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The Port of Salonica in Yugoslav Foreign Policy 1919–1941

Abstract: This paper explores the importance of the Greek port of Salonica (Thessaloniki) for Yugoslav foreign policy-makers during the interwar period. It suggests that, apart from economic interests, namely securing trade facilities in the port and transport facilities offered by the Ghevgheli–Salonica railway connecting the Yugoslav territory with Salonica, there were security considerations which accounted for Belgrade's special interest in this matter. These stemmed from two reasons — Serbia's painful experience from the Great War on which occasion the cutting off of the route for Salonica had had dire consequences for the Serbian Army and the post-war strategic situation whereby Yugoslavia was nearly ringed by hostile and potentially hostile neighbours which was a constant reminder of the immediate past and made both political and military leadership envisage a potential renewed need to retreat to Salonica in a general conflict. The events prior to and during the Second World War seem to have vindicated such preoccupations of Yugoslav policy-makers. All the Great Powers involved in the conflict in the Balkans realised the significance attached to Salonica in Belgrade and tried to utilise it for their own ends. Throughout these turbulent events Prince Paul and his government did not demonstrate an inclination to exploit the situation in order to achieve territorial aggrandisement but rather reacted with restraint being vitally concerned that neither Italy nor Germany took possession of Salonica and thus encircled Yugoslavia completely leaving her at their mercy.

Keywords: Salonica (Thessaloniki), free port, Yugoslavia, Greece, Balkans, railway, security, World War

During the interwar period the port of Salonica (Thessaloniki) was often mentioned in the foreign ministries of Greece and Yugoslavia as well as Great Powers. The concessions that Athens was prepared to grant to Belgrade in the matter of transit of goods and trade facilities was an important item in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Moreover, the arrangements in connection with Salonica had wider ramifications affecting Balkan politics and thus drawing the attention of and interference from the interested Great Powers. For that reason, the nature of Yugoslav interest in Salonica and the place it had in Belgrade's foreign policy is an issue that deserves a study of its own. So far it has been discussed in a thesis which made use of both Serbian/Yugoslav and Greek sources covering the four agreements on Salonica signed prior to and during the first decade following the Great War, but lacked the sustained analysis of foreign policy im-

plications.¹ Another study focuses on the economic aspect of the Yugoslav free zone in this Aegean port.² This paper looks beyond trade interests and examines security considerations that Salonica, or more specifically a free and unrestrained communication between the Yugoslav territory and that port, had for Yugoslav foreign policy. It suggests that these considerations were of paramount importance and informed that policy.

To fully grasp the issue of Salonica it is necessary to review the history of its place in Serbo-Greek relations prior to the Great War. The economic importance of Salonica for the pre-war landlocked Serbia grew in prominence since 1906 when she found herself engaged in a customs war with her powerful northern neighbour Austria-Hungary. In order to survive economic pressure applied by Vienna, Serbia had to find an alternative outlet for her export trade and she found it in the port of Salonica. After the First Balkan War (1912), Serbia hoped to gain access to the sea through the conquered Albanian territory, but Austria-Hungary thwarted her aspirations by the creation of an independent Albanian state. No wonder then that at the time when new borders in the Balkans had not yet been decided, an economic expert, Milan Todorović, wrote a booklet in which he expounded the economic and political reasons for which Salonica should be granted to Serbia. “For Bulgaria and Greece”, Todorović argued, “this port would be — if I may use this expression — a luxury: they would possess one more port, but would not utilise it; for Serbia, on the other hand, Salonica is a dire necessity, a requisite for her economic independence.”³ It was not, however, until the acquisition of Serbian Macedonia (nowadays known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), as a result of the Balkan Wars, that Serbia’s southern border nearly reached Salonica; Serbian territory now constituted a large part of the port’s hinterland and their interdependence grew accordingly. In fact, the deliberations of the London Peace Conference after the First Balkan War had still not been concluded when the Serbian delegate, Stojan Novaković, acting on instructions from his government, enquired of his Greek colleague, Eleftherios Venizelos, if Serbia could count on a free transit of goods, “livestock and war materiel” included, through Salonica and the railway connecting that port with Serbia, and received a suitable assurance provided Greek sovereignty over

¹ A. Papadrianos, “Slobodna zona u Solunu i grčko-jugoslovenski odnosi 1919–1929. godine” (MA thesis, University of Belgrade, 2005).

² L. Kos, “Jugoslovenska slobodna luka u Solunu i njena ekonomska problematika” (PhD thesis, University of Belgrade, undated).

³ M. Todorović, *Solun i balkansko pitanje* (Belgrade: Štamparija “Simeun Mirotočivi”, 1913), 60–61.

it was confirmed.⁴ It was not long before Greece and Serbia signed, on 1 June 1913, a defensive alliance treaty for the purpose of keeping in check Bulgarian aggressive designs on the territories they acquired at the Ottoman expense.⁵ On the basis of article 7 of that treaty Greece committed to guaranteeing full freedom of Serbian import and export trade through Salonica for 50 years provided Greek sovereign rights were not violated. In May 1914, the so-called Athenian convention was concluded stipulating the establishment of a free zone for Serbian trade in Salonica but it was never ratified due to the outbreak of the First World War.

The war transformed Serbia into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia) with about twelve million inhabitants, which was marked for the position of a regional power in the Balkans. The new country had a long Adriatic coast and its most important trade partners were Italy and Austria in the north. In the circumstances, Salonica could not be of the same significance for the newly-founded Kingdom as she had been for pre-war Serbia. Nevertheless, the port still was a natural outlet for those parts of Yugoslavia which gravitated towards the ancient transport route down the Morava and Vardar valleys, namely for Southern Serbia. The war, the devastation it brought in its tail, the break-up of the old economic patterns, and the new and as yet unsettled administration on both sides of the Yugoslav-Greek border caused a number of difficulties which hindered the free flow of goods between the two countries. The British Consul in Salonica, W. A. Smart, observed that due to the administrative incompetence and centralised nature of Greek authorities “the transit trade to Serbia has suffered severely... This obstruction has exasperated the Serbs and it is the

⁴ Arhiv Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti [Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, hereafter ASANU], Milan Antić Papers, 14387/10367, Pašić to Novaković, 9 Jan. 1913, confidential no. 141; 14387/10369, Novaković to Pašić, 11 Jan. 1913, confid. no. 148.

⁵ H. Gardikas-Katsiadakis, “Greek-Serbian Relations 1912–1913: Communication Gap or Deliberate Policy”, and A. I. Papadrianos, “Greco-Serbian Talks towards the Conclusion of a Treaty of Alliance in May 1913 and the Beginning of Negotiations for the Establishment of a Serbian Free Zone in Thessaloniki”, both in *Balkan Studies* 45 (2004), 23–38, and 39–44 respectively. For more detail on Serbo-Greek relations during the Great War, see D. V. Dontas, “Troubled Friendship: Greco-Serbian Relations, 1914–1918”, in *The Creation of Yugoslavia, 1914–1918*, ed. D. Djordjević (Santa Barbara: Clio Books, 1980), 95–124; M. Milošević, *Srbija i Grčka 1914–1918: iz istorije diplomatskih odnosa* (Zaječar: Zadužbina Nikola Pašić, 1997); D. T. Bataković, “Serbia and Greece in the First World War: An Overview”, *Balkan Studies* 45 (2004), 59–80.

despair of the Salonica merchant, who looks back regretfully to the facilities enjoyed in the days of Turkish rule.”⁶

Furthermore, during and after the disastrous war against Kemal Atatürk's forces in Asia Minor in 1919–1922, Greece found herself in a precarious state and many observers were doubtful whether she would be capable of holding on to some of her European provinces as well. Aegean Macedonia was predominantly populated by Slavs and could therefore be claimed on the basis of the nationality principle by either Yugoslavia or Bulgaria or both. The nationality principle could be compounded by economic benefits of reaching the Aegean littoral. “It is difficult to believe that the vigorous Slav populations of the interior will permanently acquiesce in economic exclusion from the Aegean by a narrow strip of Greek coastland”, Smart ruminated in his report.⁷ He believed that the further decline of Salonica as an emporium and transit port for the Balkans might account “for the possibility that the Slav flood... may one day burst through unnatural economic dams and, descending to the Aegean, impose violently on Greece abdication of sovereignty”.⁸

Consequently, the question of Salonica must be viewed in the light of the alleged aspirations of Yugoslavia towards Greek Macedonia in the wake of the war. There is some evidence that Serbian statesmen did not lose sight of the possibility, however remote it might have been, that this province could be absorbed in view of its ethnic composition. Nikola Pašić, the head of the Yugoslav delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, discussed with his Greek counterpart Venizelos relations between the Serbian and Greek Orthodox churches, which also involved educational facilities for their respective minorities. In this connection, he noted that “our people live in villages covering a large area around Salonica and, if Serbian schools and Slav liturgy were secured to them, they would be able to preserve [their identity] and wait for the time when they could join Serbia.”⁹ Yet, there is no credible evidence that Pašić and his People's Radical Party ever pursued a definite policy which aimed at snatching the port from the Greeks. On the other hand, Vojislav Marinković, one of the leading figures of the Radicals' rival Democratic Party and the future Foreign Minister (1924, 1927–1932),

⁶ H. Andonov-Poljanski, “An Account of the Situation in Salonica and Coastal (Aegean) Macedonia in 1920 [facsimile of Smart to Granville, 25 March 1920]”, *Godišen zbornik na Filozofski fakultet na Univerzitet vo Skopje* 23 (1971), Annex, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.* 24.

