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SOE and British Involvement in the Belgrade Coup d'État of March 1941

On March 27, 1941 a coup d'état in Belgrade overthrew the Yugoslav government which only two days previously had signed the Tripartite Pact in Vienna. In its place was installed a new government headed by General Simović, chief of the Air Staff, while the regent, Prince Paul, was replaced by the young King Peter II. It was widely expected that the Simović government would renounce the Pact and align itself firmly with Britain against Germany. Although this expectation was to be disappointed, the anti-German and pro-British intent of the coup was accepted by both Churchill and Hitler. Churchill declared that the Yugoslav nation had "found its soul," and in his postwar memoirs described the coup as "one tangible result of our desperate efforts to form an Allied front in the Balkans and prevent all falling piecemeal into Hitler's power."¹ Hitler, convinced that Britain had "pulled the strings," ordered the Yugoslav invasion for April 6.² In so doing, it has been widely argued that he caused a fatal delay in the opening of the Russian campaign. If one accepts this argument, the Belgrade coup can be credited with having indirectly led to Germany's defeats on the Russian front.³

It has long been known that in some way or another the clandestine wartime British agency for subversion and sabotage, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), was involved in the events leading up to March 27. In 1957 Hugh

1. W. S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* (New York, 1962), pp. 131–37.

2. The official German analysis put full responsibility for the coup on the shoulders of the British, singling out BBC Serb-language broadcasts, and stating that "the activities of the British secret service in Belgrade went hand in hand with this agitation" (see *German White Book containing documents relating to the conflict with Greece and Yugoslavia 6 April 1941*, English trans., Great Britain, Public Record Office, Foreign Office Papers, Record Group 371/29803, R7844 [hereafter cited at PRO F.O. 371]). In this and following citations of Foreign Office files, the original references are given in abbreviated form only, so that the piece can be located in the current file number in the Public Record Office.

3. This traditional view has recently been challenged (see Martin van Creveld, "The German Attack on the USSR: The Destruction of a Legend," in *European Studies Review*, 2, no. 1 [January 1972]; and Martin van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy 1940–1941: The Balkan Clue* [Cambridge, 1973]).

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Dalton, the minister of economic warfare, who was responsible for the SOE, claimed for it a major role in events, and since then a number of accounts, mostly memoirs, have embellished or modified the picture.⁴ Nevertheless, many of the details have been lacking, and the precise part played by the SOE has remained in dispute. Few have argued that the SOE, or the British, "caused" the coup, or that it was anything less than a Yugoslav (or Serb) affair.⁵ What has remained unclear, largely through lack of documentation, is whether SOE activities were part of a coordinated British effort to overthrow the Yugoslav government; and, if there was such a coordinated effort, what was its intent and how did SOE efforts relate to those of other British agencies? Were the political contacts built up by the SOE over many months of subversive political activity in Yugoslavia the crucial ones when it came to the coup d'état, as implied in some accounts, or have the contributions of others gone unrecognized?

Two recent studies, neither of which is focused specifically on the coup, have contributed to a further understanding of events and, at the same time, have raised some new questions. Elisabeth Barker, in her study on British policy in Southeast Europe in the Second World War, concludes that although the SOE had done a great deal to prepare Serb political and popular opinion to accept the coup, "when it came to the point it was not SOE's contacts, but the contacts of the air attaché, Group Captain MacDonald, with air force officers such as General Simović and General Bora Mirković, which kept the British informed of what was being planned."⁶ Jozo Tomasevich, in the first volume of his study of wartime Yugoslavia,⁷ likewise focuses on the link between the British air attaché's office and the rebel air force officers, rather than on the SOE's contacts. At the same time, however, he suggests that the British government played a more important role than implied by Elisabeth Barker, and he also suggests that the key contact figure on the British side was not MacDonald, but his assistant, Mapplebeck. According to Tomasevich, Mapplebeck was a long time operative of the British Intelligence Service in Belgrade who had excellent relations with Bora Mirković, the key figure on the Yugoslav side.⁸ While the differences in nuance and detail between these two recent accounts perhaps are not in themselves of very great significance, they highlight the fact that knowledge about British participation in the coup is still somewhat

4. Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years 1931–1945* (London, 1957), pp. 366–67. The fullest memoir account of SOE activities in the Balkans is found in Bickham Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular* (London, 1965), especially pp. 17–64. Two more recent and valuable accounts are: Julian Amery, *Approach March* (London, 1973); and Sir Alexander Glen, *Footholds Against a Whirlwind* (London, 1975).

5. The recent memoir by Sir Cecil Parrot, tutor to King Peter in the 1930s, is an exception. In an account strongly sympathetic to Prince Paul and hostile to the coup d'état, he places the blame squarely on the SOE and states categorically that "there would certainly have been no coup d'état if the British had not planned it" (see Cecil Parrot, *The Tightrope* [London, 1975], p. 105).

6. Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War* (New York and London, 1976), p. 92.

7. Jozo Tomasevich, *The Chetniks: War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945* (Stanford, Calif., 1975).

8. Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, pp. 43 and 45.

obscure. The purpose of this article, which is based on an examination of the recently released British wartime documents in the Public Record Office and certain other archival material, as well as on the recollections of some of the participants on the British side, is to lessen the obscurity. Of course, a great deal undoubtedly will remain unclear for a long time, and much on the British side probably will never be revealed. Nonetheless, it is now possible to build up a reasonably composite picture of the totality of the effort on the British side, to view SOE activities within this totality, and to answer some, if not all, of the questions which still surround British involvement.⁹

In the six months prior to the coup, the British attitude toward Yugoslavia had changed from accepting Yugoslav benevolent neutrality, to that of pressing the Yugoslavs for more active support in the war against Germany. This evolution in British policy was in turn a function of the developing (and from the British viewpoint deteriorating) Balkan situation. Following Rumania's accession to the Tripartite Pact on November 23, 1940, the British had expressed complete opposition to the idea of Yugoslavia following suit. Early in 1941, when a German drive southward seemed imminent, a decision was made to send a mechanized force to Greece. Prince Paul, the Yugoslav regent, reacted to this decision by describing it as "rash and mistaken," insisting that it would only provoke the very attack which the British feared. Nevertheless, the British now sought a commitment from the Yugoslavs. Even if Yugoslavia was not directly attacked, their forces were to join in a campaign against Germany should the latter attack Greece through Bulgaria. In short, British policy toward Yugoslavia early in 1941 became a function of the British desire to save Greece. Understandably, this was not attractive to Prince Paul, and the Yugoslav government refused to be tempted into more active participation in the war by a British offer of a postwar rectification of the Italo-Yugoslav frontier. Prince Paul refused to meet Eden, but he paid a secret visit to Berlin early in March where he came under strong pressure to sign the Tripartite Pact. The British viewed the prospect of such a signature as disastrous, for it would destroy any hope of establishing a Balkan Front and render the position in Greece precarious. They knew that the Yugoslavs had won concessions from Hitler, but signature in any form was unacceptable, as they repeatedly told the Yugoslavs. Thus, when it became increasingly clear that signature was imminent, the British mobilized their full effort to prevent it. This effort encompassed both diplomatic pressure and subversive political action; and culminated in the coup of March 27.¹⁰

9. The SOE "archives" (what may remain of them) have not been opened to public inspection and are unlikely to be opened in the near or middle future, if ever. Nevertheless, the memoirs and recollections of participants are sometimes available, and some SOE material can be found in various places.

