

BRITAIN, YUGOSLAVIA AND THE ONSET OF THE COLD WAR
1945-1947

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the changing perceptions of British foreign policy makers towards Yugoslavia, 1945-47 in the context of wider British interests in south-east Europe and the emerging Cold War. It argues that two views of the Tito regime emerged, one which sought to explain Yugoslav foreign policy in terms of totalitarianism and the monolithic Soviet bloc and the alternative view which perceived in Tito's leadership the potential for independent action.

The spring of 1945 saw the resolution of a paradox which had bedevilled British policy towards Yugoslavia since 1943: the unification of the Royal Government with Tito's Anti-Fascist Council had brought to an end the embarrassment endured by the British of being committed to opposing sides in a domestic political quarrel. However, British Government perceptions of Yugoslavia remained paradoxical in the early post-war years. On the one hand the triumph of a communist dominated regime and the country's submergence in, and ready identification with, the Soviet bloc seemed to indicate to the British that it should be written off as a potentially malignant influence which stood for the extension of communism throughout the region. On the other hand, there remained a question mark over the nature of the Tito government and its relationship with the Soviet Union. To what extent was Yugoslav policy merely a reflection of Soviet policy, or was Tito acting in some measure independently? Although it is the first interpretation that predominated in British policy-making circles in the period under discussion, the second also retained some currency.

The Trieste crisis of 1945 was of course a watershed, not only in terms of British perceptions of the new Yugoslav regime, but also in defining a post-war relationship with the Soviet Union. It was, indeed, a foretaste of the scenario which would be played out more dramatically still in Berlin some years hence. British reactions to the Trieste crisis of 1945 and their policy thereafter cannot be understood without first setting these events within the context of British interests in this region. Most imme-

diately, British policy was rooted in the exigencies of the Grand Alliance and also in pre-war experiences. The spectre of the Spanish civil war was frequently invoked in London between 1941 and 1943 as it seemed a possibility that Britain and the Soviet Union might find themselves, through supporting respectively conservative and revolutionary resistance groups, ranged once more against one another in a highly contentious civil war which would have implications well beyond Yugoslavia's geographical frontiers. The decision made in late 1943 to direct military aid exclusively to the Partisan resistance owes its origins partly to such concerns (Lane, 1996). However it was also bound up with immediate preoccupations about tactical necessities for defeating nazism.

There was also a framework of more traditional concerns which gave Britain a particular interest in Yugoslavia. The Balkans had long been a barrier to Russian expansionism and Britain, which after the war would retain primary responsibility for Western commitments in the Mediterranean and Middle East, wanted to maintain it in this function. It was axiomatic within the Foreign Office, from 1944 onwards, that the Soviet Union should not be permitted to penetrate the Mediterranean through the rise of communist-dominated regimes in the region. Indeed, Yugoslavia was seen as the missing link in a line of defence against Soviet encroachment and as a possible threat to the position of influence which Britain sought to establish in Greece and Italy. The late Elisabeth Barker, for one, has argued that in this lay the explanation of the 50-50 share proposed by Churchill to Stalin in Moscow in October 1944. Certainly, the British Government had, in its dealings with Tito, kept in mind the need to establish a working relationship with the post-war Yugoslav government (Barker, 1976, 140-147; FO 371 33470 R6363/178/92, 7. 6. 1944).

British thinking about Trieste fitted into this grander design. The question had come up during the Churchill-Tito talks in Naples in August 1944 and the Supreme Allied Commander of Mediterranean Forces, Field Marshal Harold Alexander, had travelled to Belgrade in February 1945 to establish the western allies' right for military purposes to occupy the city and port of Trieste and enough of the hinterland to gain access to the Ljubljana gap.

Asense of British perceptions of Yugoslavia in the context of wider political thinking at this juncture can be garnered from an often quoted minute by the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden to Prime Minister Churchill: 'Our present policy towards Yugoslavia', he wrote in January 1945, 'is... realistic and not over ambitious. It recognises that Yugoslavia has not the same long-term strategic and political importance for us as Greece or for that matter Italy, and that Yugoslavia lies outside or rather on the edge of the area of our major interests' (FO 371 48816 R19662/6/92, 18. 1. 1945). Eden continued that British policy was based 'on 50-50 agreement, the principle of which is in effect that Yugoslavia should be a sort of neutral area between the British and Russian zones of influence... Yugoslavia is likely to develop into the most pow-

erful and influential of the Balkan countries; if we abandon all claim to advise or express our views on the conduct of Yugoslav policies, we shall lose one principal means of influencing Balkan affairs as a whole'.

