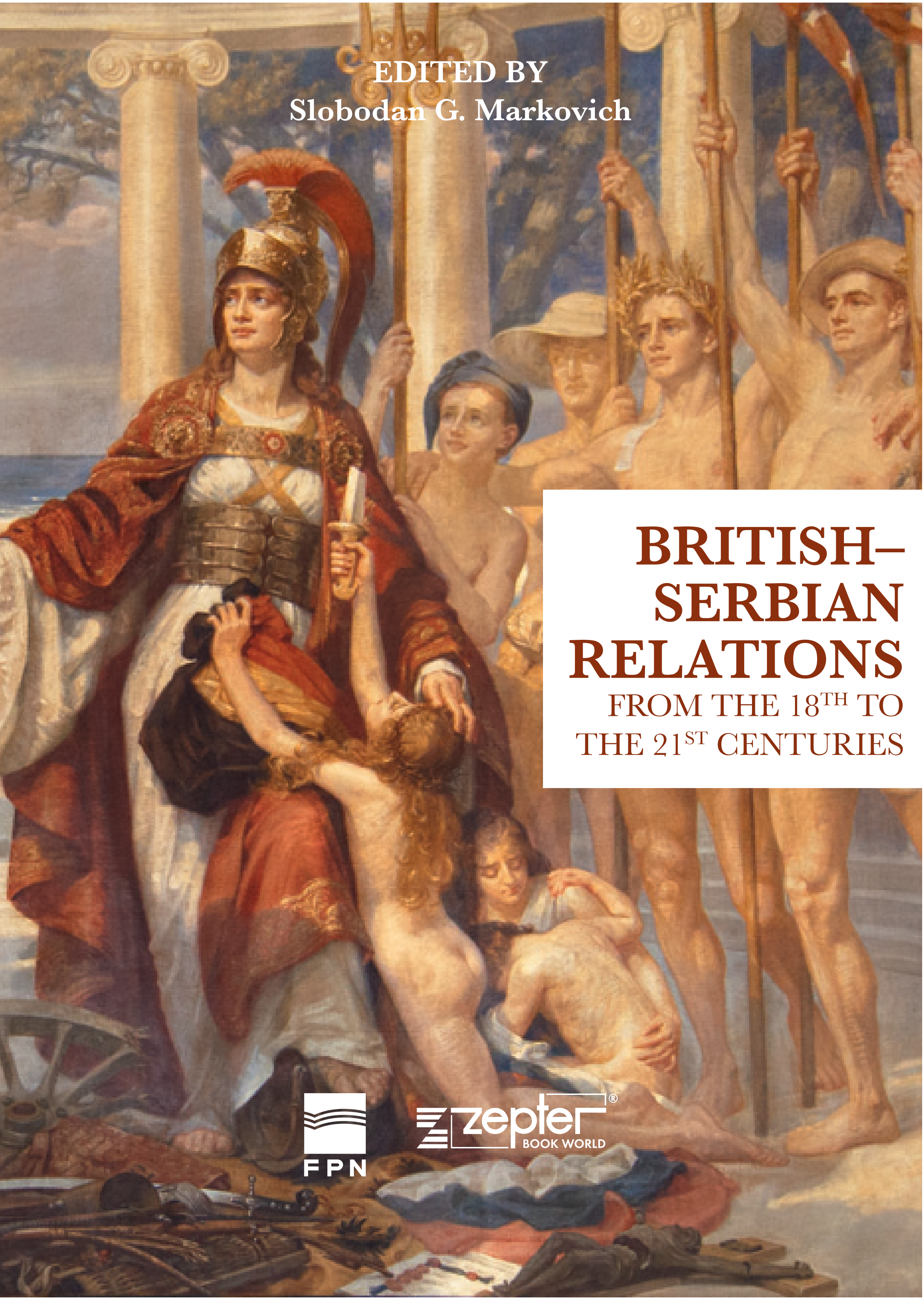

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Slobodan G. Markovich

BRITISH–SERBIAN RELATIONS
FROM THE 18TH TO THE 21ST CENTURIES

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BRITISH-SERBIAN RELATIONS

FROM THE 18th TO THE 21st CENTURIES

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THE KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA AND GREAT BRITAIN

Abstract: This paper examines in broad lines the relations between Great Britain and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia) throughout the two interwar decades of the latter country's existence. The survey shows that Yugoslavia was the most important country in the Balkans and thus commanded serious attention of British diplomacy, since Yugoslav foreign policy had an impact on Great Power rivalries in South-Eastern Europe incommensurate with her size and actual strength. While Yugoslavia constantly sought security for her borders, the Foreign Office wanted to see her as a pillar of peace and stability in the region. With her permanent troubles with hostile neighbours, most notably Italy, and internal tensions, the main of which was Croat discontent, this was a difficult undertaking for the Belgrade government. The Foreign Office had a good deal of sympathy for Yugoslavia in dealing with her difficulties, but it was also highly critical of Belgrade's inefficient and corrupt administration. In foreign affairs, Britain often took a dim view of what it perceived as Yugoslavia's conduct of foreign policy that ran contrary to British policy of all-round appeasement in South-Eastern Europe and later, in the latter half of the 1930s, containment of Nazi Germany. This would eventually lead to British involvement in the 27 March 1941 coup d'état in Belgrade which embroiled Yugoslavia in the Second World War.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, Great Britain, Anglo-Yugoslav relations, interwar period

