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A loveless entanglement.
Britain and Bulgar-Yugoslav relations 1924-1943*

In 1928 a British diplomat lost his temper: "If the Balkan races could scrap with one another without disturbing the rest of the world, we should only be mildly interested in their proceedings". The answer to this outburst was rather short: "quite so". The unkind remark belonged to Rowland Sperling, British minister in Sofia, and the reply to Orme Sargent, a Counsellor in the Central Department of the Foreign Office, responsible for Balkan states1. An attempt to explain that exchange in terms of British patrician arrogance would go neither far nor deep enough, for statements of that sort were already in vogue in (western) Europe. By the end of the 1920s the Balkans had already taken their unenviable position in European consciousness as a rather miserable and curious assortment of "unhappy little countries", and the word "Balkanisation" had started its eventful career2. In fact, it could be argued that what is interesting about such a perception is not that it was entertained at that time, but rather that it gained so much strength, that it stubbornly refused to die a natural death3.

In the case mentioned above, however, British patience with the

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2. For western perceptions of the Balkans see the masterly account of Maria Todorova, Imagining the Balkans (Oxford 1997).
3. For some recent Balkan-bashing cf. Robert Kaplan, who suggests, in a book that can claim President Clinton among its readers, that “Even the fanaticism of the Iranian clergy has a Balkan precedent... Nazism can claim Balkan origins”. He also felt obliged to ask “is there a bad smell, something about the landscape that might incriminate?”. See his Balkan Ghosts, A Journey Through History (New York 1993), xxiii. For Clinton’s taste for the book see David Owen, Balkan Odyssey (London 1996), 171.
Balkan “semi-civilised races” was tested mainly because they saw themselves involved in the twists and turns of Bulgar-Yugoslav relations, at a time when a hot incident between the two countries was never a remote possibility. Throughout the inter-war years the Bulgar-Yugoslav border could find few rivals for the title of the most hotly disputed border in Europe. Unsurprisingly, the Macedonian Question was again the centre of the controversy. The basic ingredients of that dispute are well known: Bulgaria, defeated in both the Second Balkan War and the Great War, and hosting thousands of Macedonian refugees from what became Yugoslav Macedonia, continued to claim that the Slav population of that region was Bulgarian, while at the same time Serbia flooded the region with Serbian police, sent a few thousand Serbian shelters, fortified the border, and embarked on a forceful policy of making the inhabitants forget their Bulgarian connections. Significantly, the name “Macedonia” was conveniently allowed to drop: in 1913 the region was called “Southern Serbia”, and in 1929 (the year that the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes became Yugoslavia) King Alexander christened it “Vardarska Banovina”.

Only to make matters worse, a revived IMRO, whose infamous Comitadjis (Committee men) had already achieved notoriety by distinguishing themselves in guerrilla warfare in Macedonia, established their stronghold in Petrich, in South-Western Bulgaria, and formed a state within the state, controlling the politics of the region, levying taxes, and engaging in drug trafficking. From there, under the leadership of Todor Alexandrov, and, after his assassination in 1924, of Ivan Mikhailov, IMRO sent bands to throw a couple of bombs in eastern Yugoslav Macedonia, or to kill a Serbian gendarme who happened to patrol the streets alone. Sometimes even innocent-looking young girls would be used to carry out spectacular assassinations, like the lady who shot

5. As should be expected conflicting aims on “Southern Serbia” resulted in a polarised bibliography. Serbian accounts, with many references to Serbia’s “historic” claims to the region, include: P. Popovic, Serbian Macedonia. A Historical Survey (London 1926), and T. R. Georgevic, Macedonia (London 1918). For a Bulgarian survey, stressing the “denationalisation policy” of Belgrade see Kostadin Paleshtski, Makedonskiyat Vupros v Burzhoazena Iugoslaviya 1918-1941 (Sofia 1983). A brief scholarly account is provided in Ivo Banac, The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics (Ithaca and London 1988, paperback edition), 317-321.
dead Todor Panitza, a prominent Macedonian left-wing leader, in the Vienna Opera in 1925 and later became Mihailov’s wife. The raids in Yugoslavia were accompanied by an increasing number of murders in Sofia, as Mihailov tried to achieve complete supremacy over the Macedonian movement and to eradicate the rival wings of IMRO.

To the violence of IMRO, which was supported and funded by Italy, there was a modicum of response, although it proved no match. After the fall of the agrarian leader Alexander Stamboliiski in 1923, who had tried to find a modus vivendi with the Yugoslavs, a number of Bulgarian Agrarians found shelter in Yugoslavia and engaged in subversive activities against Bulgaria. As should be expected, tension was running high in both Balkan states and voices for a tougher course of action, especially in Belgrade, were frequently heard.

Given the highly inflamed atmosphere prevailing in the Balkans, it is not surprising that for some in the Foreign Office it was not quite clear for what reason Britain should take the trouble to get involved in the Bulgar-Yugoslav conflicts. Strictly speaking, no one could see anything that could be described as “British vital interest” in the area. The volume of trade with those countries, crucially involving Bulgarian tobacco, was rather modest and it was further reduced from the late 1920s as a result of aggressive German economic penetration, and the reluctance of the British government to put politics before economics. From a political


8. Sir George Rendel, the British Minister in Sofia (1938-1941), lamented the fact that a change of smoking habits in Britain (American blends began to be favoured) led to the British withdrawal from the Bulgarian tobacco market, thus leaving the door wide open for the Germans. See Sir George Rendel, The Sword and the Olive (London 1957), 142-143. For German trade in the Balkans see John Lampe - Marvin Jackson, Balkan Economic History 1550-1950: From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations (Bloomington 1982), 456-469 and the tables for Bulgarian and Yugoslav exports in 1929-1939 in 458, 460.
perspective, things were not much better: Yugoslavia was clearly a French protégé until 1935, when Milan Stojadinović took power only to move the country towards Italy and Germany. Bulgaria was obviously a worse case, as she was a former enemy with a revisionist foreign policy.

