no reasons of her own for interfering in the internal politics of the Albanian State,” whereas Yugoslavia desired to make Albania, practically, politically and perhaps territorially, a “vassal”. Whatever Yugoslavia’s aims in Albania, it must have occurred to Chamberlain

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

that Mussolini was actually stating his own country's ambitions in Albania for which there already existed all the evidence.⁹⁰

A few days later, Orme Sargent argued in a Foreign Office memorandum that Britain had no direct interest in Albania other than a general concern to prevent friction in Europe. This was of course stating the obvious. But Sargent also expressed scepticism about Mussolini, believing that in his conversation with Rakić (which still had not taken place) he would flatly refuse to give assurances that the Treaty of Tirana did not endanger the independence of Albania and was not directed against Yugoslavia, or that he might argue that the Treaty entitled him to intervene in Albania in the support of the existing government against internal opposition and insurrection. "In these circumstances," Sargent observed, "the Yugoslav government would be fully entitled to take the matter to the League."⁹¹

With regard to Seeds' letter Chamberlain gave his comments not to hi man in Tirana, but to Graham in Rome in a letter dated 9 May. He referred to the memorandum which Mussolini had sent him on 20 April. And he did not hide his displeasure: "M. Mussolini, for the first time, definitely states in writing that he interprets Article I of the Treaty of Tirana as entitling him to interfere to protect and defend any friendly régime in Albania, not merely against foreign aggression, but presumably against internal opposition. This claim to interfere in the internal administration of Albania is precisely the claim which the Yugoslav Government have all along feared, and which they consider would constitute a threat to their own security by converting Albania from an independent country into an Italian protectorate ... his Excellency now defines this claim in such a manner that it becomes impossible for me to treat it otherwise than as representing the official and considered policy of the Italian Government." And this, Chamberlain explained to Graham, put him "in a position of some difficulty".⁹²

Chamberlain then outlined three possible courses open to him: (1) he could keep silent and reserve the right to protest if and when Italy took some action which could be held to constitute unjustifiable interference in the internal matters of Albania; (2) he could remind Mussolini that Britain was unable to accept or approve the present Italian claim; and (3) he could "tacitly acquiesce" in the Italian claim. The first option did not appeal to Chamberlain since it could easily lead to trouble for Britain at a later date. The second option he at first thought "the most consistent and logical", but he also had to consider Mussolini's possible violent reaction and, more importantly, if Belgrade found out about Britain's rejection of Mussolini's

⁹⁰ *DBFP*, No. 162, enclosure.

⁹¹ Memorandum by Mr. Sargent, 26 April 1927, *DBFP*, No. 163.

⁹² Sir A. Chamberlain to Sir R. Graham, 9 May 1927, *DBFP*, No. 183.

claims, it might encourage it to adopt an uncompromising attitude, and possibly lead to a fresh revolution in Albania.⁹³

He then addressed Seeds' "very illuminating despatch". He explained that he had always held that Britain had no direct interest in Albania, and that the only reason he wanted to see Italy's penetration in Albania confined within certain limits was that, if such penetration were unlimited, it would arouse the fear of neighbouring states and thereby endanger peace. What Seeds had convinced him of, however, was that the factor which was even more likely to endanger peace would be the disappearance of Ahmed Bey and his government since: "Should Ahmed Bey disappear, the result is likely to be civil war, during which Albania as a separate State might cease to exist or become subject to a puppet Government still more dependent on foreign bayonets than the present one ... Were His Majesty's Government now to veto M. Mussolini's policy of supporting Ahmed's Government against both internal and external aggression, and were he subsequently to be overthrown, it is not difficult to foresee the Italian arguments whereby His Majesty's Government would be held responsible for the resulting chaos and the consequent damage to vital Italian interests, and even for the eventual conflict between Italy and Yugoslavia."⁹⁴

Chamberlain also enclosed a memorandum addressed to Mussolini – a sickening piece of work in which he bent over backwards to make conciliatory statements to the Italian dictator, concluding thus: "I take note with particular satisfaction of the very frank and precise assurances with which Signor Mussolini's message concludes, namely, that the situation created by the Ambassadors' Conference resolution of 1921 and by the Treaty of Tirana guarantees the independence of Albania and does not threaten in the least Yugoslavia or any other State bordering upon Albania; that Italy casts no aggressive glances either in the neighbourhood of the Adriatic or elsewhere; and lastly, that Italy will do nothing which might disturb the peace of Europe. It is so that I have throughout understood and interpreted his policy."⁹⁵ When Briand met Chamberlain at the Foreign Office and enquired about Italo-Yugoslav relations, to his credit Chamberlain at least replied that "one could never speak confidently about so temperamental a person as Signor Mussolini".⁹⁶

The question thus arises: did Chamberlain actually decisively shift Britain's policy towards the Albanian rift between Italy and Yugoslavia?