The significance of this suggestion that Anglo-Yugoslav relations could be used as a means to influence, should not be overestimated. During the latter stages of the Second World War the Post-Hostilities Planning Sub-committee prepared an analysis which concluded that above all Britain must avoid obstructing Soviet demands where these did not conflict with vital British interests. Vital interests, as defined by the Chiefs of Staff did not include Eastern Europe. A Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee paper of December 1944 elaborated on this point, predicting that the Soviet Union would seek to use this region as a buffer zone (Barker, 1981, 290-291; Thomas, 1986, 309-310). Meanwhile, the so-called Percentages Agreement of October 1944, in which Churchill appeared to recognise Soviet predominance in Romania in return for a similar recognition of the British position in Greece suggests that although the Prime Minister was, by reserving a percentage share, signalling British intentions to maintain a foothold, he was also accepting Soviet predominance in the region!

Historians have sometimes criticised the British for indulging in romanticism about Balkan resistance, but British policy in this context can also be interpreted as indicating a certain realism which extended to having a clear idea of where precisely the limits on Soviet expansion would (and could) be set. Italy, Greece, Austria and the port of Trieste as well as its hinterland, marked that line. There was never the slightest question about this; on this issue the British, and indeed the Americans, were not prepared to negotiate and the scramble for the occupation of the city which occurred at the end of April 1945 served clear notice on this point (FO 371 50787 U650/51/70, FO minute, 3. 2. 1945).

In terms of its impact on British thinking, the Trieste crisis may have increased the cynicism with which the Churchill government regarded the Tito regime, but its principal significance resides in its contribution to the onset of an atmosphere in London in which the zero-sum logic which was to limit policy options during the Cold War began to take shape. Although it was with Tito's forces that the troops of General Freyburg competed, there was in London a growing sense that Tito was merely the catspaw of Moscow's foreign policy.

Several events contributed to this perception. The first was the forthrightness of Tito's declaration of sole allegiance to Moscow following the conclusion of the Soviet-Yugoslav treaty of friendship in mid-April. This treaty, which fitted well with the pattern of the previous year when Tito had levanted from under British protection only to show up in Moscow, caused Churchill to record this as just 'another proof of how vain it is to throw away our substance in Titoland' (FO 371 48812 R7022/6/92,

1 Much has been written on this subject. Among the more enlightening are Barker (1976); Siracusa (1979).

18. 4. 1945). The Prime Minister's correspondence with Eden in April reveals that he had already concluded that British interests in Yugoslavia should be largely written off and that energies should be devoted towards securing Italian stability as a west European bulwark instead. Churchill was adamant that the submergence of central and western Europe into the Russian sphere had to be prevented: to this end he saw in Tito's claims on Trieste an opportunity to 'split the Italian Communist Party' which was a source of concern in London owing to the spectre it raised of communist influence gaining ground through the electoral system (FO 371 48812 R7022/6/92, 18. 4. 1945).

Regarding Trieste, it was the timing of the Yugoslav climb-down - which closely followed Western diplomatic representations to Stalin - which was interpreted in London as an indication that Yugoslav ambitions were being used as a vehicle for Soviet policies. More ominously, it seemed that Stalin was prepared to pursue these policies to a point little short of armed conflict. It has to be said that the British Embassy in Belgrade dissented from this view and that the Ambassador, Ralph Stevenson was inclined to blame the crisis primarily on perceived machinations of Tito's General Staff and of the two hard-liners, Generals Jovanovic and Terzic in particular (FO 371 48813 R7941/6/92, 4. 5. 1945). However, such arguments found little sympathy in London. Orme Sargent, then deputy Under Secretary at the Foreign Office immediately countered that, in his view, it was far more likely that Tito was counting on Stalin's support. Noel Charles, then British Ambassador in Italy, was in agreement: there was no doubt, Charles wrote, that the issue was being regarded by the Soviet Union as a test of the western allies will to stand up to Russian political domination and that it was likely that Tito had been promised 'moral, though probably no concrete support'. Stalin was hoping, perhaps, to use Trieste to persuade Italy to lean further in their direction and away from the British position (Pelly et al., 1984).

It is curious that senior officials in London overlooked Tito's subsequent public protestations about the lack of Soviet support but this in turn is indicative of the early readiness to accept the thesis of the monolithic Soviet bloc. The underlying conviction that Moscow was establishing such a bloc on totalitarian lines provided the basis for the evolution of British Cold War policy-making² The significance of this for British foreign policy in the summer of 1945 is spelt out in Orme Sargent's seminal memorandum, Stocktaking after VE Day, in which he argued that Britain must take a stand in Europe 'in the immediate future if the situation were to be prevented from crystallising to our permanent detriment' as British military power declined (FO 371 48814 R8038/6/92, 7. 5. 1945; FO 371 48814 R8268/6/92). To this end he identified

2 For example Bevin gave public expression to his misgivings when he told the House of Commons on 20 August 1945 that he had gained the impression that 'one kind of totalitarianism (was) being replaced by another' (Parliamentary Debates, 291-293).

the task of taking a stand in Eastern Europe as a sine qua non of preventing the extension of the Soviet sphere. Britain must, he argued keep its 'foot firmly in Finland, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria' challenging the Russians in these six countries, instead of waiting until the Soviet Government threatens us further west and south in Germany, Italy, Greece and in Turkey. Sargent added that such a challenge would be inevitable 'if we let Stalin pocket for good these six countries'.