10. For the diplomatic background, see Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe*, pp. 78-91; and Phyllis Auty, "Some Aspects of British-Yugoslav Relations in 1941," in *The 1941 Revolt in Yugoslavia and Europe* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1973), pp. 89-112. The accounts by Sir Llewellyn Woodward, in Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London, 1970), pp. 22 ff., and by Lord Avon, in *The Reckoning* (London, 1965) are more circumspect.

What was the strategy of the British government, and particularly the Foreign Office, in the period immediately preceding the coup, and to what extent and in what ways did they seek to promote and encourage a coup d'état as a solution to the problem? An examination of the exchanges between the British legation in Belgrade, Eden in Cairo, and the Foreign Office in London will help provide partial answers to these questions by revealing British perceptions of the rapidly changing situation in Belgrade and the role which a coup d'état played in their responses to the situation. This material forms the background for subsequent discussion of the activities of various individuals and agencies, under the aegis of the legation, that were involved in political subversion; it also raises further questions which are dealt with in the concluding section of the article.

The Crown Council, meeting on March 19, precipitated the final crisis by agreeing in principle that Yugoslavia should sign the Pact, on condition that Yugoslavia would not be obliged to accept the transit of German troops or the use of its railways, nor sign the so-called "military clauses" of the full Pact. On March 20, Mr. Ronald Campbell, the British minister in Belgrade, informed Eden that the Germans appeared to have accepted the Yugoslav conditions and that the final decision to sign might be made that very day. He would do all he could to delay signature, but "if it takes place I recommend that we do all we can to minimise its importance and to keep Yugoslavia in play."¹¹ Eden endorsed Campbell's recommendation,¹² and over the following few days, up to the signature of the Pact on March 25, worked hard to persuade the prince regent's government not to sign. He had already sent Terence Shone, a personal friend of the regent and a former member of the Belgrade legation, as a special emissary to Prince Paul. Shone delivered a letter from Eden to Prince Paul, and in a meeting with him on March 18 "urged repeatedly that signature by Yugoslavia of *any* pact with Germany would be not only full of peril for her but also a grave disservice to the Allied cause in as much as Germany, feeling sure Yugoslavia was 'in the bag,' would no longer hesitate to attack Greece."¹³ The argument that the Pact in any form was unacceptable was hammered home to the Yugoslavs on numerous occasions during the next few days. The British government's position was most clearly put by Orme Sargent, deputy undersecretary at the Foreign Office. In an interview with the Yugoslav minister in London on March 23, Sargent stated that "it was strictly in keeping with [Hitler's] usual techniques, as explained in *Mein Kampf*, that he should be content in the first instance with a small gain, that he should then proceed to consolidate this gain and use it as a starting point . . . and so on, until by a slow process he

11. Campbell to Cairo, no. 165, March 20, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2778/G.

12. Cairo to FO, no. 640, March 21, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2962/G. Campbell also recommended that Serbo-Croatian broadcasts should adopt a stronger line, working on the feelings of the Serbs in particular, in order to (1) increase popular opposition to signature, and (2) if signature occurred, to ensure a "vehement reaction" (see Campbell to Cairo, no. 168, March 20, 1941, in Public Record Office, Operational Papers of the Prime Minister's Office [hereafter cited as PREM 3] 3/510/511, no. 423). Serbo-Croatian broadcasts were stepped up considerably in the week prior to the coup.

13. Cairo to FO, no. 628, March 20, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2776/G.

had demoralised and undermined the whole Government and State." It was for this reason, Sargent said, that the British government was opposed to the signature by Yugoslavia of any political agreement with Germany, however circumscribed, for they felt sure "that it would be the first step towards the ultimate destruction of the Yugoslav state."¹⁴ Thus, the nature of the British objection was quite clear to the Yugoslav side.

On March 21, the Yugoslav government decided to sign the modified Pact and three government ministers immediately resigned. Dalton noted gloomily in his diary the fact of "bad news from Juggery,"¹⁵ while Sir Alexander Cadogan, the permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office, noted in his diary that the "Yugoslavs seem to have sold their souls to the Devil. All these Balkan peoples are trash."¹⁶ Campbell now suggested the possibility of encouraging a coup d'état to Eden. Should further arguments fail to deter the Yugoslavs, Campbell said, and should the alternative of breaking off relations with the Yugoslav government be rejected, then a coup might accomplish the desired objective—either by preventing signature, or, if signature occurred, by "defeating" it. Campbell indicated four factors which would have to be considered. First, if a German attack on Greece was not imminent, would it be preferable to delay a coup so as not to precipitate such an attack? Second, a coup or revolt could only take place "at the moment of greatest effervescence," that is, at or immediately after signature. Third, the people ready to revolt should be assured that His Majesty's Government would brand the present Yugoslav government responsible for signature by breaking off relations with it, and then support the new government. Fourth, the attitude of the Croats should be taken into account. Campbell told Eden that he was investigating the possibilities of a revolt against the government, and "inclined to the belief that any encouragement and support from us should be dependent on there being almost certain prospects of immediate success. There might, however, be something to be said for encouraging a movement even if we were not certain of it achieving immediate and complete success," subject to the views of Eden and the military authorities on the question of the imminence of German action against Greece. The question of encouraging a coup d'état seemed to Campbell to depend largely on the considerations of British military requirements. Pending further investigations in Belgrade, however, he asked for his government's authority in principle to follow this line of action.¹⁷

Campbell's telegram prompted replies from Churchill and Eden which seemed to indicate that they both wished to place the burden of decision on shoulders other than their own. Churchill told Eden to settle the matter in Cairo, although he felt it was "more important to get Yugoslavia into the war anyhow than to gain a few days on the Salonika front"¹⁸ (that is, Churchill was willing to accept the risk of precipitating a German attack if a pro-Allied Yugoslav

14. Sargent minute, March 23, 1941; the gist of the minute was sent to Campbell and Eden on March 24 (PRO F.O. 371/30206, R2981).

15. Dalton diary entry for March 21, 1941, London School of Economics and Political Science (hereafter cited as Dalton Diary).

16. David Dilks, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938–1945* (London, 1971), p. 365.

17. Campbell to Cairo, no. 171, March 21, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2854/G.

18. PREM 3/510/511, no. 369.

government could be produced by a coup). The Foreign Office had also confirmed with the Chiefs of Staff that it was strategically in British interests to have Yugoslavia become an ally at the earliest moment,¹⁹ thus answering Campbell's question about the military considerations involved. Eden, replying from Cairo, expressed a more specific view which presumably reflected the view of the chief of the Imperial General Staff, who was accompanying him in Cairo. The important thing, Eden said, was that the Yugoslavs should deny the passage of German troops, especially through the Monastir Gap, which would threaten the Greek flank. It was up to Campbell to determine whether a coup would help this objective. Eden requested more information about the leadership, the chances of success, and the likely consequences of a coup. He particularly wanted to know what might happen to the prince regent, and what the attitude of the army would be. In the meantime, there was to be no breaking of relations with the Cvetković government.²⁰

From this initial exchange, three points emerge quite clearly. First, uppermost in the minds of all concerned was the effect a coup would have on the Greek situation. Would it or would it not help the defense of Greece? Second, the real decision would be left to Campbell in Belgrade. And third, relations would continue with the Cvetković government so that pressure could be applied against signature. This strategy of keeping all options open for as long as possible, which was based upon a continued hope that the prince regent would at the last minute refuse to sign the Pact, was followed up to signature of the Pact on March 25. Although Eden authorized Campbell on March 22 to give assurances to the potential leaders of a revolt that they would have the "fullest possible British military support" if they were involved in a war on the British side and that Britain would advocate the Yugoslav claim to Istria at the peace settlement,²¹ the Foreign Office on March 25 reiterated that there should be no breaking of relations.²² On March 24, the day before the Pact was signed, Eden had seized upon an ultimatum allegedly given to the Cvetković government by the Germans to urge Prince Paul, through Campbell, to step back from the brink.²³ Obviously Eden still hoped for a miracle.

