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**BELGRADE COUP D’ÉTAT OF MARCH 27, 1941**

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The article analyzes the Yugoslav coup d’état of March 27, 1941 and its consequences. The role of Bora Mirković, the general brigadier of the Royal Yugoslav Air Force in organizing the coup d’état and his relation with the British Secret Intelligence Service have been considered. The attention is paid to the Croatian politicians’ attitude towards the March events.

*Key words:* Yugoslavia, government, internal policy, coup d’état, Dušan Simović.

The assassination of King Alexander in 1934, Marseilles influenced on changes in the foreign policy of Yugoslavia, which began to vary between pro-British and pro-German course. Regent Prince Paul strove desperately to prevent the country against the war. At the same time he paid a great attention to solving Serbo-Croatian conflict, which though weakened due to Cvetković-Maček Agreement in 1939, but has not vanished ultimately. The current country state was impeded by a tense international situation in the region.

The attention of researchers was partially attracted by the preparation and realization of the coup on March 27, 1941 in Yugoslavia. Jacob Hoptner outlined the role of Bora Mirković in the organization of the March events<sup>1</sup>. Alan Palmer put stress on the role of the British Intelligence Service in preparing the coup<sup>2</sup>. Analyzing March events in Yugoslavia, Elizabeth Barker emphasized the role of A. MacDonald, the Air Attaché Captain, as the contact person<sup>3</sup>.

The question of the role of the British Intelligence Service in organizing the coup d’état on March 27 rose sharply in the second half of the 70s. In September 1977 an article by Professor David Stafford was published. There he put forward arguments about British influence on events in Yugoslavia that took place in March. He emphasized that it was the project of the British Diplomatic Mission, Foreign Office and Special Operations Executive (SOE). Hereby he agreed with J. Tomašević that T. Maplbek was the main contact person<sup>4</sup>. It caused indignation and criticism of Professor Radoje Knežević, the participant of these events. The duration of correspondence between professors was about two years. In a letter of February 27, 1978 to D. Stafford, R. Knežević emphasized “as a matter of fact, while in Yugoslavia I have never heard the names of the SOE or Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) people. I didn’t even know a single Englishman living then in my native country”. At the same time R. Knežević asked to report the name of the person who provided this information. But D. Stafford refused stating the anonymity of the source<sup>5</sup>. The last response of R. Knežević was published in the “Slavic Review” magazine of June 1979. Here he put forward arguments about the Great Britain being uninvolved. Along with a letter,

the apology by D. Stafford was published. There he regrets the error and any personal offense this might have caused to R. Knežević<sup>6</sup>.

Analyzing events in Yugoslavia held in March, Marcus Tanner focused on the Serbo-Croatian conflict and the figure of Vladko Maček as the Croatian leader<sup>7</sup>. Marcia Kurapovna paid the major attention to the role of the British liaison missions and Adolf Hitler's reaction towards events that took place in Belgrade<sup>8</sup>.

Vasyl Fomin<sup>9</sup>, Grygoriy Slavin<sup>10</sup>, Dmytriy Sevyan<sup>11</sup> and Yuriy Hirenko<sup>12</sup> are soviet time historiographers who wrote in a different extent about the coup on March 27. Yu. Hirenko considered the coup as a necessary step of Yugoslav bourgeoisie: "Taking into consideration the circumstances in the country and the widespread discontent of the masses in an effort to prevent the revolutionary upheaval that could lead to the collapse of bourgeois society in the country, a group of senior officers overthrew the government of Cvetković-Maček". Overall conclusions of soviet time historiography resulted to the overthrow of "antinational, pro-fascist" government of D. Cvetković-V. Maček and the signing of the Soviet-Yugoslav treaty. That was a great political victory for democratic and anti-fascist forces of Yugoslavia at the forefront of which communists were put.

Documents of Historical Archive of Belgrade<sup>13</sup>, memories of King Peter II<sup>14</sup> and the Serbian Patriarch Gavriilo<sup>15</sup>, the U.S. press materials<sup>16</sup>, et al.<sup>17</sup> were the basic sources of information to write this article.

