

ACADÉMIE ROUMAINE

INSTITUT D'ÉTUDES SUD-EST EUROPÉENNES

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VOJISLAV G. PAVLOVIĆ



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“DEVIL AT THE GATES”: GERMAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES AND PROPAGANDA IN THE KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA 1938-1941

Rastko Lompar

On the opposite sides during the Great War, Yugoslavia and Germany established diplomatic relations in 1920. During the first decade they were not too significant, but the turning point was the global economic crisis of 1929-1931. In 1931 Germany became the biggest importer of Yugoslav goods, and the German diplomatic representative in Belgrade maintained cordial relations with King Alexander.¹ As is often the case with Germany, the economic influence preceded the political. Germany was quick to capitalize on the void left after Yugoslavia joined the League of Nations' sanctions imposed on Italy in 1935, and practically took the place of Italy as importer of Yugoslav goods. By the time of the *Anschluss*, Germany had already accounted for 42% of both Yugoslav import and export. This trend only intensified after the Second World War began, and Germany soon accounted for more than 50% of all Yugoslav trade.²

On the political level, German-Yugoslav relations were also intensifying during that period. The national socialist *Machtergreifung*³ and the rise of Milan Stojadinović to the office of Yugoslav prime minister marked a new era in

¹ His assassination by Croatian and Bulgarian terrorists did not damage Yugoslav-German relations. In 1957 an alternative theory about the assassination was launched in East Germany, according to which Nazi Germany had played a key role in the whole affair. The published documents detailed a covert operation (*Unternehmen Teutonenschwert*) whose main target was French Foreign Minister Barthou, allegedly because of his anti-German and pro-Soviet stance, and King Alexander's assassination was used to cover the true nature of the conspiracy. However, these documents were dismissed in western historiography as forgeries aimed at discrediting West German General Speidel. V. K. Volkov, *K istoriografii voprosa ob ubiistve korolia Aleksandra i Lui Bartu v Marsele v oktjabre 1934*, Moscow, 1966, pp. 2-16.

² V. Vinaver, *Svetska ekonomska kriza u Podunavlju i nemački prodor 1929-1935*, Beograd, 1987.

³ Yugoslav diplomats were aware of the monumental changes that were taking place in Germany. As early as May 1933, the Yugoslav minister to Germany reported that the new regime would overstep its legal boundaries and continue to rule the country using the masses. See Arhiv Jugoslavije [Archives of Yugoslavia] (AJ), Royal Court (74)-3-8, Živojin Balugdžić to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 May 1933.

bilateral relations.⁴ Stojadinović gradually began to distance the country from France and her system of collective security and to get closer to fascist powers. He was, by all accounts, deeply impressed by the style and manner of fascist governance and began styling himself as “Leader” (*Vodja*) of Yugoslavia. His regime was however, parafascist at best, as Stojadinović never attempted to provide his party and regime with an ideological underpinning comparable to the fascist. Also, much of the apparent fascisation (green-shirt party uniforms, salutes etc.) was more decorative than meaningful. Most of the party rank and file was drawn by opportunistic rather than ideological reasons. However, the country clearly took a pro-Axis turn. After Stojadinović fell from power in February 1939, his successor, Dragiša Cvetković, assured the Germans that Yugoslav foreign policy would not change. The attack on Poland, and the ensuing world war, meant, however, that the German previous promises of Yugoslavia “not in the Axis but *with* the Axis” were empty.⁵ As the world was torn up by the conflict, Yugoslavia tried to manoeuvre between the German and British pressures and maintain neutrality somehow. Faced with an imminent threat of German attack, the Cvetković regime was forced into joining the Axis in March 1941. The coup d’état, which occurred two days later, not only marked the end of Prince Paul’s rule, but also signalled Yugoslavia’s demise.

Despite a significant historiography on Yugoslav-German relations during this period, very little attention has been paid to their contacts in the intelligence field. To date, there have been no scholarly attempts at describing the German intelligence network in Yugoslavia. After the communist takeover of Yugoslavia in 1945, the new regime was fundamentally interested in unravelling the German penetration into the structures of the “old” Yugoslavia. Significant resources of the State Security Agency (*Uprava državne bezbednosti* or UDB) were engaged with a view to better understand this problem. Numerous UDB agents pored over thousands of documents and testimonies for fifteen years. In 1960 the work on a monumental 6600-page manuscript titled “German intelligence service” was finally completed.⁶ It served as a manual for UDB

⁴ On Yugoslav-German relations during the period, see B. Krizman, *Vanjska politika jugoslavenske države 1918-1941*, Zagreb, 1977, p. 79-130; Ž. Avramovski, “Jugoslovensko-nemački odnosi do 1941”, in *Jugoslovenska država 1918-1998*, Beograd, 1999; D. Lukač, *Treći Rajh i zemlje jugoistočne Evrope*, 2 vols., Beograd, 1987; S. Mičić, *Kraljevina Jugoslavija i anšlus Austrije 1938. godine*, Beograd, 2010.

⁵ AJ, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (334)-16-41, Our relations with Germany in 1939.