Thus, discussions had been proceeding about a coup d'état at the same time that hopes of preventing Yugoslav signature were steadily declining. On March 24, Eden received a depressing report from Shone of another meeting with the prince regent on the previous day. It was clear from the report that the Pact would be signed and that the prince regent was completely resigned to the course he had undertaken. Shone concluded: "one feels he has now lost that reserve of courage which sufficed to meet less critical decisions in the past: he has, I believe, been so reluctant to let personal feelings weigh that he has not let his beliefs on which they are founded count enough; and in his dilemma he has fallen back on advice, and failed to control so closely the action of men who lack . . . wide vision, courage, and decision, and among whom are evil coun-

19. PRO F.O. 371/29782, R3016/G.

20. Cairo to FO, no. 650, March 22, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2871/G.

21. Eden to Belgrade, no. 122, March 22, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2872/G.

22. Sargent minute, March 25, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2962/G.

23. Eden to Belgrade, no. 140, March 24, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30206, R2964.

sels.”²⁴ Eden responded to Campbell on March 24 that the “Prince Regent’s attitude shows such a hopeless sense of unreality that there is nothing to be expected of him.” Campbell was given “full authority for any measures that you may think it right to take to further a change of Government or régime even by *coup d’état*.” Any new government prepared to resist German demands, he added, would have the full support of His Majesty’s Government.²⁵ That same day, a telegram was sent to the SOE in Belgrade telling them “to put full steam on to assist after consulting the Minister.”²⁶ Later that day the certainty of Yugoslav signature was confirmed by Campbell, and the War Cabinet was informed accordingly.²⁷

By March 24, therefore, Campbell had full authority to encourage a change of government or régime (that is, the removal of Prince Paul) by any means, including, if necessary, a *coup d’état*. What, however, was Campbell’s assessment of the situation as the Belgrade legation perceived it? Would a *coup d’état* achieve the desired objective? Were there other alternatives? If not, what were the chances of a *coup*?

Campbell, in reply to Eden’s query of March 22, gave his views on the chances of a *coup d’état* in a long telegram to Eden on March 24. He made several points. First, no government could remain in power without the backing of the army, which meant that a *coup* could be successful only if the new government were to be a military one, or if it were quickly to establish army support. Hypothetically, the best chance lay with a military movement. But, as Campbell emphasized, military support was questionable, because accession to the Tripartite Pact could be presented by the Yugoslav government as fairly harmless. Certainly nothing was to be hoped for from the present military chiefs, with one possible exception (not named by Campbell). It was probable that the most senior general officers would have to be removed from their command, and, if any movement from the army were to have a chance, it was essential that the British should hold out the possibility of military supplies. “The offer would also give us something with which to approach potential leaders directly,” he added, implying that no such contacts had yet been made. For that reason, Campbell requested His Majesty’s Government to give immediate consideration to a request for arms supplies. On the question of the timing of a *coup*, Campbell asked Eden simply for discretion “to make offer either at once with a view to exploiting feeling aroused by signature of pact . . . or at a later stage when feeling had again been aroused by German behaviour or fresh German demands. Failing immediate *coup d’état* efforts would have to be concentrated on the same objective at later stage or in the last resort on maintaining spirit in the Army divisions in Serbia to resist any attempt by the Germans to pass through South

24. Campbell to Cairo, no. 194, March 23, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30206, R2925; and War Office 201/1575. See also Campbell to Cairo, no. 195, March 23, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30206, R2925.

25. Cairo to Belgrade, no. 137, March 24, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2916/G.

26. J. Nicholls, minute, *ibid*.

27. Campbell to Cairo, no. 206, March 24, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30206, R2977; for the War Cabinet, see WM31(41)2, in Public Record Office, Cabinet Papers [hereafter cited as CAB] 65/18.

Serbia.”²⁸ It is clear from this telegram that Campbell’s views on the likelihood of a coup were less than optimistic, and that he considered the offer of British arms supplies as a *sine qua non*. Because the British ability to supply arms was already stretched to the limit, however, the reaction of the prime minister and the Foreign Office was one of gloom. Churchill noted “I am very doubtful about all this,” and a Foreign Office official minuted that “if a coup d’état is really dependent upon immediate material supplies the outlook is very gloomy.”²⁹ Eden’s reaction was both gloomy and irritable. From Cairo he told Campbell, somewhat testily, that he regretted the government could give him “no more cards to play this difficult hand,” reminded Campbell that he had full authority to handle and time matters as he thought best, and announced that he and his party were leaving Cairo en route to London that day.³⁰ Eden’s decision to leave Cairo clearly implied that he did not regard a coup as imminent.³¹

March 25, the day the Pact was signed in Vienna, was therefore a very pessimistic day in the Foreign Office because the possibilities of an alternative government emerging in Belgrade seemed slight. After the Yugoslav minister had seen Orme Sargent and R. A. Butler at the Foreign Office, Sargent minuted views which clearly reflected this general tone of pessimism. Noting that “the prospects of a successful *coup d’état* . . . are not very bright,” he said that three different policies would now have to be pursued more or less simultaneously. The British would have to (1) maintain relations with the Cvetković government to encourage them to resist future German demands; (2) foment resistance to German penetration and control simultaneously, especially in the army and among the Serbs, *primarily* to strengthen the hand of the Cvetković government, but with “the ultimate and ulterior objective of bringing about its fall if it proves useless and its replacement by another which will repudiate the Tripartite Pact and reverse the whole policy of its predecessor” (Sargent admitted that this policy could start a process of disintegration in Yugoslavia, but considered the risk worthwhile.); and (3) work for a variation of option two, that is, work for the secession of the Yugoslav army in South Serbia and the creation of a separatist government under its aegis; this “would give us control of vital passes to prevent a German attack on the flank of the Greek Army.” He noted that the British minister in Greece was already pursuing this possibility with General Papagos. Sargent also concluded that no action should be undertaken which would lead to a premature breaking of relations with the Yugoslavs before the successful execution of options two or three was certain.³² Cadogan, considering

28. Campbell to Cairo, no. 203, March 24, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R2987/G. The question of arms supplies was referred to a special committee, but its deliberations were overtaken by the coup on March 27.

29. *Ibid.*; see also PREM 3/510/511, nos. 366–67.

30. Cairo to Belgrade, no. 152, March 25, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R3030/G.

31. See Diary of C.I.G.S.’s tour to the Mediterranean, February–April 1941, in War Office 106/2145, entry for March 25: “Meeting at Embassy at 10.00 hours to discuss telegrams from Belgrade about prospects of a *coup d’état* in Yugoslavia. Various telegrams were then sent. It was agreed that nothing [need] now keep us . . . in Egypt.” The party then left for Malta where news of the coup reached them on March 27; Eden returned immediately to Athens.

