

## POLITICIANS OR PARTISANS? THE FRUSTRATIONS OF BRITISH SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN BULGARIA, 1940 - 1944

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The history of British involvement in Bulgaria during the Second World War has received limited scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> The dated and inadequate treatment of this matter is especially obvious when compared to that of Yugoslavia and Greece.<sup>2</sup> To some extent, the thin coverage is reflective of the little action that actually occurred in and with regards to Bulgaria. Indeed, Bulgaria did not experience the traumatic civil wars which engulfed its neighbours, nor did it attract such high-profile British agents as Fitzroy McLean or C.M.Woodhouse who later became lifetime champions of the countries of their wartime assignments. From the British perspective, the most dramatic "Bulgarian episode" is the murder of Major Frank Thompson in June 1944 while on mission with the Bulgarian Partisans.

Events in Bulgaria might be seen as little but a side show which could not legitimately attract British attention or resources in view of Britain's genuinely global war effort. Yet, this is hardly a satisfactory interpretation, given precisely Bulgaria's proximity to Greece and Yugoslavia and its importance for traditional British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Another explanation - plausible but too easily taken for granted - lies in the view that from the start of the Second World War Bulgaria lay in the Soviet zone of influence.

So far, most narratives have been based exclusively on documents of the British Foreign Office and the military services. They have looked in a rather broad-brush manner at diplomatic efforts, political considerations and military strategy and have accordingly established the parameters of British policy towards Bulgaria. But the instruments of this policy in Bulgaria between 1941 and 1944 have hardly been discussed in depth. It is on these that this article focuses so as to attempt an understanding of the real meaning of policy through examination of its specific on-the-spot implementation. This has been possible due to the relatively recent release of the surviving archives of the Special Operations Executive which add a

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<sup>1</sup> Barker, E. *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976; Barker, E. et al. (eds.) *British Political and Military Strategy in Central-Eastern and Southern Europe in 1944*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988; The only glimpse of the US involvement is in Boll, M.M. *Cold War in the Balkans: American Policy towards Bulgaria 1943 - 1947*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984

<sup>2</sup> Lane, A. *Britain, the Cold War and Yugoslav Unity, 1941 - 1949*. Chichester: Sussex Academic Press, 1996

Williams, H. *Parachutes, Patriots and partisans: the Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia, 1941 - 1945*. London: C.Hurst, 2003

new dimension to Britain's involvement with Bulgaria in the course of the Second World War. The Bulgarian case is illuminating as to how British policy was elaborated, and more importantly applied, when a country of relatively little intrinsic value all of a sudden acquired disproportionate importance.

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When Bulgaria joined the Tripartite Pact on 1 March 1941, Britain broke off relations but did not declare war. It was the Bulgarian Government of Bogdan Filov that declared war on Great Britain and the United States in December 1941, in an act of Axis solidarity following the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor. From that moment - having only half-heartedly tried to prevent Bulgaria from adhering to the Axis<sup>3</sup> - Britain sought to elaborate a strategy that would force Bulgaria if not to turn against Germany, at least to return to neutrality.

Just as before the war, throughout 1941 - 1944 Bulgaria rarely assumed high priority in British political or military planning. As it was not involved in active fighting, it drew sporadic attention, mostly in discussions of an alternative second front in the Eastern Mediterranean. For most of the hostilities in Europe, Bulgaria also remained fairly remote from the main war theatres and only fell within the range of the Allies' airforce after the landings in Sicily in September 1943. Logistic difficulties were aggravated by the fact that the internal Bulgarian situation was not conducive to the development of a significant resistance movement with which Britain could collaborate. Bulgaria avoided German occupation, did not engage in direct warfare and secured substantial territorial aggrandisement under German auspices, and so presented Britain with a relatively strong government whose course it was hard to influence by overt or covert measures.

As to British post-war plans, Bulgaria featured mainly in the Balkan Federation scheme which was practically banned by the Soviets at the Teheran Conference. Bulgaria was not at war with the Soviet Union and this imposed severe limitations on British policy. The British Government acknowledged a fundamental Soviet interest and was extremely careful not to create a negative Soviet perception of British actions regarding Bulgaria. Further account had to be taken of Britain's support for the exiled governments of Greece and Yugoslavia. Both were very important for Britain's regional strategy and both harboured serious grievances against Bulgaria.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dimitrov, I. *Anglia i Bulgaria (Britain and Bulgaria) 1939 - 1941*. Sofia: Izdatelstvo na OF, 1983

<sup>4</sup> Stankova, M. *Bulgaria in British Foreign Policy 1943 - 1949*. PhD. London School of Economics and Political Science, 1999. p. 49 - 53

Yet, Britain could not ignore Bulgaria altogether. The British government especially strongly refuted the Bulgarian Government's line that the latter's participation in the war was purely 'symbolic'. Not only did Bulgarian occupation of Greece and Yugoslavia free German divisions for fighting elsewhere but the country also provided a vital communications route for German troops and secured access to the Black Sea. On the whole, British observers believed that strategically and psychologically, Bulgaria was an important link in the German hold over Eastern Europe and therefore Bulgaria's knocking out of the war would similarly influence Romania and Hungary. But such, often implicit British recognition that Bulgaria could still prove 'the key to the Balkans'<sup>5</sup> rarely transformed into action. The opportunities for active British involvement in the country were few: the obstacles were numerous.