⁶ The manuscript is organized into nine volumes: I: German intelligence services in general; II: German intelligence services in interwar Yugoslavia; III-V: German intelligence services in occupied Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia respectively; VI: Examples of covert actions; VII-IX: Published sources about occupied Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia respectively. Interwar Yugoslavia is covered by volumes II and VI. *Nemačka obaveštajna služba*, vols. I-IX, Beograd, 1955-1960.

agents and was not intended for the public.⁷ Despite its shortcomings, bias and teleological approach, it remains the best overview of the German security service in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to date.⁸

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Understanding the complex nature of Nazi Germany’s intelligence services is not an easy task. Under the National Socialist regime (1933-1945) its security services were a key instrument which ensured not only stability of the regime but also oversaw the destruction of its enemies. They remained, however, remarkably decentralized and chaotic, as many individuals and organizations clashed with one another in the struggle for primacy. Also, as a result of the peculiar style of Nazi governance (the Führerprinzip), many political figures dabbled in intelligence gathering, outside of their official positions and duties. As concluded by a leading historian of secret services, David Kahn, polycentrism and conflicting agendas significantly limited the results and success of German intelligence gathering agencies.⁹ In order to understand the German intelligence penetration into Yugoslavia, it is therefore essential to understand the elusive nature of the German intelligence apparatus.

After the National Socialist takeover, the new regime did not disband the existing security services inherited from the Weimar Germany. Until the failed coup d’état of July 1944, the pre-Nazi Abwehr remained the only military intelligence service. Created in 1920, in violation of the Paris Peace Treaty, the Abwehr expanded extensively under the Nazi regime. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris became chief of the military intelligence in 1935 and spearheaded the establishment of a comprehensive foreign military espionage network. The National Socialist Party (NSDAP) had its own intelligence agency, the Security Service (Sicherheitsdienst or SD), under the authority of Heinrich Himmler and led by Reinhard Heydrich from 1931. In addition, Hermann Goering created the Secret State Police (Geheime Staatspolizei or Gestapo) in 1933, on the foundation of Prussian political police. The first year of the Nazi regime was

The manuscript will here be referred to as *NOS*, with the pages cited corresponding to the online version available at <http://znaci.net/> and not to the hard copy.

⁷ A shortened version of the manuscript was published in 1977. See S. Odić and S. Komarica, *Noć i magla: Gestapo u Jugoslaviji*, Zagreb, 1977.

⁸ Volume II is different from the others because the analysts could not rely on as many original sources, and commonly based their assessments on second-hand testimonies given years after the events. Those that had collaborated with the Germans during the occupation were often labelled as interwar German agents with little or no evidence. For a case study critique of the manuscript regarding contacts of the Yugoslav National Movement Zbor with German authorities before the war, see R. Lompar, “Afera Tehnička unija i veze JNP Zbora sa nacističkom Nemačkom 1935-1941”, *Istorija 20. veka 2*, 2020, p. 85-102.

⁹ D. Kahn, *How I Discovered World War II’s Greatest Spy and Other Stories on Intelligence and Code*, London – New York, 2014, p. 207-227.

marked by a significant confusion because there were several emerging security services with similar tasks and under different jurisdictions. However, Himmler managed to wrestle away the control of the Gestapo from Goering in 1934 and to become chief of German Police in 1936. The fact that Himmler became the de facto head of civilian security services in 1936 did not entirely clear the confusion and misunderstandings.¹⁰ That year the SD and the Abwehr agreed on separating their areas, signing the so-called “Ten Commandments Agreement”, but neither agency complied with it.¹¹ The need for further centralization was met in 1939 when all existing civilian agencies were absorbed into the Reich Main Security Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt or RSHA) under Himmler, with Heydrich at its head.¹² Other institutions had their own informal intelligence services, some of which operated independently from the official ones.

Foreign intelligence was limited to Departments I (military intelligence) and II (sabotage) of the Abwehr and Department III of the SD (the so-called Ausland-SD). After the reorganization of 1939, the Ausland-SD was renamed Office VI of the RSHA. Intelligence gathering in the Balkans was entrusted to Department VI B and, following a further reorganization in 1942, to Department VI E.¹³ After the collapse of Yugoslavia a special *Einsatzgruppe* was deployed there, and other branches of the RSHA took primacy.¹⁴ Prior to 1938, the Ausland-SD had a very limited network in Yugoslavia, relying mostly on Germans residing, both permanently and temporarily, in the country, whereas the Abwehr had a more comprehensive network. However, after the Anschluss, and the de facto absorption of the Austrian intelligence services into the German, both military and civilian services gained a significant foothold in Yugoslavia.¹⁵ As a result of Austria’s revanchist aspirations¹⁶ and geographic proximity, the Austrians had already established a significant network in Yugoslavia. Furthermore, key positions in intelligence gathering in Southeast Europe were entrusted to Austrians, such as the leader of the Abwehr’s Department II, Erwin

¹⁰ The SD and the Gestapo had several identical departments which dealt with political opponents of the regime.

¹¹ R. Doerries, *Hitler’s Intelligence Chief: Walter Schellenberg*, New York, 2009, p. 52.

¹² C. Jörgensen, *Hitler’s Espionage Machine: German Intelligence Agencies and Operations during World War II*, London, 2004, p. 27-30; G. Browder, *Hitler’s Enforcers: The Gestapo and the SS Security Service in the Nazi Revolution*, Oxford, 1996, p. 105, 198-199.

¹³ K. Pachler, *The Third Reich’s Intelligence Services: The Career of Walter Schellenberg*, Cambridge, 2017, p. 130-149.

¹⁴ R. Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman: The Life of Heydrich*, New Haven – London, 2011, p. 186.

¹⁵ See *NOS*, vol. II, p. 142-162; for an overview of the Austrian intelligence in Yugoslavia, see Hrvatski državni arhiv [Croatian State Archives] (HDA), Služba državne sigurnosti [State Security Service] (SDS), š. 202, 1, Austrian intelligence service.

¹⁶ Hitler even complained that his Austrian compatriots were pressuring him to occupy Belgrade. See H. Picker, *Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier: Hitler wie er wirklich war*, Stuttgart, 1977, p. 392-393.

von Lahousen, or the leaders of Department VI B of the RSHA, Wilhelm Waneck and Wilhelm Höttl.¹⁷ Consequently, the German intelligence agencies increased their presence in Yugoslavia after the Anschluss.¹⁸ Prior to the Second World War, they had been reluctant to engage with British or French intelligence services in the country, contenting themselves with watching their activities. In September 1939, a “cold war” of sabotage, misinformation and influence broke out between the warring countries in Yugoslavia.