The growing anxiety in London over the nature of Soviet intentions received a further boost at the London Council of Foreign Ministers in September and it was during these proceedings that the new Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and some of his officials began to suspect that the Soviet Union was not concerned simply with securing its western frontier by establishing friendly regimes in the Balkans but was actively seeking to challenge the British position of dominance in the Mediterranean. Bevin's private secretary, Pierson Dixon, wrote in his diary of 24 September, 'The main objective of the Russians is access to a base in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is therefore the real Russian challenge at this conference. And again on 2 September, 'a new point which seems to me to emerge... is the intensity of Russian jealousy of our position in the Mediterranean now that France and Italy have ceased to be first class powers. It may be that this is what the British came to believe because of the traditional British fears for their position in the Mediterranean, but clearly it had implications for the way in which the Yugoslav regime was regarded. Italy, Austria and Greece were seen in London as the demarcation line at which the Soviet advance had to be halted if British (and implicitly) western interests were to be defended and the Yugoslav Government was pressing territorial claims against each.

The direction of Bevin's policy towards Yugoslavia was first given clear expression following the Yugoslav elections in mid-November 1945. To Britain's Ambassador in Belgrade, Ralph Stevenson, Orme Sargent wrote on 24 November that there seemed 'little doubt that the Yugoslavs have the Government which the majority in fact want' and that 'having made no protest about the Tito-Subasic Agreement we really have no alternative but to acquiesce in the new regime' (FO 371 48874 R19610/130/92, 24. 11. 1945). Britain's policy, he stated, was to put a limit on Russian expansion in the Middle East and that given this context: 'Yugoslavia is strategically too important to our position in the Mediterranean and Greece and Italy for us to adopt a policy of sulking towards her.' He continued that Britain's object must be, 'therefore... to re-establish our influence in Yugoslavia and thus to challenge and even undermine that of the Soviet Union'.

Given the ideological affinity of the Tito Government to the Soviet Union and the extension to Yugoslavia of the closed system of economy, this was an ambitious objective. At the end of 1945, Britain had very little contact with the country which

could be exploited. Cultural exchanges were non-existent and in the spring of 1946 the Foreign Office acknowledged that 'for political, ideological and racial reasons, the new Yugoslavia looks to the Soviet Union in economic as in other matters and chooses to make herself the economic as well as the political satellite of Russia'. So long as the new regime lasts, it continued, 'it is to be expected that Yugoslavia will dispense with trading with the west unless in any given instance it is seriously embarrassing for her to do so' (FO 371 47857 N15085/18/38, 25. 10. 1945).

1946 was by any standards a disastrous year for Anglo-Yugoslav relations. Yugoslav intervention in the Greek civil war, which resumed in May, the Corfu Channel incident in which Yugoslav complicity was suspected, the closing of the British Reading Room in Belgrade, the failure of the Anglo-Yugoslav trade talks, all combined with the difficult negotiations over the Italo-Yugoslav frontier at the Paris Peace Conference to reduce official relations between London and Belgrade to a virtual impasse. In Trieste the fact that possession was nine-tenths of the law and that the frontier's demarcation was bound up with larger political issues meant that the western insistence on a solution which favoured the Italians could hardly fail over the long term to yield the result they desired. Given the belief which was taking root in both London and Washington that Soviet policy was intrinsically expansionist and revolutionary and could be delimited only by a show of western firmness, the significance of the sporadic civil demonstrations in Trieste in support of radical politicians, was considerable. Trieste, like Iran, had become a symbol of western determination to meet the Russian challenge in Europe and elsewhere.

There was one area with which the British had some success in their policy towards Yugoslavia and that was in the matter of the return of Yugoslav war criminals. This question was, by the end of 1946, threatening to compromise not only the British and Americans but also to provoke an issue in Yugoslav relations with Italy and Austria. At the time there were some 70,000 Yugoslav displaced persons in British and jointly administered Anglo-American camps in Italy and Austria, who were awaiting screening for collaborators and war criminals before being placed under the care of the appropriate international authorities. Shortly after the end of the war, the British and Americans had formally undertaken to repatriate for trial all members of the Yugoslav fascist Ustase and other wanted quislings found within areas under their control. This obligation was recognised by the Foreign Office as being something of a test of good faith between Yugoslavia and the Western Powers.