### ***SOE Efforts and FO Frustrations (late 1940 – September 1943).***

Most prominent among the British institutions dealing with Bulgaria in the early stages of the war were the Foreign Office (FO) and the newly established Special Operations Executive (SOE). Radically different in their methods and often with clashing immediate objectives, their working together in Bulgaria was not an easy process. Not only did they have to co-ordinate their actions in this difficult terrain, but more importantly, they had to do so while adjusting to changing military priorities in and beyond the Balkans.

Classical diplomacy aside, straightforward intelligence was but one aspect of activities behind the prospective enemy lines. The formulation and implementation of war-time policy to Bulgaria was increasingly dependent on the establishment of a network for the collection of military and political information. Britain's need for this became apparent when in the latter half of 1940 Bulgaria came under extreme pressure from Germany to join the Axis, yet Britain itself proved ill-equipped to gain knowledge of the Bulgarian Government's thinking, let alone influence it. The precariousness of the British position was further revealed when in the spring of 1941, a number of Bulgarians accused as British spies were caught and executed.<sup>6</sup> There is no reference of the incident in existing British sources. It is known, however, that the British secret services had activated in the region in the late 1930s. They were experiencing serious difficulties in Bulgaria, not the least because the British Minister in Sofia, Sir George Rendel vociferously objected to the commencement of secret operations in Bulgaria before there was an actual declaration of war.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> as Lord Halifax had called it in September 1939, quoted in Barker, E. *British Polic...* p.55

<sup>6</sup> Kotev, N. *Britanskoto razuznavane v Bulgaria 1939 – 1945g.* Sofia, 2003. p.34 - 46

<sup>7</sup> Rendel, G. *The Sword and the Olive: Recollections of Diplomacy and the Foreign Service.* London: Murrey, 1957. p.174 - 175

The preparation for work inside Bulgaria after the predicted diplomatic rupture proved a contentious issue between the FO and the SOE which had recently taken up the broad area of resistance and subversion.<sup>8</sup> The SOE realised that once relations were actually broken off, it would be extremely difficult to recruit and instruct agents in a country which was not known for its pro-British feelings. The diplomatic establishment, of whose more traditional outlook Rendel was representative, had reservations towards the SOE.<sup>9</sup> These were especially pronounced in Bulgaria where Britain - due to its aloof inter-war attitude - had restricted influence and FO expertise could be easily monopolised by the SOE. Rendel in particular, was concerned that ongoing efforts to secure Bulgarian neutrality should not be prejudiced by what he saw as adventurous and unrealistic schemes. Only reluctantly did he submit to eventual overruling by the Southern Department of the FO and conceded that intelligence and special operations officers from the legations in Sofia and Belgrade could use diplomatic cover. This occurred three months before Bulgaria signed the Tripartite Pact - and not before a marked improvement in the overall relationship between the FO and SOE.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the early institutional and personal clashes, the FO and the SOE agreed on the broad strategy regarding Bulgaria. While in late 1940 Britain continued diplomatic efforts to persuade Bulgaria of remaining neutral, the special services also planned for the alternative. At this stage SOE efforts centred on political resistance against the increasingly likely Bulgarian signing of the Tripartite Pact. Emphasis was placed on the need to contact the biggest possible number of anti-Axis organisations and bring them into a loose coalition, a generic national front which would campaign under the broad slogan of Bulgarian independence. Such an organisation would engage in propaganda and aim to mobilise anti-Hitler public opinion, the latter itself putting pressure on the Bulgarian Government to exit from the war. Simultaneously, the national front would hinder Bulgaria's prospective engagement in the war in every conceivable way, including by sabotage and subversion. At the outset, the SOE considered that its ultimate task in Bulgaria would be the staging of a revolt by the united opposition forces, if and when the British military authorities judged it appropriate.<sup>11</sup> This was somewhat different from events in Belgrade where a coup against Yugoslavia's joining the Axis took place in March 1941 with British involvement.<sup>12</sup> With regards to Bulgaria, the thinking seemed more in line with the so-called 'detonator concept' whereby a secret army would be

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<sup>8</sup> Stafford, D.A.T. *Britain and European Resistance 1940-1945*. Basingstoke, 1980. p.15

<sup>9</sup> Stafford, D.A.T. *Britain and European Resistance...* p.20 - 21

<sup>10</sup> HS5/181, CD to Jebb, 5.11.1940

<sup>11</sup> HS5/181, D/H2 to D/H1, 28.10.1940

<sup>12</sup> Stafford, D.A.T. *SOE and British Involvement in the Belgrade Coup d'État of March 1941*. *Slavic Review*. Vol.36, no.3. September 1977; Onslow, S. *Britain and the Belgrade Coup of 27 March 1941 Revisited*. Institute of Historical Research, London, April 2003

prepared to rise in the enemy's rear in co-ordination with the advances of regular Allied troops.<sup>13</sup>