February 14, 1941 Dragiša Cvetković, the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, and Alexander Cincar-Marković, the minister of Foreign affairs, had a meeting with Adolf Hitler where they discussed question of joining the "Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis". After a secret trip of Prince Paul to Berchtesgaden on March 4, the secret Hitler's residence in Germany and following trip to Rome to meet with B. Mussolini, D. Cvetković and A. Cincar-Marković on March 25, 1941 in Vienna signed a protocol of accession of Yugoslavia to the Tripartite Pact<sup>18</sup>. This led to the coup d'état, which was already about to happen among the officers' circles in Belgrade.

The vast majority of researchers are tending to think that the coup plan was developed with the impact of British Intelligence Service. If the official London agreed to the neutrality of Yugoslavia before, now it pressured to its more active role in the war against Germany. Joining the Tripartite Pact by Yugoslavia was the destruction of any plans for the formation of the Balkan front for the Great Britain. When the British governmental circles clearly understood that the signing of the pact was inevitable, they mobilized their forces to prevent that. These efforts included both diplomatic pressure and political action.

Since W. Churchill evaluated actions of Prince Paul with a suspicion, few months before the coup he ordered British agents to make the contact with potential dissident groups in Belgrade. British air attaché A. MacDonald established close ties with General B. Mirković, the deputy commander of the air force. As a student at the Serbian military academy before the First World War, he had been a pupil of Colonel Apis Dimitriević (1876-1917), organiser and leader of a secret society the "Black

Hand<sup>19</sup>. Political ideas of Yugoslav general, like most of his generation of Serbs, were romanticized and overfilled with heroic Serbian past. The result was that his actions were often guided by patriotic feelings<sup>20</sup>.

Simultaneously, the member of March events Radoje Knežević in a letter to D. Stafford notified: "I suspect it could be someone from among the followers of Prince Paul. The aim of most of them has been throughout the years to denigrate the men who had prevented Yugoslavia in March 1941 from siding with Hitler. The story of my "several meetings" with Colonel Masterson<sup>21</sup> was invented 20 years ago by D. Cvetković, Prince Paul's Prime Minister and the signatory of the Tripartite Pact, in his booklet "Dokumenti o Jugoslaviji" (Paris, February, 1958). After I rebuked him in the London review "Poruka" (March, 1958), D. Cvetković and his acolytes kept mum about it. Now, your "normally highly reliable informant" repeats the lie to you. ... There is nothing in your letter that would support your claim that in 1941 I have been an indirect link between SOE people in Yugoslavia and General Mirković. Your assertion about it is utterly inaccurate"<sup>22</sup>.

Without denying the actions of SOE and its relations with the military on the Yugoslavian territory it should be noted that their contacts with Serbian political parties and patriotic organizations were useful for propaganda and agitation. But it was not enough for the realization of the revolt against Prince Paul.

The revolutionary ideas were not spread among the Serbian political circles. The elder politicians stayed the leaders of opposition parties. Narodna Odbrana lost its revolutionary fervor. Under such conditions, the highest bid was placed on the Air Force officers. Subsequently, we should not discuss the deeds of the SOE or the SIS, but the role of the British air attaché Captain A. MacDonald. He worked with military Air Force officers such as General D. Simović and General B. Mirković<sup>23</sup>.

A. MacDonald was the main person to keep contact with. In report of March 26, he said that there was no need to wait for the coup for more than a few days<sup>24</sup>. There is also version that T. Maplbek, the assistant air attaché and operative of the British Intelligence Service in Belgrade, led these events<sup>25</sup>. B. Mirkovich recalled events on March 27 during his speech in London in 1951. He stressed that the idea of revolution appeared as long ago as 1938 and that he had discussed this possibility quite openly with the majority of generals including the minister of war Milan Nedić.

B. Mirković relied on junior grade air force officers and members of the Reserve Officers Club in Belgrade while organizing the coup. Opportunely, that was the place where he met with the British military attaché, Lt. Col. C. S. Clarke, and the air attaché, Wing Commander A. H. MacDonald. This group also included the career officers, mainly belonging to the military elite of the general staff school. They were grouping around Major Živan Knežević, current commander of a Guards infantry battalion. Liaisons between the general staff and the opposition were also there. Among them was a brother of the Major, the aforementioned Professor Radoje Knežević, the tutor of French of King Peter and the secretary of the Democratic Party's executive committee. He established contacts with the intellectual elite of the

University of Belgrade through the Serbian Cultural Club, who were grouping around the famous historian Professor Slobodan Jovanović.