In addition to the Abwehr and Ausland-SD, which were officially entrusted with intelligence gathering, there were several other unofficial intelligence centres in the country.¹⁹ Germany and Yugoslavia signed a police treaty aimed against the common enemy – the Comintern and the communist parties in their respective countries. They therefore exchanged police attachés, and SS-Major Hans Helm arrived in Belgrade in 1938. Since he was a member of the Gestapo (renamed Office IV of the RSHA in 1939), his task was not to establish a network of informants but to coordinate anticommunist activities with Yugoslav authorities. However, during his term in Yugoslavia he organized an impromptu intelligence network. In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both under Neurath and Ribbentrop, maintained a separate intelligence organization based in diplomatic missions in Yugoslavia (primarily in Belgrade and Zagreb). Ribbentrop often disagreed with SD assessments regarding Yugoslavia and relied on his diplomats’ information instead.²⁰ A document from the German minister in Belgrade, Von Heeren, to the Gestapo explicitly mentions the existence of his informants (V-Mann).²¹ The last important unofficial network was organized by Goering’s confidant, chief of the German Transportation Bureau (GTB)²² in Belgrade, Franz Neuhausen. He focused mostly on matters of economic espionage (Trepča mines etc.) and propaganda. He was deeply resented by RSHA officials, who considered him corrupt and unreliable.²³

¹⁷ R. Doerries, *Hitler’s Intelligence...*, p. 168; C. Jörgensen, *Hitler’s Espionage Machine...*, p. 27; W. Höttl, *Secret Front: Nazi Political Espionage 1938-1945*, New York, 2003, p. 116.

¹⁸ For example, in 1941 the Yugoslav police estimated the number of German agents in Belgrade at two hundred. Istorijski arhiv Beograda [Historical Archives of Belgrade] (IAB), Uprava grada Beograda – Specijalna policija [Belgrade City Administration – Special Police] (UGB-SP), 2318, Germans: propaganda and intelligence gathering by the German minority, 10 March 1941.

¹⁹ IAB, UGB-SP, 2318, Germans: propaganda and intelligence gathering by the German minority, 10 March 1941.

²⁰ W. Höttl, *Secret Front...*, p. 6, 116; *Hitler’s Secret Service: Memoirs of Walter Schellenberg*, New York, 1971, p. 249.

²¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PA AA), Referat D/Abteilung Inland (RZ 214), R 101092, Von Heeren to Gestapo, 27 March 1941.

²² The German Transportation Bureau was an organization established to promote the interests of German transportation companies. It also served as a cover for RSHA agents in Yugoslavia.

²³ C. Jörgensen, *Hitler’s Espionage Machine...*, p. 169; W. Höttl, *Secret Front ...*, p. 117; *NOS*, vol. II, p. 495-496.

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The longest-running and most comprehensive intelligence network in interwar Yugoslavia was organized by the Abwehr. Operating from its centres in Munich and Klagenfurt, on the Yugoslav border,²⁴ the Abwehr focused primarily on gathering military intelligence and building a sabotage network in case of war. The Abwehr practically inherited Austrian military assets in Yugoslavia and therefore had a strong base in Slovenia. The Klagenfurt centre played a key role, as it was the main station where deserters from the Yugoslav Army were debriefed and converted into spies. They then crossed back into Yugoslavia using false documents and spied on their former units.²⁵ Within the country, an important network was organized by the military attaché Toussaint and Air Force attachés.²⁶ The Abwehr also recruited agents among Yugoslavs living in Germany. This practice was not always successful, as shown by the recruitment of Duško Popov in 1940, probably the most famous Second World War double agent, working for the British MI6 under the code name “Tricycle” and supplying false information to his Abwehr handlers.²⁷

The Abwehr occasionally partnered with Office VI of the RSHA when penetrating the Yugoslav Armed Forces. Together they recruited a substantial number of informants in the country’s military rank and file. There has been a lot of controversy surrounding the contacts of the Yugoslav military elite and German intelligence services. A future collaborationist leader in occupied Serbia, General Milan Nedić, who had served as Yugoslav Minister of Defence between 1939 and 1940, has often been accused of having been a German agent. However, there are no documents linking him with German agents. In fact his removal from the ministerial post was celebrated in the German press, for he was seen as hostile to Germany. Wilhelm Höttl, a high-ranking official of Office VI of the RSHA at the time, concluded that Nedić “was held in high esteem, and had not been known for any undue pro-German tendencies, though he always regarded a war with Germany as madness”.²⁸ Another future collaborationist leader was in the German intelligence network, though. General Leon Rupnik, the future mayor of Ljubljana and commander of the Slovene puppet state 1943-1945, was recruited by the security service. Other high-ranking military

²⁴ HDA, SDS, š. 202, 1, Ministry of Interior to Banship of Croatia, 20 February 1940; *NOS*, vol. II, p. 165; *NOS*, vol. VI, p. 245, 282.

²⁵ *NOS*, vol. II, p. 251-255.

²⁶ AJ, 334-16-41, General Staff to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 March 1941; *NOS*, vol. II, p. 494.

²⁷ C. Jørgensen, *Hitler’s Espionage Machine...*, p. 77-80.