32. Sargent minute, March 25, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30243, R3288/G.

this recommendation the next day, agreed, although he felt it would be advisable to see what Campbell reported when the Yugoslav ministers returned from Vienna. Ultimately, he thought alternative three would be the best, as "the defence of the Greek-Yugoslav frontier is really vital to Greece."³³

The Foreign Office position, even *after* signature of the Pact, was that relations with the Cvetković government should continue. Because prospects of a coup were dim, an attempt to stimulate some sort of separatist movement in South Serbia seemed, at least to Cadogan, to be the best course of action. Indeed, the need to maintain relations with the government, while at the same time exploring the alternatives, was emphasized by Churchill in a telegram to Campbell on March 26 (the day before the coup). Campbell was not to "let any gap grow up between you and Prince Paul or the Ministers. Continue to pester, nag and bite. Demand audiences. Don't take NO for an answer . . . at the same time, do not neglect any alternative to which we may have to resort if we find present Government have gone beyond recall."³⁴

The Foreign Office views were, of course, dependent upon information from Campbell, and thus Cadogan had noted the need to wait for Campbell's further impressions. Campbell's views, however, did not seem to differ much from those of Sargent and Cadogan. In a long analysis sent from Belgrade late on March 25 (the last such analysis before the coup), Campbell reaffirmed that he still regarded an offer of arms to the military as being essential if early success was to be achieved in the creation of an alternative government (civil or military). The army was of paramount importance even if a coup did not take place, because in the last resort it would represent "the only remaining possible form of resistance to the German threat to Greece through Southern Serbia." Although there were signs in Belgrade and throughout Serbia of great dissatisfaction with the Pact, the feeling might still be defused. Campbell once again had given no indication that he expected a coup within the near future. Indeed, much of his analysis was devoted to the slow disintegration of the country in the face of German penetration, which he foresaw as likely under the Cvetković government. Campbell feared that divisions between the component parts of the kingdom would be exploited, with the Croats and possibly the Slovenes likely to push for a separatist solution. Therefore, "our efforts must be directed in the main to stiffening Serb resistance the more so as South Serbia is for us and Greece the vital point."³⁵ It is clear from the context that this recommendation was made less to encourage a coup, than to ensure that, even if the Cvetković government remained in power, German penetration would not threaten Britain's vital interest—the protection of the Greek flank on the South Serb frontier. Thus, Leo Amery's famous broadcast to Yugoslavia on March 26, in which he denounced the Pact and appealed mainly to Serb opinion, was not exclusively directed to promoting a coup, but to the more generalized aim of stiffening the Serbs' resistance.³⁶

33. *Ibid.*

34. PREM 3/510/511, no. 365.

35. Campbell to Cairo, nos. 215 and 216, March 25, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R3032/G.

36. For the text of Amery's broadcast, see PREM 3/510/511, nos. 428–30.

The diplomatic exchanges immediately preceding the coup d'état have revealed several interesting points. First, the guiding consideration was the defense of the Greek/South Serb frontier; while a coup led by a pro-Allied military leadership might be the best way of effecting this, other possibilities for doing so existed and could not be ruled out. Second, because the British government was prepared to go on talking to the prince regent and the Cvetković government even *after* the Pact had been signed, there was no great urgency for a coup. Third, there appeared to be no great likelihood of a coup in the immediate future anyway. Campbell, while indicating clearly in his telegrams of March 25 that the legation was in touch with army and political figures, still considered an offer of arms essential, and held out little hope of early action. Moreover, insofar as he thought action likely, he was thinking in terms of an army coup. There had been no mention up to that point of any air force action. As the coup took place less than thirty-six hours after this assessment, and was primarily, although not exclusively, an air force affair, the obvious question is why did Campbell fail to predict it more accurately? To answer this, one must examine the activities of the SOE and other agencies in Belgrade as well as the information about the coup at their disposal and their relationship with Campbell.

The British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) had been active in the Balkans throughout the 1930s, but the level of activity picked up considerably in 1938 and 1939. In 1938, Section D of the SIS was established with the specific task of conducting sabotage and other clandestine operations. In July 1940, Section D was separated from the SIS to form the nucleus of a new organization, the Special Operations Executive (SOE).³⁷ Throughout 1939 and 1940, Section D and its successor were active in the Balkans, attempting by various means both to sabotage the German war effort, and to promote active political opposition to German demands on the neutral Balkan states. Belgrade was the main center of Section D and SOE activities (as well, apparently, as of SIS activities) in the Balkans, and during most of this period special operations were in charge of a British arms dealer named Julius Hanau,³⁸ assisted by an engineer, S. W. (Bill) Bailey (later, Colonel Bailey, who was dropped to Mihailović in 1942). Hanau and Bailey were responsible for the planning of several schemes to block the Danube to German shipping, in particular, the scheme to block the Iron Gates by dynamiting the cliffs on the Yugoslav side of the river. They also established contact with opposition political elements in the various Balkan states

37. For the formation of the SOE, see M. R. D. Foot, *SOE in France* (London, 1966); and David A. T. Stafford, "The Detonator Concept: British Strategy, SOE, and European Resistance after the fall of France," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 10, no. 2 (April 1975). There is every reason to believe that the SIS was as active in Yugoslavia as the SOE during this period. It is also worth noting that while SOE contacts with Yugoslavia were broken by the German invasion, this was not the case with the SIS.

38. Hanau's role was well known to the Germans who later contrived to have him expelled from Yugoslavia. He is referred to by name as the leader of the "British Intelligence Service" in Yugoslavia (see Otto Leibrock, *Der Südosten, Grossdeutschland, und das Neue Europa* [Berlin, 1941], p. 296). It is probable that he had been an SIS agent before entering Section D.

who wished to resist German demands, and were responsible for the establishment in Belgrade of a supposedly independent news agency, known as *Britanova*, which disseminated pro-British propaganda.

Following the collapse of France in June 1940 and the occupation of most of Western Europe by the Germans, the Balkans remained one of the few areas in Europe where SOE networks remained intact. With the Italian invasion of Greece, the Balkan states assumed a critical role in the struggle between Britain and the Axis powers, and this was reflected in changes within the SOE-Balkan network. In November 1940, SOE activities in Belgrade were placed under the control of Tom Masterson, a sixty-year-old businessman who up to that point had been managing an oil business in Rumania. Masterson had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order in World War I for helping to destroy Rumanian oil wells and was well known in the area. His appointment was intended to reassure the British legation in Belgrade, which had been disconcerted by some of Hanau's wilder schemings, and to provide a firm basis for expanded British secret operations in the Balkans following the Italian invasion of Greece in October.

Masterson's appointment coincided with a heightened interest in the Balkans on the part of the British Chiefs of Staff. This interest was derived, in large part, from their desire to prevent the transport of Rumanian oil supplies through Yugoslavia to Germany. In the SOE's first directive from the Chiefs of Staff, on November 25, 1940, interference with Rumanian oil transports was given as a first priority, and on December 20 Ismay informed the SOE of the urgent need to make "every effort without further delay, and over-riding all other considerations, to strike at German oil supplies from Rumania."³⁹ The subject was discussed at a Defence Committee meeting on January 13, 1941, and it was against this background, amid fears of an imminent German drive into southeast Europe, that Dalton decided to send George Taylor, then chief of staff to the executive head of the SOE (Sir Frank Nelson), to invigorate and coordinate the SOE's Balkan effort. Taylor's task was to prevent the Balkan countries from falling under German influence, to make plans for the organization of resistance behind German lines should these efforts fail, and to disrupt oil supplies. He was personally briefed by Dalton and Eden before departure.⁴⁰

The Taylor mission, in addition to its possible significance for the British war effort, was also important for establishing the credibility of the SOE itself. The SOE was a new organization constantly under attack from, and in conflict with, other government agencies, and it was regarded with suspicion and disfavor by many conventionally-minded diplomats and professional soldiers. Its efforts in the Balkans had not been very successful, and the November directive and the January instructions presented the agency with a major challenge. In-

39. "Subversive Activities in Relation to Strategy," November 25, 1940, COS(40)27(0), in CAB 80/56; "Interference with German Oil Supplies," January 8, 1941, COS(41)3(0), in CAB 80/56.