The Kingdom of Yugoslavia[1] grew out of Serbia's victory in the Great War on the side of the Entente Powers, emerging from the ruins of the Habsburg Empire, and constituted perhaps the most complex state in Europe in terms of its ethnic, religious, and cultural make-up. Great Britain was, along with France, the arbiter of European affairs after the war, at least until Germany's revival in the latter half of the 1930s. During the peace conference in Paris, Britain naturally afforded a measure of support to the Yugoslav delegation, which it essentially viewed as a representative of the allied Serbia; but this support was constrained by the consideration for another war-time ally, Italy, with its Great Power status, which was inimical to the Yugoslav state from the outset. Italy had territorial designs on the littoral province of Dalmatia, mostly populated by Croats and with only a few Italians, and also perceived a large South Slav state as an obstacle to its own imperialist ambitions in the Balkans and the Danube region. British

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[1] The official name of the country was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes until it was changed to Yugoslavia in 1929. However, it is customary and more convenient to use the name Yugoslavia for the entire period of its existence. It should be noted that Yugoslavia (in different forms and spellings of this word, designating the state comprised of Yugoslavs, that is to say South Slavs – with the exception of Bulgarians) was used even prior to 1929.

Prime Minister David Lloyd George mediated, together with the French and American leaders, George Clemenceau and Woodrow Wilson, in the border dispute between Yugoslavia and Italy, known as the Adriatic question, to no avail – the British and French were bound to respect Italy's standpoint as a result of their signing the Treaty of London with Rome in 1915, which promised generous territorial concessions to the Italians in return for their entry into the war.[2] Yugoslavia eventually concluded the unfavourable Treaty of Rapallo in 1920, which resolved the matter of delimitation with her Adriatic neighbour once she had to face it alone, without the Entente mediators.[3]

After the peace settlement had been finally bedded down, Yugoslavia emerged as an especially important country in the region. To British policy-makers, Yugoslavia was the key country in the Balkans and, to a large extent, in Central Europe, as it acquired the status of a regional power and seemed to have much potential. Such an assessment was predicated on her relative size, the number of inhabitants, natural resources and military capabilities. For that reason, London paid much attention to Yugoslavia in its pursuit of the main goal of British foreign policy in South-Eastern Europe – maintaining peace and stability. It was Belgrade's misfortune that much of the regional tensions that stemmed from Italy's imperialism and the revisionist aspirations of minor powers such as Hungary and Bulgaria centred on Yugoslavia. In addition, Yugoslavia never managed to put her house in order and internal difficulties, largely the Croat discontent and separatism, presented a standing temptation for external opponents. This gave rise to misgivings among a number of British observers in the early years of Yugoslavia's existence, who came to regard "a significant revision in the direction of regional autonomy as indispensable to the country's future as a united entity."[4] Belgrade sought support to maintain the *status quo* in both Paris and London, but France was much more sympathetic; hence the close ties and the 1927 Treaty of Friendship with that country. On the other hand, there was no question of any British commitment to Yugoslavia, or any other East European country: the pressures of both foreign and internal affairs, consideration for public opinion and the attitude of Dominions, and economic and military retrenchment all combined to militate strongly against such an undertaking. After all, it was with much difficulty and reluctance that Britain agreed to rather limited commitment to Paris in order to guarantee the Pact of Locarno of 1925 between France and Germany, which was deemed a matter of British national interest.

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[2] David Lloyd George, *Memoirs of the Peace Conference*, vol. II (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939).

[3] Dragan Živojinović, "Velika Britanija i Rapalski ugovor 1920. godine", *Istorijski časopis,* 18 (1971), pp. 393–416.

[4] James Evans, *Great Britain and the Creation of Yugoslavia: Negotiating Balkan Nationality and Identity* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008), p. 220.

Britain's attitude towards Yugoslavia, and the Paris peace settlement in general, was rather ambiguous, which accounted for less cordial relations than Franco-Yugoslav ones. Britain was also doubtful as to Yugoslavia's – and other successor states' – stability and permanence, which was not entirely unreasonable in view of her internal political crises and strained relations with hostile and revisionist neighbours. In addition, there was an undercurrent of strong distrust and antipathy in the Foreign Office for Nikola Pašić and his Radicals, which were often suspected, mostly without foundation, of nurturing expansionist ambitions at the expense of Albania and Greece – designs on Salonica (Thessaloniki) in the latter case. In a similar vein, the Foreign Office strongly speculated about the likelihood of Yugoslavia's cooperation with Bulgaria and Italy, despite Belgrade's troublesome relations with these two countries, with the aim of capturing Salonica. This mistrust of Yugoslavia's conduct of foreign affairs was further exacerbated by British suspiciousness of the alleged military interference with policy-making in Belgrade, namely the influence of the so-called White Hand clique of officers.[5] The exaggerated mistrust in Yugoslavia's leadership reflected characteristic cultural prejudices among the British, tinged with racist undertones, against all Balkan peoples and their states – comments made by Foreign Office officials abounded with remarks to that effect.[6]