In its preliminary work in Bulgaria the SOE did not exclude collaboration with any group which shared anti-Government and anti-German feelings. However, such open-mindedness and optimism were far from automatically reciprocated. Most Bulgarian centre-right politicians, even if they criticised the Bulgarian Government's pro-German policy preferred to stay well within legal limits.\* The first British soundings in 1940 – 1941 revealed that in practice there were few political formations worth cultivating. Those identified as partners were the left wing of the Agrarian Union, the Military League and the Protoguerovist wing of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO). These were all left-wing radicals, holding in common a pro-Yugoslav orientation: they had probably also been pointed to by the much more active Yugoslav contacts of the SOE.<sup>14</sup>

The three organisations did have other characteristics which recommended them to the British special services. The Military League led by Damian Velchev was deemed especially important for its undisputed influence over the Bulgarian army and police force. Realism prompted the British to recognise that though these officers opposed Bulgarian involvement with Germany, they were not necessarily pro-British. Contacts with the Bulgarian military were also hindered by the utterly conspiratorial nature of their organisation and their strong desire for independence, which prevented them from accepting funding from foreigners. In contrast, the Protoguerovists, whose cause was a Macedonian state within a South-Slav federation, were eager to receive as many weapons and ammunitions as possible. The terrorist tactics they had widely employed in the 1920s and early 1930s suited SOE's plans very well indeed. The Protoguerovists, too, made it clear they would work 'with', rather than 'for' Britain.<sup>15</sup>

The main advantage of the Agrarians was their popular well-established movement with supporters and structures throughout the country. Not only were they strongly critical of the present Bulgarian Government's affiliation with the Axis but they had also long opposed the internal policies of the Bulgarian regime. The leader of the *Pladne* faction, Dr G.M.Dimitrov (known by everyone as G.M.), was a well-known public

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<sup>13</sup> Stafford, D.A.T. *Britain and European Resistance...* p.32;

\* the constitution had been suspended and organised political activity had been severely restricted since 1935

<sup>14</sup> HS5/181, D/H2 to D/H1, 28.10.1940

<sup>15</sup> HS5/181, D/H2 to D/H1, 28.10.1940, report D/H2 to D/H1, 28.11.1940; Amery, J. *Approach March*. London: Hutchinson, 1973. p.175. The links of the Protoguerovists with the Bulgarian Communists are revealed in Semerdjiev, P. *BKP, Makedonskiyat vupros i VMRO*. Detroit, Michigan: Macedono-Bulgarian Institute, c.1990. p.60, 84

figure.<sup>16</sup> In addition to his political struggle, in 1940 he had gone some way towards the formation of what he called People's Resistance Guards that were to be activated if and when Bulgaria finally sided with Germany. Only grudgingly, towards the end of 1940 did G.M. accept that his resistance efforts might benefit from technical co-operation with the British. Some very limited arrangements for this were made with Colonel S.W.Bailey who was in charge of SOE's Balkan section in Belgrade.<sup>17</sup> Although the SOE had approached G.M. almost a year earlier, negotiations had been overcast by the FO stance that political means of influencing the regime and King Boris III should be exhausted before turning to the Bulgarian opposition. Once G.M. accepted co-operation with the British secret services, the latter had many occasions to confirm that he was 'a man of exceptional judgement and mental honesty'.<sup>18</sup> In fact, among all the better- or lesser-known Bulgarian public figures the British had contacted, his was the only categorical and apparently unconditional commitment to the Allied cause. It is a sign of his centrality in the British strategy that one of the first SOE operations in Bulgaria was the arrangement of G.M.'s escape from Bulgaria in the truck transporting the archives of the British Embassy to Turkey at the end of February 1941. Even Rendel was convinced that this was a necessary and worthwhile deed.

G.M. was very soon saved by the British a second time as he had to flee German-invaded Belgrade where he had gone hoping to establish a base for Bulgarian resistance. He was again helped to make his way to Istanbul where he mostly spent the war, also travelling to Cairo and Jerusalem. Under British supervision he set up the *Free and Independent Bulgaria Committee*, which was in charge of two radio stations broadcasting into Bulgaria.<sup>19</sup> However, G.M. was clearly isolated from developments in Bulgaria and more importantly, from the main British decision-making regarding the country which took place in London. He spent a lot of effort on establishment of contacts with his followers and fellow-politicians inside Bulgaria. Overseen by the SOE, he regularly prepared messages to be smuggled overland or by sea. Very few of these reached their destination and even fewer were answered.<sup>20</sup>

It soon became obvious to the SOE that no genuine resistance network had been built in Bulgaria, while the opposition was unfocused and leaderless. It would be extremely challenging for the SOE to establish

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<sup>16</sup> although not unique in Bulgarian politics, the extreme factionalism of the Agrarian Union was notorious

<sup>17</sup> Moser, Ch. *Dimitrov of Bulgaria. A Political Biography of Dr. George M. Dimitrov*. Ottawa, Il.: Caroline House Publishers, 1979. p.137 -138

<sup>18</sup> HS5/181, D/H2 to D/H1, 28.10. 1940; Moser, p.136 - 138

<sup>19</sup> Moser, Ch. *Dimitrov of Bulgaria. A Political Biography of Dr. George M. Dimitrov*. Ottawa, Il.: Caroline House Publishers, 1979. p.157 - 160

