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Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the Resistance Movements in Yugoslavia, 1941¹

Abstract: During the Second World War a brutal and distinctly complex war was fought in Yugoslavia. It was a mixture of an anti-fascist struggle for liberation as well as an ideological, civil, inter-ethnic and religious war, which witnessed a holocaust and genocide against Jews and Serbs. At least a million Yugoslavs died in that war, most of them ethnic Serbs. In their policies towards Yugoslavia, each of the three Allied Powers (the United States of America, the Soviet Union and Great Britain) had their short-term and long-term goals. The short-term goals were victory over the Axis powers. The long-term goals were related to the post-war order in Europe (and the world). The Allies were unanimous about the short-term goals, but differed with respect to long-term goals. The relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union were especially sensitive: both countries wanted to use a victory in the war as a means of increasing their political power and influence. Yugoslavia was a useful buffer zone between British and Soviet ambitions, as well as being the territory in which the resistance to the Axis was the strongest. The relations between London and Moscow grew even more complicated when the two local resistance movements clashed over their opposing ideologies: nationalism versus communism. The foremost objective of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) was to effect a violent change to the pre-war legal and political order of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Keywords: Allies, Yugoslavia, Resistance movements, military strategy, communist ideology

Introduction

The assassination of King Alexander I Karadjordjević on October 9, 1934 in France triggered a series of events that dragged the Kingdom of Yugoslavia into the Second World War. It was the one of the first step towards the destruc-

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¹ I would like to thank Peter Radan, Macquarie University, Australia, and Dragan Bakić, Institute for Balkan Studies, Serbia, for their helpful comments and encouragement on earlier drafts of this article.

tion of the European order. Thereafter, Yugoslavia increasingly found herself at the mercy of the great European powers. The legitimacy of Yugoslavia was in question almost immediately after it came into existence, but Western democracies did not have the will or the capacity to respond to this problem.²

Prince Paul Karadjordjević³ was appointed regent for his 11-year-old nephew, Peter II. As regent, he felt constrained to undertake much needed far-reaching reforms towards resolving national differences, above all the Serb-Croat conflict over the constitutional structure of the country. Although Yugoslavia was politically oriented towards the western democracies and supported the League of Nations, it found itself increasingly economically tied to Germany and Italy. The collapse of the Little Entente (an alliance between Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania formed for the purpose of resisting a Habsburg restoration) had diminished Yugoslavia's regional influence. Paul was soon forced to submit to Hitler's demands and align his policy with the Axis powers. During his visit to Berlin in June 1939, Paul became convinced that the war in Europe was unavoidable and imminent. He therefore resolved to revive the talks with the Croats without delay in order to settle internal conflicts in his country.⁴

In July, the Regent visited London to shore up his relationship with the British. Immediately afterwards, he encouraged talks between his government and opposition leaders in Croatia, which led to the Agreement of August 26, 1939. This unexpected agreement, which granted the Croats an autonomous province (*Banovina Hrvatska*), was signed three days after the equally unexpected Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed in Moscow. However, rather than resolving the Serb-Croat conflict, the Agreement only served to exacerbate tensions between Serbs and Croats. For extreme Croat nationalists, the Agreement was, at best, a small step towards independence, while for many Serbs too much had been conceded to the Croats.

When war engulfed Europe, Yugoslavia proclaimed its official neutrality. However, even under such circumstances Paul's views remained decidedly pro-

² Vesna Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia. A Transnational History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 143.

³ Prince Paul Karadjordjević (1893–1976) was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. His mother was a Russian princess of the Demidov family, and his uncle was the Serbian King Peter I. He was educated in Geneva and Belgrade, and in 1910 he moved to Britain to attend the University of Oxford. His studies were interrupted by military service in the Balkan Wars and Great War. An intelligent individual, Paul moved easily within the upper echelons of British society, and, although he was a member of the Karadjordjević family, he was not burdened with political duties. In 1923, he married Princess Olga of Greece and Denmark; Prince Albert, Duke of York (later King George VI) served as his best man.

⁴ Srdja Trifković, "Prince Pavle Karadjordjević", in *The Serbs and their leaders in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Peter Radan and Aleksandar Pavković (Sidney: Ashgate, 1997), 179.

Allied. The fall of France was a severe psychological blow as Yugoslavia could not hope for support from either Great Britain or the Soviet Union.

Relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were burdened by the slaughter of the Romanoffs with whom the Karadjordjević dynasty had kept close links since the nineteenth century. Prior to 1917, close relations prevailed between Serbia and Imperial Russia, with Russia serving as the protector of the small Balkan kingdom. Personal correspondence between Regent Alexander of Serbia and Russian Emperor Nicholas were of major importance in the weeks prior to the outbreak of the Great War. The Emperor's cable to the Regent sent in the most difficult moments on July 27, 1914 that declared that Russia would not abandon Serbia was of great encouragement for the Serbs. However, the October Revolution forced the Serbia to terminate all its diplomatic relations with Bolshevik Russia. This gesture of the Serbian Government coincided with the separate peace agreement of Brest–Litovsk between Russia and Germany signed on March 3, 1918.

The murder of the Russian imperial family and the arrival of more than 40,000 Russian refugees to the newly-founded Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (re-named Yugoslavia in 1929) had a considerable influence on King Alexander and his attitude towards the Soviet regime. The Soviet Union was perceived not just as posing an external threat, but also as having a disruptive influence within Yugoslavia due to the CPY's pursuit of a social revolution. In this respect, the traditional sympathies of the Serbian people for Russia were conducive to the success of communist propaganda. For many years the Soviet rulers feared that Baron Wrangel's exiled White Russian army, with the support from the royal Yugoslav army, might embark on "a counter-revolution" in Russia. The Yugoslav king appeared to them to be the most dangerous candidate for the vacant Russian throne. To allay such fears, on several occasions the Belgrade government officially stated that it would assist any action against the Bolshevik regime. Nevertheless, the Soviet Government sent a stream of agents to Yugoslavia until Hitler came to power and supported anyone who tried to destabilize that country. Aside from ideological reasons, King Alexander also doubted that the Soviet Union could become a defender of European peace and stability, having previously attempted to export the Bolshevik revolution across to the rest of the continent.⁵

The Yugoslav Government decided to come to an agreement with the Soviet Union in March 1940. Belgrade hoped that Moscow would oppose Italian "expansionist tendencies" targeted against Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Government was forthcoming. The negotiations between the two countries began in late May and diplomatic relations were established in Ankara on 24 June. Germany

⁵ Branislav Gligorijević, *Kralj Aleksandar Karađorđević*, vol. III (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2002), 280–281.

was displeased with Yugoslavia's rapprochement with the Soviets, particularly with the choice of Milan Gavrilović as the first Yugoslav minister to Moscow.⁶

In the summer and autumn of 1940 the position of Yugoslavia became very complex. Romania and Hungary joined the Tripartite Pact in November, and Hitler called upon Paul to do the same, but the Regent knew that Serbs remained overwhelmingly anti-German and pro-British. In a quandary, Yugoslavia had no choice but to join the Tripartite Pact on March 25, 1941. Two days later Paul was deposed by a group of Serbian air force officers led by General Dušan Simović. The military coup was the ultimate expression of Serb nationalism. The coup leaders proclaimed internal factors as being the root cause for the coup, rather than dissatisfaction with Paul's foreign policy that had led to Yugoslavia's adherence to the Tripartite Pact. Motivation for the coup has long been a matter of historical controversy. However, it is indisputable that it was exclusively organized and supported by Serbs and it reflected deep Serbian nationalist sentiment.⁷

When the coup d'état was carried out on March 27 in Belgrade, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave the oft-quoted statement: "I have great news for you and the whole country. Early this morning the Yugoslav nation found its soul. A revolution has taken place in Belgrade. This patriotic movement arises from the wrath of a valiant and warlike race at the betrayal of their country by the weakness of their rulers and the foul intrigues of the Axis Powers. [...] The British Empire and its Allies will make common cause with the Yugoslav nation, and we shall continue to march and strive together until complete victory is won."⁸

However, the consequences of the coup were immediate and devastating for Yugoslavia. On April 6, 1941, the Axis launched its attack. Germany treated the attack on Yugoslavia as a showdown with Serbia and the opportunity to settle the score from the time of the Great War. The official statement of the German Government was marked by xenophobia and racism against the Serbian

⁶ Kosta Nikolić, *Mit o partizanskom jugoslovenstvu* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2015), 252.