⁸ *Ibid.* 25.

⁹ M. Milošević & B. Dimitrijević, eds., *Nikola Pašić – predsedniku vlade: strogo poverljivo, lično, Pariz, 1919–1920: Pašićeva pisma sa Konferencije mira* (Zaječar: Zadužbina Nikola Pašić, 2005), no. 55, Pašić to Prime Minister, 11 Nov. 1919, confid. no. 4455, 136.

seems to have contemplated a more assertive policy towards Greece. In his notes on the general tasks of Yugoslav foreign policy he included a need to “reduce Greece to her real ethnographic frontiers”.¹⁰ His foreign policy programme is not dated but it is highly likely to have been made before the expulsion of the Greek population from their ancient homeland in Asia Minor as a result of the war and atrocities committed during the fighting against the Turkish nationalists and its resettling in the European parts of Greece. Hundreds of thousands of Greek refugees found their new home in Aegean Macedonia and thus considerably changed the ethnic structure of that region. Claims that Greece’s neighbours could have raised on the basis of the nationality principle thus irreversibly lost much of their strength.

In addition, the minority question in regard to Macedonia entailed a controversy between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Both countries obtained a part of Macedonia after the successful war against the Ottoman Empire in 1912 but the division of spoils became a matter of dispute. Bulgaria was deeply dissatisfied with the extent of territory accorded to her and tried to redress her grievances by force of arms on two occasions — first by attacking Serbia and Greece and thus initiating the Second Balkan War in 1913, and again during the First World War when she joined the Central Powers in their renewed aggression against Serbia in 1915. Both aggressions ended in a dismal defeat, but Bulgarian ambitions were not suppressed. In the post-1918 period, Sofia regarded Macedonian Slavs as Bulgarian national minority, requested from Belgrade and Athens to officially recognise them as such, and turned a blind eye to the terrorist campaign of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO) which constituted something of a state within a state in the southern region of Bulgaria, from where Bulgarian neighbours were raided. The Bulgarian thesis clashed with that of Serbia, which claimed that Macedonian Slavs were of Serb origin. For that reason, Pašić was weary of the prospect of an agreement between Athens and Sofia whereby the former would “allow the opening of Bulgarian schools in Serbo-Slav municipalities”.¹¹ Such development would not just serve Greece to skilfully manoeuvre between the stronger Yugoslavia and the weaker Bulgaria but would also undermine, before the League of Nations and world public opinion, the position of the former in its dispute with the latter. In a similar vein, and again pointing to vague aspirations towards the Salonica hinterland, Živojin Balugdžić, Yugoslav Minister in Athens, contended that Yugoslavia had to be recognised as a natural guardian of the Greek Slavs and cut the link between them — as well as Yugoslav

¹⁰ ASANU, Vojislav Marinković Papers, 14439/434, “A plan for a state policy”, in manuscript and undated.

¹¹ See note 9.

Macedonians — and Bulgaria; otherwise, that population would seek its liberation “from the likes of [IMRO’s leader Todor] Aleksandrov rather than us”.¹² The Greeks were fully alive to and weary of the potential irredentist agitation which could be utilised against them and thus declined to recognise their “Slavophone” population as either Yugoslav or Bulgarian national minority.¹³ This anxiety accounted for the permanent fear in Athens that Yugoslavia, either alone or in alliance with Bulgaria, might invade the Aegean littoral, the former to occupy Salonica and the latter Dedeagatch and Kavalla.

There was another consideration of an essentially strategic nature which determined Belgrade’s policy in regard to Salonica. It was derived from the painful experience of the Great War, more specifically from the retreat that the Serbian Army had to undertake in the fall of 1915 after having been exposed to the combined offensive of the much stronger Austro-Hungarian, German and Bulgarian forces. As it became clear that the retreating army would be driven out of Serbia, the plan was to withdraw southwards down the Vardar valley and join the Franco-British troops which had occupied Salonica and its surroundings.¹⁴ The Bulgarian attack in the rear cut the envisaged fallback route and compelled the Serbian army, accompanied by a considerable number of civilians, to retreat over the inhospitable Albanian mountains under difficult winter conditions. The Serbs suffered heavy losses until they reached the coast and were transported by the Allied shipping to the Corfu island. This traumatic collective memory was termed the “Albanian Calvary” and remained alive in the minds of policy-makers after the war. The recuperated Serbian Army launched, along with its French and British allies, an offensive from Salonica which ended not just in the liberation of Serbia, but was also a decisive campaign of the war. “The Salonica front in the First World War left such a deep impression... in our army that it became an integral part of our struggle for liberation and unification and its history. Salonica entered into strategy and became an integral part of operational necessity of our army in defence of the country.”¹⁵ Such an impact was amplified by the strategic position of the new Yugoslavia which was surrounded from the west, north and east by hostile or potentially hostile revisionist neighbours. The only frontiers that seemed safe were those

¹² ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9099, Balugdžić to Ninčić, 24 Jan. 1923, confid. no. 21, subject: “Our schools in Greece”.

¹³ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9109, Vukmirović to Ninčić, 29 Aug. 1925, confid. no. 485.

¹⁴ A. Mitrović, *Srbija u Prvom svetskom ratu* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1984), 252–253.

¹⁵ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/8662, undated Antić’s note.

with the allied Romania and Greece. In addition, as early as during the Paris Peace Conference, Italy, the most dangerous neighbour, made sustained efforts, later to be continued and crowned with success, to entrench herself in Albania at Yugoslavia's flank. From the strategic point of view the Yugoslavs were frightened of the peril of the Italians "joining hands" from Albania with the Bulgarians across the Vardar valley in Serb Macedonia, thus cutting off the vital Belgrade–Salonica railway in much the same fashion as the Bulgarian army had done in 1915.¹⁶ This consideration was central to Yugoslav strategic thinking and military planning. At the time of considerable tension in relations with Rome, Major Berthouart, French Military Attaché in Belgrade, was told by the Assistants of the Chief of the Yugoslav General Staff that neutralisation of Bulgaria would be a primary goal of the army in case of a general war even at the price of a temporary withdrawal at the western front against Italy.¹⁷ Another Military Attaché, Von Faber du Faur from Germany, was of opinion on the eve of the Second World War that Yugoslavia viewed Greece as a bridge to Britain which she did not want to burn and it was this consideration that informed the attitude towards Salonica.¹⁸ He was without doubt accurate in his assessment of the Yugoslav frame of mind.

After the downfall of Venizelos, at the end of 1920, who demonstrated good will to address Belgrade's demands concerning better facilities in a free zone in Salonica, the Yugoslav government consulted the French Minister in Belgrade if it would be opportune to press Athens regarding that matter and transport between the port and the Yugoslav border on the basis of an international administration of the railway or territorial corridor. The French were favourable to facilitating economic intercourse with the Mediterranean but made sure to discourage Yugoslavia from resorting to more forward policy.¹⁹ In November 1922, the French Supreme War Council examined the strategic importance of Salonica in war and peace,

¹⁶ *Jugoslovenska država i Albanci*, eds. Ljubodrag Dimić & Djordje Borozan, 2 vols. (Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ, Arhiv Jugoslavije & Vojnoistorijski institut, 1998), vol. II, no. 14 [Foreign Minister] Dr Trumbić's expose at the meeting of the allied Prime Ministers on 10 and 12 January 1920.