²⁸ W. Höttl, *Secret Front...*, p. 138.

personnel were also recruited, Admiral Stanković and Air Force Colonel Tomić, to mention but a few.²⁹

Information supplied by the recruited members of the Yugoslav General Staff proved crucial to exposing and eliminating the most successful Yugoslav intelligence network in Germany. Namely, the Yugoslav military attaché in Berlin, Vladimir Vauhnik, managed to create an impressive network of agents and informants after his arrival in the German capital in 1938. Amongst his informants were women from the Berlin demimonde, military engineers and even anti-Nazi elements within the Luftwaffe and the Foreign Ministry.³⁰ Having penetrated the Yugoslav General Staff, in mid-1940 the Abwehr realized that the Yugoslavs were exceptionally well-informed about German military operations.³¹ It was soon discovered that Vauhnik was the source of the information. The inquiry was jointly conducted by the Abwehr and the Gestapo counterintelligence. Vauhnik was put under close surveillance in February 1941 and arrested soon after Germany invaded Yugoslavia in April. He would cooperate with the Germans and even work for them as an agent in Croatia and Italy, although he later claimed in his memoirs to have been a British double agent.³² Walter Schellenberg, the man who conducted his interrogation, the then head of the Gestapo's counterintelligence (RSHA IV E) and future chief of foreign intelligence (RSHA VI), recalled that it had been Vauhnik who convinced him of the importance of what he called society espionage (Gesellschaftsspionage).³³ The lessons learned from the interrogation of this Yugoslav intelligence officer would later be put to use during the war.³⁴

The department of the Abwehr in charge of sabotage began working amongst the German community in Yugoslavia, from which the so-called “Jupiter” network was formed in 1940. “Jupiter” was created both for intelligence in case of war and for sabotage and diversion. Secret radio stations were set up in German villages which reported on Yugoslav military activities. Weapons were smuggled into the country and distributed. In a year, everything was in place for the German invasion. When German troops crossed the border on April 6, 1941, “Jupiter” sprang into action. Armed groups of local German civilians seized local officials and took over several villages and towns ahead of

²⁹ Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (Barch), Reichssicherheitshauptamt (R58)/1144, 5v7, V-Mann index card database.

³⁰ R. Doerries, *Hitler's Last Chief of Foreign Intelligence: Allied Interrogations of Walter Schellenberg*, London/Portland, 2003, p. 179; V. Vauhnik, *Nevidljivi front: Borba za očuvanje Jugoslavije*, Munich, 1984, p. 5, 41, 69, 109.

³¹ R. Doerries, *Hitler's Last Chief...*, p. 179.

³² *Hitler's Secret Service...*, p. 188-189; V. Vauhnik, *Nevidljivi...*, p. 90, 202-203.

³³ By society espionage, Schellenberg meant intelligence gathering from people without official positions, but close to key officials (wives, mistresses, servants etc.).

³⁴ See PAA, RZ 214, R 101092, RSHA IV E 6 to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 August 1941; *Hitler's Secret Service...*, p. 187-188.

advancing German troops. Even the airfield in Zemun, today part of Belgrade, was seized before the arrival of German troops. In fact, "Jupiter" was an overarching success, whose whole potential remained unseen since the Yugoslav army collapsed within a few days.³⁵ Yugoslav authorities had been aware of its existence for months, but did nothing. Three days before the German attack it became evident that local Germans were planning a guerrilla action. However, still hoping that war could be avoided, the Yugoslavs did nothing.³⁶

Spying on political parties and trying to influence the course of Yugoslav politics was left to the Ausland-SD, or Office VI of the RSHA. Operating from its bases in Vienna and Graz, Office VI posted SS-Major Karl Kraus in Yugoslavia, giving him a cover job as an engineer at the GTB.³⁷ During Stojadinović's premiership (1935-1939), there was little need for covert actions within the ruling party, as official relations with his Yugoslav Radical Union (YRU) developed favourably. According to the UDB manuscript, however, three ministers from the YRU were recruited into Kraus's network.³⁸ Therefore, the focus was more on the political opposition within the country. The Germans could not count on the pro-British and pro-French democratic opposition, or on the communists, so they sought to penetrate and influence the fascist opposition. The national socialists established contacts with extreme right-wing or fascist parties all over Europe, regardless of their size and strength. They used these connections not only as a way of exerting influence inside countries, but also as a recruiting base for intelligence agencies. Such parties could be placed in power in case of German occupation as was the Arrow Cross Party in Hungary. Apart from Croat émigrés, many of whom were in Germany, and who were employed by the RSHA, as well as by the Foreign and Propaganda Ministries, the key fascist party in Yugoslavia was the Yugoslav National Movement Zbor. Founded in 1934, and led by the charismatic ex-minister Dimitrije Ljotić, the movement embraced fascist ideology, laced with many local characteristics, most of all a pronounced religiosity.

Although initially sceptical and often critical of Germany, Ljotić and his movement established close contacts with the Germans in 1936. Seeing it as a perfect vehicle for putting pressure on the Stojadinović government, the Foreign Political Department of the Nazi Party, and later Goering himself, sought to strengthen the movement. An elaborate plan was created according to which Zbor was entrusted with creating a Yugoslav branch of the "Technische Union" export company. The company was supposed to make exchanges of Yugoslav agricultural goods for German machinery through clearing trade. Whether this

³⁵ P. Kačavenda, *Nemci u Jugoslaviji 1918-1945*, Beograd, 1991, p. 24-27; *NOS*, vol. VI, p. 186-187.

³⁶ AJ, 334-16-41, Ministry of Interior to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 April 1941.

³⁷ IAB, Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), Ludwig Teichmann Dossier.