<sup>20</sup> Rendel, G. *The Sword and the Olive...* p.178; Moser, Ch. *Dimitrov of Bulgaria...* p.169-170

reliable channels of communication, let alone direct any subversion. An SOE agent visiting Bulgaria in early 1941 reported that 'complete understanding' had been reached between the three organisations discussed: at best this was too optimistic a statement.<sup>21</sup> If any nominal agreement had taken place at all, it was not accompanied by any practical arrangements for common activities. If conspiracies did exist, as suspected in London, the SOE failed to identify or co-operate with the perpetrators. In March 1942, a year after the spectacular flight of G.M., the SOE in both London and the Middle East registered disappointment with the fact that Bulgaria appeared almost a 'black spot' on the map. In their desperation to establish any communication with Bulgaria they suggested approaching 'friendly or corruptible diplomats'.<sup>22</sup> There is no record of the SOE actually taking steps in this direction except for helping in a parallel FO initiative.

The Southern Department of the FO which monitored Bulgaria was particularly well aware of the advantages that would be derived from stable links with Bulgarian officers. Bulgarian exiles in London persistently reminded of the enormous importance of securing contacts with the Bulgarian army which consisted of half a million well-equipped, trained and disciplined men. The FO agreed with the SOE that the military were among the few groups in Bulgaria capable of bringing about a 'revolution'. Using the term very loosely, they had in mind 'to engineer a military revolution which would at the worst neutralise the Bulgarian army as an effective fighting force, and at the best turn it into a pro-Allied force'.<sup>23</sup> In the FO's view, this was in keeping with the Bulgarian tradition of military coups in the inter-war period and reflected the historical reasons for the rank-and-file to be anti-German. Other contemporary observers such as Elisabeth Barker, who dealt with the Balkans at the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) were also inclined to accept the plausibility of the existence of some anti-Government centre within the Bulgarian army; to her mind, 'it would be contrary to Balkan tradition if there were not'. However, in mid-1943 she warned against being too imaginative and over optimistic.<sup>24</sup>

The FO was consequently prepared to authorise contacts with the Bulgarian army and itself tried to make these. It used the services of the highly regarded former Bulgarian Minister in London Nikola Momchilov, who had resigned his post on Bulgaria's adherence to the Axis. In the summer of 1942, the FO backed his initiative of writing personal letters to three senior Bulgarian officers who were serving with the Bulgarian occupation corps in

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<sup>21</sup> HS5/181, report on Bulgaria, January 1941

<sup>22</sup> HS5/181, communications February – March 1942

<sup>23</sup> FO371/37153, R5322 and HS5/180, Major Boughey - Howard, 16.06.1943, 21.06.1943; FO371/43587, R2808, SOE plan, 4.02.1944

<sup>24</sup> FO371/37155, R817, Matsankiev memorandum, 12.01.1943, R4215, Barker to Southern Department, 8.05.1943

Yugoslavia.<sup>25</sup> In early 1943, in a similar move, Momchilov wrote twice to the Bulgarian War Minister, and also to the Bulgarian Ministers in neutral Switzerland, Spain and Sweden. All letters urged responsible Bulgarian circles to put an end to the association with Germany and not 'to sit back and wait for the Soviet troops'. The letters were cleared with the Chiefs of Staff and relayed through SOE channels.<sup>26</sup>

The chances of these communications getting through appeared no slimmer than those of G.M.'s missives. The FO had little illusions about their minor value and yet, it seemed worthwhile to explore new means of penetrating Bulgaria. The alternative was doing nothing. In this largely desperate effort to 'open up' Bulgaria the FO co-operated with the SOE. In fact, the latter only secured the logistics and remained very clearly a secondary player under the guidance of the FO. Yet, the thrust of their efforts was clearly the same. As no reply was received\*, the limitations to the approach were revealed: they were indeed very similar to the obstacles G.M. was encountering. But the experience did not seem to make the FO too sympathetic towards the SOE's ongoing difficulties.

The mounting frustration with the lack of any positive development regarding Bulgaria soon surfaced. In August 1943, the death of King Boris III marked an important political crossroad for Bulgaria of which little became immediately known in London. This would have been a suitable if sensitive moment for the British to do something in Bulgaria. A minute by Orme Sargent, the Deputy Permanent Under-Secretary of the FO, transmitted well the urgent need for information: 'have we any idea what is happening in Bulgaria? Can nobody tell us anything... C? SOE? Middle East Intelligence?' His subordinates dryly commented that the SOE's Bulgarian contacts were 'rotten'.<sup>27</sup> Clearly in this instance, the FO was dependent for even basic information on the special services. But in the SOE's case, the resources were inadequate, at least partly because of the earlier disagreements about the foundations for underground work in Bulgaria. More than two years after the diplomatic break off with Bulgaria the full implications of Rendel's reluctance to give the SOE a free hand were unveiled.