The fundamental reason which militated for involvement in those far away countries of which the British knew little, was the preservation of the status quo sanctioned by the Peace Treaties. Although some in the Foreign Office would be prepared to admit (mostly in private) that the Treaty of Neuilly, or indeed that of Bucharest, was far from being "perfect or even just", it nevertheless constituted in their view the only chance for peace in the region. Consequently, no revisionist bias of any variety could be tolerated. Moreover, a war between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria would have been impossible to localise, given the intense Italo-Yugoslav rivalry, and Britain's own obligations in the League of Nations. Orme Sargent found himself many times obliged to emphasise that "it is not from any love of Bulgaria or Yugoslavia that we concern ourselves with this troublesome question", but rather from fear that "any disturbance might spread to the rest of Europe". A Balkan war, it was thought, was simply "impossible to isolate", and eventually could jeopardise the entire post-war settlement.

There has been a tendency in the Foreign Office, sometimes openly stated, to believe that "at least with questions not touching her own vital interests, she (Britain) deals strictly on their merits according to the generally accepted standards of right and wrong". Such a self-


10. Cf. Edward Grey's view that the "settlement after the second Balkan war was not one of justice but of force. It stored up inevitable trouble for the time to come". Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty-five Years, 1892-1916* (London 1925), I: 263.

11. F.O. 371/14316, C3687, Waterlow to Sargent dated 5/5/1930 and minute by Sargent attached. Cf. Sargent's letter to Sperling quoted in fn. 1, where he states that "the only guarantee for peace in the Balkans at the present time resides, in our opinion, in the maintenance of the Treaty of Neuilly".

12. Eyre Crowe, a senior F.O. figure, commenting on British views regarding the Albanian border in December 1912, as quoted by A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in
reassuring view was certainly accepted in the inter-war years as regards Bulgar-Yugoslav relations. With no “selfish” interests in the region, apart from the maintenance of peace, the British conferred upon them the role of the disinterested and unprejudiced mediators between the two parties, aiming at safeguarding the status-quo. Britain should give advice for moderation to both sides, and prevent any sliding into a hot incident. In a memorandum by the Central Department of the F.O. in 1930 the basic guidelines of British policy on Bulgar-Yugoslav relations and the Macedonian Question were made plain: the existing boundaries should be respected; the Bulgarian government should become “masters in their own house” and curtail IMROist activity; the Yugoslavs should “meet the Bulgarians half way” by providing better administration to their part of Macedonia and by not aiding the exiled Bulgarian agrarians. More significantly, the Macedonian Question should be prevented from becoming an issue in international politics, and attempts to raise the issue in the League of Nations should be resisted.

Although it could be argued that the anti-revisionist stance of the British put them by default on the side of the Yugoslavs and against the Bulgarians on Macedonia, it should be noted that this was not intended to be the case and the Foreign Office made every effort to keep an even-handed approach. There was no doubt that a strong and unitary Yugoslavia was considered an important security desideratum: when Sir Neville Henderson, the British minister in Belgrade, asserted in 1931 that “peace and security in the Balkans can only be assured by means of a united and strong Yugoslavia”, few would disagree. At the same time, however, it was emphasised that Bulgaria should not be treated as a foe.

It was even suggested that Britain, despite Bulgaria’s “salient ingratitude” in siding with the Central Powers in the Great War, had treated her with “great generosity”: she was tacitly allowed to violate the harsh military clauses of the Treaty of Neuilly, and her reparation payments amounted to less than 5% of her budget. Even an economic outlet to the

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13. F.O. 371/14317, C5316, Memorandum by the Central Department on The Origins of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation and its History since the Great War, dated 1/7/1930. Hereafter: 1930 memorandum.

14. Henderson was the British minister in Yugoslavia during the dictatorship of King Alexander. His comment is in: F.O. 371/16859, C768, 26/3/1931.
Aegean was offered to the Bulgarians, but their own “obstinacy” prompted them to turn it down. It was exactly this “impartiality”, it was felt, that added to Britain’s prestige in the area, making her the best placed power to offer some “advice” for the cause of Balkan peace.

The turbulent state of Bulgar-Yugoslav relations provided the British with ample opportunity to put their policy of caution and restraint into action. Throughout the 1920s and the early 1930s every time a point of friction emerged the British would rush to both capitals to advise moderation. In 1924, for instance, they learnt that IMRO had been preparing for a spate of major attacks in Yugoslavia. William Erskine, the British minister in Sofia, was accordingly instructed to make “the most serious representations” to the Bulgarians, urging them to prevent the raids. The Bulgarian Foreign Minister Khristo Kalfov obliged by saying that he was aware of the danger and had taken the necessary precautions. Shortly afterwards an IMRO circular appeared, calling off action.

A few years later moderation was urged in both capitals. In 1926, after the usual IMRO raids, information reached the British to the effect that the Yugoslav Foreign Minister, Momčilo Ninčić, considered invading Bulgaria “to punish the offenders”. The Foreign Office swiftly instructed Howard Kennard in Belgrade and Erskine in Sofia to restrain both sides. The Yugoslavs were reminded of the ill-fated Greek invasion of Bulgaria in 1925, when the Greeks gained nothing and ended up by paying a substantial fine. At the same time the Bulgarians were alerted to the “risks they were running” by tolerating the IMRO. In other