³⁸ *NOS*, vol. II, p. 502-505.

company was a mere facade for illegal funding or a genuine attempt to organize trade by bypassing state actors remains a highly controversial question to this day. My research in German archives found no evidence to support the often advanced claim that Zbor was secretly financed by the Germans, but there is more than enough evidence to suggest that this plan was in part seen as a way of strengthening an ideologically close movement. However, Stojadinović was quite displeased with the German dealings with an opposition political party, and in 1937 initiated an outcry both in the Yugoslav Parliament and in the press. Zbor was accused of being a German “fifth column” in Yugoslavia. The accusation which was parroted in the French, Soviet and Czech press, proved quite damaging to the German image, and Goering was forced to sever all open ties with the movement.³⁹ After this scandal, Zbor only maintained covert ties with the Germans. However, in all sections of Yugoslav society, those individuals that were in meaningful contacts with Germany were more often than not linked to the movement, either through membership or ideological affinity. While the Cvetković government was trying to manoeuvre between the warring parties in 1940, and a pro-British coup was in preparation, a group of Yugoslav army officers sought contact with the Germans. This group, according to the memoirs of Wilhelm Höttl, a high-ranking Department VI officer, was ready to carry out a coup d’état on their own. They had established contacts with the Zbor party, and were intent on installing a pro-Axis government which would enter the war on the German side. Although Heydrich and Himmler themselves were interested in this plot, the German Foreign Ministry managed to put a stop to such preparations, as they were convinced that the Yugoslav regime could be swayed into joining the Axis without a coup.⁴⁰

In addition to contacts with the fascist parties, tentative ties were established with the main Croatian political party, the Croatian Peasant Party. The Peasant Party had championed Croatian autonomy for years, and was bitterly opposed to Belgrade for more than a decade. It seems that the RSHA was much more in favour of cooperation with the Peasant Party than the Foreign Ministry or Goering’s minister to Yugoslavia, Neuhausen.⁴¹ There are very few testimonies to the talks between the two sides prior to the outbreak of the war. Croats were interested in procuring weapons for the Party’s paramilitary wing, the “Peasant and Citizen Defence”, and the Germans were willing to supply them in exchange for information.⁴² However, no meaningful agreement was

³⁹ BArch, Kanzlei des Führers der NSDAP, Dienststelle Bouhler, (NS 51)/5, BArch, Deutsche Revisions – und Treuhand AG (R 8135)/1651, PA AA, Politische Abteilung (RZ 211), R103374. AJ, Ministry of Trade and Industry (65), 1484; AJ, Dimitrije Ljotić’s Zbor (115). For an in-depth analysis of the whole affair, see R. Lompar, “Afera Tehnička unija...”.

⁴⁰ NOS, vol. II, p. 515.

⁴¹ W. Höttl, *Secret Front...*, p. 118.

⁴² NOS, vol. VI, p. 290.

reached. The Germans tried to gauge how far the Croats were prepared to go in order to obtain autonomy/independence.⁴³ The leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, Vladimir Maček, was in personal contact with the RSHA officer Höttl.⁴⁴ During late 1940 and early 1941, several meetings took place between the two parties, not unbeknownst to Yugoslav authorities.⁴⁵ However, these contacts amounted to nothing, and the Germans eventually decided to support the *Ustasha* takeover of power.

Reconstructing the Gestapo's network in Yugoslavia is a much harder task. As early as 1933 first agreements were reached between the German and Yugoslav police, with both sides agreeing to fight the "plague" of communism together. Over the course of the next five years this cooperation only intensified. In late 1937 two high-ranking police officials from Belgrade, Milan Aćimović and Dragomir Jovanović,⁴⁶ visited Berlin and met with Heydrich and the Gestapo chief Müller. They agreed on exchanging so-called "police attachés" who would coordinate with and aid their hosts in fighting communism in their respective countries. SS-Major Hans Helm, previously tasked with overseeing the Croatian fascist emigration (*Ustasha*) in Germany,⁴⁷ assumed his new post in early 1938 and maintained close contacts with the two Belgrade police officials. According to the UDB manuscript, both men had become Gestapo informants even before his arrival. Aćimović and Jovanović attended police congresses in Germany in 1935 and 1936 respectively.⁴⁸ During the next five years they would inform the Gestapo about the political situation in Yugoslavia, greatly overstepping their powers when cooperating with Helm. However, it is quite

⁴³ HDA, SDS, š. 10, 31, Statement by Rudolf Schrem, undated.

⁴⁴ W. Höttl, *Secret Front Secret Front...*, p. 130; *NOS*, vol. II, p. 451.

⁴⁵ AJ, 334-16-41, German activities in Yugoslavia, undated.

⁴⁶ Milan Aćimović (1898-1945) was a career police official. He was sent to Germany in 1930 to study police methods and soon upon his return in 1931 climbed the police ladder. He became chief of Belgrade Police Department, part of the Administration of the City of Belgrade, in 1935 until he was appointed Minister of Interior in December 1938. The Belgrade Police had a special place within the police system of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as its chief often got his orders directly from the King/Prince Regent and Prime Minister and remained largely independent of the Minister of Interior. A close confidant of both Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović and of Prince Regent Paul, Aćimović was fired after the fall of the Stojadinović government in February 1939. He later served as the first collaborationist commissar in occupied Serbia, and died in Bosnia in 1945 while fleeing from the communists. Dragomir Jovanović (1902-1946) also pursued a career in the police, but less successful than Aćimović. Deeply corrupt, he was twice fired from the police, but always managed to return. From 1936 he led a Belgrade police department and after the fall of Aćimović became deputy chief of Belgrade's police. Jovanović quickly forgot his previous boss, and he contributed to his ousting. He was mayor of Belgrade under the German occupation, and was executed in 1946. For more information about the two police officials, see B. Božović, *Beograd između dva svetska rata: Uprava grada Beograda 1918-1941*, Beograd, 1995; B. Božović and M. Stefanović, *Milan Aćimović, Dragi Jovanović, Dimitrije Ljotić*, Zagreb, 1985.