Important as they were, the difficulties of the pre- and early-war period constituted only one side of the British predicament in Bulgaria. Operational complications were almost overshadowed by important unresolved political issues. Even before the political future of the Balkans emerged into Allied

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<sup>25</sup> FO371/37151, R3420, Momchilov to Sargent, 10.04.1943

<sup>26</sup> Rachev, *St. Churchill...* p.157; FO371/37151, R3420, Momchilov to Sargent, 10.04.1943, R3952, Momchilov to Sargent, 30.04.1943; FO371/37152, R10716, Momchilov to Sargent, 24.10.1943

\* in Bulgarian archives there is evidence of only one of the letters having reached its destination - Madrid

<sup>27</sup> FO371/37153, R8978, Sargent, Rose, 13.09.1943; Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.215



negotiations, British post-war planning for Bulgaria was subject to the acknowledgement of a prevailing Soviet interest there.<sup>28</sup> This was evident even in attempts such as the Momchilov letters about which the Soviets had learned and requested more information. The Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden was then alarmed lest the USSR suspect Britain of dealing behind the Soviet back, so suddenly the rationale for the whole exercise became dubious.<sup>29</sup>

The big stumbling block in dealings with Bulgaria in the first half of the war, however, was the political status of those few Bulgarians who co-operated with the British. Here again, there were important nuances between the SOE and FO views. Significantly, the FO had firmly forbidden any *political* undertakings with any Bulgarian collaborators as opposed to purely technical co-operation against the Axis. But G.M. wasn't anything if not a party leader with a clearly elaborated political vision for Bulgaria: it was naïve of the British to expect that in dealings with him resistance could be separated from politics and diplomacy. Indeed, G.M. seemed to believe that he had been on the whole accepted as the leader of the Bulgarian resistance, even if currently there was no organised resistance worth the name. This was the impression left on the Agrarian upon his arrival in Istanbul where shortly afterwards he met Sir Stafford Cripps, the British Ambassador to Moscow.<sup>30</sup> In his work from the Middle East G.M. was also *de facto* treated as not just the representative of his own Agrarian faction but also as the envoy of the other Bulgarian organisations which had shown an inclination to collaborate with the British services. This too reflected the SOE's belief that an agreement had been achieved among the three groups. Internal SOE memoranda clearly indicate that early on G.M.'s support was so sought at least partly due to the British perception that he constituted the link with the Velchevists and even, possibly, the Communists. Thus G.M. 'could be our sole contact and could handle the whole organization for us'.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, a year into the relationship with G.M., an internal note at SOE London referred to G.M. as simply 'the leader of his own party'.<sup>32</sup> Then, most strikingly, another year later, in the autumn of 1942, the SOE was seemingly prepared to treat G.M. and his associates as friendly exiled political leaders. On 21 October 1942, Lord Glenconner, Head of SOE Cairo, wrote to G.M. and his aide Kosta Todorov that they were recognised as the heads of a Bulgarian pro-British organisation and as such would be helped on the principles of Lend-Lease.<sup>33</sup> The statement was in such stark contrast with the intentions of the FO, that its only explanation could be that the SOE defied the FO. Could it

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<sup>28</sup> Stankova, M. *Bulgaria in British Foreign Policy...* p.32 - 34

<sup>29</sup> Moser, Ch. *Dimitrov...* p.159; Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.214

<sup>30</sup> Moser, Ch. *Dimitrov...* p.147

<sup>31</sup> HS5/181/ 28 October 1940 D/H2 to D/H1

<sup>32</sup> HS5/183, 25 October 1941, note

<sup>33</sup> HS5/183, Lord Glenconner to Dr.G.M.Dimitrov, September 1941

be a sign that the SOE appreciated better the need to offer their Bulgarian associates something which would help towards the promotion of the latter's own long-term goals if more than just a few individuals were to be recruited? There is meagre documented internal discussion to illuminate the circumstances in which the letter had been sent. Some indirect evidence suggests that contrary to initial appearance, in fact Lord Glenconner was offering a very limited political concession to the exiled Agrarians.

Apart from referring to G.M. and his associates as 'not individuals but collaborators and representatives of the Agrarians, Military League and the Protoguerovists', Glenconner's letter was charging them with the task of contacting these organizations. The promise of support was followed by a reminder that SOE had the right to alter any radio broadcasts and by implication, that it controlled G.M.'s activities. Finally, it mentioned the possibility of sending G.M. to the Balkans and therefore the need to find his deputy. A brief comment on the letter explained that it had been an attempt to please G.M. which was 'not easy'.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, immediately after sending the letter, the SOE tried to dispatch G.M. to Yugoslavia for establishing a link with his supporters inside Bulgaria through Mihajlovic's Četniks.<sup>35</sup> The effort failed due to G.M.'s ill health; that it was undertaken at all is telling about the necessity the SOE felt of distancing itself from the Bulgarian – both in the political and physical sense.

In addition to FO scepticism and SOE disappointment after almost two barren years, the deterioration of relations with G.M. was the result of the exiled Agrarians' activities in the Middle East and London. In June 1941 G.M. and Todorov had established links with representatives of the exiled Yugoslav and Greek governments in Cairo. Although the meetings had been arranged by the SOE, it had been G.M.'s own initiative to raise the issue of the post-war settlement in the Balkans and more specifically, that of South Slav Federation. Here he was stepping into controversial territory and the Greeks specifically expressed fears that this meant that the British Government supported the idea of independent Macedonia.<sup>36</sup> Shortly afterwards, just as the British had alleviated the inevitable Greek suspicions, the appearance of the outspoken Todorov in London in July 1941 created some unpleasant incidents for the FO. He remonstrated at being denied allegedly promised backing for representing an émigré Bulgarian Government and lobbying for a South Slav Federation.<sup>37</sup> There is no concurrent – or subsequent record of G.M. himself complaining about any worsening of the British attitude. There are no indications, either, that G.M.