40. DO(41)4th, January 13, 1941, in CAB 69/2. This meeting also led to a new directive to Bomber Command; see Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945*, 3 vols. (London, 1961), 1:158-62, 289-90. On the Taylor mission, see Dalton Diary, January 8, 1941; and George Taylor communication to David A. T. Stafford, February 6, 1975.

deed, when German aggressive intentions in the Balkans had become clear to the British in December, Churchill "sent for Dalton and told him this was the acid test for S.O.E. He must do everything possible to hamper the German effort in the Balkans."⁴¹ It must have been particularly mortifying, therefore, for Dalton to hear Churchill draw the attention of the Defence Committee meeting of January 13 to the failure of past schemes of sabotage, and to express his skepticism about schemes they were currently considering.⁴² This obviously was all the more reason for some tangible success to result from the Taylor mission. The future of the SOE might rest upon the outcome. Dalton's burning desire for some recognition, and probably a strong instinct for survival as well, helps to explain his subsequent claims that the SOE had played a determining role in the events in Belgrade.

Against this background, and in the context of Yugoslavia's move toward signature of the Pact, subversive activity by the SOE assumed great significance. As the SOE representatives in Belgrade saw it, their special function was to act in areas closed to the official mission. They particularly wanted to maintain intimate contacts with elements in opposition to the Yugoslav government,⁴³ which included most of the Serb politicians who were excluded from power by the regent, in alliance with Maček, the Croat leader. While the official mission in Belgrade concentrated on influencing Prince Paul's government against signature of the Tripartite Pact, the SOE's strategy was to mobilize and direct the major Serb elements in Yugoslavia with the object of reversing or influencing the policy of the government. There were three major political instruments available for the SOE's purpose: the Serb Peasant Party; the Radical, Democratic, and Nationalist opposition parties; and the national associations such as the *Narodna Odbrana* (subsidized by the SOE), the Chetniks, the Veteran Associations, the Order of White Eagle with Swords, and other groups mostly associated with Serb resistance in World War I. The SOE had been helping to subsidize the Peasant Party since July 1940. The leader of the party, Milan Gavrilović, was the official Yugoslav representative in Moscow, but Masterson was in close touch with Milos Tupanjanin, the temporary party leader within the country. Although the Serb Peasant Party was represented in the government, it was, in the SOE's view, the most militantly anti-German and pro-Allied element in Yugoslavia.⁴⁴ SOE links with *Narodna Odbrana's* leader, Ilija Trifunović, were particularly useful, because Trifunović also presided over all

41. George Taylor communication, February 6, 1975.

42. DO(41)4th, in CAB 69/2. For the SOE Balkan Record, see Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular*, pp. 52–63; and Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe*, pp. 28–95.

43. Much of the following is based on the report of SOE activities in Yugoslavia written by Taylor and Masterson. This report, dated June 24, 1941, is to be found in the Dalton Papers at the London School of Economics and Political Science, under the title "Report to S.O. [Dalton] from A.D. [Taylor] and DHY [Masterson] on Certain S.O. 2 Activities in Yugoslavia." The original report consisted of six sections. The last four, dealing with post-occupational matters (sabotage and guerrilla resistance), unfortunately, are missing; the first, dealing with the Danube sabotage, is not considered here.

44. Tupanjanin has been described by one Yugoslav source as "the principal agent of the British intelligence service among the Serbs" (see J. B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis* [New York, 1962], p. 264). References to the subsidy can be found in PRO F.O. 371/30205, R1525/G, and in Dalton Diary, particularly his comment on March 27, that "the money we

the national associations. These organizations, with the SOE's encouragement, flooded the government with petitions against signature of the Pact in the days immediately preceding the coup.⁴⁵

The SOE's basic plan was to encourage Serb political and public opinion to exert pressure on Prince Paul. The agency, for example, hoped to convince the Serb Peasant Party to threaten withdrawal from the government should any agreement be signed with the Germans, thus precipitating a government downfall. The SOE also worked hard to persuade the three opposition parties, in conjunction with the Socialist Party, to agree to a joint declaration on the German issue. An agreement was reached on March 7, 1941, but the original draft—apparently the responsibility of the SOE—was watered down to mollify the Germans. One Foreign Office official, in commenting on the situation, noted that "it rather looks as though we have wasted our money and SO 2 their efforts."⁴⁶

Certainly the efforts at persuasion had come to nothing, and by March 18 it was clear that Prince Paul's government was about to sign the Pact. The SOE's objective then became the fall of the Yugoslav government, preferably before, but if necessary after, the Pact had been signed. The first stage of the plan was discussed at a meeting in the legation on March 19—the same day that the Crown Council agreed in principle to signature of the Pact. This first stage concentrated on the "legitimate," or peaceful, overthrow of the government, by encouraging the resignation of as many of its members as possible to force a government crisis. Here the SOE utilized its contacts with Tupanjanin to the maximum. He was in contact several times each day with SOE representatives, and it was largely because of his efforts that three cabinet members resigned on March 20 when Cvetković announced the proposed terms of the Pact. Cubrilović, of the Serb Peasant Party (which was being subsidized by the SOE); Budysavlević, of the Independent Democrats (also being subsidized by the SOE); and Konstantinović, an Independent, submitted their resignations immediately, and when Konstantinović temporarily withdrew his resignation under direct pressure from the prince regent, Tupanjanin "bullied" him into line.

The successful campaign by the SOE and their Serb allies to secure official resignations appears to have been largely responsible for the British attempt to influence the Cvetković government against signature between March 21 and March 24 (the period when a coup d'état, while under consideration, was not regarded as a first priority). When it became clear, however, that the resignations were not going to force the government to delay signature, the SOE concluded that "the only possible course was to bring off a *coup d'état*."⁴⁷

have spent on the Serb Peasant Party and other opposition parties has given wonderful value." Ironically, the subsidy led the British to regard intelligence provided by Tupanjanin with great skepticism.

45. As early as July 1940, the same month that the SOE began subsidizing the Peasant Party, the SOE had been involved in discussion with the legation and the Foreign Office about the usefulness of a coup d'état in Yugoslavia. The conclusion then was that it would be premature, but that it should not be discarded as an alternative in the future (see Amery, *Approach March*, pp. 174–76; and Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe*, p. 85).

46. PRO F.O. 371/29779, R2270/G.

47. SOE memorandum, p. 12.

With a coup d'état recognized as the only viable means of producing an alternative government, the focus of the British side inevitably shifted away from the SOE and its political contacts and toward agencies or individuals who had contacts in the Yugoslav armed forces. Tupanjanin and the Peasant Party, while valuable in publicizing the issues involved and arousing Serb public opinion, were poorly represented in state and army administrative posts, were regarded with suspicion by economically powerful interests in the country, and were thus ill suited to launch a coup d'état. The national associations, although influential throughout the country, were not sufficiently organized for such action. And the opposition parties, even though they included many SOE contacts, were not prepared to take the initiative.