¹⁷ M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca/Jugoslavije, 1922–1935* (Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije), 220–221.

¹⁸ *Aprilski rat 1941*, 2 vols. Vol. I, ed. Dušan Gvozdenović (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1969), vol. I, doc. 65, Report of the German Military Attaché in Belgrade of 21 July 1939 on the military-political situation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1 Oct. 1935 to 1 July 1939.

¹⁹ D. Todorović, *Jugoslavija i balkanske države 1918–1923* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1979), 148.

and reached the conclusion that French interests coincided with those of Yugoslavia inasmuch as the realisation of the request for a free zone in that port would secure a corridor for France to supply military equipment not just to Yugoslavia but also to the other Little Entente countries and Poland.²⁰ Perhaps it was not a coincidence that at about the same time the Yugoslav government raised the question of a Salonica convention and made a draft agreement. On that basis Živojin Balugdžić embarked on negotiations which resulted in the conclusion of the new convention about the “Serbian free zone in Salonica” on 10 May 1923.²¹ Just like ten years earlier, this agreement was part of a wider political understanding; it was accompanied by the renewal of the 1913 alliance treaty. However, neither the convention nor the treaty proved to be effective and long-lived. As for the practical application of the former, there was a number of disputes over the unsettled questions such as the territorial enlargement of the zone, the interpretation of Yugoslavs rights in it, the exploitation of the railway connecting Salonica with Ghevgheli in Yugoslavia and technical issues pertaining to customs, veterinary control, telegraphic and docking services etc. One of many Serbian export-traders, for example, who suffered from transport delays and difficulties on the Salonica–Ghevgheli railway — it took 10 to 15 days for wagons loaded with goods to traverse a distance of 77 km — complained to the Yugoslav Trade Chamber in Salonica about “a chaos in which a complete indolence on the part of the respective Greek railway authorities towards our trade interests is manifested”. The request was forwarded to the Athens Legation which appealed to the Greek government to secure the improvement of transport facilities.²²

On 14 November 1924, Yugoslavia denounced the alliance pact with Greece. This action was a result of the accumulated dissatisfaction in Belgrade: aside from the Free Zone and the Salonica–Ghevgheli railway issues, there were grievances over the expropriation of the Serbian Hilandar monastery’s land, the status of a number of former Serbian/Yugoslav subjects in Salonica and their properties, but most of all over the act of concluding

²⁰ Ibid. 181.

²¹ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9083, Antić’s memorandum on “Salonica zone”, 30 Nov. 1923.

²² Arhiv Jugoslavije [Archives of Yugoslavia, hereafter AJ], Fond 379, The Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Greece, Athens, fascicle 2, file “Emigrants and Transport”, Bogdanović to the Chamber of Commerce of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 6 Sept. 1924; Stojanović (General Consulate) to Athens Legation, 10 Sept. 1924; Stojanović (General Consulate in Salonica) to Athens Legation, 16 Oct. 1924, no. 1734; Athens Legation to General Consulate, 4 Nov. 1924, no. 993. A note of the Athens Legation and the reply of the Greek government are attached.

the Greco-Bulgarian protocol on minorities of 29 September 1924. By that convention Greece “made our political position in the Balkans more difficult in favour of Bulgaria against which our defensive alliance had been concluded”.²³ More specifically, in reaching this agreement with Sofia, Greece conceded to regard the Slavs in Greek Macedonia, and by implication those in Yugoslav Macedonia, as ethnic Bulgarians and, in doing so, directly undermined the Serbian thesis as to the origin of the Macedonian Slav population which was central to Yugoslavia’s claim in her dispute with Bulgaria and the struggle against the IMRO. Facing Belgrade’s bitterness on account of the treaty, Athens denounced it although it had been filed with the League of Nations. As for Yugoslavia, she viewed the denounced alliance treaty with Greece as a practically unilateral obligation on her part, firstly because she did not truly believe that the unsettled Greece was capable of providing military support and secondly, because she even less believed that Athens would be willing to do so. In this connection, policy-makers in Belgrade never forgot how the Greeks had failed to fulfil their obligation under the 1913 treaty to come to the aid of Serbia when she had been attacked by Bulgaria in 1915. In their view, if Yugoslavia were to guarantee Greek territory, she should obtain tangible concessions in return.

The question of the Salonica free zone and the Ghevgheli–Salonica railway were reopened. Additional privileges were requested for the exploitation of the zone in terms of the reduced control of Greek authorities over the transit trade in the port while ex-territorial rights were demanded for the railway administration.²⁴ In the words of Foreign Minister, Momčilo Ninčić, since the possibility of utilising the free Salonica zone, paralysed to a large extent by the building of a Greek free zone around it, depended on the manner of exploitation of the Salonica–Ghevgheli railway, “we have asked for guarantees for the free transit on that railway insofar that its exploitation during a certain period of time would be transferred to the hands of our Railway Direction and thus achieved an administrative unity on the Belgrade–Salonica railway which per se presents a single traffic unit.”²⁵

²³ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9043, Ninčić to Gavrilović (Athens), 10 Nov. 1924, no. 9652.

²⁴ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9056, Minutes of the plenary session held on Friday, 22 May 1925, between the Yugoslav and Greek delegations; 14387/9057, Minutes of a plenary session held on 1 June 1925.

²⁵ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9053, Ninčić to Paris, London, Rome, Warsaw, Bucharest, Prague, Athens and Sofia, 8 June 1925. To facilitate the takeover of the railway the Yugoslav government strengthened its hand by buying off the shares from the previous concessioner, the French Oriental Railways. See Antić Papers, 14387/9092, Ninčić to Paris, Warsaw and Bucharest Legations, 25 Nov. 1924.

Not surprisingly, Greece found these demands objectionable on account of their infringing on the sovereignty of the country. Ninčić expounded to the French Minister the reasons for Greek anxiety and Yugoslav policy in these terms:

The Greeks are always afraid, and do not hide their fear, that one day we might come to an agreement with the Bulgarians and take away Salonica and Kavalla respectively. If by getting the administration of the Salonica railway in our hands we completely secure our transit through our Salonica zone, Greece will be able to believe that we would not have any second thoughts in the future since we get from Greece what we really need, and we do not need new territories as we have them enough.²⁶

To make things more complicated, Yugoslav-Greek bickering became a part of the larger diplomatic initiative in the mid-1920s. In the wake of the Locarno agreement of October 1925, Britain promoted the conclusion of an agreement between the Balkan countries on the lines of that procured by Sir Austen Chamberlain between France and Germany.²⁷ Greece tried to utilise this initiative to subsume the matters of dispute with Belgrade into the conclusion of a Locarno-like arbitration treaty arguing that a more friendly atmosphere created thereby would be conducive to the easier solution of all problems. The Yugoslav approach, on the contrary, was to resolve all the outstanding questions with Athens as a prerequisite for the successful conclusion of an arbitration treaty.²⁸ On the occasion of a parliamentary debate about the conclusion of a "Balkan Locarno", Ninčić explained why he insisted to dispose of all bilateral questions prior to it: "The question of transit of our goods from Ghevgheli to Salonica is not a small matter for us. It is a question of our security and it is of first-rate importance and our requesting to have this question settled previously is not an excuse."²⁹

Although the Foreign Minister did not enlarge on security implications, his utterance, in view of Yugoslav strategic considerations, was not an over-exaggerated statement. Yugoslavia was concerned to have an

²⁶ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9052, Ninčić to Gavrilović, 20 June 1925, strictly conf. no. 140.

²⁷ For more detail, see Dragan Bakić, "Must Will Peace: the British Brokering of 'Central European' and 'Balkan Locarno', 1925-1929", forthcoming in *Journal of Contemporary History*.

²⁸ AJ, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 334-9-29, Gavrilović to Ninčić, 9 Jan. 1926, conf. no. 20.

