

# BRITAIN AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA 1942-1946: CONSPIRACY THEORY OR CHAOS THEORY?<sup>46</sup>

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the background of British foreign policy and the emergence of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia within the second Yugoslavia. It suggests that there was a great uncertainty about the future of the territory in 1944 and British policy towards Tito was often based on speculation and ignorance of his plans for Macedonia after the conflict. The traditional Philhellenism of the British elite also played a part in policymaking. The prime factor in policy evaluation was to maintain a strong stable authority in Belgrade after the World War II and to resist the growth of Bulgarian and hence Russian influence in the wider region of the Southern Balkans.

**Key words:** World War II, Macedonia, British policy, diplomacy, the Balkans

## АПСТРАКТ:

Во овој труд се истражува позадината на британската надворешна политика и конституирањето на Социјалистичка Република Македонија во рамките на втора Југославија. Тој сугерира постоење на голема неизвесност за иднината на оваа територија во 1944 година, а британската политика спрема Тито не ретко беше заснована на шпекулации и незнаење за неговите планови во врска со Македонија по воениот судир. Традиционалниот еленофилизам на британската елита исто така одигра голема улога при несењето на одлуките. Главниот фактор во евалуацијата на политиката беше одржувањето на силна и стабилна власт во Белград по Втората светска војна и отпорот спрема растот на бугарското, а оттука и руското влијание во поширокиот регион на јужниот Балкан.

**Клучни зборови:** Втора светска војна, Македонија, британска политика, дипломатија, Балкан

The decline and collapse of the Axis occupation of the southern Balkans in the latter stages of World War II saw the return of uncertainty over the future of Macedonia and the re-emergence of the Macedonian Question after the interwar period when it had seemed to

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<sup>46</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the State University of Tetovo conference in April 2008 on 'Western Macedonia in World War II.

disappear. It is a truism to state that nobody in the British Foreign Office, in 1943, knew what would happen in Macedonia as a result of the uprisings against the Axis Occupation of Yugoslavia and Greece. In our historiography in Britain, recent Macedonian narrative has been built almost exclusively around the story of the Greek Civil War, and the development of the 'Truman Doctrine', where the struggle against communism in Greece was to prefigure the beginning of the wider Cold War. Yet the Cold War is over now, for half a generation, but much of the told story remains the same. In the historical literature of the Balkan region, this process is not, of course, unique or confined to Macedonia - similar obsolete and outdated patterns prevented understanding of the post-1990 crisis in many other places in the Balkan region, as Christopher Cviic, Carol Hodges, Brendan Simms and others have shown.

Nevertheless, there were certain parameters of expectation, particularly in Britain, which as a World War I victor was one of the progenitors of the First, Royalist Yugoslavia, after the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles was supposed to have resolved the nationality issue in the Balkans by the creation of the first Yugoslavia. In the mainstream British school of thought, the creation of this Yugoslavia has 'solved' the Macedonian Question, which had been a product of the collapsing Ottoman Empire. The violent clashes in Macedonia between Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian interests in the 1903-1913 periods seemed to have come to a historic conclusion, in that geographic Macedonia, as understood in antiquity, had been divided between Greece which had found its 'final' northern borders, and Yugoslavia, that had found its southern limits.<sup>47</sup> It was, of course, an entirely speculative engagement with recent history, and empty as a guide to the future.

The understandings - or misunderstandings - of recent history deeply affected the British policy in World War II<sup>48</sup>. In 1944, there was an intelligence crisis in London and Paris over Macedonia as much as over many recent issues in Iraq. There was little detailed knowledge of Tito's thinking about the future on many issues, and until the latter months of 1943 and the winter of 1944, it was not at all certain that Tito would in any case be victorious over the Chetnik opposition to the communist Partisan movement<sup>49</sup>. There were other long standing strands in British thinking for Balkan leaders to consider. One of the major importances was the strength of the Greek lobby within the British Foreign Office, the secret intelligence service in particular, which had always seen Bulgaria as a basically pro-German and pro-Russian surrogate and the post-Balkan Wars Macedonian Question as an invention of the Russians to increase their pressure on Greece. A Titoist takeover of Macedonia, while unwelcome insofar as Tito was a communist and until 1948 firmly within the Russian camp was nevertheless much better than