The British attitude towards Yugoslavia's difficulties with Italy, especially Mussolini's Italy, was of particular importance – it should be borne in mind that this was the most pressing concern for Yugoslavia's security and foreign policy. Although it was Italy that nurtured aggressive plans against Yugoslavia, this was not, at least initially, acknowledged in London. The Foreign Office found Mussolini's bombast rather benign, whereas it took a dim view of Yugoslavia's close ties with France as part of what was seen as a French security system in Eastern Europe. Given the tensions that existed between Rome and Paris, the British were inclined to interpret Italy's bullying of Yugoslavia as a fearful reaction to what the Italians considered a policy of encirclement on the part of France and Yugoslavia.[7] British benevolence to Mussolini's policy was also manifested in the tacit acquiescence to the Italian economic and political domination over Albania, located at Yugoslavia's flank, which posed a strategic danger to Yugoslavia and was thus bitterly opposed from Belgrade.[8] Britain's apparent support of Italy gave rise to suspicions in Belgrade that

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[5] For a discussion of British views see Dragan Bakić, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe: Foreign Policy and Security Challenges, 1919–1936* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 33–39.

[6] For an interesting discussion of the impact of abiding stereotypical images on foreign policy-making, see Patrick Finney, "Raising Frankenstein: Great Britain, 'Balkanism' and the Search for a Balkan Locarno in the 1920s", *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2003), pp. 317–342.

[7] Bakić, op. cit., pp. 116–121, 164–168; Dunja Hercigonja, *Velika Britanija i spoljnopolitčki položaj Jugoslavije, 1929–1933: britanska politika prema jugoslovensko-italijanskim sukobima u vreme svetske privredne krize* (Belgrade: ISI, 1987).

[8] Jovan Zametica, "Sir Austen Chamberlain and the Italo-Yugoslav Crisis over Albania, February-May 1927", *Balcanica*, Vol. 36 (2006), pp. 203–235.

London encouraged, or at least tolerated, Mussolini's aggressiveness. The Yugoslavs and in particular their Foreign Minister, Vojislav Marinković, were convinced that Britain's attitude was a decisive factor in breaking the deadlock in relations with Rome. "London is always the goal of all my efforts, whether in Paris, Geneva, Hague, Belgrade or Rome," he stressed.[9] The British Minister in Belgrade, Sir Nevile Henderson, struck a friendship with King Alexander Karadjordjević and supported fully the Yugoslav point of view in his reports to Whitehall.[10] Other British ministers in the interwar era also displayed, although not to the same extent, a fairly sympathetic attitude towards Yugoslavia, her people and the diplomatic and political difficulties that the Belgrade government faced.[11] However, the Foreign Office was not willing to support Yugoslavia in her troubles with Rome: apart from its general dislike of the air of commitment, especially in respect of territorial integrity, there was no true confidence in the future of that country.[12] The British perception would change in the 1930s when the illusions of Mussolini's allegedly pacifist policy were dissipated, but the Foreign Office continued to advocate Yugoslavia's detachment from France as the safest means for Belgrade to come to terms with Rome. It was only briefly during the Abyssinian Crisis, when it seemed that Britain might even militarily confront Italy in pursuing the League of Nations sanctions against that country, that Britain sought Yugoslavia's cooperation in a potential conflict.[13] Unsurprisingly, Belgrade was not prepared to expose itself to a full-scale Italian military invasion for the sake of applying sanctions against Rome over Italy's aggression in Africa.

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[9] Belgrade, Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts [hereafter ASANU], Vojislav Marinković Papers, 14439/169, Marinković to Rakić, 16 December 1930.

[10] Nevile Henderson, *Water under the Bridges* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1945), pp. 169–198.

[11] British Ministers in Belgrade were: Sir Charles Alban Young (1919–1925), Sir Howard William Kennard (1925–1929), Sir Nevile Meyrick Henderson (1929–1935), Sir Ronald Hugh Campbell (1935–1939) and Ronald Ian Campbell (1939–1941). It is interesting to note that, apart from Young who retired after his service in Yugoslavia, other British diplomats went on to have distinguished careers after their departure from Belgrade and left their mark in history. At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Kennard was the British Ambassador to Poland and later, after the German conquest of Poland, to the Polish government-in-exile, while Henderson became the notorious appeaser of Nazi Germany as an ambassador in Berlin (his successful mission in Yugoslavia played a part in the Foreign Office's considerations to appoint him head of the Berlin embassy). Ronald Hugh Campbell left Belgrade to become the British ambassador in Paris, in recognition for what was regarded as his outstanding abilities, and remained there until the fall of France in June 1940. After having completed his tenure in Belgrade, his successor and namesake was appointed deputy head of mission in Washington, with the rank of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, just like in the Belgrade Legation – he was Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office in 1945 and served as the United Kingdom's Ambassador to Egypt from 1946 to 1950. See the relevant volumes of the *Foreign Office List and Diplomatic and Consular Year Book* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1907–1965). For the annual reports on Yugoslavia written by British Ministers see Robert L. Jarman, ed., *Yugoslavia: Political Diaries 1918–1965*, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge Archive Editions, 1997), I-III; Živko Avramovski has published these reports in the Serbian language in his *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji: godišnji izveštaji britanskog poslanstva u Beogradu 1921–1938.* 3 vols (Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije; Zagreb: Globus, 1986–1996). The Yugoslav diplomats with the rank of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the London Legation were: Mihailo Gavrilović (1919–1924), Djordje Djurić (1925–1935), Slavko Grujić (1935–1937), Dragomir Kasidolac (1937–1939) and Ivan Subbotić (1939–1941). From November 1924 to November 1925 the Yugoslav Legation was headed by the chargé d'affaires a. i. Djordje Todorović. From 26 June 1931 to 3 December 1931 it was the chargé d'affaires a. i. Božidar Purić who ran the mission. The surviving monthly reports of the Yugoslav Ministers in London were published in Miladin Milošević and Miodrag Zečević, eds, *Mesečni izveštaji jugoslovenskog poslanstva u Londonu 1930–1941. godine* (Belgrade: Eksportpres, 1991). For short biographies of the Yugoslav diplomats in Britain see also Belgrade, Archives of Yugoslavia [hereafter AJ], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia [collection No. 334, hereafter Foreign Ministry], Personal Files.