⁷ Peter Radan, "Constitutional Experimentation and the National Question in Interwar Yugoslavia", *Istorija 20. veka XXIX/3* (2011), 37–38.

⁸ Quoted in Winston S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, vol. III of *The Second World War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), 148–149. About the British role in the coup see Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs, 1931–1945* (London: Frederick Muller, Ltd, 1957); Elizabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Heather Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans. The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia, 1941–1945* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2003); Sebastian Ritchie, *Our man in Yugoslavia. The story of a Secret Service Operative* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004); Sue Onslow, "Britain and the Belgrade Coup of 27 March 1941 revisited", *eJournal of International History* (March 2005).

nation: "They are the same conspirators whose atrocities did not cease to infect the Balkans, who did not even stop short of killing monarchs, and who caused a worldwide war in 1914 with the assassination in Sarajevo, thus unleashing unprecedented calamities on the mankind."⁹

On the same day Germany invaded Greece. Hitler accused "British imperialism and Jewish financiers" of making plans to conquer the world, so Germany had to achieve "a true consolidation" of Europe. The Belgrade government was dubbed "a band of ruffians", whereas Britain was said to be "the greatest war-monger" of all time: "Soldiers of the Southeast Front, in your duty you will not be less courageous than the men of those German divisions who in 1915, on the same Balkan soil, fought so victoriously."¹⁰

Yugoslavia was conquered and dismantled and some of its regions sided with the Nazis. On April 10, 1941 the fascist *Ustasha* organization, led by Ante Pavelić, proclaimed the Independent State of Croatia as German troops were pouring into Zagreb. Bosnia and Herzegovina was also included in this Nazi puppet state. The core of *Ustasha* ideology was fanatical Croatian nationalism and its regime was supported by the nationalist, anti-Communist Catholic Church in Croatia. Most Croats supported the idea of an independent Croatia after many centuries of foreign rule.¹¹ The Croatian Government immediately introduced racist measures against their Serb, Jewish, and Roma minorities. A violent anti-Serbian campaign and mass terror, which soon reached genocidal proportions, started after a meeting between Pavelić and Hitler on June 6, 1941.¹²

Serbs from Serbia proper constituted approximately 200,000 prisoners taken from the royal army and sent to forced-labour camps in Germany (out of some 340,000).¹³ Serbia was the only region of occupied Yugoslavia under the direct control of German military authorities. Her frontiers were reduced to those of pre-Balkan Wars Serbia (in 1912). Parts of southeast Serbia, as well as a part of eastern Kosovo, were annexed by Bulgaria. The eastern part of Srem was annexed by Croatia. Bačka was occupied and then annexed by Horthy's Hungary. Banat became a separate administrative territory under the administration of the Banat Germans, while the remaining parts of Kosovo and Metohija, along

⁹ Vojni Arhiv (VA), Belgrade [Military Archives], Fonds *The German occupying forces from 1941 to 1945*, 2-2-45; Declaration of the German Government.

¹⁰ VA, *The German occupying forces*, 2-2-46; Hitler's order of the day April 6, 1941.

¹¹ Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 79.

¹² Kosta Nikolić, *Istorija Ravnogorskog pokreta*, vol. I (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2014), 204-205.

¹³ John R. Lampe, *Balkans into Southeastern Europe, 1914-2014*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 158.

with a portion of Sandžak, was included in the Italian protectorate of "Greater Albania".¹⁴

The Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht introduced a strict occupation regime in Serbia as a way of punishing the Serbs for the 27 March putsch. The first military commander in Serbia was Air Force General Helmut Förster (General der Flieger). The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Cultural Development of Nations and Propaganda rejected any idea of fostering culture in Serbia because "Serbia has always been hostile to us. The only guideline in our attitude should be the protection of our own interests as an occupation force."¹⁵

After the surrender of the royal Yugoslav army, just nine days into the German invasion, King Peter¹⁶ and his government fled to Greece and continued their journey to Alexandria and then to Jerusalem where the Yugoslav Government-in-exile announced that Yugoslavia would continue the war against the Axis powers. On June 21, King Peter and his government arrived in London to take residence in the British capital. On June 26, Prime Minister Dušan Simović and Foreign Minister Momčilo Ninčić were received by Churchill.¹⁷ The British Government was reassuring: "We are renewing the comradeship that in the Great War carried us through tribulation to victory. We will conduct the war in common and make peace only when right has been vindicated and law and justice are again enthroned."¹⁸

However, as time went by the British were less and less inclined to consult with the Yugoslavs and simply informed them about preferred Allied policies, especially as they now had their own operatives out in the field.¹⁹

The Soviet Union's attitude towards the events in Yugoslavia leading to the German military attack had been rather reserved. The Soviets had not revealed their position neither at the time of Yugoslavia's adherence to the Tripar-

¹⁴ More Kosta Nikolić and Nebojša Stambolija, "Royalist Resistance Movement in Yugoslavia during the Second World War", *Istorija 20. veka XXXVI/2* (2018), 12–13.

¹⁵ Quoted in Walter Manoschek, "Serbien ist judenfrei". *Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1995), 34.

¹⁶ Peter II Karadjordjević (1923–1970), the last King of Yugoslavia. Peter was the eldest son of King Alexander and Queen Maria (born Princess of Romania); his godfather was King George V. After the Yugoslav monarchy had been abolished by Yugoslav communist regime on November 29, 1945, he settled in the United States and died in Los Angeles, California. In January 2013, Peter's remains were transported to Belgrade. He was reburied on May 26, 2013, with full state honors in the Mausoleum of the Karadjordjević Dynasty in Oplenac.

¹⁷ Walter R. Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies, 1941–1945*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 20.

¹⁸ Quoted in Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia*, 155.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 156.

tite Pact nor that of the 27 March coup. However, Moscow made a demagogic move on April 6. Almost simultaneously with the German onslaught against Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union signed the anodyne treaty of friendship and non-aggression with the Yugoslav minister in Moscow. For that reason, it was back-dated to April 5. The treaty's stipulation that in case of attack "from a third party" the Soviet Union would maintain a policy of friendly relations towards Belgrade meant nothing in terms of Yugoslavia's defense.²⁰

After Yugoslavia's capitulation, Nazi Germany pressured the Soviet Government to sever its relations with Yugoslavia and other occupied countries. The Soviets succumbed and announced on May 8 that Milan Gavrilović had "no legal basis" for further work in his mission in Moscow since the Yugoslav Government had left its country.²¹ Gavrilović left Moscow on May 19 and went to Ankara. This meant that the Soviet Government accepted the German claim that Yugoslavia ceased to exist as an independent state.

After having been attacked on June 22, the Soviets reconsidered their policy. In early July, Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador in London,²² presented British officials a proposal for the normalization of relations with Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia. As these states had formally and legally lost their independence and sovereignty, the Soviet Government suggested the formation of national committees (Czech, Polish and Yugoslav), which would form their own military units. Moscow was prepared to equip and arm such units which would then fight against the Germans as part of the Red Army.²³

On July 8, 1941, Ambassador Maisky told Ivan Subotić, the Yugoslav Minister in London, that the Soviet Union was prepared to conclude an agreement on the renewal of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Yugoslav Government then instructed Subotić to ask for not only the re-establishment of diplomatic relations but also for the restoration of the friendship treaty signed on the day of the German attack on Yugoslavia.²⁴ Maisky emphasized that the Soviet Union would fight for the restoration of Yugoslavia's independence, while the "internal regime [in Yugoslavia] was their own business."²⁵

²⁰ *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici SFRJ 1941–1945*, vol. I (Belgrade: Jugoslovenski pregled, 1984), 27.