²⁹ Momčilo Ninčić, *Spoljna politika Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca: u god. 1925-1926: govori, odgovori i ekspozice u Narodnoj skupštini* (Belgrade: Makarije, 1926), A speech prior to voting on the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the 79th session on 26 March 1926, 69-82 (79).

absolutely secured route to Salonica along which she could transport war supplies on which she depended in case of war. The Great General Staff argued as late as November 1940 that the development of a war industry was a necessity with a view to overcoming dependence on foreign supplies, especially given the “great sensitivity of our only war communication link with abroad (through Salonica) which can be quickly cut due to the vicinity to the border front.”³⁰ In fact, in the mid-1920s Belgrade had military conventions stipulating that the railway branch leading to Salonica would be utilised for the transport of war supplies not just for Yugoslavia but, if need be, also for her Little Entente allies, Romania and Czechoslovakia, and even Poland. It should be noted that these plans bore the mark of the French military analysis of November 1922, which had suggested the usefulness of a Yugoslav-controlled corridor for such purposes. Milan Antić of the Foreign Ministry left no doubt on this score: “As far as the transit of ammunition and war materiel is concerned, in peace and war, it is necessary to insist to have such transport carried out without any Greek control and, in doing so, we could secure the functioning of the ammunition transit convention with Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania.”³¹ This request, in fact, constituted the chief reason behind the Yugoslav demand that all the goods in transit through Salonica be exempted from their custom declaration; in this way, war materiel could be obtained without Greek control.³² Sensing that the issue of war materiel transit was what perhaps most mattered to Belgrade, the Greeks argued that the best way to secure it in case of war was to make an alliance treaty between the two countries, as opposed to Yugoslav negotiators who insisted on settling the outstanding questions prior to the conclusion of a treaty. There is yet another indication that security concerns were not less important than those pertaining to trade interests. The economic importance of Salonica for Yugoslavia as a whole, with the noted exception of Southern Serbia, should not be overestimated. Statistical data for the 1921–1931 period showed that Greece took a fifth or sixth place (eighth in 1922) in the Yugoslav export and around twelfth place in the import trade. During those years the Greek share of the export trade never reached 10 percent while the maximum import from Greece fell short of 6 percent.³³

³⁰ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 25, Report of the General Staff of 20 Nov. 1938 to the Minister of Army and Navy on unpreparedness of the armed forces and the necessity to grant additional material assets for the country’s preparation for war.

³¹ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9691, Antić to Ninčić(?), 7 July 1926.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ R. Perović, *Solun i njegov privredni i saobraćajno-trgovinski značaj za Jugoslaviju* (Bilj: Prosveta, 1932), 33–34.

On the Yugoslav side the negotiations were conducted by Antić, Panta Gavrilović, the Minister in Athens and Ranislav Avramović, a technical expert, but did not yield much result. As the Yugoslavs realised that the idea of putting the Salonica–Ghevgheli railway under direct control of Yugoslav administration was not likely to be materialised, they fell back on the reserve solution to form a mixed Yugoslav-Greco-French commission to administer it as it was expected that a French arbiter would be generally favourably disposed to Belgrade.³⁴ France had, however, plans of her own and wanted to have full control over the railway and internationalise the Salonica dockyard. Antić was not happy with such alternatives for they could, notwithstanding the usefulness of French presence in the Balkans for Yugoslavia, “reduce our liberty of action” and make more difficult “penetration in the direction of south in the future.”³⁵ Other proposals encompassed various forms of exploitation ranging from the administration of a private company, Greek exploitation with the guarantees of Great Powers to the League of Nations’ control over it.³⁶

On 17 August 1926 the agreement between Greece and Yugoslavia was finally reached, comprising a political treaty of understanding and friendship and a set of conventions covering railway and transit questions, including the administration of the Ghevgheli–Salonica Railway, the Yugoslav free zone in Salonica and a minority convention. The Greek dictator General Alexander Pangalos’ generous concessions which satisfied all Yugoslav demands made this arrangement possible. Pangalos gave in as part of his strategy to settle relations with Yugoslavia in order to have free hands to re-conquer Thrace from the Turks. If this was his grand scheme, it would appear to have been thoroughly miscalculated, as Ninčić, according to the firsthand account of Antić, in March 1926 had asked the senior officials of the French Foreign Ministry whether it would be possible for Yugoslavia to attack Greece if she invaded Turkey without abrogating the League of Nations’ Pact.³⁷ However, there was no use of Papagos’ concessions. Just a few days after the signature of the agreement with Yugoslavia, the dictatorship of General Pangalos was overthrown in a revolution, and the new Greek government never ratified the agreement. The negotiations were resumed

34 ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9110, Avramović to Ninčić, subject: Ghevgheli–Salonica railway, 6 Nov. 1925; 14387/9680, Antić’s note, 4 July 1926; 14387/9691, Antić’s memo, 7 July 1926.

35 ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9028, Antić’s note, 17 Nov. 1925.

36 ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9018, Antić’s note, 26 Dec. 1925; 14387/9782, Avramović to Ninčić, 10 May 1926.

37 ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/8993, undated Antić’s note. See also H. Psomiades, “The Diplomacy of Theodoros Pangalos, 1925–26”, *Balkan Studies* 13 (1972), 1–16.

with the new regime of Pavlos Kountouriotis, which made the dispute with Belgrade a national cause, and led nowhere. In such an atmosphere a memorandum on Yugoslav-Greek relations concluded on a pessimistic note: "In the relations between us and the Greeks there is the psychosis of a fear of our descent on Salonica and the sensitivity that we do not respect the Greeks them being a small and weak state."³⁸

It fell to Ninčić's successor, Vojislav Marinković, to break the deadlock. He was remembered as Foreign Minister who had denounced the treaty with Greece in 1924 during his brief first term in office. On several occasions the Greeks offered the conclusion of a special convention which would secure a transit of war materiel but Marinković did not show much enthusiasm. The sharp deterioration in relations with Italy after Mussolini had concluded the first Pact of Tirana with the Albanian President, Ahmed Zogu, in November 1926, weakened Yugoslavia's position in the Balkans. By contrast, Venizelos, once more in office in mid-1928, signed the agreement with Mussolini in September that year thus breaking Greece's diplomatic isolation. On French urgings to settle the difficulties with Greece, Marinković at first replied that he wanted to either come to terms with Italy or conclude a pact with France previously.³⁹ He apparently did not want to negotiate from the position of weakness. Although he had his pact with France in November 1927, it did not make any difference in regard to the negotiations with the Greeks. Moreover, Venizelos energetically refused to allow transport of war supplies for Yugoslavia as such provision would contravene his agreement with Italy. In the ensuing conversations between technical experts the "main" idea on the Yugoslav side was "to find a formula which would allow an import of our war materiel through the [Salonica] zone." France advised Marinković to conclude an agreement with Greece even at the price of considerable "sacrifices on our part."⁴⁰ Finally, the pact of friendship between Yugoslavia and Greece was concluded on 27 March 1929 in Belgrade and accompanied by a protocol settling the outstanding questions in accordance with the Greek point of view. The dispute was off the table, Yugoslav-Greek relations were improved and Salonica would not be on the lips of statesmen for the next ten years until Italian aggressive designs in the Balkans brought it back in focus.

Since late April 1938, Mussolini and Ciano started preparing the ground for the annexation of Albania. In order to realise their plans, it was

³⁸ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/8779, Memorandum by Antić, 30 Dec. 1926, fol. 10.

³⁹ AJ, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 334-9-29, Memorandum on the negotiations with Greece, fols. 6-7, undated, author unknown.

⁴⁰ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/8996, Antić's letter to an unknown person, undated; 14387/8992, undated Antić's note.

deemed necessary to obtain the consent, or even complicity, of Yugoslavia the good will of which had carefully been nurtured since Ciano had signed the Pact of Belgrade with the Yugoslav Prime Minister, Milan Stojadinović, on 25 March 1937. The cooperation between the two countries, in the Italian view, was regarded as a valuable lever for withstanding German pressure in the direction of the Adriatic in case of Anschluss and consequently seen as having potential to be a fundamental factor in the Danube and Balkan region. For these reasons, Stojadinović had to be approached and won over for the Italian plan, and the mission was to be undertaken by Ciano himself who had much personal sympathy for and a close working relationship with the Prime Minister. The Duce thought of an additional inducement for Stojadinović — the port of Salonica.⁴¹ Just three days before Ciano's departure for Yugoslavia, the final decision was made "that it would not pay to gamble with our precious friendship with Belgrade to win Albania"; in order to attain an amicable consent of Yugoslavia, a fairly generous offer was prepared: "increase at the Yugoslav borders, demilitarisation of the Albanian borders, military alliance, and the absolute support of the Serbs in their conquest of Salonica."⁴²

On 19 January 1939, Stojadinović and Ciano met at the Belje estate for a confidential conversation. The latter referred to the hostile attitude that Greece had taken towards Italy during the application of the League of Nations-imposed sanctions on account of the Italian aggression against Abyssinia which Rome would never forget. This was an opening to advance claim that Yugoslavia was in need of an access to the Aegean Sea and "she should take Salonica." Moreover, Ciano proclaimed, "for that purpose, [Yugoslavia] can count on the full support of Italy: moral, political and military, if needed."⁴³ In a summary report sent to Prince Regent Paul, Stojadinović did not reproduce his answer to Ciano's suggestion. In his memoirs, however, he recorded his stiff reply:

⁴¹ *Ciano's Diary, 1937–1943: the Complete Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1936–1943* (London: Phoenix, 2002), entry on 6 Dec. 1938, 164; 8 Jan. 1939, 174–175.