16. Cf. the view that British prestige in Yugoslavia was “high and survived despite our post-war indifference” while the French influence was based solely “on politics and the material advantages it gives”. F.O. 371/16830, C747, Annual Report for Yugoslavia in 1932 dated: 15/1/1933.
17. Erskine’s telegrams to F.O. in: F.O. 371/9659, C3163 (representations to Kalfov), Ibid., C3353 (IMRO circular), 27/2/1924.
18. That year Greece, under the dictator Theodoros Pangalos, invaded Bulgaria after a border incident, which left two Greeks dead, was perceived by Athens as a wholesale Comitetdji attack. The League of Nations promptly intervened, and unanimously condemned Greece, who had to withdraw from Bulgaria and pay a fine. James Barros, The League of Nations and the Great Power: The Greek-Bulgarian Incident 1925 (Oxford 1970).
cases, especially when tension reached almost boiling point, the British would join forces with the French and the (reluctant) Italians to make their presence felt. This was the case in 1927 and 1928, at a time of a sudden escalation of IMRO violence, which resulted in the assassination of the Serbian Commander of Shtip, General Sava Kovasević in 1927, and of General Alexander Protogerov, Mihailov’s rival, in July 1928. In both instances the British very strongly urged the Bulgarian government to seriously clamp down on IMRO, and impressed upon them the “folly of their present inaction”. At the same time, however, they continued to pressurise the Yugoslavs to improve the deplorable standards of administration in Yugoslav Macedonia and to keep calm.

Equally forceful and persistent action was taken by the British at the end of the 1920s when the Yugoslavs called the Bulgarians to meet at Pirot and discuss the prevention of future IMRO raids and the issue of the “double proprietors”, i.e. those who lived on the one side of the border but owned property on the other. An Agreement was reached in March 1929, which provided for the formation of a permanent Bulgar-Yugoslav commission to deal with the frontier traffic. However, the whole undertaking faltered as the Croatian separatist Ante Pavelić, the arch-enemy of Yugoslavia and a supporter of IMRO visited Sofia in April invited by the Committee of Macedonian Refugees. At that point, the British, seconded by the French, intervened and Howard Kennard urged the infuriated Yugoslavs to ratify the Pirot Agreement. Their combined effort was apparently successful, for the Yugoslav Foreign Minister, Vojslav Marinčković, admitted to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations, Sir Eric Drummond, in November, that his decision to put the Agreement into force was due to the Anglo-French Representations.

Protracted negotiations led to agreements in February 1930, concerning the liquidation of “double properties”, and the establishment of a mixed commission to enforce law and order in the frontier. Sidney Waterlow, the British minister in Sofia, was pleased to report that the Bul-


garian Foreign Minister, Atanas Burov, had expressed his "fervent gratitude" for Britain's role in that agreement. Britain's satisfaction was not to last. In March, IMRO comitadjis threw their bombs in Pirot and Strumitza, leaving two men dead and many more wounded. Marinković was furious, and rumours began to circulate, to the effect that King Alexander contemplated punishing the perpetrators. Undeterred by those incidents, Waterlow in Sofia and Henderson, the new minister in Belgrade were instructed to appeal for moderation. At the same time strong representations were made in Sofia, with the participation of the Italians. Despite the fact that the only thing that the Bulgarian government did was to make some arrests, it can be said that the British actions contributed to the survival of the Bulgar-Yugoslav agreements, and to the prevention of a "hot" incident. The negotiations continued and in December 1931 Waterlow reported that the liquidation of "double properties" was completed.

On the whole, the policy to be followed —the "line" as the jargon has it— was clear: the Bulgarians should put their house in order and eradicate this most annoying pest, i.e. IMRO, while Yugoslavia should stop entertaining punitive expeditions and improve her record in her slice of the Macedonian pie. Such a policy, however, did not remain unopposed by those who would implement it, namely the British political representatives in Belgrade and Sofia. Quite often those representatives became captives of the peculiarities of their post, and, being very close to local susceptibilities, suggested policy options, which ranged from modification to total rejection of the official line. Moreover, the "impartiality" of the Foreign Office was strongly questioned in many cases. As a result, a "triangular" exchange of views took place, with the Foreign Office firing off argumentative dispatches to British ministers, penned normally by Sargent, in order to make them understand (and comply with) the line "as seen from here". The understanding of this dimension is not without importance, for it suggests a caveat against overestimating one angle, thus obscuring the broader picture.

The British representatives in Yugoslavia tended to sympathise with King Alexander's improbable task of unifying his country and were rather keen to give the Yugoslavs the benefit of every doubt, including their conduct on Macedonia. Henderson, himself a Serbophile, frequently criticised the Foreign Office for partiality: it was unjustifiable and unfair, he stressed, to urge moderation to the Yugoslavs every time the IMRO thought it nice to throw a few bombs. After all, he opined, the Yugoslavs wanted a rapprochement, but the Bulgarians rendered this impossible by allowing IMRO to reign supreme in Petrich. He also warned the Foreign Office that Bulgaria's "instincts" are "chiefly communistic and bloody murder". His predecessors in that post seemed to agree: Sir Alban Young, minister in 1924, accepted that the Yugoslavs run Macedonia badly but "corruption is rife throughout the Kingdom" anyway. His successor, Howard Kennard, voiced similar thoughts: administration was deplorable but it was not Yugoslavia's fault. The reason was simple: "this is the Balkans".