Sir Nevile Meyrick Henderson, British Minister in Belgrade (1929–1935)

On the Yugoslav side, the British reserve and reluctance was duly noted. Slobodan Jovanović, the well-known law professor and historian, told William Strang, a young British diplomat who had just started his diplomatic career in Belgrade in the early 1920s: "No allied country, he said, had been more generously friendly to Jugoslavia than Great Britain, and no allied country politically so hostile."[14] This was an exaggerated claim, but it echoed a wide-spread feeling on the Yugoslav, or rather Serbian side, that Britain's attitude towards Belgrade left much to be desired. Other Serbian politicians and officials largely understood it in terms of time-honored and deep-rooted notions of British policy toward the Slav, and particularly Serb, populace of South-Eastern Europe. In 1930, Marinković professed to his friend, the Yugoslav Minister in Rome Milan Rakić, that the British attitude resulted from "an innate distrust due to the difference in our characteristics and conceptions and long-standing prejudices against our people. For the whole century English policy was so orientated that we were always a nuisance whether as opponents of Turkey or opponents of Austria, or opponents of Bulgaria. In such an old and traditional state that means a lot."[15] Much of Yugoslavia's fear that British policy might support her opponents stemmed from different manifestations of public backing for the Italian, Bulgarian or Hungarian cause, or for the Croat autonomist and separatist aspirations. There was never a lack of prominent Britons who for various reasons advocated the rights of the alleged Bulgarian minority in Macedonia, rectification of the Hungarian borders, or federalization of Yugoslavia to satisfy non-Serbs. The British press and well-known experts in the Balkan affairs, such as historian Robert William Seton-Watson and Henry Wickham Steed, a journalist, often voiced such opinions. They kept in close touch with the opponents of the Belgrade government, be it Croat politicians or Serb opposition leaders, and damaged Yugoslavia's image in British public opinion.[16] The vigorous campaign of Lord Rothermere, the owner of the *Daily Mail*, for the restoration of Hungarian borders in 1928 caused a storm of protest among Hungary's neighbours; a caucus of 168 members of parliament that took up the Hungarian case for border revision five years later was no less annoying. For Yugoslavia, the most harmful were former friends of Serbia from the time of the Great War, who turned against Belgrade whether Pašić was in power or King Alexander established his personal rule. This led Božidar Purić, Chargé d'Affaires of the Yugoslav Legation in London, to muse that "English historians and publicists, [Arthur] Evans, Steed, [Seton-]Watson, were discovering the Austro-Hungarian Slavs and saw the salvation of Austria in resolving their problems, a salvation from breakdown by means of which Russia could, as well as by means of us South Slavs, break out to the Adriatic and Mediterranean sea. [They were] friends of the Austrian Slavs for the sake of Austria, not for the sake of Slavs." Although pro-Austrian sentiment had been suffocated during the Great War, the inertia of traditional views, Purić believed, according to which Belgrade's orthodoxy was regarded as "oriental, enigmatic and revolutionary," carried on.[17]

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[12] Bakić, op. cit., p. 165.

[13] Živko Avramovski, "Pitanje učešća Jugoslavije u vojnim sankcijama protiv Italije za vreme italijanske agresije na Etiopiju (1935–1936)", *Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis*, 1 (1964), pp. 13–36.

[14] Lord Strang, *Home and Abroad* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1956), p. 55.

[15] ASANU, Milan Rakić Papers, Marinković to Rakić, private, 30 December 1930, quoted in Dunja Hercigonja, *Velika Britanija i spoljnopolitički položaj Jugoslavije*, p. 47.