Thus, the work of the SOE in this period was essentially to urge the necessity of a coup d'état on all their contacts in the hope that as soon as someone took the first step, everyone else would rally behind him. Their links with the air force conspirators, led by Bora Mirković, were only indirect—through Trifunović and Radoje Knežević on the Yugoslav side,⁴⁸ and through the air attaché's contacts with Mirković on the British side. Nonetheless, they were kept relatively well informed of developments.

The SOE had been informed by Trifunović on March 24 that preparations for a coup were making good progress. On the afternoon of March 25, Trifunović indicated that "the conspiracy was 99% certain of success," and that action could be expected in about another forty-eight hours. Thus, the SOE, on March 25, turned down a suggestion from London, in response to the news of the signing of the Pact, that the train bringing the Yugoslav ministers back from Vienna should be blown up. The SOE feared that such action would lead to the introduction of martial law and the disruption of the conspirators' plans.⁴⁹ None of this, however, was reflected in Campbell's exchanges with London, which were still arguing that an offer of British arms was essential and that action against the government could not be expected in the near future.

The apparent discrepancy between SOE information about the progress of the conspiracy and Campbell's dispatches to London requires some explanation. The SOE had no interest in withholding their information, and they had every opportunity of making Campbell aware of it. Both Taylor and Masterson met daily with Campbell and Armand Dew, counselor at the legation, to exchange information. Furthermore, Taylor and Dew would usually draft a report reviewing the situation in the light of all the intelligence, which the minister could use in reporting to London. Thus, the SOE had ample opportunity to inform the minister of their activities and information, and Taylor appears to have operated on the assumption that Campbell passed all intelligence information on

48. In the SOE's view, it was Knežević who took the initiative in fomenting a coup, and his were "the brains behind the conspiracy." The SOE considered Mirković, "while enthusiastic and energetic, to be unfortunately entirely without political capacity" (*ibid.*, pp. 13–14).

49. See Dilks, ed., *Cadogan Diaries*, p. 365, entry for March 24, 1941: ". . . Cabinet at 5. After we met, I got Transocean message that 7 Jugs are off tonight to sign Pact. Told Cabinet. A [Eden] is doing all that is possible, and that is unavailing. Can only ask G. J. [Gladwyn Jebb, chief executive officer to Dalton] to blow up the Jug train. But he probably can't do that." See also SOE memorandum, p. 14.

to London, although he never actually saw any of Campbell's dispatches.⁵⁰ Obviously, the explanation must lie elsewhere.

The SOE, of course, was not the only service or agency involved on the British side. Apart from the regular diplomatic staff, three services, represented by the attachés, and the SIS were all working in one way or another on the various problems associated with the effort to stiffen the resolve of the Yugoslavs. At the same time, however, the separate units were in competition with each other, were jealous of their contacts, and generally told each other as little as possible about their own activities. Campbell and Dew, therefore, acted as a clearing house for information and intelligence. Information passed on by the SOE had to be weighed against information provided by other sources, as well as measured against the minister's own personal views. It is possible that Campbell, reflecting his government's concern with the military requirements of the defense of South Serbia and Greece, relied most heavily upon information provided by his military attaché, Lieutenant Colonel C. S. Clarke. Clarke's role is obscure, and has received little or no mention except in Sir Alexander Glen's recent reminiscences.⁵¹ He was certainly important in some respects, however, for he had extremely close relations with Colonel Žarko Popović, the chief of Yugoslav Military Intelligence. Their relationship went beyond strictly intelligence matters, to consideration of postoccupational planning, with which the SOE was also involved. Clarke and Popović met regularly, and it was through Clarke that Glen, for example, first met Draža Mihailović in the late summer of 1940. Masterson, the head of the SOE in Belgrade, was later also in touch with Mihailović.⁵² It is conceivable, therefore, that Clarke, through Popović, supplied details of the few elements within the army prepared to take action, and Campbell took Clarke's word rather than the SOE's.⁵³

But why would Campbell discount the SOE information? A possible clue is suggested by his own admission a year after the events in Belgrade. In a letter to Orme Sargent from Washington in July 1942 he indicated that he had had no great respect for the SOE: "they did a great deal of [political dabbling] in Yugoslavia, and usually did it pretty ignorantly." He added, significantly, that

50. George Taylor, communication to David A. T. Stafford, December 1976.

51. Glen, *Footholds*, pp. 51, 61–63. Sir Alexander has also discussed the coup with the author in August 1976. See also C. L. Sulzberger, *A Long Row of Candles: Memoirs and Diaries, 1934–1954* (New York, 1969), pp. 100 and 126.

52. That Mihailović was in contact with the military attaché and Masterson over matters relating to postoccupational planning prior to the coup has been confirmed to the author by Sir Alexander Glen, who was, at least formally, assistant naval attaché in Belgrade. This may help explain the later sense of commitment to Mihailović. On the other hand, according to Taylor, Clarke (the military attaché) told Taylor nothing of such discussions, and Mihailović's name did not appear in that part of the Taylor/Masterson report dealing with postoccupational matters.

53. Although Clarke saw Kosić, the army chief of staff, on March 25, his report of that meeting makes it clear that there was no discussion of any coup; rather, it indicates that Clarke was impressed by Kosić's resignation in the face of events, and deals with his unrealistic assessment of the army's ability to resist the Germans (see Campbell to FO, no. 537, March 26, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30259, R3069). More likely sources for army information about a coup would come from Clarke's contacts with the Reserve Officers' Club, to which he and MacDonald were frequent visitors (see Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, p. 254).

they were "always toying with the idea of staging a *coup d'état* in favour of the very political leaders who are now [1942] in the Yugoslav Government. *I always resisted this on the ground that the political leaders in question were well past their prime, and that it was not at all certain that they any longer represented Yugoslav opinion*, and I was certainly sorry that, after the *coup d'état*, these men were called into the Government by Simović."⁵⁴ If this is not to be dismissed as merely wisdom with the benefit of hindsight, it is an extremely significant admission. It raises a reasonable suspicion that Campbell deliberately failed to pass on to the Foreign Office the information relayed to the SOE by Trifunović on March 24 and 25 because he disapproved of the conspirators and even, perhaps, because he disapproved of a *coup d'état* against the regime.

Whatever the explanation, it was not until March 26 that the first mention was made to the Foreign Office of General Simović and the air force conspirators. This came in a telegram of March 26 from MacDonald, the air attaché, to the Foreign Office, for the director of intelligence at the Air Ministry. Dispatched at 7:40 p.m., and not arriving in the Foreign Office until *after* the coup had begun, the telegram reported an interview MacDonald had had that morning with General Simović, "head of an organisation intending to carry out a *coup d'état*." The salient points of the telegram were that (a) according to Simović, "we should not have to wait more than a few days before *coup d'état*"; (b) Simović expected war with Germany to result, and hoped Britain would defend Salonika; (c) Simović predicted that the Yugoslavs would also attack in Albania; (d) Simović asked what help the British could offer and seemed satisfied with the very vague assurances MacDonald could give him; (e) it was probable that the prince regent would not be permitted to remain in power after the coup, but would be handed over to the British. MacDonald concluded his report by saying that Simović was clearly "now committed to a course of action from which nothing could deter him."⁵⁵

Simović had given the British everything they could have wished, and it is ironic that the report reached London after the coup began. Here was a virtual promise to fight against the Italians in Albania and to join in the war against Germany, regardless of any firm commitment of British material support. The information conveyed in the telegram undoubtedly was in large part responsible for the high expectations of the Simović government and for the subsequent disappointment when it failed to live up to its promise.