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, enclosure.

⁹⁶ Record by Sir A. Chamberlain of a conversation with M. Briand at the Foreign Office on 18 May, 1927, *DBFP*, No. 201.

And the answer, surely, is that he did not do so in any meaningful sense. As he and his diplomats kept endlessly repeating, Britain had no interest in Albania except to keep the country pacified lest Britain found itself involved in a crisis, or a conflict which served her no purpose whatsoever. Here, Britain was actually more suspicious of France with her Little Entente system than of Italy. And, if anything, as the records show, the Foreign Office was far more frequently backing Yugoslav complaints against Italy than the other way round. In this case at least, it was not the case what Professor Slobodan Jovanović told William Strang, the young British diplomat at Belgrade in the early 1920s: "No allied country, he said, had been more generously friendly to Yugoslavia than Great Britain, and no allied country politically so hostile."⁹⁷ What so frightened Chamberlain in May 1927 was the possibility that Zogu could easily be removed, that no suitable replacement could be found for him, and that a Balkan conflagration could ensue, something which Britain absolutely wanted to avoid. This was sheer pragmatism on Britain's part, hardly a change of policy. It should be remembered that Britain's rejection of the Geneva Protocol in 1925 had created the essential basis for her postwar international behaviour: avoid all foreign commitments at all costs unless your own direct interests are under threat. And it is wrong to argue that the Treaty of Tirana was made possible by British acquiescence: "Having just blocked any substantial Italian gains at the expense of Ethiopia and Turkey, Britain was glad enough to allow Mussolini a little balm for his ego in Albania which, from 1921 on, had been recognized by the Conference of Ambassadors as a special Italian sphere of interest."⁹⁸ Indeed, it was precisely the Treaty of Tirana which confirmed an already existing state of affairs between Italy and Albania, and British preoccupations in Ethiopia and Turkey had nothing to do with it: they were entirely separate issues with entirely separate possible consequences. Britain was an imperial power with vast interests in the Near and Middle East. She had had no pretensions in the Adriatic at least since the Napoleonic period.

And thus the almost hysterical Italo-Yugoslav crisis over Albania in the spring of 1927 soon petered out. Yugoslav-Albanian relations deteriorated further, with diplomatic relations being broken off in June 1927, only to be restored again in August.⁹⁹ But Yugoslavia, economically and militarily far weaker than Italy, had long since lost Albania which now became Italy's satellite state in all but name, this being a state of affairs which in reality represented merely "a political technicality" at least since the Treaty

⁹⁷ Lord Strang, *Home and Abroad* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1956), 55.

⁹⁸ Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, 87.

⁹⁹ See Mirko Avakumović, *Prekid i obnova diplomatskih odnosa između Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca i Albanije 1927. godine* (Belgrade: Štamparija Privrednik, 1934).

of Tirana.¹⁰⁰ Which, it may be argued, was just as well. As a contemporary British observer wrote, the “Albanians have given convincing proof that they are unfitted to govern themselves, whereas a protectorate would result in bringing peace to a distracted land”.¹⁰¹

The rest of the story is well-known. Zogu made himself King in 1928, thus rounding off his somewhat cinematic career. But there existed no constitutional monarchy in Albania to speak of. He made attempts to modernize his country, whilst in foreign policy he pretended to be independent of Italy – a claim that fooled no one. And it was the rivalry between Mussolini and Hitler that ultimately decided the fate of Zogu and Albania. The Germans marched into Prague in March 1939, an action that threw *il Duce* into an infantile mood and, influenced by his foreign minister Conte Ciano, he sent his troops to occupy Albania in April, a military operation not particularly distinguished by its brilliance, but nevertheless successfully completed by the middle of April when the crown of Albania was offered to the Italian King Victor Emmanuel. Zogu went to exile, rumoured to carry \$4,000,000 in treasure.¹⁰²

After the Second World War Tito’s Yugoslavia briefly asserted some influence over Tirana, but the People’s Albania preferred to try other versions of the Socialist experiment – first Soviet, then Chinese – before settling on her own isolationist and famously paranoid model.

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¹⁰⁰ Alan Palmer, *The Lands Between: A History of East-Central Europe since the Congress of Vienna* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 242.

¹⁰¹ E. Alexander Powell, *Embattled Borders: Eastern Europe from the Balkans to the Baltic*, (London: John Long Limited, 1928), 110–111.

¹⁰² Joseph S. Roucek, *Balkan Politics: International Relations in No Man’s Land* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), 141.