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<sup>34</sup> HS5/185, 21 October 1942, notes

<sup>35</sup> HS5/185, notes, 16, 23 November 1942

<sup>36</sup> HS5/183, various communications 4 June – 3 July 1941

<sup>37</sup> HS5/183, SOE communications, SOE to FO, September 1941; Todoroff, K. *Balkan Firebrand*. Chicago, Il.: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1943. p.312-313

weakened his commitment to the Allied cause. Still, in the summer of 1943 the FO insisted on a restriction of G.M.'s movements and responsibilities for propaganda to Bulgaria. This precipitated doubts in the SOE whether he would continue the association with it at all.

It is plausible that without much fuss resources were being diverted elsewhere as two years of association with the Bulgarian émigrés had not yielded many results. Simultaneously, the FO seemed genuinely apprehensive that the Agrarian leader would indeed form a government-in-exile, which would then seek official British support. A British refusal would be embarrassing in view of the erstwhile involvement. Conversely, recognition would be impossible without scandalising the vociferous Greek and Yugoslav Allies, let aside raising Soviet suspicions.<sup>38</sup> Despite the gradual cooling off towards G.M., in its substance the FO position had not in fact budged since the moment of Bulgaria's joining the Axis. When resigning his diplomatic post Momchilov had specifically voiced the idea of setting up a Bulgarian Government-in-exile in London – and had been quickly turned down by the FO. Similarly to G.M. with whom he hardly had anything else in common, Momchilov's readiness to co-operate with the British had not been affected by the firm FO rejection of any political involvement.<sup>39</sup> Yet, offering no political concessions to potential supporters was detrimental to the British short-term necessity of establishing links with emerging resistance or stimulating internal opposition to the regime in Bulgaria.

### ***British Military Missions in Bulgaria.***

By mid-1943, there was a growing necessity for both the SOE and the FO to achieve tangible results in Bulgaria. G.M.'s contacts were barely giving signs of existence; in January 1943 the SOE had dropped 'blind' and lost J.S.Morgan, their best-trained officer for work in Bulgaria.<sup>40</sup> After the successful Allied landings in Sicily it became obvious that a Bulgarian *volte-face* could be decisive for the course of the war in the whole Balkan Peninsula. So, the goal of taking the country out of the war acquired new urgency. Simultaneously, the death of King Boris III in August 1943 presented the Allies with new diplomatic and propaganda opportunities. As ever, the political restraints of the FO remained in place but the need for action in the field

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<sup>38</sup> HS5/180, special report: April - September 1943, 1.10.1943; HS5/190, D/H2, 28.09.1944; Young, K. (ed.) *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart*. vol.2, 1939 -1965. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980. p.115; Moser, D. *Dimitrov...* p.159

<sup>39</sup> Stankova, M. *Bulgaria in British Foreign Policy...* p.61; Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.212

<sup>40</sup> HS5/180, memorandum on Bulgaria, 7 June 1943; Deakin, W. *The Embattled Mountain*. London, Oxford University Press, 1971. p.183

became imperative. Still, dependent on local partners, the British braced themselves for entering some uneasy alliances.

The prevailing evidence from the winter of 1943 – 1944 confirms that the British evaluated Bulgaria from a largely military angle and emphasised the exigency of knocking it out of the war even at the cost of association with the radical political left. Most illuminating of their priorities is the fact that both the FO and the SOE began to regard work with the Bulgarian Communists as advantageous and therefore desirable.

When Bulgaria joined the Axis, the Bulgarian Communist Party was still suffering from the embarrassment and confusion created by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact. Nevertheless, British observers acknowledged it was one of the staunchest anti-Government forces with a record of terrorist actions and underground survival. Even so, British agents had not sought direct connection with the Communists before or immediately after the outbreak of war. The SOE believed that G.M. was sufficiently to the left of the Bulgarian political spectrum to be able to attract Communists for common action, if necessary.<sup>41</sup> As for the FO, it was only in early 1943 when reports of increased Bulgarian Communist activity accumulated in London that its attention was more closely drawn in that direction. In February 1943, the FO enquired of the SOE London Headquarters as to why no direct links with the Bulgarian Communists had been made. The SOE's immediate reaction showed the little patience the two institutions had for each other:

...having been accused by the Foreign Office of working only with the Communists in Greece, we are now politely ticked off for not working with them in Bulgaria. ...in Yugoslavia they are quite incapable of making up their minds whether to support their accredited Ally the Yugoslav Government, or the so-called Communists supported by Russia. ...it is too much to expect the Foreign Office to be consistent.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, the controversy was more apparent than real. The FO was getting rid of its final prejudices and prepared to work with those who it admitted were engaging in serious resistance in Bulgaria. This was possible as the imperative of military objectives, including the contribution of the guerrillas was asserted over prospective political interests. In fact, accepting *direct* cooperation with Communists made British priorities crystal clear. In this the erstwhile lack of reliable contacts and allies in Bulgaria could even be construed as an advantage: it freed British policy makers to undertake what they considered the most practicable course. They were not restrained by ties with political elements inside or outside the country whose position they might endanger by new connections. The repercussions for G.M.'s position were instantly obvious, and it can hardly be a coincidence that his responsibilities were further diminished just as the Communists were gaining increasing attention.