But although Whitehall was never prepared to provide full and unconditional support that policy-makers in Belgrade wanted, that is not to say that it had no understanding for some of their difficulties. The Foreign Office was more sympathetic to Yugoslavia than to Bulgaria in their dispute over the Serbian part of Macedonia. It found that Macedonian Slavs were neither Serb nor Bulgarian, as it was claimed in Belgrade and Sofia respectively, but it believed that the assimilation of the Macedonian population within Serbia afforded "the best hope of permanent peace in the Balkans"; it also believed that the demand for autonomy by the pro-Bulgarian terrorist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) was only envisaged as the first step toward a union with Bulgaria, which could be considered "an almost certain cause of future conflict."[18] Belgrade was advised repeatedly to improve the administration in the southern province as the best means of facilitating the rapid assimilation of the local population. But Belgrade needed to secure Serbian Macedonia from IMRO's outrages and scotch Bulgaria's ambitions to seize its territory, perhaps in conjunction with some other powers. Since the attempts to reach a rapprochement with Sofia did not succeed, Yugoslavia formed the anti-Bulgarian Balkan Pact with Greece, Romania and Turkey in 1934 – it was also envisaged as a means of defending the Balkan countries from Great Power, mostly Italian, interference. Britain took a dim view of the Balkan Pact, because it wanted to see the appeasement of Bulgaria and found the alliance against that country entirely counterproductive.[19] British policy also never supported Hungary's demands for revision of the Trianon peace treaty which would affect Yugoslavia. Belgrade formed the Little Entente together with Czechoslovakia and Romania in 1920–21 to keep in check Hungarian – and Bulgarian – irredentism. The Foreign Office initially welcomed the alliance on the grounds that it could contribute to peace and stability in the Danube region, but in time came to see it as an obstacle to the appeasement of Hungary, whose conservative regime had become rather popular with the British establishment. It also admitted that a certain change in borders in favour of Budapest would be justified from the ethnographical point of view, but British diplomacy realised that any such attempt was bound to lead to military conflict in Central Europe. And that was exactly what Britain wanted to prevent. Despite the powerful support and lobbying for the Hungarian cause in British public opinion and even in parliament, the Foreign Office deprecated the harmful effects produced in the Danubian countries and decided to pass over it in silence so as not to give it publicity.[20]

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[16] For example, see the views and activities of Seton-Watson in Hugh Seton-Watson et al., eds, *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs: correspondence, 1906–1941*, 2 vols. (London and Zagreb: the British Academy and the University of Zagreb, 1976).

[17] *Mesečni izveštaji jugoslovenskog poslanstva*, No. 2, General Report on the internal and foreign policy of Great Britain for March 1930 (Purić to Kumanudi, Apr. 1, 1930, confidential No. 210).

It should also be noted that the British were rather sympathetic to the Yugoslav government in their internal problems with the Croats. All British Ministers in Belgrade, as well as Foreign Office officials, were critical of Serbian administrative deficiencies, corruption and unduly centralist policies that had caused dissatisfaction in Croatia and other provinces. Nevertheless, they found the obstinate opposition of the Croat Peasant Party to the Serb-dominated government rigid, unconstructive and practically designed to block any compromise between the two sides. On balance, they blamed the Croats more than the Serbs for the deadlock in which Yugoslavia found herself for most of her interwar existence. It is interesting to note that such a perception of the Serbo-Croat controversy was influenced by another interethnic strife that had taken place in the British Isles themselves, namely in

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[18] Bakić, op. cit., p. 34.

[19] Živko Avramovski, *Balkanska antanta, 1934–1940* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1986); the same author discussed the British angle in "Stav britanske diplomatije prema sklapanju balkanskog sporazuma (1933–1934)", *Radovi Instituta za hrvatsku povijest*, 16 (1983), pp. 139–180.

[20] Bakić, op. cit., pp. 24–30, 110, 132.

Ireland. It is perhaps no wonder that British diplomats and officials tended to liken the Croat opposition in Yugoslavia with the dogged struggle of the Irish for their independence. This was reflected in a repeated comment that the Croat stance was simply "agin the Gov[ernmen]t", which suggested it had no definite and constructive aims.[21] Hence the understanding that the British showed for Serbian policy-makers in Belgrade. Officially, the British were careful not to associate themselves in any way with Croat emissaries who lobbied in London for their cause and thus give grounds for complaint to the Yugoslav government. The introduction of King Alexander's dictatorship in 1929, following the tragic shootings in the parliament and the death of Croatian leaders, was also received in democratic Britain with much appreciation for the difficulties of the Yugoslav monarch and some hope that his authoritarian rule might perhaps make some headway where democratic methods had failed. However, such hopes soon proved unfounded and the British came to consider the King's personal regime, with good reason, not just ineffective, but also a source of weakness for Yugoslavia – it failed to conciliate the Croats and encouraged Yugoslavia's enemies, mostly Italians, to expect and work for her demise.

In October 1934, King Alexander was assassinated during his official visit to France by Croat *Ustasha*, a fascist organization that would go on to run the Nazi puppet Croatia formed in 1941. Anthony Eden famously described the Marseilles assassination in his memoirs as "the first shots of the second world war" – he had a prominent part in handling the matter in Geneva in his capacity as a rapporteur before the Council of the League of Nations.[22] This was retrospective wisdom, whereas in reality Britain spared no efforts, together with France, to exculpate Italy, which had harboured *Ustasha* terrorists, in order to make possible an agreement between Rome, Paris, and Belgrade for the purpose of safeguarding Austria from Hitler's onslaught.[23] This proved to be no more than wishful thinking. But the assassination of King Alexander was important for Anglo-Yugoslav relations insofar as it led to Anglophile Prince Paul's assuming power as Regent of Yugoslavia until the underage King Peter II came of age. Prince Paul was educated in Oxford during the Great War and came to personally know a number of British would-be politicians and civil servants. In fact, many observers from both countries found him more British then Serbian in outlook. In addition, he had close family ties with the British royal house: his wife, Princess Olga, and Princess Marina, the Duchess of Kent, were sisters – they were the daughters of Prince Nicholas of Greece and Denmark and Grand Duchess Helena (Romanov). Prince Paul was friends with Prince George, the

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[21] Kew, The National Archives [hereafter TNA], Henderson to Simon, 30 December 1934 and minutes by Gallop, R 219/219/92, FO 371/19574.