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<sup>47</sup> See 'The Macedonian Question 1893-1908 from Western Sources', by N.Lange Akhund, Columbia, New York, 1998 for a good introductory account of events after the foundation of IMRO. The seminal British book forming pre-1914 London opinion was 'Macedonia' by H.N.Brailsford, London,1906, along with the work of G.F.Abbott. For Central Power assumptions, see 'Austro-Hungarian documents relating to the Macedonian Struggle, 1896-1912', Ed.F.R.Bridge, Thessaloniki, 1976.

<sup>48</sup> See Elizabeth Barker's works for representative examples of post-1945 British official and semi-official thinking, as in 'British Policy in South East Europe in the Second World War', London,1976.

<sup>49</sup> There are numerous English language biographies of Tito, most of which neglect the national question in Yugoslavia and often have hagiographic and uncritical attitudes towards the biographical subject, i.e. Phyllis Auty's work.

Bulgarian dominance, provided the former did not go as far as to affect the Greeks interests or border. A major factor in British official thinking was the image problem of the Macedonian themselves, as Andrew Rossos and others have shown - Macedonians had been involved with the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in 1934, and the heritage of IMRO, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation was (with the contemporaneous Serbian 'Black Hand' organisation) essentially that of the first modern terrorist organisation<sup>50</sup>. IMRO was feared in its day in Europe as much as Islamic extremists are feared at the moment, and it was hardly an advertisement for British support for a Macedonian socialist republic after 1944<sup>51</sup>.

A second major intelligence issue was the very divergent political viewpoints of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). British Liaison Officers attached to the resistance movements themselves, who almost always tended to adopt the standpoint of the forces they were attached to, so that in Albania men like Julian Amery and David Smiley working in the north were anti-communist and pro- 'nationalist', while others attached to Hoxha's Partisans in the south like Reginald Hibbert and H.W.Tilman tended to see the war through left wing eyes. This deeply conditioned the kind of information that eventually reached the Foreign and War Offices in London.

In Serbia, of greater direct relevance to the future of Macedonia, there was a similar split, between the dominant Deakin-MacLean group around Tito, who played a key role in Tito's rise to power, and the firmly anti-communist figures like Michael Lees who worked with Draza Mihailovic's pro-Royalist Chetniks, and saw the anti-Axis struggle as having been betrayed by pro-communist subversives with the Special Operations Executive in Bari regional HQ, in London and amongst the field officers.

What did London really know about what was happening? In the confused conditions of Partisan warfare and without modern communications technology, inevitably there were serious difficulties in intelligence reporting to London. But equally important were the ideological constructs that were a major obstacle to understanding. Most of the reporting from British Military Liaison Officers (BLO) attached to the Partisans came from people like Fitzroy McLean and Bill Deakin who were physically and in Deakin's case politically close to Tito<sup>52</sup>. As with Albania, hardly any of the SOE field officers had any wider empirical or academic study of Yugoslavian society from pre-war experience. Of the northern BLO group, only one, Bill Hudson, had detailed knowledge, in his case of pre-war Serbia as a result of his work as a mining engineer for the Selection Trust organisation in the 1930's. He could thus speak good Serbo-Croat.

None of the Yugoslav-based BLO's had pre-1939 experience in northern (Yugoslav) Macedonia at all. There was no inter-war 'Macedonian ' narrative for even the most educated

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<sup>50</sup> See Andrew Rossos 'The British Foreign Office and the Macedonian National Identity, 1918-1941', in *Slavic Review*, No 53, 1994 P.369 ff.

<sup>51</sup> This image prevailed for a long time in the United States also, see Duncan .M. Perry, 'The Politics of Terror-The Macedonian Revolutionary Movements 1893-1908', Duke, 1988.