⁴² *Ciano's Diary*, entry on 15 Jan. 1939, 178. Ciano had already spoken to Boško Hrstić, the Yugoslav Minister in Rome, encouraging Yugoslav action towards Salonica, "the natural outlet of the Yugoslavs to the [Aegean] sea." See entry on 24 Nov. 1938, 160.

⁴³ AJ, Prince Paul Papers, Stojadinović to Prince Paul, private, 20 Jan. 1939, Belje [digitised] reel 4, 534–541 [range of scans]. Ciano made no reference to Salonica in *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, ed. Malcolm Muggeridge, transl. Stuart Hood (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1948), "The Report on my Journey to Yugoslavia and of the Conversation with the Prime Minister, Stoyadinovitch, 18th–23rd January, 1939 – XVII, 267–272.

The taking of Salonica from the Greeks would not constitute any sort of assuagement in the eyes of Yugoslav public opinion for the undertaking of the proposed operation in Albania. On the contrary, Greece is an ally of Yugoslavia, Serbo-Greek friendship was proven by the blood-shedding on the battlefields in the Balkan Wars as well as the World War. In the area [stretching] from Ghevgheli to Salonica, Greek governments settled pure Greek element, the refugees from Asia Minor... In the port of Salonica there is a free Yugoslav customs zone which functions well... All this speaks against the idea regarding Salonica.⁴⁴

According to Stojadinović, the Yugoslav military was of opinion that no effort should be spared to prevent Italy from subduing Greece; if, however, a war became inevitable and a victorious Italy got hold of Salonica, it was necessary to prevent her, “either by means of an agreement or at the cost of war”, from maintaining control of the port for such contingency would amount to “the collapse of the economic lung through which Yugoslavia breathes i.e., a free sea route.”⁴⁵ In the end, nothing of these Italo-Yugoslav exchanges materialised. Prince Paul removed Stojadinović from the office which brought about the end of an era of friendly relations between the two Adriatic neighbours. Italy decided to proceed with the annexation of Albania without regard to, and if necessary against, Yugoslavia. Indeed, on 7 April 1939, Italian troops disembarked on the Albanian coast and occupied the whole country. In the circumstances, there was no question of any compensation for Belgrade in Albania or still less at the expense of Greece. Nor was such compensation in the realm of practical policy, given the attitude of Prince Paul who would never enter any combination with Mussolini if it meant becoming an accomplice in the latter’s aggressive enterprises.

This was not the end of the troubles caused by Rome, however, and Yugoslavia would soon again find herself in a strategically dangerous situation. On 28 October 1940, Mussolini attacked Greece and spread the theatre of the Second World War to the hitherto peaceful Balkans. One of the primary objectives of the Italian offensive was to take possession of Salonica and it was this consideration that most alarmed Belgrade. On the very day the war started, the Crown Council held a meeting to decide on the attitude to be adopted. Prince Paul spoke first and set the tone of the discussion when he put forward a proposal to mobilise troops in the south in the vicinity of the Greek border. “We cannot allow Italy to enter Salonica. This [situation] cannot be endured any more... It is better to die than loose

⁴⁴ M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt: Jugoslavija između dva rata* (Rijeka: Otokar Keršovani, 1970), 518.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

honour”, the Regent was agitated.⁴⁶ The Prime Minister, Dragiša Cvetković, supported Prince Paul’s view and expressed willingness to fight at any cost, and to withdraw if necessary, although he did not specify in which direction the army might retreat. On the other hand, the Foreign Minister Aleksandar Cincar-Marković was not in favour of heroic solutions. He asked what would become of those left behind the retreating army and declared himself against rash decisions, including mobilisation. Cincar-Marković underlined that Germany stood by Italy and concluded: “We cannot wage war against them.” The Minister of War, General Milan Nedić, thought that the main question was what the German attitude would be and warned that a partial mobilisation might lead the country to war. Finally, Milan Antić, now the Minister of Court, was the most outspoken and diplomatically cautious: he advised the wait-and-see attitude as the further course of war in Greece and Germany’s stance could largely depend on “English support and Turkey’s attitude”. Prince Paul seemed “very depressed” but there was no final decision. During the conversation with Antić the next day, the Regent revealed his inner torments when he stated that he could not be requested to attack the country of his wife, Princess Olga, who was a granddaughter of King George I of Greece. Antić had to calm him down and explain the rationale behind the Yugoslav policy: “No one thinks of attacking Greece, but we are all in agreement that we cannot have Italy in Salonica. In the final instance, it is better for Greece herself to have us instead of Italy in Salonica.”⁴⁷ Cincar-Marković was then called to join their discussion and it was decided to entrust Milan Perić, the director of the news agency *Avala*, with the mission of soliciting the views of Walter Gruber of the German agency *Deutsches Nachrichten Büro* in Belgrade and Josef Hribovsek-Berge, the German press attaché. An informal communication with these men — who apparently performed important intelligence operations — had been going on for some time, and, in fact, Gruber had phoned General Nedić on the day Italy had declared war on Greece informing him that the Yugoslavs would be invited to descend on Salonica. According to Perić, Gruber suggested that “[we] should moot the question of Salonica in Berlin. He asks [us] what we are waiting for?” On the basis of Perić’s information, Cincar-Marković and General Nedić were to prepare a telegram for the Military Attaché in Berlin, Colonel Vladimir Vauhnik, and instruct him to sound out the opinion in the highest German military circles. It was also decided

⁴⁶ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 293, Minutes by the Minister of Court, Milan Antić, on 28 and 31 Oct. and 1 Nov. from the meeting of the Crown Council in connection with the question of Salonica.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

to concentrate additional troops at the Greek border.⁴⁸ The meeting was concluded with Prince Paul's remark "that he should be understood, that he sacrifices himself for the interests of the country, although he find it difficult to conceive that he has to work against his wife's country, which is also an ally."⁴⁹ The decisions reached were acted upon. By 6 November 1940, nine infantry divisions were mobilised for the purpose of advancing to Salonica, if ordered so, and securing this operation from the direction of Bulgaria.⁵⁰

It is clear from the information provided by Perić that the initiative for Salonica's passing to Yugoslav hands came from the German side. Furthermore, the pro-German Minister for Physical Education in the Cvetković Cabinet, Dušan Pantić, had an interesting conversation over dinner with two distinguished German diplomats, Ambassador in Rome, Ulrich Hassel, and Minister in Belgrade, Viktor von Heeren, which threw some light on the reasons which might have guided Berlin in its prodding of Belgrade's aspirations in the port's direction. The former diplomat underscored that the Third Reich considered the Vardar valley together with Salonica to be "the aorta artery of Yugoslavia, and the Serbian part of the people in particular" and expressed German willingness to transfer Salonica with its hinterland to Yugoslavia. Pantić had an impression that "our eventual taking of the territory, even provisional, would be a guarantee for the German Reich against the eventual creation of a Salonica front on the part of England and that in such case Germany would even remain an observer of the Italo-Greek conflict and regard it as a local war conflict."⁵¹ He had no doubt that Hassel's and Heeren's suggestions were authorised by their superiors. Pantić discussed this matter with Prince Paul the next day and

⁴⁸ Ibid. See also ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/8509, 8512, undated Antić's notes implying that General Nedić may have overstepped a simple indication to the Germans as to the military-strategic importance of Salonica for Yugoslavia.