As should be expected the view from Sofia was different. The British ministers there complained that Bulgaria was not getting a fair treatment. Sperling told Sargent that London was treating the Serbs as "a mother's pet", and Sidney Waterlow, his successor, argued that it was the Yugoslavs that should be blamed for the tension in the region, for they stubbornly refused to alleviate the miserable position of the Macedonians, and aided the exiled agrarians in their attacks in Bulgaria. He even suspected that at least some of the IMRO raids could have been Yugoslav provocation. So, it fell on Sargent to get the record straight. Indeed, he was the right man for the job, for, curiously enough, he was never sent abroad and therefore he was quite immune to any sort of "local" susceptibilities. He assured Sperling that "we don't allow our policy towards post-war Yugoslavia to be in the least influenced by what pre-war Serbia did or did not do in 1914 and 1915..."; at the same time he repeated to Henderson that "sentimental bias is not our philosophy... We hold the scales evenly between the two countries". Besides, he would always add, the only thing that mattered for Britain was the

maintenance of the status quo, not the tending of a “pet” or the punish-
ishment of a foe.25

Apart from constantly urging moderation and restraint, the British
attached much importance to the prevention of the Macedonian Quest-
ion becoming an issue in the League of Nations. There was no shortage
of those who would have wished to raise the matter in that forum: the
Yugoslavs wanted the League to punish the Bulgarians for harbouring
IMRO, and the Bulgarians wished it to recognise the existence of a Bul-
garian minority in Yugoslavia and put pressure on Belgrade to grant
them minority rights. Understandably, IMRO also hoped that the League
would take an active interest in the Macedonian Question. Apart from
the Slavs, the tireless Noel Buxton and the Balkan Committee con-
stantly flooded the Foreign Office with memoranda asking for minority
status for the Macedonians, to the irritation of the officials who had to
send back polite but negative responses.26

In the Foreign Office, however, it was understood all too well that
had the League been forced to taste the Macedonian salad it would have
been impossible to digest it. The Greek invasion of Bulgaria in 1925,
and its swift settlement by the League, demonstrated that unanimity and
consensus were absolutely essential if the League was to be able to effi-
ciently handle a crisis.27 In the case of Bulgar-Yugoslav controversy dis-
sension and friction among the members of the Council were inevitable,
for France would support Yugoslavia while Italy, which regularly finan-
ced IMRO, was expected to aid the Bulgarians. Therefore it would be im-
possible for the League to find a solution and its prestige would be dealt
a severe blow. Moreover, undue publicity would be given to IMRO thus
prolonging its life, and making even more difficult the task of the
Bulgarians to suppress it.28 The conclusion to be drawn was not difficult
to reach: any attempt to raise the issue in the League “will create bitter-

25. For Sperling’s view see fn. 1. Waterlow’s accusations are in F.O. 371/14315,
C2318, 24/3/1930, Waterlow to A. Henderson. Sargent’s comment in F.O. 371/14315,
C2367, Sargent to Nevile Henderson, dated 24/3/1930.
26. In 1929 Alexander Cadogan, then a Counsellor at the Foreign Office, decided that
he had had enough of the Committee’s memoranda. “It has been acknowledged”, he minuted
on the last vintage of them, “that is sufficient”. F.O. 371/13572, C5973, 5/8/1929.
27. For the 1925 incident see fn. 18.
ness and will do nothing to alter the fundamental conditions in Macedonia”, wrote Charles Bateman in 1927\(^29\). The best policy seemed to be to “let the sleeping dogs lie”\(^30\), and not to upset them by unnecessary talking in Geneva.

Consequently the British tried (and managed) to prevent the League from discussing the various petitions (mainly of Bulgarian provenance) sent to its council, which demanded recognition of the Bulgarian minority in Yugoslav Macedonia, as well as the use of Bulgarian language in schools and the church. Alexander Cadogan, commenting on such a petition in 1931, summarised the policy to be followed: “It might be better to strangle it at birth and declare it non-receivable, if we can honestly do so”\(^31\). They could. The 1931 petition, lodged by a former Yugoslav MP and a former mayor of Skopje, was declared non-receivable, because —inter alia— the petitioners maintained links with the IMRO. As was officially stated Messrs Anastasov and Challev had: “liaisons spéciales avec certaines organisations terroristes”\(^32\). Many other petitions travelled the same way to the diplomatic dustbin and the League was kept out of the Macedonian controversy.

The question of minority rights was closely interconnected with the thorny issue of the nationality of the Macedonians. Throughout the inter-war years, that question became a central point of debate within the Foreign Office\(^33\). Were they an oppressed Bulgarian minority, a distinct nationality, or was Macedonia just an ethnological no-man’s-land? To begin with, it should be stressed that the British approached the minority question in the light of their conviction that the Peace Treaties should be respected and that revisionism would reduce the Balkans and indeed the whole of Eastern Europe into a Hobbesian world of *bellum omnium*


\(^{30}\) Minute by Sargent, dated 14/3/1930 attached to F.O. 371/C1992, 12/3/1930, Henderson to F.O.

\(^{31}\) Minute by Cadogan in F.O. 371/15173, C8388, dated 2/9/1931.


contra omnes. So, from a political perspective the British firmly refused to recognise that the inhabitants of Yugoslav Macedonia had a distinct nationality: successive memoranda on that issue made it quite clear that "once the existence of a Macedonian nationality is even allowed to be presumed, there is the danger that the entire Peace Settlement will be jeopardised by the calling into question not merely the frontiers between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, but also of those between Yugoslavia and Greece, and between Yugoslavia and Albania." Consequently it was concluded that "H.M.G. refuse to recognise a distinct Macedonian nationality requiring either independence or absorption by Bulgaria, or else a degree of autonomy, which Yugoslavia would not willingly concede."  

Although the need to keep Yugoslavia a strong and unitary state and to prevent border rectification undoubtedly played a part in upholding that position, the Foreign Office from an early stage took the view that the "majority of the Slavs (in Macedonia) do not care to what nationality they belong". They were neither "Southern Serbs" nor "Bulgarians" and both the Serbian and the Bulgarian claims were "unjustified". Therefore "it is incorrect to refer to them as other than 'Macedo-Slavs'". The "Macedo-Slavs", the Foreign Office asserted, "do not have any particular national aspiration but would be perfectly content under any government which granted them reasonable freedom and protection from the Comitadjis". Within that framework the Foreign Office considered the name "Macedonian" to be devoid of any national connections, and instructed the British diplomats to use the word in a purely geographical sense: "In public", insisted Balfour, the term "Macedonian" should be preferred to "Bulgarian", because "Macedonia is an accepted geographical term and not open to political construction". Given the development of the Macedonian Question in the 1940s, this was a rather optimistic view. But it was also a convenient one, for if the Macedonians had no national consciousness, it followed that there was no need

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34. 1930 memorandum.  
37. 1930 memorandum.  
for minority rights or plebiscites.