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<sup>41</sup> HS5/181, D/H2 to D/H1, 28 October 1940

<sup>42</sup> HS5/185, SOE report; 13 January 1943; HS5/185, DH/V to CD, 27 February 1943

Indeed, the news of successful Communist fighting was more often than not accompanied by warnings that the leftist elements were getting too strong and clearing the ground for radical social changes to be backed by the approaching victorious Soviet army.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the scarcity of solid knowledge about the Bulgarian resistance made some SOE officers suspicious of getting involved with simple 'never-do-wells' who could eventually turn out to be anti-British. But the notion that even such people could be useful prevailed: in much the same manner as the FO, the SOE proceeded to disclaim any interest in the political affiliations of their potential collaborators:

Whether these are good Bulgarians or bad Bulgarians... are questions, which do not interest SOE. What interests SOE is that these are Bulgarians who are prepared to fight and commit sabotage against the Bulgarian Government and the Germans although this means risk of torture or death for them. Such men can be useful to us.<sup>44</sup>

SOE was understandably focussed on military goals and the longer-term political repercussions of its own actions were largely outside its immediate concern. From the start, the SOE realised that the utility of the Bulgarian movement depended on the extent of British help: material support was vital for enabling the Bulgarian Partisans to play their potentially important part. The FO which could not neglect post-war considerations altogether was also driven by the priorities of war. Therefore the FO approved support for the Bulgarian Partisans even though the latter were unlikely to promote British interests after the war.<sup>45</sup>

In November – December 1943, two British Military Missions (BMM) were dispatched to the Bulgarian Partisans. They were dropped in zones controlled by the Yugoslav Partisans on the border with Bulgaria. The Missions' brief was to estimate the strength of the underground Bulgarian movement and gather evidence for a considered opinion as to whether Britain should support it. They found Bulgarian guerrillas and established contact with representatives of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, which effectively controlled Bulgarian armed resistance.<sup>46</sup> Led first by Mostyn Davies and after his death by Frank Thompson, the short story of the BMMs is relatively well-known.<sup>47</sup> The political dilemmas in which they were caught up are only now becoming clear.

The initial reports of the British Liaison Officers (BLOs) as the Missions' heads were called were favourable to the Bulgarian Partisans. The latter

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<sup>43</sup> De Santis, H. *The Diplomacy of Silence: the American Foreign Service, the Soviet Union and the Cold War 1933 – 1947*. Chicago, Il.: Chicago UP, 1980. p.108; FRUS 1944, vol.III, p.317, Berry to Hull, 25.03.1944; HS5/179, 30 March 1943 G.M. conversation with A/HA

<sup>44</sup> HS5/180, Bulgaria situation report, March 1944

<sup>45</sup> HS5/185, FO to SOE, 27 February 1943

<sup>46</sup> HS5/180, memorandum on Bulgaria, 7.06.1943; Rachev, St. *Churchill...* p.193

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, S. *Agents Extraordinary*. London: Hale, 1975; Thompson, E.P. *Beyond the Frontier : the Politics of a Failed Mission, Bulgaria 1944*. Merlin Press, 1997

claimed to have divided the country into twelve operational zones, which were under the command of a central military authority. This body also directed armed town units, which were responsible for a wave of political murders in 1943, especially in Sofia. The BLOs also tried to comprehend the role of the political organisation behind the resistance, the Fatherland Front coalition of anti-Government parties. The Communists were eager to forestall suspicions that the Fatherland Front was simply a facade for themselves, who in turn stood for exclusively Soviet interests. To this effect they understated their own role in the armed resistance in Bulgaria. The BLOs forwarded to London the view that not all guerrillas were Communists and that the latter were but one of the founders of the Fatherland Front.<sup>48</sup> The British officers were told of the existence of about 12,000 Partisans in Bulgaria.\* New sources reveal that the Communists used different statistics for internal purposes. In March 1944, the Central Committee of the BCP reported to Moscow that 'there were twenty-six Partisan detachments altogether with the overall number of Partisans at 2,320'.<sup>49</sup>

Not being able to verify it independently, the SOE in the Middle East where the BLOs reported had no reason to distrust the received information. The high numbers of Bulgarian Partisans even seemed to be indirectly confirmed by the constant stream of news about the upsurge of leftist opposition to the Bulgarian regime. The BLOs themselves did not express the slightest doubt about the sincerity of their Communist contacts and could not even guess at the discrepancy between reality and the data they were given. They themselves were attached to the biggest Partisan units operating in relatively favourable circumstances on the Bulgarian-Yugoslav border. The BLOs also assessed favourably the opportunities for the Partisan forces in Bulgaria to grow: the population was assumed to be of generally leftist inclinations, attracted by the Partisan slogans and occasional personal examples of courage. Another positive factor was the perceived mounting popular discontent with the Bulgarian Government's internal and foreign policy.