⁴⁷ *NOS*, vol. II, p. 149.

⁴⁸ B. Božović, *Beograd...*, 203.

difficult to offer concrete evidence to prove this claim.⁴⁹ The UDB manuscript draws a difference between Aćimović and Jovanović by stating that Aćimović believed that his contacts would benefit Yugoslavia and that Jovanović was simply a paid informant.⁵⁰ In fact, two separate issues, not necessarily linked, are conflated: anti-communist cooperation between the Yugoslav and German police, which was consistent with Yugoslav foreign and domestic policies, and illegal contacts with representatives of a foreign power. In fact, it has only recently been discovered that the Yugoslav press attaché in Berlin, Miloš Crnjanski, played an important part in the arrangements for the police agreement of 1937.⁵¹ He was not an informant of the Gestapo, nor has he ever been accused of having been one.⁵² However, it seems quite probable that Jovanović was in fact an informant, since a report on the contacts between the British and Soviet ministers to Yugoslavia mentions sources in “well-informed circles of the Belgrade police”.⁵³ Aćimović’s role in the Gestapo network in Yugoslavia remains debatable. Helm, on the other hand, indeed organized a network of agents (in cooperation with Kraus), some from the ranks of the Yugoslav police. These contacts would be quite useful to him during the war, and he would go on to draw quite a large number of people into it.⁵⁴

German intelligence activities in Yugoslavia were monitored by Yugoslav counterintelligence. Unfortunately, the capacity of Yugoslav counterintelligence proved insufficient to actively combat German influence within the country. On the one hand, the lack of a serious counterintelligence agency in Yugoslavia made any and all activities chaotic and decentralized, and, on the other hand, political pressure from Germany seriously limited their the scope of their powers. A clear sign of the lack of proper information is the fact that all German officials in Yugoslavia were referred to as agents of the Gestapo, rather than attributed to the agency they actually belonged to.⁵⁵ The Yugoslavs primarily focused on surveillance and only acted when evidence for someone’s culpability was overwhelming. All German officials in the country were placed

⁴⁹ Both Helm and Jovanović denied this accusation during their interrogation by the communist post-war authorities. See HDA, SDS, š. 202, 2, The emergence of RSHA in Yugoslavia; *Kolaboracionisti pred sudom OZNE*, ed. by Srdjan Cvetković, Rade Ristanović and Nebojša Stambolija, Beograd, 2018, p. 166-167.

⁵⁰ *NOS*, vol. VI, p. 467-471; IAB, BIA, Milan Aćimović Dossier; B. Božović and M. Stefanović, *Milan...*, 20; B. Božović, *Beograd...*, 205-206.

⁵¹ M. Crnjanski, *Diplomatski izveštaji 1936-1941*, ed. by Aleksandar Stojanović and Rastko Lompar, Beograd, 2019, pp. 86-87, 802-803, see fn. 68 and 69.

⁵² For his involvement, see AJ, Central Press-bureau of the Presidency of the Ministerial Council (38)-49-108, Miloš Crnjanski, Yearly Report, 9 December 1936; PA AA, RZ 211, R 104549B; BArch, Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (R55)/1207.

⁵³ PAA, RZ 214, R 101092, RSHA to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 December 1940.

⁵⁴ See IAB, Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des Sicherheitsdienstes (BDS), Borivoj Bogić Dossier (B 64); IAB, BIA, Borivoj Bogić Dossier.

⁵⁵ *NOS*, vol. II, p. 580.

under “discreet surveillance”, and so were German students, tourists and Yugoslav workers returning from Germany.⁵⁶ Ethnic Germans living in Yugoslavia were also under watch. Especially young German-Yugoslavs who had spent some time in the Reich in previous years, as a document from 1940 reveals.⁵⁷ These measures meant that Yugoslav officials were at times overzealous and harassed ethnic Germans, especially in Slovenia.⁵⁸ The Ministry of Interior even had to warn local authorities not to be too harsh on local Germans.⁵⁹ They reported about a “psychosis” amongst local Germans, who became increasingly hostile towards the South-Slav state. A memorandum from the Foreign Ministry proposed that the government should “combat the influence of German citizens, peacefully and gradually nationalize German capital in Slovenia, keep close watch over German tourists, and limit migration to Germany”.⁶⁰ Yugoslav police managed to discover several spy networks in the country and to prosecute those responsible. For example, in 1940, twenty-one persons were convicted for espionage in favour of Germany. Amongst them were both local and Reich Germans, Russians, Slovenes, Croats, and they were given sentences ranging from two years to life imprisonment.⁶¹

However, some of the guilty could not be prosecuted due to political pressures from Germany. German minister to Belgrade, Victor von Heeren, protested after every incident involving Germans. How severe the pressure in fact was is best shown by the fact that a minister of interior was forced to step down for being too harsh on the German population.⁶² Numerous documents show that Yugoslav diplomats often interfered in police work, ordering the release of Germans suspected of espionage, and overturning decisions to expel them from the country. Such meddling greatly undermined Yugoslav counterintelligence capabilities, but it served a diplomatic purpose.⁶³ Furthermore, the abovementioned “cold war” between the Germans and British over Yugoslavia greatly complicated Yugoslavia’s position as a neutral country. Dealing with the British Intelligence Service (IS), led on the ground by the talented Julius “Caesar” Hanau,⁶⁴ was one of the principal goals of the RSHA. In

⁵⁶ For individual cases, see HDA, Banship of Croatia – Department for State Security (BH-ODZ), boxes 9 and 35.

⁵⁷ HAD, SDS, š. 202, 1, German intelligence before the war.