The success of the coup was to be favored by a support of B. Mirković by different groups. Among the Serbs on his side were the older generation of generals, intellectuals, leftist students, the opposition, the army, the air force and the Orthodox Church. He also had a support among some Croats and Slovenes, who believed that the signing of the pact is a betrayal of old allies and the doom of Yugoslavia to the shame and penalties after the inevitable Allied victory over Germany<sup>26</sup>.

One of the priorities in the organization of the coup by B. Mirković was the election of a candidate who would be able to lead a revolt and the government formed by it. He offered that position to the governor of Morava M. Krasojević, to the war minister Milan Nedić, to the Commander of the Royal Guard General Aleksandar Stanković, to General Bogoljub Ilić and to General D. Simović. M. Nedić and refused that offer, stating that in their positions they could not take an active part in. Instead A. Stanković promised not to use the Royal Guard against people and keep plans he was informed about in absolute secrecy. General B. Ilić refused to lead the coup and the government, as he did not feel enough power in himself for the political leadership of the country. Though later he became minister of war in the post-revolutionary government. The offer was accepted by General D. Simović<sup>27</sup>.

When the revolution became an accomplished fact, General Petar Živković, the Prime Minister of the time of King Alexander and his brother General Dimitrije Živković joined the coup. They gave their support to the commander of the Second Army at Sarajevo, General B. Ilić. Each of the elderly generals had personal reasons for despising the regency. For some it was the retirement or giving the reserve status with wages, but no other status. For others it was continuation of military service in small areas in order to prevent them from taking part in the political activity. In addition, they did not have a personal approval and apprehension of Prince Paul's politics.

By March 26 all benevolent to B. Mirković groups were ready to make the coup started. They were waiting for the signal. The Headquarter of the coup was situated at the airfield of Zemun. In their possession was an inspector of posts, telegraph and telephone, who had to cut off communication between Belgrade and the rest of the country at once with the beginning of the revolution. B. Mirković and his allies got even the blessing of the hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church<sup>28</sup>.

On the evening of March 26, L. S. Amery, a member of W. Churchill's government who had served as a liaison officer with the Serbs in 1916, delivered a remarkable broadcast from London. He appealed to the Serbs "who throughout centuries of oppression kept flame of national spirit alive" not to "let your people become once more a subject race". His message made a deep impression in Belgrade<sup>29</sup>.

B. Mirković came into operation at dawn on March 27. Tanks and artillery went to all the main streets of the capital. Escorted by air force officers General Simović occupied the Ministry of War. The task of the first priority was to force the Prime

Minister D. Cvetković to resign<sup>30</sup>. The radio broadcasted the proclamation and the declaration that announced the overthrow of the government and the end of the regency<sup>31</sup>. B. Mirković had no intention to take political power in hand. He returned to the airfield of Zemun and left the government in the hands of D. Simović<sup>32</sup>. By two o'clock in the afternoon all strategic positions were occupied by the troops<sup>33</sup>.

Despite the fact that lots of military and politicians were involved in the coup, events of March 27 came as a surprise to the members of the royal family and a part of politicians. Particularly 17-year-old Peter, the heir to the throne, was very surprised to hear on the radio that the royal power will be in his hands. "I came back to the palace about 9 a.m. and turned on the radio on Radenko's advice. To my great surprise I heard a voice slight different from mine uttering the following proclamation:

"Serbs, Croats, Slovenes!

In this morning, so grave for our people, I have decided to take the Royal Power into my hands. The members of the Regency Council have appreciated the correctness of the reasons for my action and immediately resigned at their own accord. My Royal Army and Navy have at once placed themselves at my disposal and are already carrying out my orders. I appeal to all Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to rally round the Throne. Under the present grave circumstances this is the surest way of preserving internal order and external peace. I have charged Army Corps General Simović with the formation of a new Government. With trust in God and the future of Yugoslavia I appeal to all citizens and all authorities of the country to fulfill their duties to King and country"<sup>34</sup>.