On the other hand, numerous reports from the area made plain that the Serbs were despised in Yugoslav Macedonia, their administration was of the poorest quality, and that in general they were considered as invaders and foreigners. Discontent, however, emanated from economic deprivation and incompetent administration, not from national feelings. All that was needed was a decent administration and economic prosperity. The Belgrade Vice-Consul, Charles Blakeney, argued that although “in language, customs and sympathies” the population was “Bulgarian” he added that “if the Yugoslavs could offer them good administration and could relax their punitive and violent methods, they could accept Yugoslav domination”39. In 1927, the Vice-Consul in Skopje, David Footman, remarked that the population was “indifferent alike to Serb and Bulgarian pretensions” apart from the intelligentsia, which remained “to a fair proportion Bulgarophil”40.

In other words Macedonia was for the Foreign Office a place “just like Alsace: one of those parts of Europe with no real nationality” and the Macedonians were classified by Balfour as “Serb’s first cousins”41. Sargent was even prepared to venture in anthropology: he minuted in 1931 that the “idea of a separate Macedonian nationality was against the obvious trend of political evolution in the Balkans”, because it would obstruct “the natural and inevitable tendency of the Slavophone population to be assimilated by the more masterful and expanding Yugoslav race”42. The same year, Henderson neatly epitomised British perceptions: “The Macedonians have got to be either Yugoslavs or Bulgars. They had better be the former than the latter”43.

As has already been pointed out, the British representatives in the Balkan capitals tended to differ in their assessment of the state of Bulgar-Yugoslav relations. The Macedonian Question was no exception to that rule. Henderson, for example, was all too eager to reassure the

Foreign Office that "the Macedonian will settle down to become as good a Yugoslav as any citizen". Howard Kennard had gone even further. In 1926 he toured Yugoslav Macedonia and painted an idyllic picture: the roads were superb, he marvelled; Skopje and Tetovo appeared "relatively affluent", and education was quite advanced. In Ohrid he even found that the teaching of French and History were "of a higher standard than in England". A year later he opined that the Macedonians were neither Serbs nor Bulgars, but they had been "bulgarised" by the Exarchate. Therefore they could be Serbianised "just as efficiently in a few years time".

Reporting from Sofia Sperling and Waterlow viewed things from a different perspective and were prepared to propose radical changes to British policy. Opening a lengthy and argumentative debate in 1928 with the declaration that he holds "no brief for the Macedonians, the Bulgarians or any of the other semi-civilised races inhabiting the Balkan peninsula", Sperling suggested that "nothing will make the Macedonians to abandon their aspirations" and therefore Britain should consider "some border rectification". Sargent's reply was forceful: "you may prove to be a true prophet but I fear that you would suffer the fate of all prophets in their own country". The Peace Treaties should be kept intact not because they are perfect but because "in this naughty world they offer the best means of preserving peace". However, Sperling continued undeterred to refer to the "Macedonian minority" in Yugoslavia, only to provoke fierce responses from the Foreign Office. C. H. Bateyman noted his "abysmal failure" to see what was at stake, and emphasised that the Macedonians have "no political consciousness... Prior to the war they called themselves Greeks, Bulgars or Serbs according to the circumstances". Sargent's reply stressed that the name "Macedonia" referred to a region inhabited also by Turks, Albanians, Greeks and Vlachs:

44. Henderson's comment on a report by the Military Attachés Major Oxley and T. D. Daly who found that "Southern Serbia is gradually resigning to the Yugoslav idea". F.O. 371/16828, C4601, 15/5/1933.
45. Report by Kennard in F.O. 371/11405, C6187, dated 26/5/1926. No doubt the high standard of Serbian education in Macedonia had something to do with his visit being "official and under the aegis of the local authorities".
46. F.O. 371/12091, C8807, 26/10/1927.
“they also”, he noted, “could have the right to be called Macedonians”48.

In an equally long debate, Sidney Waterlow’s views provoked an equally forceful response from the Foreign Office, when he suggested that the only solution to the problem was a Bulgar-Yugoslav federation with a “united and independent” Macedonia as a unit, and a link between the two nations. “What a blessing that would be... it may come true some day”. He also proposed “some rectification and adjustments” at the districts of Tsaribrod, Trn and Bosilevgrad, that Bulgaria lost to Yugoslavia after the war. Balfour and Sargent rushed to dismiss such views. For Balfour an autonomous Macedonia was not “a logical idea”. Besides, a “Bulgaro-Macedonian consciousness” was not established among the population. “It could be found here and there”, but the majority “just wanted to be left in peace”. As far as border changes were concerned, this would only whet the appetite of other aggrieved and revisionist nations like Hungary. After months of debate, Sargent’s reaction best reflected the prevailing mood: “for heaven’s sake, don’t let us butt in”49.

As has been seen, the British tried hard to stop the Bulgarians and Yugoslavs from being at each other’s throats. By the mid 1930s, however, they were forced to consider another possibility that would haunt them for the years to come. In 1934 the Bulgarian government of Kimon Georgiev finally suppressed IMRO in what was a bloodless and rather quick affair. Mihailov, of course, escaped arrest to the irritation of the British, but IMRO’s power was dealt a blow from which it never fully recovered. The eradication of IMRO gave the Bulgar-Yugoslav rapprochement a much needed impetus. King Alexander visited Sofia in September 1934, and despite his assassination shortly afterwards in Marseilles by a Macedonian gunman relations between the two states were put on a more normal footing. Moreover Italy’s reconciliation with Yugoslavia during the premiership of Milan Stojadinović also

48. The debate is recorded in F.O. 371/12856, C7743, Sperling to Sargent, dated 10/10/1928, and minute by Bateman attached, dated 18/10/1928, and reply by Sargent, dated 22/10/1928. See also Rossos, op.cit., 386-387.

helped to draw the two countries together. In 1937 a Treaty was signed by the two states, which bore the rather ambitious title of *Treaty of Perpetual Friendship*.  