[22] Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell, 1962), pp. 108–120.

[23] Bennet Kovrig, "Mediation by Obfuscation: The Resolution of the Marseille Crisis, October 1934 to May 1935", *Historical Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1976), pp. 191–221.

From left to right: The Grand Duchess Helena (Romanov); Prince George, the Duke of Kent; Princess Olga and Prince Paul of Yugoslavia; Princess Marina, the Duchess of Kent; and Prince Nicholas of Greece and Denmark at Bled in July 1935

From left to right: Sir Ronald Hugh Campbell, British Minister in Belgrade; Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović; and Minister of the Army and Navy, General Ljubomir Marić, at the military airport in Zemun, Yugoslavia, date unknown

Duke of Kent, and his brother King George VI from his days in England.[24] Prince Paul was the reason why Anglo-Yugoslav relations in the latter half of the 1930s became more intimate than ever before – or since, for that matter; he was referred to as "our friend" in British diplomatic correspondence (or simply "F."). Indeed, British Ministers were something of his confidants; he exchanged thoughts with them on all major political issues, and even shared with them his intelligence reports. Prince Paul's prime minister was Milan Stojadinović, formerly connected with British business enterprise in Belgrade. Henderson later recorded that Stojadinović "owed a good deal of the success of his political career to me".[25] Since Henderson left Belgrade shortly after the latter had become prime minister – and foreign minister as well – it seems likely that he alluded to his influence with the Prince Regent in appointing Stojadinović. There is, however, no evidence to confirm the claim of the British Minister. Be that as it may, Stojadinović proved to be too much of his own man to be susceptible to any special pro-British or other sentiment.

Hitler's rise and the aggressive German foreign policy heightened the importance of Yugoslavia for any attempt to contain Nazi Germany in South-Eastern Europe. The Foreign Office envisaged the formation of a Danubian pact that would gather together smaller countries of the region under the aegis of France and Italy as a bulwark for the German absorption of Austria and extension of German dominance to the Balkans. Yugoslavia was regarded as a central link in that prospective agreement, which would cement the rapprochement between France and Italy rather than remain the stumbling block between the two Great Powers.[26] While Britain tried to enlist Yugoslavia for the purpose of erecting an anti-German barrier, the Belgrade government struggled to preserve the integrity and independence of the country between Germany, which became a neighbour after the Anschluss in 1938, and Italy. This was an increasingly difficult task as the German ascendancy over the Balkans was growing stronger. The volume of trade with Germany acquired the largest share in Yugoslavia's exports and imports, which was partly a natural state of affairs due to geographic reasons and their complementary economies and partly resulted from the comprehensive German effort to obtain political dominance in South-Eastern Europe. Prince Paul and Stojadinović were still able to reap some benefits from the fact that Germany and Italy, despite their increasingly close relations, pursued conflicting interests in the Danube region. The Italians were afraid that Germany might descend on the Adriatic following the inevitable Anschluss and wanted to strengthen their hand through a rapprochement with Belgrade. This was the rationale behind the Italo-Yugoslav pact of friendship in March 1937. Italy dropped its support for the Hungarian and Bulgarian revisionism, promised to improve the status of the Yugoslav (Slovene) national minority and renounced its patronage over the *Ustasha* organisation – its leader Ante Pavelić and his supporters were interned on the Aeolian (or Lipari) island, in Sardinia and elsewhere in southern Italy. Yugoslavia also established good diplomatic relations with Berlin, which were facilitated by the fact that there were no notable issues between the two countries.

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[24] Neil Balfour and Sally Mackay, *Paul of Yugoslavia: Britain's Maligned Friend*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg: Canada Wide Magazines &Communications, 1996).

[25] Henderson, *Water under the Bridges*, p. 172.

[26] Bakić, op. cit., pp. 132–148.

Since Britain's relations with Italy markedly deteriorated after Mussolini's Abyssinian aggression and remained strained despite the Gentleman's Agreement signed in January 1937, the Foreign Office deplored the conclusion of a pact between Rome and Belgrade. It urged Minister Campbell to exert all his influence with Prince Paul to emasculate his Italian agreement, which he did to the point of irritation, albeit without complete success.[27] This showed the considerable extent to which the British voice was heard in Belgrade, but also the limitations placed on British influence. London had no other leverage to buttress its diplomatic efforts in Belgrade apart from appealing to Prince Paul's friendship. Despite repeated requests, the British were not forthcoming in increasing Anglo-Yugoslav trade which was necessary to prevent Yugoslavia from becoming fully dependent on Germany, or in supplying armaments for the Yugoslav army. The Foreign Office took a favourable view of assisting Yugoslavia in these matters, but this never materialised due to the unhelpful attitude of economic departments and defense priorities that allocated more arms exports to countries other than Yugoslavia.[28] These realities were fully grasped in the Foreign Office where Anthony Eden, now Foreign Secretary, lamented that they were asking their minister in Belgrade "to make bricks without straw".[29] On the other hand, the Foreign Office was increasingly weary that Yugoslavia was sliding to the Axis camp under Stojadinović's premiership in the wake of the Italo-Yugoslav pact. In reality, the Yugoslav leaders were far from being inclined to the Axis Powers, but they were forced to find a *modus vivendi* with them, especially since it was apparent that they could not expect much from Britain and France. British fears peaked during the time of Stojadinović's visit to Rome in December 1937, which was suspected of being a further step in his alignment with the Axis. "We are being double crossed, & taking a long time to perceive the fact," Eden declared, despite Campbell's assurance to the contrary.[30] Such anxieties subsided in time and