<sup>52</sup> Deakin's politics are often rather unclear, but he was certainly well to the left of Maclean, in British political terms

and well informed British officials to draw upon, apart from that derived from IMRO terrorism and Greek nationalism which although of some influence in London, had none of the traditional Philhellenist input of the Civil War and post-1949 Civil War period with the ascendancy of the Royalist Right<sup>53</sup>. The main literary influence on that generation, Rebecca West, in 'Black Lamb and Grey Falcon', saw the whole issue of Macedonia through South Serbian eyes (as she saw much else), another conditioning factor for British elite views. The Greek lobby in London was perhaps less directly concerned in this ideology formation than is sometimes alleged. In terms of the sociology of London Hellenism, the very influential Greek exile shipping community was dominated by families which originated in the eastern Aegean, who no doubt embodied the nationalist views of the Greek Right on most things, but had no particular connection with Macedonia. This did not change substantially until twenty years after 1949, in the 1960's, with the arrival of the Latsis family on the London scene, with its roots in Kavala. It is also worth noting that in the internal discourse of the Civil War period, Macedonia does not play a dominant role until the so-called 'Third Period' of the war, particularly between 1947 and 1949. Before that, the pro-communist ELAS and Democratic Army forces are presented by Athens as pro-Russian and a threat to Greece as a whole, rather than specifically 'Macedonian', although a high percentage of Democratic Army soldiers were in fact from geographic Macedonia.

There was little immediate pre-war experience for diplomats to draw on. In the pre-1939 period, geographic Macedonia did not figure much in British Yugoslav policy, as it was poor and backward and apart from Tetovo region had few mineral resources. It had in any case lost its identity within the pre-1939 Royalist *banovina* system where it was merely part of 'South Serbia', or of Greece. Even those with a sympathetic knowledge of Yugoslav communism, - which in London official circles meant virtually nobody - could not easily foresee the emergency of a new semi-state unit called the People's Republic of Macedonia within a socialist Yugoslavia. Yet the Titoists did not disguise their intentions. The founding of ASNOM, the Anti-Fascist Assembly of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, in 1942, with its explicit commitment to Macedonians as one of the five constituent people of Yugoslavia was of course known in London, but it was mainly seen by Prime Minister Churchill and the Foreign and War Offices as a positive move that would help galvanize the military struggle against the Axis in a part of Yugoslavia where the Partisan movement had been slow to develop<sup>54</sup>.

The heart of the Yugoslav Partisan resistance was in Montenegro, Bosnia and northern and central Serbia. The Yugoslav communist party was weak in Macedonia; in fact it was difficult for Tito and Djilas to form an adequate party at all. Axis power was well entrenched, with major fortifications along the very limited number of usable asphalt roads in the tough mountainous

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<sup>53</sup> For a comprehensive picture of how Macedonia was subsumed within Royalist Yugoslavia, see Nada Boskowska, 'Das Jugoslawische Makedonien 1918-1941 Eine Randregion zwischen Repression und Integration', Vienna, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> There is a very large primary and secondary literature on ASNOM, embodying different national viewpoints, for the most part. For an introduction in English to official Skopje government positions in the post-communist period, see 'Historical Dictionary of Macedonia' Ed. V. Georginva and S. Konechni, Skopje and London, 1998. For mainstream Greek thinking, see 'Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia', E.Kofos, Thessaloniki, 1964, and for Macedonian Albanian views under Titoism,, 'ASNOM-1' Ed.V.Vangeli, 'Flaka',Skopje, 1984.

terrain controlling all wheeled vehicle movements. In this situation, it was natural for some policymakers in London to see ASNOM, in Macedonia, in 1943, as mainly a military and resistance organisation, and to not inquire too closely into what it might symbolise politically, or what influence it might have on the post-World War II Macedonian Question. Churchill, in particular, had little interest in the details of Titoist post-war policy for the entire country, embodied in his famous remark to Fitzroy McLean that he has no plans to live in Yugoslavia after 1945, and if he had little interest in the details of Belgrade, he has none in what happened in Skopje, beyond a strong residual Hellenism that was to shape British Greek Civil War policy. In fact, as we know, in the Skopje narrative of the modern post-1991 Republic of Macedonia, the founding assembly of ASNOM is seen as the beginning of the modern Macedonian nation state - but it did not seem like that at the time, in western Europe in particular.