The sight of two adversaries becoming allies gave the British much cause for reflection and concern. The prospect of a Bulgar-Yugoslav war alarmed them and they had tried hard to prevent it, but they soon realised that a close *rapprochement* between the two Slav neighbours did not appear to be a more desirable prospect either. The Foreign Office understood that both states shared religion, cultural outlook and "racial affinity" by being Slavs. Of course the Catholicism of the Croats and the Slovenes, as well as their more "westernised" orientation were duly acknowledged, but the Serbs were in the driving seat of Yugoslavia anyway. If this was so, it followed that the strength of racial and cultural affinities might start pulling the Slavs together perhaps even in a federation, despite the background of enmity that punctuated their history.

In the wake of the mid-1930s *rapprochement* such thoughts became quite topical and sparked off an interesting debate. In March 1934 Henderson furnished the Foreign Office with a long memorandum, which painted a situation pregnant with danger: a united South Slav state, he argued, with a population of more than 20,000,000 would be a profoundly destabilising factor in the Balkans, for it would destroy the balance of power in the area and make Greece, Romania and Turkey feel the pressure. "Peace ends", he firmly stressed, "where Serb, or rather Yugoslav-Bulgar Union begins".  

Although Henderson stressed that such a Union was not in any sense imminent in 1934, his alarmist ideas were echoed in many quarters. Balfour, in another memorandum on Balkan union in 1936, agreed that there was no "fundamental" distinction between Serbs and Bulgarians as far as "blood, religion or language" were concerned, and pointed to the fact that the Greek port of Thessaloniki would certainly be the Union's much coveted outlet to the Aegean. Thus, the intrinsically destabilising nature of a Slav union and the danger it posed for the territorial integrity of Greece was fully understood, although appreciations of its strength

50. For a view on Bulgar-Yugoslav relations see Hoptner, *op.cit.*, 161-165.  
varied. Waterlow, for instance, commenting now from Athens, also observed that the Slav states “had a tendency to coalesce” but predicted that such a Union would be “jelly rather than granite”. Charles Bentinck, minister in Sofia, was more reserved: he thought that a Bulgar-Yugoslav union was a “somewhat hypothetical” question but agreed that if it materialised it would seriously alarm Greece and Turkey.

What was even more worrying about a Slav Union was the possibility of it coming under the influence of the Russians. The pro-Russian sentiment of the Balkan Slavs, especially the Bulgarians, had always been taken for granted in the Foreign Office and the presence in the country of a strong communist movement attracted much attention in London. Consequently, it was conceivable that Moscow could place a Balkan Union under its tutelage, thus directly threatening British interests not only in Greece, but in the Middle East as well. Rodney Gallop, a 1st Secretary at the Foreign Office, commenting on Henderson’s memorandum, registered those fears, concluding that a Balkan federation “would emphatically not be in our best interests”.

At that time, however, the British had no reason to pursue further their discussion on Balkan federations, for no side seemed to seriously advance such a gloomy prospect, and the run-up to the Second World War found the two countries drifting in different directions. Between 1939 and 1941, the British tried without success to bring the two states together in a “neutral Balkan bloc”, which aimed at preventing the spread of the war in South-Eastern Europe. But they were bound to fail. The differences between the two states were as wide as ever and Prince Paul could not overcome his deep mistrust of the Bulgarian King. Moreover, the British could not commit forces on the ground, nor were they prepared to offer Bulgaria a slice of the Macedonian pie.


marked, “is Germany or Russia. These are the powers who will seal the future of Bulgaria. Your feelings tell you Russia. But if you listen to your reason, you’ll answer Germany”55. With the British remaining “far away”, Bulgaria adhered to the Tripartite Pact, and received parts of Greek and Yugoslav Macedonia as rewards. Yugoslavia, after spasmodic efforts to postpone her fate, was overrun by the Germans, and ceased to be a state56.

Evidently, those developments meant that a Bulgar-Yugoslav federation was definitely dead. But not for everyone concerned. In 1941, and for the second time in 25 years, the British had failed to prevent Bulgaria from choosing the wrong side. It would appear that an independent Bulgarian state, with a Bulgarian King, “an Italian Queen, a pro-German army and a pro-Russian population”, was prone to make decisions detrimental to British security interests in the area. Clearly, such a pattern would change if Bulgaria’s independence were cut down sharply, or even eliminated altogether. As the British started contemplating future arrangements in the Balkans, the Bulgarian problem led some in the Foreign Office to consider some form of a Greater Yugoslavia, incorporating and neutralising Bulgaria, as a possible solution. The emergence of a Bulgar-Yugoslav union in the British wartime planning, reversed the terms of the 1930s debate on the subject: a Balkan federation could be a dangerous thing, if left unguided or, worse still, if Russia was to be the patron. But if the British were to sponsor it, and let the loyal Yugoslavs lead it, then it would conceivably develop as a bulwark against Russia and force Bulgaria to sit tight.

