Lane, Ann: *Britain, the Cold War and Yugoslav Unity, 1941–1949*. Brighton: Gazelle Book Services 2012. ISBN: 978-189872327-1; X, 220 S.

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As is well known, Winston Churchill's British government adopted an uncharacteristic policy shift vis-à-vis Axis-occupied Yugoslavia during World War II: despite Churchill's own fierce anti-Communist sympathies, he switched support from the principal royalist and anti-Communist guerrilla movement, Draza Mihailovic's Chetniks, towards Josip Broz Tito's Communist-led Partisans, on the grounds that it was the latter who were conducting the real resistance. This policy shift has outraged hardline Western anti-Communists ever since, who have claimed that Tito – assisted by Communist infiltration of the British intelligence establishment – 'hoodwinked' Churchill into believing that he and the Partisans were resisting while Mihailovic and the Chetniks were collaborating. In fact, British assessments of the respective activities of the Partisans and the Chetniks were based on sound intelligence from multiple sources, and have been substantiated by subsequent scholarship, most notably Jozo Tomasevich's now-classic *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: The Chetniks* (1975).[1]

The British decision to abandon Mihailovic and support Tito was the result of the sober and hard-headed calculation that this would cause maximum military damage to the German enemy, even though this would come at the price of a Communist take-over of Yugoslavia. This can be seen as the sacrifice of long-term Western political interests for the sake of short-term military expediency, but the reality is more complex. As Ann Lane points out in this crisp and polished study of British policy toward Yugoslavia in the 1940s, originally published in 1996 and now reprinted unchanged, Britain's policy of bolstering Tito was ultimately a success, in that his regime, albeit Communist, would shake off Soviet domination and prove to be a valuable buffer for the Western alliance: 'Indeed, the emergence of the Cold War in Europe had made an independent Yugoslavia more valuable to the West than could have been envisaged in 1943–44 when the advantages of securing a foothold with the Yugoslav regime were discussed in London. With Belgrade's neutrality, Italy could be defended against attack at the Ljubljana gap, her natural point of defence, rather than on the Venetian Plain; Greece could be defended in the upper Vardar Valley, rather than at Salonika; the thirty-three divisions of the Yugoslav army were neutralised' (p. 175).

British policy toward wartime Yugoslavia has been a popular topic among Western historians, and the subject of some excellent monographs, most notably by Walter Roberts and Heather Williams. In that respect, the chapters of Lane's book dealing with the war years are treading familiar ground, but because her study of British policy extends to the end of the decade, it has the advantage precisely of showing how Churchill's policy turned out well for the West in the end, even if scepticism might have appeared justified in 1946. There was a remarkable continuity to British policy toward Yugoslavia and the Balkans before, during and after World War II, which cannot be reduced to mere Great Power competition with Germany or the Soviet Union, and which a narrow focus on the war years obscures. This included support for Yugoslav unity and for stability in the Balkans, with which Britain began the war. By the end of the 1940s, as Lane notes, 'The purpose of British war-time policy – the search for stability and order in a notoriously troublesome and dangerous region – had been achieved' (p. 175).

Seen from the standpoint of a quest for stability, the British policy of supporting the more genuinely pan-Yugoslav Partisans against the narrowly Serb-nationalist Chetniks made additional sense. Mihailovic was a military strongman who had ruthlessly promoted civil war against the Partisans from the early months of the resistance. Even before the British abandoned him, as Lane shows, there were voices among them who invoked

[1] Jozo Tomasevich, War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: The Chetniks, Stanford 1975.

the pre-war Spanish precedent, even identifying him as a Yugoslav Franco. And as Geoffrey Warner points out in his foreword to Lane's book, 'the same anxiety preoccupied President Roosevelt in respect of China, where there was a similar internal conflict between Communists and anti-Communists running parallel with resistance to foreign aggression and occupation, in this case by Japan. The Americans chose to support the anti-Communists in China, but it did not do them much good. Intervention in other countries' civil wars is a perilous enterprise at the best of times; it is even worse if you back the losing side' (p. vii).

Lane's book is a well researched and smoothly written study of Western policy-making, which it presents in a balanced, sober and nuanced manner. It is not primarily a study of Yugoslavia as such, so it is marred only slightly by the author's rather inaccurate portrayal of the facts of Yugoslavia's history and geography. It is untrue, for example, that Milan Nedic became the quisling ruler of Serbia immediately following the Axis conquest of Yugoslavia (p. 11), or that Ravna Gora, where Mihailovic had his base, was located in quisling Croatia rather than in Serbia (p. 12) or that the Slavic population of Istria in 1919 was predominantly Slovene rather than Croat (p. 86). It is a gross oversimplification to claim that the interwar 'Yugoslav state as constituted, suited the Serbs' (p. 8), given the radical assaults on the constitutional order mounted by leading Serbs from Svetozar Pribicevic to King Aleksandar. It is wholly inaccurate to claim that in 1941 'the Croat nation quickly embraced the fascist alternative offered by its ally, Roman Catholic Italy' (p. 8) – Italy was no ally of the Croat nation, and the part of the latter that embraced the fascist alternative was very narrow.

Nevertheless, a more careful study of Yugoslavia the country would probably only have strengthened Lane's conclusions, rather than altered them. The Chetniks were not merely Serb-supremacist, but actively genocidal vis-à-vis non-Serbs, in particular Muslims and Croats. Irrespective of what the British did, the Soviet Union would not have permitted this anti-Communist force to conquer Yugoslavia following the German withdrawal, but leaving that aside – such a Chetnik conquest would not have been feasible, given the size of the non-Serb population of Yugoslavia, and any attempt at it would have involved genocidal slaughter on a vast scale. The British during World War II were eventually wise enough to realise that to bank on Mihailovic and the Chetniks was not a viable option. It is unfortunate that Western leaders in the first half of the 1990s, faced with a renewed Great Serbian offensive under Slobodan Milosevic, did not show similar perspicacity.

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