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[27] TNA, Sargent to Campbell, 4 February 1937, R 650/224/92; Eden to Campbell, 25 February 1937, R 1147/224/92; Campbell to FO, 21 February 1937, R 1190/224/92; Campbell to FO, 24 February 1937, R 1318/224/92; Vansittart to Campbell, 2 February 1937, R 1340/224/92; Campbell to FO, 26 February 1937, and O'Malley to Campbell, 1 March 1937, R 1357/224/92, FO 371/21197.

[28] David Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War: Germany, Britain, France, and Eastern Europe, 1930–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 177–182.

[29] TNA, Eden to Chancellor of the Exchequer [Neville Chamberlain], R 1494/21/92, FO 371/21194.

[30] TNA, Minute by Eden, 21 December 1937, R 8392/224/92, FO 371/21199.

Ronald Hugh Campbell, British Minister in Belgrade (1935–1939), October 12, 1935

Britain remained supportive of Prince Paul and Stojadinović, believing that the latter's government had no viable alternative. The attempts of the Croat leader, Vladimir Maček, who professed his democratic convictions to London and Paris, to internationalise the Croat question were ignored. Maček's lieutenant Juraj Krnjević could not establish contact with the Foreign Office, despite the intercessions on his behalf of prominent figures such as the Duchess of Atholl and Wickham Steed. Whitehall was weary of allowing him to cause difficulties in its official relations with Belgrade and deplored even the prospect of Krnjević's making propaganda in Britain against the Yugoslav government.[31]

In the summer of 1939 the war in Europe seemed imminent. Prince Paul sent his Chief of General Staff, General Petar Pešić, on a mission to Britain and France in July to discuss Yugoslavia's position and learn what he could of French and British war plans in the Mediterranean. The latter assured his interlocutors that Yugoslavia would, although initially neutral in the coming war, side with the Allies as soon as they secured control over the Adriatic. Prince Paul crossed paths with Pešić on his own journey to London, where he enquired about the British capability to defeat the Italian fleet, but he received no assurance whatsoever; instead he was to be made a member of the Order of the Garter. These diplomatic and military exchanges reflected the fact that the sympathies of both the Yugoslav government and population, especially the Serb people, were overwhelmingly pro-Allied. As further evidence of this, Belgrade transferred the gold reserves of the National Bank to Britain and the United States of America for safekeeping.[32] While Britain was engaged in the war against Germany after September 1939, Yugoslavia maintained her neutrality until April 1941. But this was a difficult period for Yugoslavia as well, since the German economic and political pressure mounted at the time when the German army was invincible on the European continent. The best Yugoslavia could hope for was that the Balkans would remain outside the conflict.

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[31] Dragan Bakić, "Milan Stojadinović, the Croat Question and the International Position of Yugoslavia, 1935–1939", *Acta Histriae*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2018), pp. 218–219.

[32] Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: the Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938–1939* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), pp. 294–295; Irina Nikolić, "Anglo-Yugoslav Relations, 1938–1941" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2001), pp. 102–103; Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 950–952.

Britain appreciated Belgrade's precarious position and was content with Yugoslavia's neutrality, hoping that the country might eventually join the Allied side. During the Phoney War phase, the Foreign Office confined its expectations from Yugoslavia to the bare essentials: "resistance by force to Axis attack, refusal to make any territorial concessions, and, in particular, refusal to permit passage of Axis troops."[33] Yugoslavia was more than willing to do this. It was France, particularly General Maxim Weygand, the commander of the French forces stationed in Syria, who was determined to form a Salonica front in the Balkans, which he believed to have potential to contribute, just like in the previous war, to the final German defeat.[34] The French military maintained regular contacts with the General Staffs of Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania for that purpose. The British, however, discouraged Weygand's schemes: they could have brought about the end of the Italian non-belligerence which was, in view of London, a more valuable asset than the vague prospect of a Salonica front.[35] Britain instead promoted the idea of a neutral Balkan bloc, in which Bulgaria would forego her territorial aspirations to show solidarity with her Balkan neighbours and which would perhaps be led by the still neutral Italy. With the French military disaster in May–June 1940 and Italy's entry into war, both French and British strategies were put to rest.