Thus, an exchange of views about a “Greater Yugoslavia” began in 1941, and after some initial hesitation, it emerged that such a prospect was considered increasingly attractive. Commenting before Bulgaria’s adherence to the Tripartite Pact, the British minister in Bulgaria, George Rendel, clearly was in favour. In his view a South-Slav “confederation” had many advantages: it would solve the Macedonian imbroglio with the

56. For German plans on Yugoslavia, which led to the “smashing” of the country see Martin van Creveld, *Hitler’s Strategy 1940-1941: The Balkan Clue* (Cambridge 1973), and especially 3-13, 144-166. Frank Littlefield, *op.cit.*, 57-130. For Bulgaria see Marshal Lee Miller, *Bulgaria During the Second World War* (Stanford 1975). For Boris’s predicament see the sympathetic account of Groueff, *op.cit.*, 253-274.
formation of a Macedonian federal unit, and allow the combined weight of the “Balkan” Serbs and Bulgars to counteract the “Central European” Catholic contingent of Croats and Slovenes57. Bulgaria’s accession to the Axis in March 1941 removed another obstacle to the Bulgar-Yugoslav union: Boris had backed the wrong side, as had his father in 1915. Therefore the Bulgarian dynasty had to go, leaving the leadership of a Bulgar-Yugoslav state to the Serbian Royal House. In May 1941, Leo Amery (and his son Julian) expressed these views and forwarded to Anthony Eden a paper on the future of Bulgaria written by Dr Malcolm Burr, stressing the merits of the subordination of Bulgaria (minus the dynasty) to Yugoslavia. George Clutton, of the Foreign Office, advised the Foreign Secretary to reply cautiously: “it is one solution”, he minuted, “but it is as yet premature”58. Others, however, were more enthusiastic. Philip Nichols, for instance, thought that a Greater Yugoslavia “might be the best solution and we may eventually find it necessary and desirable to give it our support”59.

It should be stressed here that talk of a future Bulgar-Yugoslav federation under Yugoslav (and ultimately: British) control did not develop in a vacuum. At that time the Foreign Office entertained grandiose federal plans for the future of Europe60. It was envisaged that the Czech-Polish Agreement of November 1940, and the Greek-Yugoslav “Constitution de l’Union Balkanique”, signed on 15 January 1942, could serve as nuclei for the formation of two federal “poles”, covering the whole of Europe61. The combined strength of those formations, it was hoped, would guarantee their independence in the future against the menace represented by Germany and Russia. As far as the Balkans were concerned, the Greek-Yugoslav “Union” was considered by the British as the first step towards an all-Balkan federation. “We are interested”,

57. F.O. 371/29729, R4460, dated 15/1/1941.
60. For brief surveys of British federation plans see Barker, op.cit., 130-137, and Victor Rothwell, Britain and the Cold War, 1941-1947 (London 1982), 193-198.
minuted Pierson Dixon, “in this attempt to explore the possibilities of a Balkan Federation”"62. By the beginning of 1942, Sargent, now Deputy Under-Secretary of State, argued that future federations were the centrepiece of British policy in the Balkans: “the only instrument at our disposal to prevent Soviet domination in the Balkans”, he minuted, “is the policy of Balkan Confederation including Bulgaria and Romania”63.

This, of course, was easier said than done. The Greeks, for instance, were clearly not interested in a Federation that would include their arch-enemy, Bulgaria, which at the time was ravaging the Greek part of Macedonia. Moreover, they were growing increasingly sceptical about the Greek-Yugoslav union, especially when the Yugoslav King thought that the union should unite with the Czech-Polish unit “in a supreme organ... a great organisation”. Such a grandiose federal plan would not only attach Greece to distant commitments, but also give rise to the suspicion of the Kremlin. The Greek Premier, Emmanuel Tsouderos, reminded Dixon in January 1942 that decisions about the future of Europe were beyond the reach of small states64. Greek scepticism, however, did not deter the Foreign Office from considering federal plans as a “perfectly sound policy”, and “the best hope for some really satisfactory and lasting post-war settlement”65.

Within that framework the question of the shape of Bulgar-Yugoslav relations was approached from a different perspective. Earlier views about an exclusive Bulgar-Yugoslav federation seemed to have been dropped, as the British opted for the creation of an all-Balkan federation, including Romania. In a long memorandum written in June 1942, Sargent argued that Serbia and Bulgaria were Moscow’s “natural allies” in the Balkans, and therefore should not be allowed to federate. Bulgaria was considered especially dangerous a species, for after the defeat of Germany she “would provide a spearhead for Soviet penetration of the

62. Dixon’s minute attached to F.O. 371/29838, R9497, 28/10/1941.
Balkans". It followed that she should be incorporated into the Greek-Yugoslav union. Such a "sterilisation" of Bulgaria, as he put it, would appeal to both Yugoslavia and Greece. If Sofia had second thoughts about it, then the British should consider "force to compel Bulgaria to enter the Confederation and to prevent her from leaving it"66.

Although the need for Bulgaria's "sterilisation" was unquestioned, opinions slightly diverged in 1943 as to the best means of carrying out the operation. George Rendel, who after 1941 was attached to the Yugoslav government —in exile as minister, argued that the Greeks would never welcome the Bulgarians into a federation and therefore a Bulgar-Yugoslav union should be established first, and then the Greeks could join in. He did not fail to stress that the unit should be placed under the control of a curious animal called "a Yugoslav federal monarchy", thus ensuring that Bulgaria remains obedient. Sargent, and indeed the majority in the Foreign Office, were not prepared to accept that view. He replied to Rendel playing up his customary fears: that a Bulgar-Yugoslav unit would "overshadow" the whole Balkan federation, and would become a "spearhead for Russian penetration" in the area. Further, he argued that the Greeks, no less than the Croats and the Slovenes, would never agree to join such a bloc. The Greek-Yugoslav agreement, he firmly insisted, should remain the basis; Bulgaria should then oblige67. Clearly, a Balkan federation was considered a more suitable and safe stable to house the troublesome Bulgarian horse than a Slav hut.

That view carried the day, and in the British war-time planning there was no room left for the establishment of a Slav bloc. This was again emphasised in early 1943, when the Foreign Office Research and Press Service, based in Balliol College, Oxford, produced a massive 79 page-long document entitled "Memoranda on Confederations in Eastern Europe", which examined every aspect of the federal theme68. That Memorandum, which followed closely Sargent's paper of June 1942, envisaged

66. His views are recorded in F.O. 371/33134, R3793, under the rather cumbersome title: Suggested Confederations of the states lying between Germany and Italy, on the one side, and Russia and Turkey on the other, dated 1/6/1942 and attached Annex, entitled "Pan-Slavism in the Balkans". Cf. also minutes attached to F.O. 371/37153, R2129, 9/3/1943.