⁵⁸ See PA AA, Gesandtschaft Belgrad (RAV) Belgrad, 61/9; BArch, R58/3366, V-Mann S.20, Report, 21 September 1939; AJ, 334-16-41, Memorandum of German Embassy, 4 May 1939.

⁵⁹ AJ, 334-16-41, Ministry of Interior circular, 27 June 1940.

⁶⁰ AJ, 334-16-41, J. Gonjak, Report on incidents in Slovenia, April 1939.

⁶¹ HDA, SDS, š. 202, 1, Convicted German spies before the war.

⁶² P. Kačavenda, *Nemci...*, p. 24.

⁶³ Several examples can be found in AJ, 334-16-41.

⁶⁴ For more information about the IS in Yugoslavia, see Hanau’s dossiers by German and post-war Yugoslav communist authorities: IAB, BDS, Julius Hanau Dossier; IAB, BIA, Julius Hanau Dossier.

fact, Major Kraus was especially tasked with ensuring the security of the Yugoslav section of the Danube waterway, along which precious shipments of coal and petroleum were transported, against IS sabotage.⁶⁵ The RSHA managed to infiltrate the British Consulate in Zagreb and gain an advantage, but was ultimately frustrated by the Yugoslav stance.⁶⁶ Despite the country's proclaimed neutrality, Yugoslav counterintelligence chose to occasionally partner with the IS against the RSHA and regularly turned a blind eye to British activities.⁶⁷

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In addition to all shortcomings of Yugoslav counterintelligence, German espionage in Yugoslavia was further aided by propaganda. It was directed at both the German minority and other Yugoslavs, and served two purposes: on the one hand, it Nazified the German communities and, on the other, it made Nazi Germany more appealing to the Yugoslav populace. Ideological affinity and intelligence penetration went hand in hand, and many of those impressed by the new regime in Germany became informants and agents of its intelligence agencies. Some Yugoslav documents did not even distinguish between propaganda dissemination and information gathering, as the two were correctly recognised as being intertwined. German propaganda was quite simple, focusing on the ideological appeal of National Socialism as a means of overcoming economic troubles and internal quarrels, and on German successes in the areas of economy, technology and industry. From September 1939 much attention was devoted to German military offensives.

In charge of propaganda dissemination was the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment under Joseph Goebbels. In 1936 the Ministry decided to increase the number of propaganda brochures in Balkan languages, and to focus more on the German economy, industry and technology. Such literature was to be translated into Balkan languages.⁶⁸ A year before, special radio broadcasts in Balkan languages were launched.⁶⁹ This German propaganda offensive did not go unnoticed in Belgrade. Yugoslav authorities were aware of the danger posed by German propaganda, and therefore attempted to limit its influx into the country. Even Milan Stojadinović, by no means hostile to Germany, issued an order in 1937 banning the dissemination of Nazi propaganda and open displays of allegiance to Germany.⁷⁰ Seizures of National Socialist

⁶⁵ HDA, SDS, š. 202, 2, The emergence of RSHA in Yugoslavia; IAB, BIA, Ludwig Teichmann Dossier.

⁶⁶ BArch, R58/1144, 4v7, V-Mann index card database.

⁶⁷ PA AA, Büro Staatssekretäre (RZ 102), R 29663, OKW Information about Yugoslavia, 5 April 1941; NOS, vol. II, p. 581.

⁶⁸ BArch, R55/383, Note about propaganda in the Balkans, 8 June 1936.

⁶⁹ See BArch, R55/20645.

⁷⁰ IAB, BIA, Milan Stojadinović Dossier.

literature became commonplace. However, German diplomatic representatives put pressure on Yugoslav authorities to return the seized materials. Fearing a diplomatic scandal, Yugoslav authorities regularly gave in.⁷¹ After the war broke out, the Yugoslavs had a compelling reason to ban the propaganda material depicting German war successes, as it would “damage” Yugoslavia’s neutrality.⁷² Strictly doctrinal texts, such as *Mein Kampf* for example, were still allowed. In order to evade seizures, Lufthansa airplanes began illegally dropping materials over German towns and villages.⁷³ The German embassy and consulates in the country, as well as German bookshops, were principal points for propaganda dissemination. The German Transport Bureau was the most important amongst them. Film screenings depicting German war successes were frequent, and more than 30,000 brochures were circulated from the GTB headquarters in Belgrade in February 1941 alone.⁷⁴ The German bookshop in Novi Sad also operated as a secret intelligence centre.⁷⁵

The propaganda offensive was successful as a number of intellectuals initially drawn to Germany for entirely professional reasons became increasingly Nazified and prone to disclosing information about Yugoslav affairs. For example, Stevan Ivanić, director of the Hygienic Institute and a leading Yugoslav medical expert, had established contacts with a number of medical and health institutions in Germany, notably the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin. In his contacts with them, he expressed interest in German racial doctrine and racial purity laws. This led to his becoming a regular guest in Germany on various occasions, from medical congresses to meetings of the *Kraft durch Freude*. Although there is no proof, he actually worked for the RSHA, he was deeply impressed by Germany and collaborated during the war.⁷⁶ Bogumil Vošnjak, one-time minister of labour and a leading Yugoslav economic expert, followed a similar path. Whilst studying German and Italian economic doctrines he came into contact with German officials. He was in cordial relations with the *Reichsarbeitsleiter* Ley, and a common guest at the meetings of *Kraft durch Freude* and similar organizations.⁷⁷ With time, he increasingly favoured the German economic system and advocated the establishment of a similar system in Yugoslavia.⁷⁸ He also supported German expansionist policy and openly praised

⁷¹ See AJ, 334-16-41.

⁷² AJ, 334-16-41, Ministry of Interior to Foreign Ministry, 5 November 1940.