⁴⁹ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 293. It should be noted that the editor has commented (n. 8), in blatant disregard for the content of this document, not to mention the wider context of Yugoslavia's situation, but typical of the biased view of communist Yugoslav historiography, that Prince Paul decided to "traitorously attack Salonica justifying such an action by the alleged interests of the country".

⁵⁰ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 294, Order of the Minister of Army and Navy of 2 Nov. 1940 for the activation of war regiments for the purpose of eventual occupation of Salonica; doc. 296, Directive of the Minister of Army and Navy of 5 Nov. 1940 to the Chief of the General Staff which authorises in principle the project of mobilisation and concentration of forces for an attack on Salonica and orders further measures for the realisation of this project; doc. 297, Order of the Minister of Army and Navy of 6 Nov. 1940 for the activation of all as yet unactivated units, commands and facilities of the Third Army's area of responsibility and some units from the Fifth Army's area.

⁵¹ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 293, n. 8.

made plain his view that the time had come to definitely arrange relations with Germany. He proposed a diplomatic initiative in Athens to obtain a voluntary cession of Salonica at least until the end of the war in order to prevent the spreading of the conflict in the Balkans.⁵² He did not record Prince Paul's reply to his suggestion but it is safe to assume that the latter was not receptive to it.

Colonel Vauhnik carried out his orders discussing the Salonica issue with two high-ranking officers and reported them to have been rather evasive. They waited for further Italian military operations in Greece and promised to provide an answer in a few days. Vauhnik added that he found the Germans "disinterested in the Italo-Greek conflict and even pleased that things were going badly for the Italians."⁵³ After the resignation of General Nedić on 6 November 1940, Vauhnik informed the Germans that he had dropped the Salonica matter and was not likely to raise it again.⁵⁴

At about the same time, there was another seemingly unofficial sounding of German position as to Salonica. Danilo Gregorić, Director of the *Vreme* newspapers known for his pro-German leanings, was received in the German Foreign Ministry. He talked of rapprochement between Berlin and Belgrade, their intense economic cooperation, and hinted at the importance of the Greek port which in the hands of Italians would be "a noose around the neck of Yugoslavia".⁵⁵ The origins of Gregorić's meddling in this matter

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., n. 6 which contains the transcripts of the two telephone conversations with Colonel Vauhnik on 4 and 5 Nov. 1940 relaying the content of his discussions with German military officials. These transcripts were originally published in Radoje Knežević, "Kako se to zbililo", *Poruci* 4–5, pp. 6–7, published by an emigrant organisation in London. In his memoirs, V. Vauhnik, *Nevidljivi front: Borba za očuvanje Jugoslavije* (Munich: Iskra, 1984), 164–168, has revealed that he thought that the order he received from Belgrade was a manoeuvre on the part of an informal group of officers, perhaps without the knowledge of the Minister of Army and in conjunction with certain civilian circles, which could saddle the country with "a political adventure." He even doubted that it could be made a part of a deal whereby Yugoslavia would have to adhere to the Tripartite Pact and cede Slovenia (Vauhnik was Slovenian) to the Reich in exchange for Salonica. Therefore, Vauhnik made enquires in the German headquarters in such manner as to underscore that, despite feelers put out by some of his countrymen, Yugoslavia did not make any sort of claim on the port although she insisted that it did not pass to anyone else, and least of all Italy. He, in fact, sabotaged what he believed to be a shady business of an irresponsible clique in Belgrade.

⁵⁴ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 304, Report of an official of the Political Department of 11 Nov. 1940 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany about Yugoslav aspirations towards Salonica.

⁵⁵ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 305, Report of Dr. Smith of 12 Nov. 1940 to Ribbentrop on conversation with Danilo Gregorić.

are not clear. Whereas he confessed to his German interlocutor that he had had a long conversation with Cvetković and Cincar-Marković before his departure for Berlin and thus created an impression of acting upon instructions from his government, the latter flatly denied it to the Reich Minister in Belgrade.⁵⁶ Yet, Gregorić went to Berlin again less than two weeks later and was this time received by Ribbentrop himself, which suggests that he did not act without authorisation.⁵⁷ Gregorić later confided to Antić that Cvetković had also conversed with von Heeren about Salonica and promised to meet all German demands in return for a favourable solution of this question, but it remained unclear if the Regent had been familiar with it.⁵⁸ In Antić's view, such initiative was incompatible with Yugoslav foreign policy which, once forced to accept negotiations for joining the Tripartite Pact, endeavoured to extract maximum concessions from the Germans with a view to securing the independence, integrity and neutrality of the country. The Salonica matter came under discussion "without Cvetković's intervention, in a hypothetical form, for the purpose of defending the vital interests of our country, in case of Central Powers' [*sic*] victory, so that Italy, Bulgaria did not enter Salonica, or an unfavourable international solution for us was imposed", Antić explained.⁵⁹

Von Heeren closely observed the mood of the government in Belgrade and found that the Salonica issue was revived due to the Italo-Greek war and the consequent uncertainty as to the future territorial extent of Greece. In his analysis, "earlier, this old political objective was silenced over, and only because it is in contradiction with the anti-revisionist attitude in principle for which the official Yugoslav foreign policy always stood for, and also because it seemed bearable to have Salonica in the hands of the Greek partner in the Balkan Entente".⁶⁰ Italian conquest of the port would be regarded as the completion of a military encirclement of Yugoslavia and

⁵⁶ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 318, Heeren's Report of 24 Nov. 1940 to Ribbentrop relating to the impending visit of Cincar-Marković to Germany.

⁵⁷ D. Gregorić, *Samoubistvo Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Luč, 1942), 105–129. If Antić's recollection can be trusted, Gregorić, whom he met in a prison of communist Yugoslavia after the war and found him superficial, garrulous and too close to Germans, had been chosen for a mission to Berlin by Cvetković, while Cincar-Marković unsuccessfully tried to oppose his meddling in the ongoing negotiations. See ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/9545, Antić's notes, fols. 81–82, 167.

⁵⁸ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/8509, 8512, undated Antić's notes.

⁵⁹ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/8512, undated Antić's note.

⁶⁰ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 307, Report of the German Minister in Belgrade of 14 Nov. 1940 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the increased interest of Yugoslavia for an outlet to the Aegean Sea through Salonica.

resisted with force of arms, if necessary, and provided Germany did not interfere. Von Heeren predicted that Belgrade would hesitate even to speak about the possession of Salonica as long as it remained Greek, but would disinterest itself in the fate of Greece if both Axis powers recognised the Yugoslav right to have Salonica which had previously been detached from Greece. Furthermore, he believed that a promise to that effect could be decisive for the permanent soothing of relations between the Serbs and their Italian and Bulgarian neighbours.

Von Heeren's views and the Yugoslav soundings in Berlin apparently made impression on Hitler himself. While discussing with Ciano the position in the Balkans in relation to the Italo-Greek war, he asked for Italy's consent to neutralise Yugoslavia by offering her a territorial guarantee and Salonica; after having consulted Mussolini, Ciano agreed.⁶¹ Hitler then turned to make a deal with the Yugoslavs. He received Cincar-Marković and tried to wring from him Yugoslav adherence to a non-aggression pact with both Axis powers.⁶² The Führer exploited the animosity between Rome and Belgrade, and insisted that the moment was extremely favourable for the latter to define its relations with the Axis and secure a place in the new European order. Germany was presently capable of demanding Italy's respect for such an arrangement on account of the military help he was prepared to provide in the Balkans following the Italian failure in the Greek campaign. Moreover, Yugoslavia's access to the Aegean would reduce the tension in the Adriatic where Italy was very sensitive for military reasons. Hitler's offer of Salonica did not meet with an enthusiastic response on the part of Cincar-Marković. On the contrary, he seems to have attempted to dissuade Hitler from involving himself in the Balkans by pointing out that the formation of a Salonica front by the British was a mere rumour not to be taken seriously.⁶³

The Yugoslavs maintained their reserved attitude towards the Axis and thus remained an unknown quantity for them in relation to the campaign in Greece that the Wehrmacht planned for the spring. "It cannot be predicted whether Yugoslavia would join a German attack reaching for Salonica", read an estimate of the German Supreme Command of the Armed

⁶¹ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 312, Minutes of the conversation between Hitler and Ciano on 18 Nov. 1940 in Obersalzberg about the situation in the Mediterranean and the Balkans; doc. 314, Minutes of the conversation between Ciano and Hitler on 20 Nov. 1940 in Vienna about combinations with Yugoslavia due to the Italo-Greek conflict.