Until the end of 1946, however, the lack of manpower and other resources, as well as difficulties of co-ordination with other Allied authorities, meant that little progress had been made. Consequently Bevin, on his return from the New York Council of Foreign Ministers in December 1946 where the Italian Peace Treaty had been agreed for signature on 8 February 1947, informed his senior officials that he wanted every effort made to, put Britain right with Yugoslavia' (FO 371 66600

WR2/1/48, 23. 12. 1946). As things stood the 20,000 or so Yugoslav DPs would be handed over to Italian jurisdiction on the treaty's signature and it was already clear that the Italians did not have the resources to prevent would-be trouble makers from creating anti-Tito disturbances along the Italo-Yugoslav frontier. Moreover, the Badoglio government was known to be considering forcible repatriation of the refugees en masse.

Despite opposition from within and without the Foreign Office, Bevin appointed Fitzroy Maclean, now the Conservative Member of Parliament for Lancaster, to head a special Screening Mission which would investigate and put in hand screening operations firstly in Italy but also in Austria and the British zone of Germany³. Maclean's personal friendship with Tito was perceived by Bevin to be a particular asset and so it proved when a series of informal visits to Tito effectively cut short the Belgrade government's predisposition towards bureaucratic prevarication and a mutually beneficial agreement was signed in Bled on 8 September 1947 (Maclean, 1981/82; FO 371 67402 R3750/97/92, 8. 9. 1947). While the British had managed to escape from their earlier and somewhat imprudent undertaking to repatriate the Ustase automatically and to set a definite time limit on further requests for the handover of quislings, the Yugoslav Government received the right to be consulted formally in the screening process.

The Bled Agreement was a short lived success, however. Criticism of the agreement which began to emanate from Belgrade within a month of its signing, became increasingly vitriolic as the autumn wore on and when it was denounced by the Yugoslav Government at the beginning of December, British officials swiftly concluded that Tito had been declared out-of-order in Moscow for signing his own agreement with Britain and in the process had offended against the principles of Soviet policy (FO 371 66675 WR3810/10/25, 24. 12. 1947; 29. 12. 1947). With the benefit of hindsight, this analysis seems especially prescient.

During the course of Maclean's visit to Tito in Slovenia in June, the Yugoslav leader had taken the opportunity to deplore the general deterioration in Anglo-Yugoslav relations since the end of the war. Not confining himself simply to the refugee question Tito used the occasion to air a wide range of grievances from claims of British violations of Yugoslav air space to the state of affairs on the Austro-Yugoslav frontier. Maclean responded in kind. Tito, he said, was very unpopular in Britain for a number of reasons, among them a variety of actions over the previous two years including the downing of two unarmed American planes, the imprisonment of Archbishop Stepinac, the trial and execution of Draža Mihailović, but in general because of the consistently hostile attitude of the Yugoslav government towards its former allies (FO 371 67440 R13091/1430/92, 23. 6. 1947). To this Tito wryly ob-

3 I have explored British policy towards the Yugoslav displaced persons question in Putting Britain right ... (1992, 217-246).

served that a 'prerequisite for any radical improvement in them was a fundamental change in the relationship of Soviet Russia with the United States'.

Conclusion

Indeed, the pivotal issue in British relations with Yugoslavia in this period is clearly the nature of Yugoslavia's relationship with the Soviet Union and the way in which this was perceived in the West. In the immediate post war years, the Western perception of communism as monolithic and totalitarian was extended to the whole region of the Soviet sphere without any allowances for the local characteristics or historical factors which were ultimately to make the experience of communism in Yugoslavia unique. This tendency was reinforced by Bevin who was known to be suspicious of communists.

Nevertheless Tito's independence of mind had been detected by British liaison officers who had close contact with him during the war and this characteristic was subsequently commented upon from time to time by officials in London and Belgrade. It was this which underlay Bevin's approach to the refugee question. Until the summer of 1948, however, British policy was based primarily on the assumption that the difficulties they encountered in dealing with Yugoslavia were essentially a reflection of the problems that existed between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. The idea that Moscow was the brake rather than the accelerator on Yugoslav foreign policy did not really become conventional wisdom within the Foreign Office until 1949 by when the hostility of the Soviet bloc towards the Tito government had been shown to have deep-seated foundations.

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VELIKA BRITANIJA, JUGOSLAVIJA IN ZAČETEK HLADNE VOJNE
1945-1947

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POVZETEK

Članek raziskuje spreminjajoče se poglede britanskih zunanjepolitičnih dejavnikov na Jugoslavijo v času od 1945-1947 v smislu širših britanskih interesov v jugovzhodni Evropi in bližajoči se hladni vojni. Pojavila sta se dva pogleda na Titov režim. Prvi je poskušal razložiti jugoslovansko politiko v smislu totalitarizma in monoličnega sovjetskega bloka. Alternativni pogled pa je Titovo vodstvo videl kot sposobnost samostojnih dejanj.

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