68. F.O. 371/35261, U1292, dated: 26/2/1943.
an all-Balkan confederation, including Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania and Greece. Macedonia, labelled a “disturbed and unruly” area, presented something of an anomaly. She could become a federal unit, the memorandum read, but she was too “primitive” to seriously qualify for membership. Therefore she should remain within the pre-war Yugoslavia. As for Bulgaria, it was admitted that the use of force to persuade her to accept a place in the federation should not be ruled out. The stick, however, was accompanied by some sort of carrot for it was suggested that Bulgaria should be compensated for the loss of Macedonia: according to the memorandum she would receive some districts lost to Yugoslavia in the First World War, a Greek port, or an economic outlet to the Aegean.

By the end of 1943, the amount of paperwork concerning various federal schemes about the future of Eastern Europe was quite impressive; so much so that some officials complained that there was more paper than concrete policy, especially on American and Russian attitudes to British plans. In August 1943, Douglas Howard, the Head of the Southern Department, commented that “acres of paper exist on alternative confederations... but we have no idea where our preferences lie.” Developments were to show that British plans remained no more than “acres of paper”. The Greek-Yugoslav “federation”, invested with so much hope by the British, was from its inception a non-starter: the Greeks had their own agenda to pursue and they never supported it wholeheartedly; on the other hand the London-based Yugoslav government soon found that it had more important things to deal with than to opine on the future of Europe. In January 1944, the Yugoslav Premier Dr. Božidar Purić even forgot the Union’s second anniversary. Indeed there was nothing left for the Yugoslavs to remember and the project receded into oblivion.

At about the same time the Russians, no less than the Americans, made clear that the grandiose British schemes about Eastern Europe would have the same fate: in October 1943, Molotov called them a “cordon sanitaire” directed against Russia, and a month later Cordell

69. Ibid.
71. For Greek reservations see Pawlowitch, op.cit., p. 42, and Xydis, op.cit., p. 22.
Hull told Congress that there was no need for spheres of influence in Europe, or "any other arrangements". "Mr Hull", observed Howard, "had killed the federation scheme stone-dead". By the end of 1943 most parties concerned had done so.

Throughout the period under consideration the British approached the troublesome issue of Bulgar-Yugoslav relations with a sense of duty tempered with frustration. The former was due to the fact that their only reason for "being there" in the first place was the need to safeguard the status quo as devised in the peace settlements; the latter came as the price that had to be paid for dealing with "obstinate", "murderous" and "semi-civilised" races which refused to behave themselves, and act as instructed. The paramount importance of the preservation of the status quo dominated British views on the shape of Bulgar-Yugoslav relations and prompted them to reach definitive conclusions, at an early stage which influenced their planning for years. An important conclusion concerned the question of a Balkan federation. For the British the Balkan Slavs should learn to live in peace but not in the same state. A Slav bloc was bound to be a destabilising factor, irrespective of who kept the lead. It would fall under Russian domination and unleash its combined might against Greece, thus posing a direct threat to the vital British communication lines in the eastern Mediterranean basin. Therefore it should be prevented at all costs.

For some in the Foreign Office a Slav federation was a natural development for it was thought that the power of "race" and culture, shared by Serbs and Bulgars, would eventually triumph over the political differences that divided them; for others it would even be a desirable outcome, given that it would produce a more stable Slav state by balancing the "Ottoman" with the "Habsburg" contingent within Yugoslavia, and guarantee Balkan independence from Russia. Such views were expressed at times, but never carried the day.

A second conclusion referred to the fate of Macedonia. The Foreign Office had little difficulty in arguing during the inter-war years that no concrete "national" sentiment could be found in the area, and its inhabi-

72. For Molotov's statement see Barker, op.cit., p. 137. For Hull's speech and the F.O.'s reaction see: F.O. 371/37173, R13912, Report by the London Times, dated 20/11/1943, and minute by Howard of the same day.
tants would not be able to pronounce on the issue even if they were presented with the opportunity to do so. A neat conclusion was that each state should keep its slice of the pie, and stop thinking of federations with Macedonia as a unit. If that were allowed to happen, then the territorial integrity of Greece would be at stake. On the other hand, if the Yugoslavs could try and make the miserable position of the “Southern Serbians” even marginally bearable, all the better. But no undue pressure should be applied. Dissenting voices were again heard, both before and after the Second World War, about the advantages of an autonomous Macedonian unit either in a Bulgar-Yugoslav union or within a British-sponsored federation. In both instances they were defeated.

If the Slavs could not be trusted if left alone, the inclusion of Romania and Greece, somehow piercing the Slavic belt of the Balkans from the North and the South, would ensure that the region kept out of the Soviet orbit. In their wartime planning the Foreign Office spent much ink about an all-Balkan federation, as part of a wider policy which envisaged confederations throughout Eastern Europe. It was a completely non-practical proposition which duly collapsed under Russian hostility and American rejection of post-war spheres of influence. Yet again, the federation plans led the British to consolidate their views about what they did not want to see in the Balkans. This was not without significance. In late 1944, when a victorious Tito moved decidedly to establish a Balkan Federation with the (more than reluctant) Bulgarians, the British saw the resurrection of a ghost they dreaded the most. And they intervened to prevent it from becoming a reality, using the same argument that Henderson had aired ten years earlier, that “Peace ends where ... Yugoslav-Bulgar Union begins”, and stressing that all they could accept was an all-Balkan federation. It can safely be said that although British planning about the future of Bulgar-Yugoslav relations had always been “acres of paper”, the conclusions they drew during the course of two decades were real enough.