A significant role in the current Yugoslav politics played V. Maček, Deputy Prime Minister of Yugoslavia and leader of the Croatian Peasant Party. He arrived to Zagreb on March 26 at 10 p.m. The next morning he received a call from the Finance Minister Juraj Šutej. He was informed that a group of army officers headed by General B. Mirković were forming the new cabinet and insisted on an inclusion of four Croat ministers in the deposed government – Juraj Šutej, Boris Smoljan, Ivan Andres and Josip Torbar. But Croatian politicians refused to join the new cabinet without V. Maček's consent. He asked J. Šutej to call back in two hours. During this time he had to meet the vice-president of the Croatian Peasant Party August Košutić and his general-secretary Juraj Krnjević. He asked them to come to his home. At his parlour V. Maček encountered the chief of the Zagreb police Vikert. The chief brought a message from Prince Paul who was at the railway station of Zagreb at that time<sup>35</sup>.

On March 26, 1941, Prince Paul has left Belgrade by train. Putschists regarded that as a fact that he was informed about the coup plan before and therefore had planned to leave the country. However, according to a report received from the royal residence, it was found out that the regent went on holiday to Slovenia and Princess Olga stayed with children in Belgrade<sup>36</sup>.

The meeting was held in the residence of the governor of Croatia. Besides Prince Paul, the deputy prime minister V. Maček, Ban of Croatia I. Šubašić and commander

of the Croatian divisions in Zagreb General August Marić were present. V. Maček considered that Prince must restore the previous order and not to compromise with the coup. General August Marić said that the situation in the Croatian military garrisons was stable and they gave their support to Prince Paul<sup>37</sup>. According to V. Maček, the mobilization of Croatian army units was to strengthen the position of regent against the conspirators in Serbia. However, Prince Paul gave up that idea. One of the reasons was Princess Olga and children's stay in Belgrade<sup>38</sup>.

He addressed through the consul to the British government for permission to obtain refugee status in the British colony. Already at the noon on March 27 regent left Zagreb accompanied by the Ban of Croatia Ivan Šubašić. The objective of Šubašić was to evaluate the real situation in the capital and to negotiate about the conditions under which the Croatian ministers would serve in the new government. In the evening of the same day the royal train with Prince Paul and Ivan Šubašić arrived to Zemun. General D. Simović, who was waiting for them at the railway station, immediately escorted Prince Paul to the war ministry<sup>39</sup>. There Prince Paul, along with Radenko Stanković and Ivo Perović, royal governors of the minor King Peter II, signed the documents of abdication<sup>40</sup>. Around 10 p.m. Prince Paul and his family left to Greece. Not long after they conveyed across to Kenya and a few months later they were allowed to move to the Union of South Africa<sup>41</sup>.

The complex dilemma was set to V. Maček due to the coup. He was personally loyal and devoted to regent, who ended the persecution by the authorities in 1935 and worked tirelessly to overcome the hatred between Serbs and Croats. The leader of the Croatian Peasant Party had a fear that the coup plot was designed by the same circle of Serbian nationalists who opposed to the Concordat with the Vatican in 1937 and to the agreement in 1939.

The problem was that Prince Paul had gone back willingly to Belgrade. That gesture lent the coup legitimacy. The refusal to join the next cabinet created the risk of plunging the country into bloodshed. Also general D. Simović was reassuring V. Maček for long time in a telephone conversation to join the new government assuring him that the agreement of 1939 remains in force. Moreover, he was promising to extend the Croatian Banovina's competences. V. Maček joined the government after the promise of a new Prime Minister to make a treaty with Germany<sup>42</sup>.

New cabinet with D. Simović as the Prime Minister was established on March 27. V. Maček became Deputy Prime Minister, Slobodan Jovanović – President of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, General Bogoljub Ilić – war minister, and Srdjan Budisavljević, the leader of the Independent Democratic Party – minister of internal affairs<sup>43</sup>.

A choice of the candidate for the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs has caused considerable debate. Due to the significant support of the leader of the Democratic Party Milan Grol, Momčilo Ninčić, Serbian radical, gained the post. Pro-Italian policy

favours helped him with this assignment which the government of D. Simović was planning to use to establish relations with Germany<sup>44</sup>.

After the formal nullification of the Tripartite Pact by the government, numerous demonstrations started gathering in Belgrade. They declaimed slogans in support to the United Kingdom. Mass meetings were held under the slogans “Bolje rat nego pakt!” and “Bolje grob nego rob!” (“Better the war than the pact!” “Better the grave than the slavery!”). Demonstrations in support of the coup also took place in Cetinje, Podgorica, Split, Skopje, Kragujevac and other major cities<sup>45</sup>.