⁶² *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 323, Minutes of the conversation between Hitler and Cincar-Marković in the Berghof on 29 Nov. 1940.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Forces.⁶⁴ The Belgrade government was, however, far from contemplating any such action. On the contrary, it refused Italian and even German requests to permit military transports for Italian forces in Albania across Yugoslav territory and, moreover, secretly supplied hundreds of thousands of hand grenades, artillery fuses and horses for the Greek cavalry.⁶⁵ In doing so, Yugoslavia helped Greece defeat the Italians and drive them back to Albania. Nevertheless, Italian debacle made German military intervention inevitable. With it, Belgrade fully realised it would be faced with the onerous demands on the part of Germany. In order to pre-empt German request for Yugoslavia's adherence to the Tripartite Pact, a special emissary of Prince Paul, Vladislav Stakić, a lawyer of the Italian Legation in Belgrade, visited Rome twice during February 1941 to find out whether it would be possible to reach some arrangement with Italy and obviate German pressure. Mussolini proposed a new alliance pact between the two countries and offered Yugoslavia the port of Salonica once again as well as the exchange of population — the Yugoslav minority in Istria for the Albanian minority in Kosovo — but his offers were declined.⁶⁶ In his memoirs, Stakić recorded how Mussolini had even warned him that the Germans would take Salonica unless Yugoslavia had it, and specified that the negative answer had been given due to Prince Paul's adamant stance against taking part in the partition of an allied country.⁶⁷ Besides, at this point it became clear that if an agreement counted for anything, it had to be made with Berlin.

In mid-February 1941, German pressure was mounting. Both Prime Minister Cvetković and Foreign Minister Cincar-Marković were invited to Salzburg to meet Hitler and Ribbentrop. The Yugoslavs were interested in mediating for the purpose of liquidating the Italo-Greek war and then creating a diplomatic instrument which would oblige all Balkan countries to resist any foreign power to use their territories for military operations. They were not too hopeful as to Hitler's reception of such a proposal and struggled to fathom German intentions. Cincar-Marković concluded:

But one thing is beyond any doubt: a descent of the Germans southwards across Bulgaria means a mortal danger for us because the natural, shortest and best route between Germany and the coast of the Aegean Sea leads through our country. Therefore we cannot consent to any suggestion which would give Salonica to the Germans. Once they obtain Salonica, they will

⁶⁴ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. I, doc. 332, Information of the German Supreme Command of the armed forces of 21 Dec. 1940 on German military preparations in the Balkans.

⁶⁵ J. B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934–1941* (New York: Columbia University Press), 190–192.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 208–209, 211–212.

⁶⁷ V. Stakić, *Moji razgovori sa Musolinijem* (Munich: Iskra, 1967), 99–100, 105.

strangle us completely. It is better for us if they directly attack us rather than torment us isolated. For even if our end would be the same in both cases, the path would not be the same. In case of an attack and resistance our honour would be saved and that will mean something at the moment of a liquidation of this war.⁶⁸

It is difficult to find a more obvious and straightforward statement as to the vital strategic importance attributed to Salonica by high-ranking Yugoslav officials. In the event, Cincar-Marković and Cvetković were requested to sign the Tripartite Pact but did not accept it. They were asked to relay an invitation to the Prince Regent to come and see Hitler. This visit took place in Berghof on 4 March 1941. Prince Paul was clearly given to understand that Yugoslavia was requested to join the Tripartite Pact in order to provide evidence of her loyal attitude. Hitler also dangled a prospect of granting Salonica to Yugoslavia at the end of the war.⁶⁹ Two days later, the Crown Council met in Belgrade to make a decision. It was decided to open negotiations with the Germans but to insist on the maintenance of Yugoslavia's armed neutrality and the exclusion of Yugoslav territory from transit of troops.

When Cincar-Marković secured the acceptance of these conditions, another meeting of the Crown Council was convened on 12 March. At this point, the Minister of Court, Milan Antić, knowing that the Salonica issue had already been mooted by General Nedić with the German military (and still not knowing about Cvetković's conversations on this subject) and aware of the Italian ambitions voiced by the fascist press, which ran contrary to the vital Yugoslav interest not to tolerate an entrenchment in the port of any other power except Greece, raised the matter of Salonica.⁷⁰ In the ensuing discussion Ivo Perović, a co-Regent of Prince Paul, was the most determined and professed that Salonica would be worth a war with Italy. Finally, it was decided to discuss the fate of Salonica with the Germans in

⁶⁸ AJ, Ministerial Council of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 138-1-526, Cincar-Marković's memorandum of 13 Feb. 1941 prepared for Cvetković, published online in V. Djurić-Mišina, *Kraljevina Jugoslavija 1941*, downloaded from http://27march.org/images/File/Veljko_Djuric_Kraljevina_Jugoslavija_1941_lat.pdf.

⁶⁹ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. II, ed. Antun Miletić (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1987), doc. 53, Report of the German Foreign Minister to the Minister in Belgrade of 7 March 1941 on the conversation between Prince Paul and Hitler in the Berghof.

⁷⁰ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/10487, Antić's note, undated. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, 228-229, claims that Cincar-Marković and Antić consulted on the matter. Allegedly, the latter was emotionally attached to Salonica because of his role in the negotiations of 1925-26 and the former exceeded Cvetković's instructions when he insisted in his talks with the Germans on a territorial link with Salonica rather than on a free access.

case it did not remain under Greek sovereignty after the war. Following another round of negotiations, the Germans, having procured Mussolini's consent, agreed to provide assurances to Belgrade as to Salonica. According to Antić, Cincar-Marković submitted a draft note to the Crown Council which found it "not clear and precise enough" and the Foreign Minister was instructed to ask for another redaction, "always hypothetical and only in the case [Salonica] cannot not stay in Greek hands after the war."⁷¹ Cincar-Marković carried out his instructions successfully. The final text of the secret note reads as follows: "On the occasion of a new delimitation of borders in the Balkans the interest of Yugoslavia for a territorial link with the Aegean Sea and the extension of her sovereignty to the town and port of Salonica will be taken into account."⁷² Prince Paul still had doubts about the wording of the Salonica note and Antić reassured him that it was not directed against Greek interests which could be endangered by the belligerents alone. The Regent's crisis of conscience was all the more striking in the light of Hitler's interpreter Paul Schmidt's impression that "the Yugoslavs seemed to have no special interest in Salonica, with which Germany had baited the hook."⁷³ The note constituted one of the four notes which accompanied the text of the Tripartite Pact signed by Yugoslavia on 25 March 1941. The note on Salonica remained secret, that on Yugoslavia's abstention from military operations was not to be published without the prior consent of both sides, whereas the notes pertaining to the guarantee of Yugoslavia's integrity and sovereignty and the exclusion of her territory from transports of troops and war materiel were announced.

It is interesting to note that the Salonica affair during those fateful days became a matter of bitter dispute between the Serb emigrants after the war. Deprived of the possibility of returning to the now communist Yugoslavia, they were sharply divided into the defenders of Prince Paul and his regime and the supporters of the 27 March coup d'état. Radoje Knežević, one of the political architects of the putsch, and thus having a vested interest in denouncing Prince Paul, went as far as accusing the Regent of signing the Tripartite Pact in a simple exchange for Hitler's promise to let Yugoslavia have Salonica. This accusation, equally groundless as that of Yugoslav communist historiography, was vehemently refuted by Dragiša Cvetković.⁷⁴

⁷¹ ASANU, Antić Papers, 14387/10487, Antić's note, undated.

⁷² *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. II, doc. 114, Note of the German government of 25 March 1941 to Dragiša Cvetković guaranteeing the extension of sovereignty to the town and port of Salonica.

⁷³ Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, 239, n. 67.