²¹ *Ibid.* 47.

²² Ivan Maisky (Иван Михайлович Майский, 1884–1975) was a Soviet diplomat, historian and politician. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Maisky was in charge of the normalization of relations with the Western Allies.

²³ Nikola Popović, *Jugoslovensko–sovjetski odnosi u Drugom svetskom ratu 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1988), 60.

²⁴ Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 42.

²⁵ *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici SFRJ 1941–1945*, vol. I, 47.

The Yugoslav Government feared that the idea of a Yugoslav committee was just an attempt to establish some form of alternative government under the auspices of the Soviet Union. That is why Maisky told Simović, Ninčić and Subotić on 11 May that his government no longer insisted on the creation of such committee. Subotić and Maisky met again on July 23 when the latter claimed that diplomatic relations between their countries had not been formally terminated. "Our diplomatic relations were temporarily suspended and now they are fully restored," Maisky disingenuously explained.²⁶ On August 7, Maisky reiterated to Ninčić that the renewal of Yugoslavia's independence was one of the priorities of his government "and that the form of internal regime in Yugoslavia should be decided by the Yugoslav people."²⁷

However, diplomatic relations were not resumed without difficulties. When Moscow launched its policy of "Pan-Slavism" the Yugoslav Government perceived it as a new "leverage in the expansionist policy" of the Soviet Union. They were particularly perturbed to find out that the first Pan-Slavic meeting, held in Moscow on August 10 and 11, 1941, advocated the existence of the Montenegrin and Macedonian nations – pre-war Yugoslavia recognized only Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – which was seen as having been designed to break up Yugoslavia along national lines.²⁸ Milan Gavrilović felt, however, that the idea of Slavic solidarity should be supported and that, given the existing circumstances, the Yugoslav Government had to put aside the threat of "bolshevization of all Slavic peoples."²⁹

Resistance to Nazism

British policy in occupied Europe involved fostering resistance groups and insurgency in order to overstretch the Axis's military resources. Even before the outbreak of war in September 1939, steps had been taken to create special agencies which might organize and carry out subversions, sabotage and other forms of "ungentlemanly" activities. Britain's failure to predict and halt Germany's advance into Western Europe forced British leaders to consider alternative policies. For that reason, the organization known as the Special Operations Executive (SOE), an independent branch of the "special services" tasked with nourishing general resistance within the occupied Europe, was established. The SOE was formed on July 22, 1940, on Churchill's orders and it was placed under the direct control of Hugh Dalton, Minister of Economic Warfare. British strategic

²⁶ Ibid. 66, Maisky to Subotić.

²⁷ Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ) [Archives of Yugoslavia], Belgrade, Fonds *The Royal Yugoslav Government in exile*, 103–61–281, Maisky to Ninčić.

²⁸ Popović, *Jugoslovensko-sovjetski odnosi*, 61–62.

²⁹ *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici SFRJ 1941–1945*, vol. I, 70.

thinking in the interwar years and during the initial phase of the war was still strongly influenced by the experience of the Great War. Britain's strength lay in its ability to cause economic disruption in Germany. In line with this idea, the creation of the SOE was intended to forge a liaison between Britain and European resistance movements. The SOE was designed to coordinate all subversive actions against the enemy overseas with the ultimate aim, as Churchill put it, of "setting Europe ablaze".³⁰

With the collapse of the Yugoslav army, the British services lost their foothold in the region. The SOE had to rely on refugees and messengers coming out of Yugoslavia for information on what was going on there in terms of resistance against the Germans. The news from Yugoslavia that reached London and Cairo painted a grim picture of large-scale atrocities in the dismembered country, particularly in Croatia where the Ustaschas massacred the Serb population.³¹ Later, news emerged about two guerrilla movements in Serbia and Montenegro, with opposed political agendas and different concepts of resistance. History knows these groups as "Chetniks" and "Partisans".

The Serb nation had a long history of fighting against foreign occupiers. Due to the rapid collapse of Yugoslavia and the ensuing operations in Greece and the Soviet Union, many Yugoslav army officers and soldiers were not captured. A group of officers led by General Staff Colonel Dragoljub Mihailović gathered at the plateau of Ravna Gora in Western Serbia on 11 May 1941.³² Mihailović and his men saw their action as a continuation of the royal Yugoslav army's resistance to the Axis. They used the old Yugoslav symbols and were

³⁰ W. J. M. Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE: the Special Operations Executive 1940–1945* (London: St. Ermin's Press, 2000), ii–xi; A. R. B. Linderman, *Rediscovering Irregular Warfare. Colin Gubbins and the Origins of Britain's Special Operations Executive* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 102; Sibylle Scheipers, *Unlawful Combatants. A Genealogy of the Irregular Fighter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 133.

³¹ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans*, 47.

³² Dragoljub Mihailović (1893–1946) had served with distinction in the Balkan Wars and on the Salonika front in the Great War. He was awarded the *Gold Medal for Courage* and the *Order of White Eagle*. In the interwar period he held a series of staff posts; in 1935, he was appointed Military Attaché in Sofia with the rank of Colonel. Soon after arriving he upset the Bulgarian Government by establishing contacts with an anti-fascist group of officers and intellectuals and, as a result, he was recalled and sent to Prague as Military Attaché; he was later the Professor of Tactics at the Higher School of the Military Academy in Belgrade (for more on Mihailović's career see Simon Trew, *Britain, Mihailović and the Chetniks, 1941–42* (London: Macmillan, 1998, 5–6)). After the Second World War, Mihailović went into hiding. He was captured by the communist authorities on March 13, 1946, and indicted with treason and collaboration with the Germans. Mihailović was sentenced to death and executed in July 1946. On May 15, 2015, he was rehabilitated by the Higher Court in Belgrade.

recognized by the Yugoslav Government-in-exile, as well as the Allies, as the legitimate Yugoslav armed force in the occupied Yugoslavia.³³

In the late 1930s, Mihailović appears to have developed a strong anti-Nazi attitude. During that time he was in contact with certain SOE agents in Belgrade such as Julian Amery³⁴ and Alexander Glen. He also maintained close relations with Colonel C.S. Clarke, the British military attaché in Belgrade. Mihailović went to see Clarke together with Žarko Popović (Chief of the Intelligence Department of the General Staff of the Yugoslav Army and later the Military Attaché in Moscow). They discussed the military and political situation in Europe, and Clarke provided them with British analyses of the German army. They also talked with Amery and Glen about the possibilities of defense against a possible German attack by means of guerilla warfare if Yugoslavia was defeated. Mihailović kept in contact with the British on his own. He did not inform his Head of Intelligence Department, Colonel Stjepan Kalečak about his connections because the latter was a Croatian officer who rejected any cooperation with the British.³⁵

Upon reaching Ravna Gora, Mihailović had very few men under arms and could not undertake substantial operations against the Germans. Therefore, he only intended to recruit, organize, and arm an underground organization throughout Yugoslavia. This organization would seek assistance from the British and prepare for a nationwide rebellion against the Germans at the right moment. This would be at the time of a British invasion or a German withdrawal. Meanwhile, efforts would be concentrated on intelligence gathering, sabotage, and propaganda against the Axis. Mihailović followed the policy laid down by the Yugoslav Government on July 22 which issued a declaration read over the BBC advising the Yugoslav people to avoid premature engagement with the enemy and wait for the signal from London.³⁶ Nevertheless, Chetnik units under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Veselin Misita liberated the town of

³³ Vjeran Pavlaković, "Yugoslavia", in *European Resistance in the Second World War*, eds. Philip Cooke and Ben H. Shepher, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Praetorian Press, 2013), 219; Aleksandar Petrović, "The Transformation of Mihailović's Chetnik Movement: from Royalist Yugoslav Forces to Serb Nationalist Guerrillas", Ph.D. Thesis, Burnaby, British Columbia: Simon Fraser University, 2011, viii-ix.