Orthodox priests and officials in senior positions throughout the country also expressed their disagreement with the signing of the Tripartite Pact. Even the police, whose job was to maintain the order, was favoured by people. In his memoirs, King Peter II said: “For every true Serb could be the only way out – the revolution, which took place on March 27”<sup>46</sup>.

On the day of the coup the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Gavrilo made in Belgrade the radio call to all Serbs of the Orthodox faith to reunify. Then the patriarch said: “Today the question was put again towards our nation. And this morning the question was answered. We choose the heavenly kingdom which is nationally strong and free – the kingdom of God’s truth and justice. This ideal is eternal in the hearts of all Serbs and preserved by our church”<sup>47</sup>.

The inauguration of King Peter II was held on March 28 with Patriarch Gavrilo’s presence. On the same day a conflict with the German travel agency which was at the same time the headquarters of the Gestapo occurred. The protesters broke windows and tore the swastika flag at the agency. Due to the conflict one German was injured<sup>48</sup>.

Official London reacted immediately and called it the first major political defeat on the Continent for Germans. In France, Marseille, strangers laid banks of flowers upon the scene of the assassination in 1934 of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and Foreign Minister Barthous of France<sup>49</sup>.

British Prime Minister W. Churchill pointed that “Early this morning Yugoslavia found his soul”<sup>50</sup>. King of Great Britain George VI on the first anniversary of the coup d’état emphasized that ‘March 27 will remain inscribed by golden letters in the history of Yugoslavia and entire Europe’. Canadian Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King on July 10, 1942 told King Petar II in Canada that, ‘Before the war in Canada Yugoslavia was a geographic name. But she is today known to every child as the country which had shown the example to the entire world how one must defend his national freedom...’. British Ambassador to the Yugoslav government sir George Rendel in his book “The Sword and Olive”, wrote: ‘Young King Petar ... became the symbol of Yugoslavia’s desperate struggle to preserve her liberty ... The Serbs are among the most physically courage people in the world ... the coup d’état had shown a fine fighting spirit’.

Simultaneously, Moscow didn’t congratulate Yugoslav government with the coup d’état. On April 1, 1941 the most influential Soviet edition ‘Pravda’ stated that the

Yugoslav people were distinguished by a glorious past and were deserving of congratulations. However, the USSR had not sent a message to that effect to the new Yugoslav regime<sup>51</sup>.

The coup in Belgrade on March 27, 1941 changed the course not only of Yugoslavian, but also of European history. There are still ongoing debates about the role of the British Intelligence Service in organizing events which took place on that March. Although there is no evidence of its funding on the part of Special Operations, the Secret Intelligence Service or other special services, the fact of organizing the coup was clearly known. The reason for its implementation was the signing of the Tripartite Pact on March 15, 1941. However, the reasons of it are much deeper and the chief aim of the coup was overthrowing of Prince Paul. One of the main reasons of Serbs attitude towards him and D. Cvetković's government was the policy of reconciliation with the Croats, which caused aversion among Serbian generals and Serb nationalists in general. After the peaceful outcome, the revolution caused a wave of endorsement among the people not only in Belgrade but also in many other Yugoslavian cities. But Germany accepted it as a challenge and it led to the assault on Yugoslavia.

## БЕЛГРАДСЬКИЙ ДЕРЖАВНИЙ ПЕРЕВОРОТ 27 БЕРЕЗНЯ 1941 РОКУ

Марта ЯРЕМКО

Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка  
кафедра нової та новітньої історії зарубіжних країн

У статті проаналізовано белградський державний переворот 27 березня 1941 року та його наслідки. Автор також розглянула роль бригадного генерала Югославських королівських повітряних сил Бори Мірковича в організації перевороту та його стосунки з Британською розвідкою. Особливу увагу звернуто на ставлення хорватських політиків до беззневих подій.

*Ключові слова:* Югославія, уряд, внутрішня політика, державний переворот, Душан Сімовіч

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<sup>8</sup> *Kurapovna M. K.* Shadows on the Mountain. The Allies, the Resistance, and the Rivalries That Doomed WWII Yugoslavia. – Hoboken, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2009. – 336 p.

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<sup>49</sup> A Nation's Fight for Survival: The 1941 Revolution and War in Yugoslavia as Reported by the American Press. – P. 6.

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