What exactly was MacDonald's role in the events of March 1941? Four days after the coup, on March 31, the air attaché reported in a telegram to the Air Ministry that "the Chief organiser of the *coup d'état* was General Mirkovitch, Chief of Air Staff, with whom I was in close touch, before and during

54. Campbell to Sargent, July 1, 1942, in PRO F.O. 371/33490, R4518/G. Emphases added.

55. Air attaché to FO, no. 536, March 26, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30253, R3071/G. See also War Office 201/1575 16a. A report of this meeting came immediately into German hands and was forwarded to Berlin the same day: "a lengthy conversation took place this morning between the British air attaché and General Simovitch, during which precise details were discussed regarding British aid in the event of war with the Axis powers, which Simovitch regards as unavoidable should the *coup d'état* proceed" (von Heeren to Berlin, March 26, 1941, quoted in the *German White Paper*, PRO F.O. 371/29803, R7844).

events, has been [*sic*] a personal friend for over two years. . . ." MacDonald also implied that he had been privy to details of the coup for some time beforehand, when he mentioned that it had been difficult for him not to "give away the show" when approached by pilots and even commanders of air force units asking his advice about leaving the country.⁵⁶ It is presumably on the basis of these two reports that Elisabeth Barker claims that MacDonald was the main contact with the conspirators. There is, however, good reason to doubt her claim and to agree with Jozo Tomasevich that a more important figure was Mapplebeck, the "assistant air attaché." According to Tomasevich, Mirković, who was more important in the planning of the coup than Simović, later claimed that a crucial moment came when he was strongly urged, on March 26, by T. G. Mapplebeck, "a long time operative of the British Intelligence Service in Belgrade," to carry through a coup within the following forty-eight hours.⁵⁷

Mapplebeck was in many ways much better situated than MacDonald to have intimate contacts with members of the Yugoslav Air Force. An expatriate Englishman, who had flown with the Royal Flying Corps in France in World War I, and had spent two years in a German prisoner of war camp, Mapplebeck had lived continuously in Belgrade since 1923. In addition to developing his own business interests, he also acted as agent for the Hawker Aircraft and Rolls-Royce companies, played an important part in negotiations for the purchase of British military aircraft by the Royal Yugoslav Air Force in the 1930s, and as a consequence developed close contacts with individuals such as Simović and Mirković. He certainly passed on information which came his way to the Air Ministry in London, but, more important than that, he had also developed a very close relationship with Mirković. In the spring of 1940, before the collapse of France, Mirković began passing on to Mapplebeck the weekly intelligence summaries of the Yugoslav General Staff, copies of which Mapplebeck duly passed on to MacDonald. It was because of this activity that Mapplebeck, in 1940, was appointed honorary attaché at the legation, and it was probably also why Mirković gained the idea that Mapplebeck was an intelligence agent (which, conversely, led to the view that Mirković was a British agent).⁵⁸

Mapplebeck, because of his longstanding relationship and personal friendship with Mirković, was undoubtedly in a stronger position to be acquainted with Mirković's plans for a coup than MacDonald, even though MacDonald saw

56. Air attaché to Air Ministry, March 31, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30209, R3711/G.

57. Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, p. 45.

58. According to Campbell, in 1942 he was told by Ninčić (the Yugoslav foreign minister) that "Mirković had stated before a number of people in Egypt that while still in Belgrade before the coup d'état he had already been an agent of the British. This of course made his position impossible *vis-à-vis* other Yugoslavs and made it impossible for the Government to have anything further to do with him. If he was indeed an 'agent' I did not know of it; I knew he was in confidential contact with the Air Attaché and told him that a coup d'état was being planned but he never furnished details or dates, and I should doubt that he ever received pay from any of our Intelligence or other services" (Campbell to Sargent, July 1, 1942, in PRO F.O. 371/33490, R4518/G). Mirković, however, did later receive a pension from His Majesty's Government, and in 1968, while living in London, he admitted that "he had been passing on military intelligence to the British, derived from the Yugoslav mission in Berlin" (see *Times* [London], March 23, 1968).

a great deal of Mirković for professional reasons. On March 25, the day the Tripartite Pact was signed, and the day that Trifunović assured the SOE that the plans for a coup had a 99 percent chance of success, a meeting took place between Mirković and Mapplebeck. Mapplebeck strongly urged Mirković to launch a coup as soon as possible, and Mirković replied by assuring him that one could be expected shortly. Mirković apparently did not seek any specific guarantees of supplies from Britain, such as Campbell had indicated were necessary.⁵⁹ It was only on March 26 that MacDonald had his interview with Simović, and it was not until March 31 that he revealed the importance of Mirković and claimed to have been kept fully informed of the progress of the coup by him before and during events. The conclusion must be that MacDonald claimed credit for what was primarily Mapplebeck's achievement. It should also be noted that MacDonald was not considered a reliable informant by the Foreign Office.⁶⁰

Although the importance of MacDonald or Mapplebeck in the relationship between the British legation and the leaders of the coup d'état should not be overemphasized, the Mapplebeck-Mirković meeting of March 25 adds to the mystery of Campbell's telegrams to the Foreign Office. Assuming that Campbell had been given all this information, why did none of it find its way into his exchanges with London? Or, if it did, why did he emasculate it and lead London to believe that a coup was only a remote possibility?⁶¹ Again, we are led back to his 1942 letter to Sargent, in which he denounced SOE activities. Significantly, he singled out Mapplebeck as one of the people whose "dabbling in

59. T. G. Mapplebeck, discussion with David A. T. Stafford, August 1976. Mapplebeck places the day of his meeting with Mirković before the day claimed by Tomasevich.

60. MacDonald sent a series of reports to the Air Ministry after the coup, in which he reported claims by an informant close to Simović that Yugoslav forces had crossed the frontier into Albania, and, later, information from Simović himself alleging that Prince Paul had been promised the crown and had twice tried to poison Prince Peter. Nicolls of the Foreign Office minuted: "this information . . . is very highly coloured and I am quite sure is untrustworthy. . . . I know, confidentially too, that the Air Ministry have not a high opinion of this officer's capabilities or character" (see the correspondence in PRO F.O. 371/30207/8, R3183/G, R3222/G, R3187, R3387/G, and R3496/G). On March 28, MacDonald reported that his informant had told him that "referring coup d'état he said staff work had been excellent and had all been worked out by a senior Air Force Officer (J.K.)." As J.K. were the initials used to denote Mirković, it indicated that MacDonald was being told for the first time of Mirković's role—which must throw grave doubt on his later claim of March 31, that he was in close touch with Mirković throughout the events (see PRO F.O. 371/30207, R3183/G).

61. Mapplebeck's relations with both the minister and MacDonald were bad, and it is conceivable that he did not tell either one of them about his meeting with Mirković, or that, if he told MacDonald, MacDonald kept the information to himself. Exactly what Campbell learned from the air attaché's office, and when he learned it, must remain open to question. As for the SOE's information, it might be argued that even if Campbell failed to pass the information on in full to London, this would not be significant in view of the SOE's own communications with London. However, two points should be noted: (1) Taylor clearly operated on the assumption that Campbell was forwarding all information to London, and (2) the SOE did *not* have their own channel to London (they were dependent on SIS W/T, and Taylor did not send "separate reports, in any regular fashion, by any channels") (George Taylor, communication to David A. T. Stafford, December 1976).

politics" he had opposed (although Mapplebeck was not SOE). Did he consider Mapplebeck's contacts and information as unreliable as that of the SOE? Informed of Mirković's leadership and promise of a coup, did he ignore it? And why did he let his air attaché report the interview with Simović, rather than pass on the information, or at least comment upon it, himself? Precise answers cannot be given to these questions, but there seems to be a *prima facie* case for suggesting that the British minister, for reasons which may have been quite legitimate, failed to pass on to London the full information available to him about the prospective coup (organized primarily by Mirković, but involving political figures close to the SOE), which, on March 27, overthrew the Cvetković government and the prince regent.