³⁴ Harold Julian Amery (1919–1996) joined the RAF as a sergeant in 1940; later with the rank of Captain.

³⁵ Bojan Dimitrijević, *General Mihailović. Biografija* (Belgrade: "A.L.X", 1996), 144–145; Dalibor Denda, "Vojna obaveštajna služba u Kraljevini SHS/Jugoslaviji 1918–1941", *Vojnoistorijski glasnik LX/2* (2010), 29.

³⁶ Nikolić and Stambolija, "Royalist Resistance Movement in Yugoslavia during the Second World War", 15; W. Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 26.

Loznica on 31 August. More than ninety German soldiers were captured on that occasion, but Misita was killed.³⁷

On the other hand, the communist resistance in Yugoslavia was revolutionary and militant. For Yugoslav communists the Soviet Union was their political and spiritual centre. Lenin and, later, Stalin were not just “ingenious leaders”, but also the incarnation of the communist idea and the “dreamed new society”. Founded in 1919, the CPY had been a legitimate political party before its involvement in subversive and terrorist activities forced authorities to outlaw it in 1921.

The CPY carried on as an underground organization. Its activities were completely directed by the Comintern. From 1939 onwards, after a series of brutal internal purges in the Soviet Union, when approximately 800 Yugoslav communists were shot or died in concentration camps, Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) became Secretary-General of the CPY. His major task was to “purge” the Party which he did by eliminating the most prominent leaders of the Yugoslav Communist movement.³⁸

The real nature of the Soviet regime was almost completely unknown in Yugoslavia, especially in Serbia, and all the news about the horrors of the Stalin’s rule were considered as mere anti-communist propaganda. Certain left-wing intellectuals and numerous students favoured communism because they saw the Leninist/Stalinist party as the model for the necessary transformation of their society. They had unreserved faith in communism and did not believe the news about the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union. For them Russia was their “last hope”.³⁹ Some of them were easily recruited by the Soviet intelligence service, including prominent people such as Milan Gavrilović, the first Yugoslav minister in Moscow.⁴⁰

The political doctrine of the CPY was initially based on the belief that “English imperialists” were warmongers provoking Germany. This doctrine was formulated after the Soviet-Nazi agreement of August 23, 1939 which Soviet propaganda justified by proclaiming that the new war was entirely “imperialistic” and that England and France were responsible for its outbreak. Nothing was said about the smaller nations directly threatened by Germany. Communist parties were ordered to directly confront the social-democratic and democratic anti-fascist parties which refused to accept the Comintern’s interpretation of

³⁷ VA, *The German occupying forces*, 44H-1-6, The Report of the Staff of 718th German Infantry division.

³⁸ Kosta Nikolić and Ivana Dobrivojević, “Creating a Communist Yugoslavia in the Second World War”, *Balkanica XLVIII* (2017), 247.

³⁹ Jože Pirjevec, *Tito i drugovi*, vol. I (Belgrade: Laguna, 2013), 66.

⁴⁰ Aleksej Timofejev, *Rusi i Drugi svetski rat u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2011), 244.

the on-going war. The CPY had advocated the abolition of the existing order of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia prior to the Second World War. Its regime had been considered “fascist” and until 1941 it had been accused of belonging to the circle of “imperialist countries that provoked the global conflict”. Also, the Yugoslav communists had always regarded the Ustasha as their allies in the revolutionary struggle against the pre-war Yugoslav regime.⁴¹

Following the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov pact the CPY loyally adhered to Soviet policy.⁴² In this respect, it should be noted that it did not cause trouble to the Germans even after they attacked and conquered Yugoslavia – a fact that would be conveniently struck out from the Party’s history after the war. More controversially, the Yugoslav communists remained hesitant in rising up against the occupiers even after the German invasion on the Soviet Union. It was not until a strict warning from Moscow on July 1 that the order for an immediate uprising was issued by the Partisan’s Supreme Staff. The armed actions in early July were directed against the local Serbian administration, especially the gendarmerie, rather than against the small German garrisons. Such behaviour reflected the fact that Yugoslav Communists embarked on a revolutionary war in accordance with their most central war goal of establishing a new social and political regime.⁴³

The “Russian Project”

When news about the emergence of resistance movements in Serbia reached Istanbul a number of diplomats and agents sprung into frantic activity. Stanislav Rapotec, a Yugoslav Reserve Lieutenant, and Dragomir Rakić, a Serbian industrialist, arrived separately to Istanbul in early summer. Rapotec, a Slovene, had studied in Zagreb in the 1930s and was politically active. At the end of the 1930s, he found a job in a bank in Split, Dalmatia. He was mobilized into the Yugoslav army. He was captured by the Germans, but soon escaped and

⁴¹ Nikolić and Dobrovojević, “Creating a Communist Yugoslavia in the Second World War”, 247.

⁴² In a secret additional protocol attached to the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty of August 23, 1939, Poland was divided into German and Soviet spheres of influence and Finland, Estonia and Latvia allocated to a Soviet sphere of influence in the Baltic. Under the terms of the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty of September 28, 1939, the German-Soviet demarcation line in Poland was adjusted and, in a further secret protocol, Lithuania was reallocated to the Soviet sphere of influence in the Baltic: Geoffrey Roberts, “Ideology, calculation, and improvisation: spheres of influence and Soviet foreign policy 1939–1945”, *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999), 657.

⁴³ Nikolić and Dobrovojević, “Creating a Communist Yugoslavia in the Second World War”, 248; see also Stanley G. Payne, *Civil War in Europe, 1905–1949* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 212.

returned to Split which had been annexed by the Italians. He became involved with an illegal organization of Yugoslav patriots, who persuaded him to go the Middle East to establish contact with the government-in-exile and the British. He left Split in June and reached Cairo in July 1941, having passed through Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade, and heard from a friend that Colonel Mihailović had not surrendered and headed a resistance movement in Serbia.⁴⁴

Rakić brought news of two resistance groups, one led by Mihailović and a number of other officers in western Serbia, and the other led by communists. The latter's anti-Axis activities resulted in brutal German reprisals. Rapotec and Rakić contacted Jovan Djonović, the Yugoslav representative in Cairo. Djonović arrived in Istanbul in June to establish an intelligence centre on behalf of the Yugoslav Government. He was an SOE contact in Belgrade and he continued to work closely with that organization in Istanbul. Mihailović appealed through Rakić for funding to keep his organization going as he was compensating local peasants for the supplies needed for his men. Djonović immediately sent a million Yugoslav dinars but Mihailović received only 900,000 dinars.⁴⁵

Djonović also made contact with the British Colonel Stanley William Bailey, a former staff member in the British-owned Trepča mines in Serbia. He was fluent in the Serbian language and knew the persons involved in the 27 March coup. In 1941, he was in charge of the SOE's Balkan staff in the Middle East. Bailey would have one of the most important roles in the execution of British policy in wartime Yugoslavia. To begin with, Djonović and Bailey agreed on the urgent need to infiltrate someone into occupied Yugoslavia.