It was, however, Mussolini who brought the war to the Balkans with his invasion of Greece in October 1940. His military adventure led to both British and German involvement in the Balkans that would prove critical for Yugoslavia. With British land forces and aircrafts employed in Greece, Germany was determined to conquer that country and secure its flank before launching an attack on the Soviet Union. Germany thus exerted tremendous pressure on Belgrade to force it to adhere to the Tripartite Pact in order to facilitate its impending military campaign. Britain was, on the other hand, preoccupied with the defense of Greece, for which the attitude of Yugoslavia was of crucial importance. In these circumstances, the Foreign Office spared no effort to dissuade Prince Paul from signing any pact with Germany. Moreover, the British government put pressure on Yugoslavia to enter the war in defense of Greece, even without being attacked by Germany and regardless of her desperate geostrategic situation, military unpreparedness, the uncertain attitude of the Croats and the lack of any prospect to receive aid from Britain. It was even suggested to Yugoslavia to attack the Italians in Albania to help out the Greeks and lay hands on Italian military equipment as a substitute for what Britain could not provide itself[36] – long gone were the days when the Foreign Office discouraged Belgrade from marching into Albania in defense of its own vital security concerns threatened by Italy. It was a measure of British influence with Prince Paul "that from the first days of September 1940 until the end of the Regency, the Prince received Victor von Heeren ... the German Minister on three occasions, Francesco Mameli ... the Italian Minister not once, while he received the British Minister twice or thrice weekly."[37] Nevertheless, British military weakness was rather apparent. Without resources to provide effective help himself, Churchill tried and failed to organise a new variant of a Salonica front which would consist of Yugoslav, Greek and Turkish forces with only a token British participation. For all his abiding affection for Britain, Prince Paul was not willing to commit national suicide on advice of his British friends. The realities of the situation forced Yugoslavia to sign the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941 to remove the danger of an Axis invasion. However, Yugoslavia succeeded in imposing considerable limitations to her adherence to the Axis. As no other country in Europe, Yugoslavia freed herself from the military clauses: she was not obliged to take part in the Axis military operations and her territory was excluded from the passage of Axis troops. This amounted to *de facto* neutrality, but Germany found it sufficient with a view to securing the flanks of its troops which were about to descend on Greece from Bulgaria. Whitehall was dissatisfied, but it decided that it would be best to maintain relations with the Yugoslav government to stiffen its resistance to further German demands, but also to explore the possibility of fomenting revolt in the country that could lead to the fall of the incumbent government, if it became subservient to Germans.[38]

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[33] Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975), p. 86.

[34] Alexandros Papagos, *Grčka u ratu* [*Greece in War*] (Belgrade: Vojno delo, 1954), pp. 51–52, 99, 105.

[35] Barker, op. cit., pp. 11–19; Vuk Vinaver, "Vojno-politička akcija fašističke Italije protiv Jugoslavije u jesen 1939. godine", *Vojno istorijski glasnik* 3 (1966), pp. 73–94, esp. 76–78.

[36] Barker, op. cit., pp. 78–91.

But only two days later, on 27 March, a military *putsch* took place in Belgrade – that was the decisive event that got Yugoslavia embroiled in the Second World War. Britain's policy and intelligence agencies played a part in the coup d'état, but the particulars of this involvement remain controversial to this day. British intelligence services were heavily involved in stirring the rebellious atmosphere against the regime of Prince Paul, as reinsurance in case the Regent did not prove amenable to British advice, largely behind the back of the Belgrade Legation. The extent of the activities of the well-known Special Operations Executive (SOE) has been thoroughly documented, including subsidies for the Serbian Agrarian Party, Independent Democrat Party and Ilija Trifunović – Birčanin, the leader of paramilitary *Narodna Odbrana* (People's Defense).[39] It is significant, however, that other British intelligence services were also at work in Belgrade, namely the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and military intelligence which operated through the army and naval attachés at the Belgrade Legation. It was the Yugoslav army, or more specifically General Dušan Simović, commander of the Air Force and the new prime minister, and his deputy General Borivoje Mirković, the true architect of the plot, who carried out the coup, and they were not among SOE contacts. The *putschist* officers were in touch with the British army and naval attachés, and it is this connection that might reveal the full extent of British involvement. But it seems doubtful that crucial records would be declassified or have been preserved at all, and the truth is likely to remain elusive. What is certain is that the 27 March coup led to the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia on 6 April and that the country collapsed within twelve days and was subsequently occupied and dismembered. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the *putsch*, apart from bringing about a disaster for the Yugoslavs, made no difference to the defense of Greece and the British military effort. Yugoslavia emerged four years later on the side of the victorious Allies, but this was now a very different country – a communist dictatorship under Tito – whereas the strain of war ruined Britain's standing as a Great Power.

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[37] K. St. Pavlowitch, "Yugoslav-British Relations 1939–1941 as Seen from British Sources", *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1978), part II, p. 425.

[38] K. St. Pavlowitch, "Yugoslav-British Relations 1939–1941 as Seen from British Sources", *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1978), part I, pp. 321–324.

[39] Barker, op. cit., pp. 91–94; Filis Oti, "Neki aspekti britansko-jugoslovenskih odnosa 1941. godine", in Vasa Čubrilović, ed., *Ustanak u Jugoslaviji 1941. godine i Evropa* (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1973), pp. 89–97; David Stafford, "SOE and British Involvement in the Belgrade Coup d'État of March 1941", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1977), pp. 399–419; Sue Onslow, "Britain and the Belgrade Coup of 27 March 1941 revisited", *Electronic Journal of International History*, 8 (2005), pp. 1–57. For memoir literature

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of the SOE participants see Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years 1931–1945* (London: Frederick Muller, 1957), p. 373; Bickham Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular* (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 17–64; Julian Amery, *Approach March* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 171–185; Alexander Glen, *Footholds Against a Whirlwind* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), pp. 43–64.

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