The history of ASNOM has yet to be written, in terms of a major comprehensive study, but some issues are becoming clearer. What is very unclear is how little London and Paris and Washington really knew about what was happening in Vardar Macedonia. Their perceptions were formed by the fact that inter-war Serbian regimes did not recognise the Macedonian nationality or the Macedonian Question, and Western capitals post-Versailles did not object to Belgrade attempts to systematically try to serbianise the population<sup>55</sup>. The work of Rebecca West and other publicists like Nora Alexander tended to suggest that this process had been fairly comprehensive and successful, and IMRO was a hangover from the past, and their views were in turn reinforced by the heritage of Seton Watson and the British intellectuals involved in the formation of the first Yugoslavia in London University at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Moscow knew more but tended only to see the political struggle as important in terms of inner-Comintern politics. This was true even before the Yalta Conference when Stalin knew that Yugoslavia was his for the taking after the war finished. The Comintern remained a battleground between Yugoslav and Bulgarian aspirations, as it had been prior to 1939. Many Macedonian communists saw their territory as a colony of Belgrade, and demanded radical action to correct this, but Tito did not agree. It is certain that Tito's problems with the Macedonian party had long predated the foundation of ASNOM. This is traditionally seen as that of the shortage of communist cadres, and depends on the writing of Ivo Banac. But Banac can be questioned for basing his analysis too much on the 1948 crisis and the Stalin-Tito split, and it is not as applicable in the pre-World War II period.

The problem for Stalin was not new, and long predated the Second World War. Within the international communist movement problems over the Macedonian Question appeared almost as soon as the Comintern was founded, and while Lenin was still alive. In 1923, the Comintern had pronounced that the right long term solution to the Macedonian problem was for national autonomy within the framework of Yugoslavia, but many Macedonian communists themselves

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<sup>55</sup> It is, of course, arguable, that the Treaty of Lausanne was a more potent influence on Belgrade Macedonian policy post-1923 and on the Balkans generally, than the Versailles Treaty itself, with its legitimisation of mass population movements between Greece and Turkey that produced largely ethnically homogenous new states.

were only able to envisage this as occurring within Bulgaria. The Bulgarian party continued to recruit in parts of Macedonia right through the First Yugoslav period, and some pro-Bulgarian 'heretics' were still in gaol in Yugoslavia as late as 1960<sup>56</sup>.

In the so-called 'Third Period' of the Comintern policy, after 1928, a separate Macedonian state had been briefly foreseen, but the CPY reasserted control over the policy with the end of the ultra-leftist Third Period and the onset of the Popular Front in the early 1930's. In his book, Stephen Clissold notes on relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1973 that as early as 1938 Macedonian communist groups were trying to form their own party that was independent of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), and in September 1942 the controversy had reached the point where Tito had to get Comintern support for his inner-party crackdown and expulsion of various oppositional Macedonian communists. His problem was compounded by the fact that the Secretary of the Comintern for a long time had been the 'old Bolshevik' and widely respected figure of Georgi Dimitrov, who was a Bulgarian, and saw the future of Macedonia as within a Balkan Federation, rather than as a constituent unit of a new communist Yugoslavia.

Tito's main adversary pre-1939 was Metodi Satarov (known in the Comintern as 'Sarlo'), the leader of the Macedonian party who was born a Bulgarian and had once been a member of the Bulgarian Workers party. Whatever the background, and the links between these events and the foundation of ASNOM, which is not really relevant to this paper, the salient point is that even then, long before the Greek Civil War, Tito was repressing the national aspirations of a major opinion-national group within his nascent state territory, and centralising control of it from Belgrade. This was what interested London.