Djonović suggested enlisting Soviet help to get back into Yugoslavia as he already had some useful Russian contacts. Bailey endorsed this plan as he thought it essential to involve the Soviets at an early stage while they were still fighting for their lives rather than later when, if their situation improved, they might be more difficult to work with. In London, the SOE agreed with this policy. John Bennett, the Head of the SOE's Yugoslav Desk in Cairo and responsible for operations in the Middle East, left Jerusalem and met with Djonović in Istanbul on August 4 to discuss the plans.⁴⁶

It was decided to send a joint mission to Serbia – one that would include a Yugoslav, British and Soviet representative. Djonović believed that this was of vital importance in order to secure unity of action, given the existence of two organized resistance groups with different ideological outlooks.⁴⁷ This plan was

⁴⁴ For more on Rapotec's mission see Stevan Pavlowitch, *Unconventional Perceptions of Yugoslavia, 1940–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 67–105.

⁴⁵ Jovan Djonović, *Moje veze sa Dražom Mihailovićem* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2004), 85.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, 47–48.

⁴⁷ Djonović, *Moje veze sa Mihailovićem*, 86.

known as the Russian Project. Đonović entrusted the mission to Vasilije Trbić, a former commander of the Serbian irregulars fighting against the Ottomans in Macedonia prior to the First World War and Dušan Radović, a retired Royal Yugoslav Air Force Colonel.⁴⁸

Đjonović suggested, and Bennett agreed, that the Russians be approached for the purpose of obtaining an aircraft. Đjonović then made contact with a certain "Colonel Nikolaev", ostensibly the "Chief of Soviet Services" in Istanbul.⁴⁹ This individual was, in fact, Vasily Mikhailovich Zarubin, an elite Soviet intelligence officer.⁵⁰

The plan to send a joint mission to Yugoslavia was hatched at the moment when Britain wanted to establish cooperation with the Soviet Union in spreading and controlling the anti-Axis resistance in Europe. The first agreement to that effect was concluded on July 12, 1941 in Moscow between Richard Stafford Cripps, the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and Vyacheslav Molotov, a leading figure in the Soviet government from the 1920s and the Soviet Foreign Minister from 1939 to 1949. It envisaged the following: 1) the two governments agree to help and support each other in the ongoing war against Germany; 2) they would neither negotiate nor conclude a separate armistice or a peace treaty.⁵¹

Furthermore, the British wanted to mitigate the zeal of Stalin's demands for the opening up of the second front in Europe by encouraging sabotage and organizing uprisings behind the German lines. The problem of the second front

⁴⁸ Colonel Radović had been an SOE agent with the code-named "Cousin" from the beginning of 1941 onwards: Marko Pivac, "Rad britanske tajne službe u Jugoslaviji u predvečerje Aprilskog rata 1941. Izveštaj SOE operativca Džordža Tejlora", *Istorija 20. veka XXXIII/1* (2010), 203.

⁴⁹ Đjonović, *Moje veze sa Mihailovićem*, 86. Đjonović did not inform any of the Yugoslav officials in Cairo and London about his talks with Zarubin.

⁵⁰ From 1918 to 1920, Zarubin served in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. In 1920, he joined the Soviet state security service; in 1923, he was appointed the Head of the OGPU (Объединённое государственное политическое управление) economic department in Vladivostok. From 1924 he worked in the Soviet intelligence service. His secret missions were undertaken in Denmark (1927), France (1930), Germany (1933) and the USA (1937). In February 1937, Zarubin became the Deputy Chief of the State Security – NKGB (Народный комиссариат государственной безопасности). In the spring of 1941, he renewed contact with the Soviet agent Walter Stennes in China. Later Zarubin became the Resident Chief of the NKVD (Народный комиссариат внутренних дел) in the USA working from early 1942 to August 1944 under the name of "Vassili Zubilin". There he recruited Savo Kosanović, the future Yugoslav Ambassador in Washington, and Ivan Šubašić, the last Prime Minister of the Yugoslav Government-in-exile, to work for the Soviet intelligence service: Timofejev, *Rusi i Drugi svetski rat u Jugoslaviji*, 264 and 274.

⁵¹ Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, 342.

continued to be a stumbling block in the relations among the Allies throughout the war. Moreover, this was the issue that would determine the fate of the resistance movements in Yugoslavia.

In late July of 1941, Ambassador Cripps presented the first official proposal for cooperation towards preventing a German breakthrough into Persia. Cripps reported that not only had Stalin “blessed personally” the idea of cooperation in Persia, but also proposed that the British and Soviet services for subversive warfare work together in Germany, the Balkans and other areas. London seems to have been taken aback by Stalin’s far-reaching and enthusiastic response. The officer selected to pursue the matter further, Lieutenant-Colonel D. R. Guinness, flew to Moscow in mid-August. During the negotiations conducted from 14-29 August, Guinness and Zarubin drafted a treaty providing for a worldwide common policy in strategic sabotage, subversion, and propaganda. It was supposed to be applicable everywhere outside the Soviet Union, the British Commonwealth, and the territories occupied militarily by either side. Western Europe and Greece were to fall into the British zone of influence, while Romania, Bulgaria, and Finland were allotted to the Soviet zone. The question of the existing or potential guerrilla forces in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia was left for subsequent discussions between the Soviets and their governments-in-exile which implied that those countries were also placed into the Soviet zone. The agreement was signed in Moscow on September 30, 1941.⁵²

This agreement was part of a larger arrangement on military aid to the Soviet Union by the United Kingdom and the United States concluded just a day earlier. That agreement set out that the Soviet Union would receive monthly supplies of the extensive amount of war material from either Britain or America.⁵³

Meanwhile, after having received Rapotec’s preliminary report from Istanbul, General Simović approached Churchill on 14 and 22 August asking for a British submarine to go to Split to establish contact with the people indicated in Rapotec’s report.⁵⁴ On August 28, the British Prime Minister asked Hugh Dalton to report to him on the ties with the resistance bands in Yugoslavia and the

⁵² Mark Wheeler, “Resistance from abroad: Anglo-Soviet efforts to coordinate Yugoslav resistance, 1941–1942”, in *Special Operations Executive. A new instrument of war*, ed. Mark Seaman (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 107. Wheeler identified Zarubin as Vladimir Nikolaev, the NKVD General in charge of subversive activities. However, the rank of general did not exist in the Soviet secret service. Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, 48, also wrote that Zarubin was actually Nikolaev.

⁵³ David Hal, “Shaping the Future: Eden, the Foreign Office and British Foreign Policy, 1941–1943” (Ph.D. Thesis, Norwich, University of East Anglia, 2015), 64.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, 53.

possibilities of supporting them.⁵⁵ Two days later Dalton informed Churchill that the sum of £20,000 was being sent to Mihailović by a courier from Istanbul and that an intelligence-gathering mission was to be dispatched to study the situation on the ground.⁵⁶

With regard to Yugoslavia, Dalton formulated general British policy as follows: "The Yugoslavs, the War Office, and we are all agreed that the guerrilla and sabotage bands now active in Yugoslavia should show sufficient active resistance to cause constant embarrassment to the occupying forces, and prevent any reduction in their numbers. But they should keep their main organization underground and avoid any attempt at large scale risings or ambitious military operations, which could only result at present in severe repression and the loss of our key men."⁵⁷

The details of the forthcoming joint mission to Yugoslavia were discussed at a conference held in Istanbul on 5–7 September. In his memoirs Vasilije Trbić, one of the participants at this meeting, wrote that, besides Bailey and Bennett, those present included the "younger son"⁵⁸ of the British lord who was, at the time, the Minister of Colonies in the British Government,⁵⁹ and whose elder son was in Berlin and demanded, on a daily basis, reconciliation between Great Britain and Germany over Radio Berlin. A new face at the Conference was a Russian whose name was simply Nikolaev.⁶⁰

Bailey was instructed by Churchill to make sure that financial aid be sent to Mihailović immediately as a mark of British recognition. In addition, a team consisting of three Serbs and one Englishman was to be prepared to run a radio station and then sent to Serbia after agreement was reached with Mihailović as to the exact place they were to be dropped. Another team consisting of at least six officers led by Colonel Radović was supposed to go to Russia. After all details were settled, both London and Moscow accepted the plan. However, the Russians wanted to have one of their representatives at Mihailović's headquarters. According to Trbić, the plan envisaged that two Serbs, one Briton and one Russian should be sent to Mihailović immediately, while five aviation officers with Radović were to leave for Russia. According to Trbić: "A few days passed by Churchill sent a cable [saying] that two Serbs and an English radio telegrapher

⁵⁵ Quoted in F. V. D. Deakin, *The Embattled Mountain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 126.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Quoted in Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 27.