⁷³ IAB, UGB-SP, District XVII to Belgrade City Administration, 8 February 1941.

⁷⁴ AJ, 334-16-41, German propaganda in our country; IAB, UGB-SP, 2318, Germans: propaganda and intelligence gathering by the German minority, 10 March 1941.

⁷⁵ HDA, SDS, š. 202, 1, German intelligence service before the war.

⁷⁶ IAB, BDS, Stevan Ivanić Dossier (I-1117).

⁷⁷ AJ, Milan Stojadinović Papers (37)-30-217, Miloš Crnjanski to Milan Stojadinović, 31 December 1937; AJ, 38-49-107, Miloš Crnjanski, Report, 10 July 1938.

⁷⁸ From his initial cautious praise of the German economic system, he became increasingly impressed by it and began to promote it openly as a solution to the economic troubles of the

the *Anschluss*. As a result, he was recruited by Department VI as an informant.⁷⁹ Another economic expert, Danilo Gregorić, whose doctoral dissertation was devoted to the German economic system and its ideological basis, was recruited in the same way. He was also a journalist of the semi-official newspaper *Vreme*, and Prince Paul’s personal envoy to Germany. He would go so far as to provide German agents in Greece with cover identities by supplying them with Yugoslav press passes.⁸⁰ Journalists proved quite useful, as they were very well-informed and influential.⁸¹ In 1940 those that were recruited started editing the Serbo-Croatian edition of the German propaganda magazine *Signal*.⁸²

After a RSHA informant suggested the Germans should pay more attention to Yugoslav youth, who were under a strong Soviet, French and British influence, steps were taken to attract the ruling party’s youth to Germany.⁸³ For example, Fadil Azabagić, brother of Stojadinović’s secretary, spent several months in Breslau as a guest of the local Hitler Jugend organization. His hosts reported that he was very interested in National Socialism and that he returned home to Yugoslavia with a chest of books, mostly anti-Semitic.⁸⁴ Similarly, in order to counter the strong influence of the Anglican Church on the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), contacts were initiated between the latter and the German Evangelical Church.⁸⁵ They masterfully employed the clergy’s deeply anticommunist convictions in order to improve the opinion of Germany. The Germans positioned themselves as key partners in the struggle against “godless bolshevism” and regularly offered propagandistic and other help to the Church in its opposition to communism. This led to a rising pro-German sentiment within the SOC.⁸⁶ Yugoslav officials were convinced that the German evangelical clergy was trained in espionage and were anxious about contacts between the two churches.⁸⁷ The German representatives soon realized that there was in the Balkans a group of young nationalist theologians who were unwilling to go to London or Paris for their PhDs. Therefore, they started offering scholarships for Orthodox theology students in Germany. The first scholarship

Yugoslav state. Compare B. Vošnjak, *Pobeda Jugoslavije: nacionalne misli i predlozi*, Beograd, n.d., p. 23-30; idem, “Predgovor”, in A. Iljčenko, *Put ka uspehu u privrednom radu*, Beograd, 1937, p. VI-VII; idem, *Tri Jugoslavije*, Ljubljana, 1939, p. 20-23.

⁷⁹ BArch, R58/1144, 5v7, V-Mann index card database.

⁸⁰ AJ, 334-16-41, Note about Sven Schacht, 20 November 1940.

⁸¹ For a list of Yugoslav journalists in Germany and their contacts with German institutions, see BArch, NS 42/49.

⁸² NOS, vol. II, p. 511-512.

⁸³ BArch, R55/383, Report from Yugoslavia, 29 April 1938.

⁸⁴ IAB, BDS, Fadil Azabagić Dossier (A-32).

⁸⁵ BArch, NS51/5, Rudolf von Maltzahn, Report, 11 February 1937; IAB, BDS, Bishop Irinej Dossier (I-37).

⁸⁶ IAB, BDS, Velibor Jonić Dossier (J-87); Dušan Glumac Dossier (G-1166).

⁸⁷ AJ, 334-16-41, German propaganda in our country.

holders from Yugoslavia were Djoko Slijepčević and Dimitrije Najdanović, both members of Zbor. Although the German side constantly requested the increase in Serbian students, and offered better conditions and more scholarships, the programme stagnated after the war broke out. The Serbian church officials regularly agreed to an increase in scholarships at their meetings, but later informed the Germans with regret that such a decision could not be taken before the end of the war.⁸⁸

In conclusion, it can be noted that the only field in which the Germans were clearly dominant in Yugoslavia was the field of the economy. In essence, Germans lagged behind the British in all other spheres of influence. Germany was able, through its military might, to pressure Yugoslavia into joining the Axis, but it lacked the intelligence to forestall the oncoming coup. Germany, unlike the British, could count mostly on low- to middle-ranking individuals, be they politicians, military or church dignitaries. Those that they did attract were the basis of the future collaborationist governments. A pro-German sentiment did exist among the populace, predominantly among the Croats, but also among many Yugoslav/Serbian nationalists. German intelligence agencies managed to establish a significant footing and to aid the military during the brief war, but failed completely to attract influential politicians. Therefore, during the occupation, power was given to relatively marginal political actors. In the case of the Independent State of Croatia, the *Ustasha* managed to attract a vast majority of Croats, but Serbian collaborationists could never count on a broad popular support. Nevertheless, German intelligence in interwar Yugoslavia helped the destruction of the country:

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⁸⁸ For more information about contacts between the two churches, see R. Lompar, "Naslov je promenjen nakon pisanja rada. Sada glasi: Kontakti Nemačke evangelističke crkve i Srpske pravoslavne crkve u kontekstu nemačke spoljne politike prema Balkanu 1935-1941", *Tokovi istorije* 2, 2020, p. 51-73.

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