In terms of modern politics and human rights, this might be seen as retrograde but to Churchill and the British government at the time, this was an entirely positive feature of Tito, and perhaps helps explain some of the strength of British support for the Partisans - and incidentally, of course - helps undermine the 'conspiracy theory' put forward by Michael Lees, Julian Amery and the Right in London post-war. There were far deeper political forces at work than a simple pro-communist 'conspiracy theory' could account for within the Special Operations Executive or elsewhere in London. It had been possible for the British Prime Minister to understand from his close relationship with Fitzroy Maclean, a fellow Tory aristocrat by background, that Tito was open to outside influences in a way many communist leaders of the period were not, and would listen to British advice on major issues<sup>57</sup>. Churchill was looking for a strong leadership in post-war Yugoslavia and where he hoped he could cash the cheque of British support with Tito against the Royalists and to turn Tito to at least a degree against Moscow. In fact the policy turned out to be much more effective than its progenitors could have ever dreamed, as events in 1948 showed. The British Prime Minister was carrying on strands of

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<sup>56</sup> Interview by James Pettifer with Georgi Petkov, Skopje, 1995

<sup>57</sup> See 'Eastern Approaches', London, 1962, where Maclean sets out clearly what he felt could be achieved with Tito. It is worth bearing in mind, when studying Maclean and Deakin's works, that both felt they had been proved right by post-World War II developments, particularly after 1948.

policy that long pre-dated the World War II, to support strong centralised 'Yugoslav' government as a barrier against German influence in the Balkans, and Hapsburg influence before that.

Where did this leave the Albanian communities within what is now the modern Republic of Macedonia/FYROM? And the Albanian national question? The Albanians had benefited from the Axis occupation, and under the Italian-occupied parts of the Western Macedonian and Kosovar Albanian-majority lands, had a substantial degree of self-rule and various education and cultural rights that were not recovered until the Ohrid Accords in 2001. Ethnic Albanians, like the Bulgarians, were on the wrong side when the war was over, the losing side, never an enviable position in any period of history. In his memoir of his work as a visiting BLO based in Dibra in Albania, Reginald Hibbert describes the confusion in the military situation around Tetovo and Gostivar in winter of 1943-1944, much of which was dominated by the difficult relations between the CPY and the Communists in Albania itself, who were seeking to establish their authority in the western Macedonian communities.

Only a few Kosovar Albanians had fought with Tito, and fewer still from western Macedonia. British policy was very unclear. Hibbert considered that the original Davies leadership of the overall SOE missions had considered some form of 'Greater Albania' was inevitable after the war ended, but the Foreign Office in London had been unaware of this orientation for some time. Hibbert comments, 'It was difficult to believe the Foreign Office could have known about it, as the FO regarded Yugoslavia as an allied country towards which Britain had obligations, while it was not sure that Albania was a viable country or what would happen to it after the war.'

In these circumstances, the British support of the Partisans in Western Macedonia was small and irregularly distributed, whereas German aid, in troops and materials, continued to Fiqri Dine and his pro-Axis militia until the end of the fighting. From the point of view of London, it seemed best to acknowledge what Hibbert calls Tito's force majeure in the region, and consign the Albanian fighters, both followers of Mehmet Shehu's Albania National Liberation army spill over forces after the Battle of Dibra, and the few local western Macedonian groups who were actually pro-communist, to the not very tender mercies of the new order that was to be imposed from Belgrade.

In conclusion, it is possible to emphasize how much British policy rested on anti-German, anti-Central Powers assumptions, where stable central authority in Belgrade to follow the chaos of the war was largely the be all and end all, and that thread can of course be traced on after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 right through the close relationship with Tito to the support and sustenance given to the Milosevic regime in Belgrade post-1990. It was a policy that technically could be defended in terms of real politic and the British special relationship with Serbia and Greece, but it was impossible to sustain under the pressures of the post-communist violent conflicts in the region, the emergence of the national questions, and modern principles of human rights and national self-determination. The burden of this difficult history, nevertheless, remains over Macedonia, as the current situation of the state indicates.

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