⁵⁸ Julian Amery.

⁵⁹ Leopold Stennett Amery (1873–1955). His elder son Joh (1912–1945) was a Nazi sympathizer hanged for treason, having pleaded guilty.

⁶⁰ Vojvoda Vasilije Trbić, *Memoari*, vol. II (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1996), 202.

should go to Mihailović, but not a single Russian should be in that team. As for the other team that is supposed to go to Russia, the English don't care."⁶¹

After the Istanbul conference Bailey reported to Cairo that the Russian Project was vital in order to secure the adherence of pro-Russian elements in Yugoslavia to the common Allied policy, to demonstrate Anglo-Russian cooperation, and as a form of monitoring Russian intentions.⁶² However, London did not want to see Soviet officers in Yugoslavia. Đonović had no doubt on this score. He was convinced that the British and the Yugoslav premier Simović sabotaged the mission at the last moment.⁶³

It was apparent that the Yugoslav Government intended to seek support from Great Britain rather than from "Red Russia". The Serbian cultural and political elite, which had supported the 27 March coup, was traditionally oriented towards Great Britain (and France). Their distaste for Bolshevism was compounded by the widespread conviction that the Soviet Union was unable to resist Germany's invasion. The military crisis of the USSR certainly diminished the will to insist on that country's co-operation.⁶⁴

A joint mission to Serbia would imply Moscow's support for the Serbian royalists. However, their goals and requests could hardly recommend them to Stalin, although the Soviet leader did understand that the national idea was a much more attractive motive for the fledgling European resistance movements than the cause of "proletarian solidarity".

Mark Wheeler asserts that Moscow had another and secret reason for the dispatch of a joint mission to Yugoslavia, namely, the punishment or squeezing out of the chief of the CPY from his leadership position. The dropping of the mission altogether meant the ultimate acceptance of Tito.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Wheeler, "Resistance from abroad", 110.

⁶³ Đjonović, *Moje veze sa Mihailovićem*, 87. Trbić, *Memoari*, vol. II, 206, writes that "Nikolaev" (Zarubin) just clenched his teeth and cursed something in Russian, "which I think was related to the entire Serbian-English coalition".

⁶⁴ Timofejev, *Rusi i Drugi svetski rat u Jugoslaviji*, 271–272.

⁶⁵ Wheeler, "Resistance from abroad", 106. In his explanation, Wheeler adhered to the traditional viewpoint in Anglo-Saxon historiography in Tito's lifetime. He tried to find signs of differences between Tito and Stalin in early days when there were none. Lack of criticism about Tito's communist resistance movement did not derive just from the fact that certain individuals had been personally involved in the execution of British wartime policy, but also from the support given to Yugoslavia after its 1948 conflict with the Soviet Union. That confrontation seemed to justify Allied policy during the war and even presented it as being capable of anticipating future events. When the single-party communist dictatorship was established in Yugoslavia at the end of the Second World War, many of those who had considerably contributed to this outcome realized that their expectations were not met. However, the conflict between Belgrade and Moscow soon followed and it revived the view that the

The Partisans or the Chetniks

The existence of two rival resistance movements intensified the contacts between Yugoslav and Soviet Government. On October 24, the Yugoslav Minister Branko Čubrilović met with Alexander Yefremovich Bogomolov, the Soviet Minister to the Yugoslav Government. According to the former, “Bogomolov advised me to save Yugoslavia by all means.”⁶⁶ On 25 and 28 October, Čubrilović met Maisky who spoke about the necessity of a united resistance front in Yugoslavia. The Soviet diplomat promised that Yugoslav suggestions would be presented to his government. Maisky again saw Čubrilović and Simović on 4 November. The Yugoslav Prime Minister asked Maisky to forward his personal plea to Stalin – he wanted the Soviet leader to influence the Partisans to join forces with the Chetniks and avoid further conflicts them.⁶⁷

On November 12, the Yugoslav Government asked the British to intervene with the Soviets. Foreign Secretary Eden, whose only direct information about the situation in Yugoslavia came from Hudson’s reports, received Simović early in November. The latter again pleaded with the British Government to urge Moscow to assist with placing the Partisans under Mihailović’s command. At the same time, Stanoje Simić, the new Yugoslav Minister to the Soviet Union, also pressed his hosts to instruct the Communists in Yugoslavia to help Mihailović and work with him against the Germans. A similar request was sent to Ambassador Maisky.⁶⁸

Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, discussed the situation in Yugoslavia with Maisky on 15 November. Maisky promised he would ask Moscow to stop the Communists from fighting against Mihailović.⁶⁹ Simović also tried through Dragomir Bogić, the Yugoslav Chargé d’affaires in Moscow, to “influence” the Soviet Government to the same end.⁷⁰

Even Lord Glenconner, the head of the SOE Headquarters in Cairo from 1942 to 1943, contemplated the events in Yugoslavia. On November 15, 1941, he wrote to Pearson Dickinson, the Principal Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary between 1943 and 1948, that direct support to the Partisans would mean the rejection of the legitimate Yugoslav Government and the acceptance of those “fighting for Russia”. Glenconner was in favor of giving British support

Anglo-American decision to support the Partisans had been well founded. Consequently, the wartime supporters of Tito were now in a position to whitewash the Yugoslav variant of communism.

⁶⁶ Branko Čubrilović, *Zapisi iz tuđine* (Sarajevo: Državna štamparija, 1946), 53.

⁶⁷ Krizman, *Jugoslavenske vlade*, 30.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 241.

⁶⁹ Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 43.

⁷⁰ VA, The Royal Yugoslav Government in exile, 290–1–3, Simović to Bogić.

to Mihailović because he had a much better chance to build his movement into a respectable military force. Glenconner wrote that British backing for Mihailović could be best carried out “by letting the Yugoslav Government to appoint him the leader of the uprising against the Axis powers.” Furthermore, Moscow ought to call upon all the communists in Yugoslavia “to place themselves, without reserve”, at the disposal of Mihailović as the national leader.⁷¹

Mihailović learned that he had been appointed the leader of the national resistance in Yugoslavia on November 15, 1941. General Simović announced it on Radio London, but added the warning that the right moment for the “decisive” fight had not yet come. Simović called upon all people fond of freedom, “especially those brave sons who have risen to defend that freedom with the arms in their hands to unite in the common struggle against the occupiers and satraps by rallying under command of Draža Mihailović, the commander of all the Yugoslav armed forces in the country.”⁷² This policy was accepted by the Foreign Office – Mihailović was to be supported and Moscow was to be prodded to influence the Partisans to collaborate with him.⁷³ On November 16, Hudson received a message from London to that effect, declaring that in Britain’s view the struggle “should be ‘Yugoslavs for Yugoslavia’ and not a revolt led by Communists for Russia.”⁷⁴

Cadogan informed Simović that Eden wanted to have a discussion with him. He pointed out the questions of particular interest: 1) the British Government wanted to do everything in its power to reach an agreement between the royalists and the communists; they also already asked the Soviet Government to influence the communists to accept Colonel Mihailović’s command; 2) Mihailović needed to avoid retaliatory measures against the communists; 3) King Peter needed to send a telegraph to both Mihailović and the communists. Cadogan stated that he hoped such policy would be in accordance with that of the Soviet Government.⁷⁵

The attempts to influence Moscow to accept Mihailović continued. On November 16, the British Government informed Ambassador Cripps that the British policy toward the revolt in Yugoslavia was to do its utmost to provide Mihailović’s forces with the supplies necessary to maintain the movement. Cripps was instructed to take the matter up with the Soviet Government and urge it to force the communists to place themselves at Mihailović’s disposal.⁷⁶

⁷¹ VA, FO, 1-1-46, Simović to Bogić.