⁷⁴ R. L. Knejevitch, "Prince Paul, Hitler, and Salonica", *International Affairs* 27/1 (Jan. 1951), 38–44; the reply is given in Dragiša Tsvetkovitch, "Prince Paul, Hitler, and

His friend, Časlav Nikitović, wrote him a letter informing him of the historian Jacob Hoptner's difficulties to ascertain the Yugoslav attitude towards Salonica in view of the Croat leader Vlatko Maček's differing accounts and Count Ciano's note of what transpired between the government and the Germans as to the port's fate. Nikitović thought that it was necessary to explain that the Crown Council had endeavoured to ensure free access to the Aegean, which Yugoslavia had already enjoyed under the existing arrangement with Greece, rather than to take the city from the Greeks.⁷⁵ Božidar Purić, a former high-ranking diplomat, was also engaged in fighting off Knežević's accusations regarding Salonica in the pages of the Serb émigré journal *Kanadski Srbobran*, and kept Prince Paul up to date on this matter.⁷⁶ He compounded the classic strategic reason of holding Salonica in order to keep Italy out of it by another calculation which, according to him, was not far from the thoughts of Yugoslav officials at the time: "After the experience of Czechoslovakia's and Romania's fate following the Vienna meeting [Awards], it had to be clear to us that, in case of German victory, the question of Croatia, Slovenia and Dalmatia would be resolved in favour of Germany's and Italy's interests, and that Salonica would be a sole outlet to sea for us."⁷⁷ This argument, which had never been previously mentioned in documents or by the participants in the events, points out to an exclusively Serbian concern based on the worst case scenario of Yugoslavia's dismemberment through detaching Croatian and Slovenian, to a great extent coastal, areas which would reverse the position of Serbia to that of the pre-1914 landlocked state. In Purić's view, it justified Antić's initiative for the German assurance with regard to Salonica. The whole post-war controversy as to what was Yugoslav stance in those critical moments, he believed, was caused by Cvetković's inconsistent claims relating to Salonica — whether it had been offered to and imposed on the Yugoslavs or demanded by them from Berlin.

As the German pressure mounted in March 1941, Yugoslavia was also faced with the British endeavours to enlist her to the anti-German camp. This was a change in attitude that had been taken since the outbreak of the war. During the "phoney war" phase, France, and in particular General Maxim Weygand, the commander of the French forces stationed in Syria, was bent on the creation of a Salonica front in the Balkans which he believed, no doubt invoking the successful French-led campaign in the previous war, to have potential to decisively contribute, provided that Bal-

Salonica", *International Affairs* 27/4 (Oct. 1951), 463–469.

⁷⁵ AJ, Prince Paul Papers, 7/737–741, Nikitović to Cvetković, 9 May 1958.

⁷⁶ AJ, Prince Paul Papers, 8/764, Purić to Prince Paul, 4 April 1963.

⁷⁷ AJ, Prince Paul Papers, 8/758–761, Purić to Prince Paul, 22 Jan. 1962 (?).

kan nations sided with the Allies, to the final German defeat.⁷⁸ To this end, the French military maintained regular contacts with the General Staffs of Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania. 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.⁷⁹ Instead, Britain promoted the idea of a neutral Balkan bloc in which Bulgaria would forego her territorial aspirations and show solidarity with her neighbours organised in the Balkan Entente formed in 1934 and which would perhaps be led by the still neutral Italy. Politically unrealistic, such combination clearly indicated the paramount importance accorded to Rome, and at least was not as divorced from the military realities on the ground as Weygand's plan. With the French military disaster in May–June 1940 and Italy's entry into war, both strategies were put to rest.

In March 1941, Britain was preoccupied with the precarious situation of Greece which was about to be invaded by Hitler. Without resources to provide effective help himself, Churchill tried to organise a new variant of a Salonica front which would consist of Yugoslav, Greek and Turkish forces with only a token British participation. In order to realise this plan, the British exerted all the influence they commanded on the Anglophile Prince Paul. The Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, strove to persuade him that the Germans were about to encircle Yugoslavia and so seal her fate. "As we see it, Germany's objective in the Balkans is to subdue Greece and to immobilise Turkey. If Germany could achieve these dual objects and in the course of so doing occupy Salonica and dominate the straits, Yugoslavia would be at Germany's mercy."⁸⁰ In fact, this was the only concrete strategic reason that Eden could provide as to the necessity for Yugoslavia of taking up arms and resisting Hitler; the rest was but a pathetic appeal to "the soul of a people... splendid traditions and brave deeds" and the prospect of facing "the future with the greater courage and hope".⁸¹ Barely a fortnight later, Eden prodded the Prince Regent to withstand German pressure and even suggested that the Yugoslav Army should take initiative and attack the Italian forces in Albania — which would soon be defeated — captur-

⁷⁸ A. Papagos, *Grčka u ratu* (Belgrade: Vojno delo, 1954), 51–52, 99, 105.

⁷⁹ E. Barker, *Britanska politika prema jugoistočnoj Evropi u Drugom svjetskom ratu* (Zagreb: Globus, 1978), 28–35 — a Serbo-Croat translation of *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975); V. Vinaver, "Vojno-politička akcija fašističke Italije protiv Jugoslavije u jesen 1939. godine", *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* 3 (1966), 73–94, esp. 76–78.

⁸⁰ AJ, Prince Paul Papers, 2/28–33, Eden to Prince Paul, 4 March 1941.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

ing large quantities of war supplies in the process.⁸² The Salonica card was also emphasised in a communication made by the British Minister, Ronald Campbell, to Prime Minister Cvetković. Realising the imminence of an agreement between Belgrade and Berlin, the former requested from the Yugoslav government to insist on Germany's obligation to refrain from attacking the port. "Such an assurance can easily be valueless, but if Germany gives it and later menaces Salonica, Yugoslavia will be fully justified to cross her borders", Campbell argued.⁸³ This was another, albeit more subtle, attempt to recruit Yugoslavia as bulwark to German descent on Greece. If it proved ineffective, which might have seemed highly likely to the British, it could have provoked Berlin to resorting to more forward measures and consequently brought Belgrade in the conflict. Just like Germany, Britain used the bait of Salonica to make Yugoslavia do its bidding. London encouraged Prince Paul's government to revive the Salonica front presenting it as the only way for Yugoslavia to preserve her independence.

Despite all British warmongering and his personal feelings, Prince Paul had to acknowledge political and military realities and Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941 but without the military clauses which for all practical intents and purposes left Belgrade in the position of a neutral. Two days later, the irresponsible group of high-ranking officers abused the anti-German sentiment of Serbian population and carried out a putsch against Prince Paul and his government. Hitler promptly responded by attacking Yugoslavia and destroying her as a country. In the short-lived April War, the strategic significance of the Vardar valley leading to Salonica was once more demonstrated — though being far from a decisive moment — since German troops made it one of their primary objectives to cut this line of communication and thus prevent the Yugoslav Army from withdrawing down that route and making contact with Greek forces.

In conclusion, this review of Yugoslav policy towards the Salonica issue argues that, along with economic interest, and perhaps more than that, Belgrade viewed the free communication with the Greek port from a military-strategic standpoint. With the experience from the Great War during which the Salonica front became ingrained in the collective memory of the Serbian Army and people, the port remained central to operational thinking and military planning of the Yugoslav armed forces. This was facilitated by the strategic situation of Yugoslavia which, although a bigger and stron-

⁸² AJ, Prince Paul Papers, 2/34-45, Eden to Prince Paul, 17 March 1941.

⁸³ *Aprilski rat 1941*, vol. II, doc. 89, Letter of the British Minister in Belgrade of 20 March 1941 to Dragiša Cvetković on the insistence of the British Government to include a clause that Germany will not attack Salonica in the text of an agreement on the adherence of Yugoslavia to the Tripartite Pact.

ger country than pre-war Serbia, seemed to find herself in a similar position in that it was to a large extent encircled by hostile or potentially hostile neighbours. In times of peace, the unimpeded exit to Salonica was needed to secure a free flow of the military equipment which Yugoslavia could not produce herself, whereas in times of war it could also serve as a retreat route to a fallback position where a contact could be made with and material help received from her (old) allies. Such significance of Salonica was convincingly demonstrated during the turbulent times on the eve of and during the Second World War. Italy, Germany and Britain in turn tried to use Salonica as a bait in order to win Yugoslavia over for their intended actions in the Balkans. There was, however, no enthusiasm in Belgrade for those offers which incited the lust for territorial aggrandisement. To be sure, Yugoslavia did strike a deal on Salonica with the Germans, but it was somewhat tentative and only meant as reassurance so that the port would not fall in the hands of some other hostile or potentially hostile power. In fact, Yugoslavia's behaviour during those perilous times provides evidence that for her the Greek port was indeed, as Ninčić once described it, a matter of security.

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