At best, this may have been no more than the exercise of the "admirable balance and judicious control" which Campbell is reputed to have employed in his running of the legation. As one participant has put it, Campbell was "an extremely cautious man, even for a diplomat," and he may have simply been unwilling to commit himself in any forecast to the Foreign Office which dealt with a rapidly changing and uncertain situation in which rumors of an impending coup abounded. At worst, his action may have represented a deliberate suppression of information dictated by a deep reluctance, which had ceased to be justified, to break relations with the prince regent and his government.⁶²

Whatever the explanation, there were those on the British side who were quick to claim credit for their part in encouraging the coup. On the morning after the coup, the *New York Times* correspondent phoned the British legation. "Who's there?," he asked; back came the answer "Bloody well everybody. We're having champagne. Come on."⁶³ Despite this unrestrained and understandable enthusiasm, the British were quick to emphasize for public relations purposes that the coup was a Yugoslav affair, however much it was to be welcomed. But this restraint clearly was not exercised internally. Apart from the air attaché, whose postcoup claims have been noted, the SOE was, predictably, the outstanding claimant. Even though Dalton noted in the privacy of his own diary that "it was the Air Attaché who went to Simović and finally persuaded him to act,"⁶⁴ he was not averse to claiming and accepting credit for the coup within Whitehall. On the day following the installation of the Simović government, the Defence Committee noted that "an expression of appreciation should be conveyed to Doctor Dalton for the part played by his organisation in bringing about the coup d'état in Yugoslavia."⁶⁵ Although the Simović government did not live up to expectations, the net effect of the SOE's part in the events "certainly improved our standing in Whitehall and was good for morale in Baker Street."⁶⁶ Moreover, Dalton had other strings to his bow, for example, sabotage plans being

62. No one on the British side, however, knew the exact timing of the coup, because it was brought forward by twenty-four hours in order to take advantage of the prince regent's departure for his hunting lodge on March 26. The SOE, for example, was not informed of the change in plans, and initially assumed that a counter-coup was taking place.

63. *New York Times*, March 28, 1941.

64. Dalton Diary, March 27, 1941.

65. DO(41)10th, March 27, 1941, in CAB 69/2. See also Dalton Diary, March 28, 1941; and COS(41)111th, March 27, 1941, in CAB 79/10.

66. Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular*, p. 63.

carried out by SOE representatives in Yugoslavia on the Danube. These plans had played a major part in the Taylor mission, and their success would also reflect favorably on the SOE. The details cannot concern us here, but it should be noted that Gladwyn Jebb, the chief executive officer of the SOE, went out of his way on April 2, 1941 to forward to the Foreign Office details of SOE activities in Yugoslavia after the coup.⁶⁷ And on April 30, when Dalton received the "first really good news about the Danube," he immediately sent Churchill a minute recording the news, providing copies "for other eminences."⁶⁸ In short, Dalton was only too keen to disprove the prime minister's skepticism of January about SOE sabotage activities. Indeed, Dalton was so eager to capitalize upon the successes of Taylor's mission that when Taylor finally returned to England on June 17, having been captured along with other members of the British legation in Belgrade by the Italians, he received immediate instructions from Dalton to produce a full report on SOE activities in the Balkans prior to the German invasion. This was the genesis of the SOE memorandum of June 24, 1941, and it is certainly no coincidence that on the next day Dalton, besides arranging for a debriefing dinner at which Eden was present, sent a report on SOE activities directly to Churchill—even though the next regular report was not due until September.⁶⁹ Dalton thus made every effort to use the SOE's role in Belgrade to the agency's full advantage. The story, however, grew in the telling; by 1957, when Dalton wrote his memoirs, he could claim "on March 20th [*sic*] the Yugoslav Government signed the Axis Pact. We sent a wire to our friends to use all means to raise a revolution. On March 27th there was a *coup* in Belgrade."⁷⁰ In reality, it was not quite that simple.

The effect of the British subversive efforts on the leaders of the coup and on Yugoslav opinion cannot be assessed here, but three broad conclusions about the British side may be drawn from the evidence considered above: First, although a coup d'état was under consideration and Campbell had full authority after March 24 to encourage such an action, it was viewed by the Foreign Office as a last resort only. The guiding consideration was to ensure that the Greek flank would not be turned and to secure southern Serbia. Until signature of the Pact, the hope remained that Prince Paul, the Oxford educated "honorary Englishman," would step back from the brink, and, even after signature, the British government's main concern was to make sure that the Cvetković government would resist subsequent German pressure. This approach was very largely the result of Campbell's reports from Belgrade, which did not indicate that a coup was imminent, and which insisted that a necessary condition for a coup was the British offer of arms supplies. Second, there appears to be a discrepancy between Campbell's assessments of the situation as transmitted to London and what was known about the development of the conspiracy by the SOE, at least prior to the air attaché's message of March 26. This may have been the result of the minister giving priority to concern about the army (and thus to speculation

67. Taylor to Nelson, March 31, 1941, in PRO F.O. 371/30213, R3466/G.

68. Dalton Diary, April 30, 1941. See also entries for April 3, 7, 17, 22, and 25.

69. Dalton to prime minister, September 2, 1941, in Dalton Papers.

70. Dalton, *The Fateful Years 1931-1945*, p. 373.

about possible army action) or of excessive diplomatic caution in a highly fluid situation, but there also appears to be a *prima facie* case for suggesting that Campbell disapproved of SOE contacts among the conspirators, and deliberately chose not to draw London's attention to them.⁷¹ Finally, though it would be invidious and unprofitable to attempt a minute analysis of the relative merits of the efforts by the SOE and the service attachés in subversive work, it is clear that there was considerable rivalry between them, and that as the direction of the British effort changed, so did the relative contribution of the SOE and the attachés. The SOE's political links, which were important in the early stages of the crisis, were overtaken in the later stages by the direct and close links between the air attaché's office and the air force conspirators. But however close these links, and whatever persuasion the British exercised, it is still clear that the initiative came from the Yugoslavs, and only by a stretch of the imagination can the British be said to have planned or directed the coup d'état.

71. After the final draft of this article was accepted and prepared for publication, the author had the opportunity to interview Sir Ronald Campbell in May 1977. With due allowance for the passage of thirty-six years, Sir Ronald's recollections largely support the author's arguments in that he recalls (a) that he had not finally decided by March 27 that a coup d'état was the best response to signature of the Pact, and that he was still doubtful of its military advantages; (b) that he regarded SOE contacts as rather peripheral, and was unaware of the degree to which they were involved in preparations for a coup d'état; (c) that his relations with MacDonald, the air attaché, were distant, and he has no recollection of seeing the telegram of March 26 reporting the interview with Simović; (d) that he was unaware of Mapplebeck's contacts with Mirković.

Thus, although it is incorrect to assume that the minister was informed of the air force contacts, it appears safe to say that he was less than enthusiastic about a coup d'état, that his assessment and support of subversive activities was thereby affected, and that his reservations were what was reflected in his reports to London. The claim by one SOE member that the minister was "one hundred percent with us in working for the coup" is, therefore, quite mistaken.

The author would like to thank Sir Ronald for his help, time, and hospitality.