⁷² *Službene novine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, 1 December 1941, 10.

⁷³ MA, FO, 1-1-46. Foreign Office to War Cabinet on November 16, 1941.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Deakin, *The Embattled Mountain*, 140.

⁷⁵ AJ, Royal Yugoslav Government in exile, 103-1676-593/2, Cadogan to Simović.

⁷⁶ Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 43.

On November 17, Bogić visited Andrey Vyshinsky, the Soviet Assistant Foreign Minister,⁷⁷ and implored him for an “urgent, swift and decisive” intervention. He argued that the whole liberation movement in Yugoslavia had to be united under Mihailović “who was a soldier best able to organize and lead the fight against the enemy”. He received an evasive answer: “I understand your request. I personally can’t give you an answer because the matter is decided by the Government, so I will inform Moscow about this conversation. Besides, I need to consult our military experts. I will try to get the answer from Moscow by the end of the week.”⁷⁸

On November 18, Vyshinsky assured Cripps that his Government had no communication with the Yugoslavs and no control over the Communists in that country.⁷⁹ Eden was sceptical that the Partisans would ever accept Mihailović as their leader because they were “organized and supported by Moscow and fought for Russia.”⁸⁰

However, this diplomatic initiative was not without results. It terminated the civil war and initiated negotiations for a ceasefire in Yugoslavia. After direct intervention from Moscow, Tito wrote to Mihailović on 19 November and proposed to stop hostilities between the two movements. The talks between Partisan and Chetnik delegates had already started a day earlier. The former refused to place their forces under Mihailović’s command as requested by Simović in his speech of November 15. The next meeting was held on November 20 and it ended with the conclusion of a ceasefire agreement in order to stop “the fratricidal struggle, stop the shedding of fraternal blood, and unite all the patriotic forces of the Serbian people and turn them against the occupiers and national traitors.”⁸¹

In London, Simović was making a determined effort to prevent a final rupture between the Partisans and Chetniks. On November 21, he cabled Mihailović asking him to contribute to reaching an agreement: “You must endeavour to smooth over disagreements and avoid any kind of retaliation.”⁸² Two

⁷⁷ Andrei Vyshinsky (Андрей Януарьевич Вышинский, 1883–1954) was a Soviet politician, jurist and diplomat. He was known as the State Prosecutor in Stalin’s Moscow trials and in the Nuremberg trials. He was Soviet Foreign Minister from 1949 to 1953, after having served as Deputy Foreign Minister under Molotov since 1940.

⁷⁸ VA, The Royal Yugoslav Government in exile, 290–1–3. – The answer came on January 6, 1942, after Bogić’s third intervention: “Vyshinsky told me that the Soviet Government does not consider it opportune to intervene in the uprising in Yugoslavia. No other explanation was given, because he did not have ‘authorization.’ This means that the Soviets did not have any serious intentions in the Balkans” (ibid).

⁷⁹ Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 43.

⁸⁰ VA, FO, 1–1–47, Eden to Cripps.

⁸¹ Quoted in Nikolić, *Istorija Ravnogorskog pokreta*, vol. I, 188.

⁸² VA, Royal Yugoslav Government in exile, 290–1–5, Simović to Mihailović.

days later Mihailović answered that he had done all in his power and succeeded in ending the fratricidal strife provoked by the other side: "In the fighting against the others [Germans] I have almost exhausted my ammunition. I have made every effort to unite all forces of the people and to complete the organization for the decisive action against the Germans."⁸³

On November 24, the British military mission in Moscow asked the Soviet Defence Ministry "to intervene promptly with the rebels in Yugoslavia". The British memorandum declared that HMG had encouraged the uprising in Yugoslavia at the specific request of the Soviet Government and it was thus in the Soviet's interest to help bring about the unity of the insurgents in that country. The Memorandum read: "The British Government regards Colonel Mihailović as the only possible leader and all parties should obey his orders or should at least work with him."⁸⁴

The British never received a reply to their written communication. Nevertheless, the Soviet Government seems to have responded to this British insistence and took an important and, from the Yugoslav Government's point of view, positive step. Mihailović was mentioned in a broadcast on Radio Moscow on November 24 as "the leader of the resistance forces in Yugoslavia". This angered Tito and he decided to react through Josip Kopinić: "Submit this telegram [to the Comintern] because Radio Moscow is voicing a horrible stupidity about Mihailović with whom we've been in a bloody fight for a month. He is the commander of Chetniks, gendarmes and the rest of the scum."⁸⁵ Tito emphasized that the Partisans had not liquidated Mihailović only because of their regard for London, "but it will be difficult to stop our Partisans from doing so if Moscow doesn't stop voicing the nonsense broadcast by BBC."⁸⁶

Simović informed Eden on November 26 about the content of the telegram he received from Mihailović. He stressed that Mihailović was taking measures to unite national forces and completing the organization of the army for the decisive battles and relayed his requests for a larger amount of war material – guns, ammunition, clothes, money, and food.⁸⁷

On November 28, Eden wrote to Simović reiterating the importance of forming a "united front of all patriots in Yugoslavia". He expressed his satisfaction with the news that Mihailović had settled his differences with the Partisans. Eden informed Simović that the British Government would resume the supplies

⁸³ Ibid. Mihailović to Simović.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 43.

⁸⁵ Quoted in *Izvori za istoriju SKJ. Dokumenti centralnih organa KPJ. NOR i revolucija (1941–1945)*, vol. II (Belgrade: Komunist, 1985), 156–157. – Josip Kopinić (1911–1997), a Yugoslav Communist and Soviet intelligence officer.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ VA, FO, 1–2–16, Simović to Eden.

of material and money to Mihailović, but that these deliveries would be dependent upon the maintenance of a united front under his leadership.⁸⁸ Eden urged Simović to send a message to that effect to Mihailović. He added: "We are asking the Soviet Government to send a similar request to the Partisans to maintain a united front under Mihailović."⁸⁹

At the end of 1941, Simović strove to attach particular importance to what was going on in Yugoslavia and he suggested to King Peter to promote Mihailović to the rank of general and include him in the government-in-exile. This maneuver was designed to confirm that, although the Yugoslav army capitulated in April 1941, part of that army never consented to surrender and continued to fight. Such an interpretation was important to the Yugoslavs because it allowed them to insist on the Allies' granting Mihailović's forces the status of a regular army which had certain rights under international law. On December 7, the Yugoslav Government promoted Mihailović to the rank of Brigadier General. On January 11, 1942 Mihailović was appointed the Minister of Army, Navy, and Air Force in the new government headed by Slobodan Jovanović, a well-known law professor and historian.⁹⁰

On January 19, Mihailović was promoted to the rank of Division General and he renamed his forces into the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland – the new official name would remain until the end of the war. It reflected the effort to maintain the continuity of pre-war Yugoslavia and the desire that Chetnik guerilla force would be transformed into a regular army.

Epilogue

The attitude of the British Government towards the armed resistance in Yugoslavia was contradictory from the beginning. On the one hand, the determination and capacity of the German forces to crush any resistance movement was underestimated and, on the other, the local people's will and capability to organize themselves for the fight against the German occupiers was overestimated. In such circumstances, Mihailović and the British misunderstood each other at an early stage. He expected an invasion of the Balkans by the Allies, whereas the British believed that his guerilla army could act as an efficient military force and an effective opponent for the German army.

When the civil war broke out in Serbia, it was only Mihailović who requested the termination of the conflict. Cadogan wrote to Simović on November 18 that the British Government, although it supported Mihailović as the leader of the resistance movement, did not support his "possible intentions" to

⁸⁸ The next British supply drop did not arrive until the end of March 1942.

⁸⁹ VA, FO, 1–2–20; see also Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, 44–45.

⁹⁰ *Službene novine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, 16 January 1942, 3.

fight against the communists: "Avenging actions should be avoided, if possible. That is crucial. Instructions to that effect have been sent to Mihailović."⁹¹

Such instructions were, however, never issued to the Partisans during the Second World War. Consequently, Mihailović became responsible for the actions of the other side without being able to influence them. Even the continued supplying of his forces was made dependent upon ceasing hostilities with the Partisans, something that he could not secure on his own. This was the beginning of the policy to pressurise Mihailović alone to maintain a united front which was, from the outset, equally impossible to achievement. The Soviet Government was expected to intercede with the Partisans, but they simply refused to interfere in Yugoslav internal affairs.

Another difficulty in facilitating a Serbian uprising concerned the horrific extent of German reprisals against the civilian population. The official British stance was that large-scale actions should not be undertaken for the time being. This approach was in accordance with Mihailović's decision to maintain a low-intensity resistance that would spare civilian casualties as much as possible. However, there were different opinions amongst British officials.

In discussions on the subject of sabotage and reprisals with Douglas Howard at the Foreign Office Southern Department Gladwyn Jebb, assistant Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Economic Warfare, refuted Simović's opinion that communist sabotage harmed the Serbs without hurting the Germans. Any sabotage, he wrote, disturbed the Axis and the reprisals were a double-edged sword: the more savage they were, the more recruits joined the resistance movement. Jebb concluded: "Only by stirring up the whole nation to murder Germans and Italians, that revolt has any prospect of maintaining itself at all."⁹²

Britain and the Soviet Union found it difficult to pursue a common policy towards the two resistance movements in Yugoslavia for the purpose of welding them into a single organization because both Great Powers had their own particular interests. The Soviet Government was clear in treating Yugoslavia as part of its sphere of interest. For the British, Mihailović was useful for propaganda purposes, not just in Britain, but also in the Nazi "European fortress". Mihailović was also viewed as a bastion of order and continuity as compared to the communist threat.

When Eden went to Moscow from December 16 to 28, 1941 to discuss political collaboration and eventual peace, Stalin raised the issue of Yugoslavia. He said that the Soviet Government had no influence on the reconciliation between the Chetniks and Partisans because it was an internal Yugoslav matter.

⁹¹ Note by Cadogan to Simović on November 18, 1941, quoted in Krizman, *Jugoslavenske vlade*, 247–248.

⁹² Note by Jebb to Howard on December 2, 1941, quoted in Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, 46.

On the basis of that statement Dragomir Bogić informed the Yugoslav Government on 29 December that Yugoslavia had “an excellent position with Stalin”.⁹³

Obviously, he was completely and utterly wrong. The first official Soviet attack on Mihailović occurred on August 3, 1942, when Solomon Lozovsky, the Deputy People’s Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and the Head of the Soviet Information Bureau, handed to Stanoje Simić a memorandum on Mihailović’s alleged collaboration with the Axis powers.⁹⁴ At the same time Moscow put into motion the communist propaganda machinery throughout the world. The conflict between the Partisans and Chetniks was made public with special emphasis on Chetnik “guilt” and “cooperation” with the enemy. On the other hand, the importance of the Partisan struggle and its contribution to the general Allied cause was widely publicized.

Eden also received a copy of the Soviet Memorandum from Maisky on August 7. Although he made clear to Maisky that this information did not fit in with that in his possession, the Foreign Secretary was concerned by the realization that the Soviets had changed their attitude towards Mihailović.⁹⁵

The change in the Soviet policy was brought about because the USA had raised the issue of the aid for Mihailović at the highest level during King Peter’s visit from June 19 to July 23, 1941. Accusing Mihailović of anti-Allied activity and collaborating with the Axis was designed to drag Washington into adopting the Soviet policy towards Yugoslavia.⁹⁶ From this moment onwards British and American policies towards the resistance movements in Yugoslavia were increasingly conditioned by Anglo-American relations with the Soviet Union. Postponing the opening of a second front in Western Europe left Britain and the USA exposed to constant Soviet accusations of not contributing their share of responsibility in the war against Germany. This produced a fear that the Soviet Union might conclude a separate peace with Germany.⁹⁷

As the Soviet propaganda campaign against Mihailović continued, the Foreign Office and the British Army became increasingly concerned about their differences with Moscow with regard to Yugoslavia. It was necessary to settle those differences and the issue centred on how to reconstruct Yugoslavia on completely new foundations. British diplomats discretely warned about this as soon as late 1941. The Foreign Office wanted a reconstructed Yugoslavia. In this connection, the crucial issue was whether Mihailović’s movement was pan-

⁹³ Quoted in Popović, *Jugoslovensko–sovjetski odnosi*, 82.

⁹⁴ VA, Royal Yugoslav Government in exile, 29–1–57.

⁹⁵ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, 86.

⁹⁶ Valerii Teodorovich Yungblyd and Alexei Aleksandrovich Kostin, “Amerikanskoe vospriiatie Sovetskoi politiki v otnoshenii Yugoslavii v 1942–1945”, *Izvestiia Ural’skogo federal’nogo universiteta* 120/4 (2013), 74.

⁹⁷ Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans*, 246.

Yugoslav or exclusively Serbian since its nature and goals could have a decisive impact on the form in which Yugoslavia would emerge at the end of the war. The Partisans versus Chetniks dilemma was finally resolved in favour of the former because it was generally thought that the Serbian people had a hegemonistic attitude in Yugoslavia and that Mihailović was a “Serbian nationalist”, and that the new Yugoslavia would be more stable as a federal state.

From the summer of 1942 onwards Foreign Office officials started to formulate the principles of a new strategy for Yugoslavia. Those were: a) the Serbian pre-war “hegemony” had been a “chronic damnation” of Yugoslavia and, to a large extent, was responsible for the country’s collapse in April 1941; b) despite the past, most Yugoslavs desired a reconstruction of their country and British policy had to try to strengthen “the moderate forces” among the Yugoslavs prepared to fight against the enemy. Thus, it was necessary to find a formula that could resolve the old dispute between the Serbs and Croats in order to induce the latter to abandon Pavelić and support the idea of Yugoslavia’s reconstruction.⁹⁸

Another consideration was a conflict within the Yugoslav government-in-exile between the Serbs, the supporters of a unitary Yugoslavia, which was seen as a mere for an “expanded Serbia”, and the Croats, who favoured a federal state based on the principle of national equality. The British required the Yugoslav government-in-exile to dispel any suspicion that its “sympathies” were exclusively Serbian and that it intended to re-establish a “Serbian hegemony” after the war. For that reason, émigré Serbian politicians came to believe that the Western Allies supported the communist revolution in Yugoslavia and that it was “anti-Serbian”. This in turn reinforced the Foreign Office’s opinion that other political forces had to be promoted to reconstruct Yugoslavia along new principles. This was the starting point of a long and complex process that led to the destruction of the social and political order of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the introduction of a communist dictatorship at the end of the war. Yugoslavia was an example of what it meant for a country to be drawn into the Soviet sphere of interest during the Second World War.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Nikolić and Stambolija, “Royalist Resistance Movement in Yugoslavia during the Second World War”, 25.

⁹⁹ For more see Vojislav Pavlović, *Od monarhije do republike. SAD i Jugoslavija 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Clio, and Banjaluka: Glas srpski, 1998), 524–525.

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