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<sup>48</sup> FO371/43579, R724, Talbot-Rice to Howard, 14.01.1944, R3645, BLO report, 21.02.1944, R3646, BLO reports, 23.02.1944

\* Post-war Western historiography accepted these numbers as opposed to the hugely inflated ones put forward by the Bulgarian Communists after September 1944. See Bell, J.D. *The BCP from Blagoev to Zhivkov*. Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1986. p.63

<sup>49</sup> The first communications from the BLOs in Bulgaria claimed that the Partisans were 'several thousands', later they were reported at about 12,000, FO371/43587, R2808, SOE plan, 4.02.1944. The lower figure is confirmed by a communication to Tito stating a total of around 2,800 Partisans, AMVR, OB15513, vol.IV, I.32; Daskalov, D. *Zhan Suobshtava. Zadgranichnoto Byuro i antifashistkata borba v Bulgaria 1941 – 1944*. Sofia: Universitetsko Izdatelstvo 'Sv.Kl.Ohridski', 1991. p.187. An even smaller figure, 2,180, is quoted in Dimitrov, G. *Dnevnik...* p.414.

Such analysis of the situation in Bulgaria led the SOE to resolve to assist the Partisans. The SOE Bulgarian section highlighted the crucial element of time: at an early moment comparatively small supplies of arms would go a long way and eventually make a big difference. An even more significant result would be the knowledge that aid had been sent by the Western Allies. This would give the British clandestine organisations a good chance of gaining the Partisans' confidence and establishing mutual co-operation on a firmer basis. It could convince the Bulgarian guerrillas to provide the SOE with the necessary military information and accept BLOs for other parts of the country. Such reasoning was accepted by the FO which authorised further involvement and aid.<sup>50</sup>

As the number of Partisans in the BLOs report was not doubted, initial supplies were apportioned accordingly.<sup>51</sup> The SOE Bulgarian section were apportioned stores for the equipment of 15,000 men. Sorties were planned to start in February 1944. There should be twenty that month, increasing to fifty in May. These were calculated to provide the Bulgarian Partisans with at least 7,500 rifles, 18 tons of explosive materials and demolition accessories, and 2,000 pairs of boots.<sup>52</sup>

However, the optimistic schedule stumbled at the very start as transportation aircraft was not available due to other more urgent tasks. The original planning was quickly modified to fifteen possible sorties in February, with the hope for compensation in the following months. In practice, the combination of lack of aircraft and bad weather conditions reduced the number of successful sorties in February and March 1944 to three.<sup>53</sup>

The logistical difficulties were further aggravated by the re-structuring of the SOE. Following the move of the Allied Headquarters, the SOE operational centre was transferred from Africa to Bari in Italy at the beginning of 1944. For technical reasons, however, the Bulgarian and Romanian sections remained in Cairo. The lines of command and decision making became extremely complicated, crossing even more when the Balkan Allied Force was made responsible for the operation of special duty aircraft in the region but not for the special operations themselves. At roughly the same time a special Balkan Affairs Committee had been established to co-ordinate all Allied actions in the region by reconciling conflicting institutional priorities. This was from the beginning stalled by the reluctance of the US participation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> HS5/180, review of situation in Bulgaria, 29 September 1943

<sup>51</sup> HS5/180, Bulgarian operations, 21 January 1944

<sup>52</sup> FO371/43587, R2808, Force 133 appreciation, 4.02.1944; also in HS5/ 180

<sup>53</sup> HS5/180, situation report, March 1944

<sup>54</sup> FO371/43654, R4736, Lord Moyne memorandum, 8.03.1944; FO371/43655, R10986, 9<sup>th</sup> meeting of AFHQ Political Committee, 16.05.1944

The position of the BLOs in Bulgaria was not made easier by the Partisan leaders' doubts as to Britain's intentions for the country. In March 1944, the CC of the BCP received a letter from its exiled head Georgi Dimitrov in Moscow ordering it to treat with caution any British approaches and to make no political undertakings. Dimitrov warned that 'imperialist Britain' might try to trade immediate material help for future political influence in Bulgaria. As time went on and supplies did not come, the Partisans began wondering whether Britain had not set out to disrupt the Partisan organisation. They suspected that Britain aimed at destroying the Partisans' potential for taking power in Bulgaria at the end of the war.<sup>55</sup>

Such allegations were not based on any understanding of Britain's priorities of the moment. The assertions simply refused to accept that Britain's intention to support the Partisans could be genuine and neglected Britain's record of doing so in the countries neighbouring Bulgaria. There is no evidence of deliberate British anti-Communist political scheming in late 1943. However, at face value, these suspicions are indicative, of the profound lack of trust of the Bulgarian Communist guerrillas for Britain and therefore of the shaky original basis of the relations of the SOE with the Partisans.<sup>56</sup> On its part, Britain totally failed to appreciate its being cast in the stereotype of 'perfidious Albion', another aspect of its over-optimism regarding Bulgarian resistance and Communists in particular.

In fact, the plan for SOE activities which the FO approved listed purely military objectives. The overall aim was to secure German withdrawal from Bulgaria and to cause the fall of the Bulgarian Government. If 'revolution' was mentioned it was in the sense of a military *coup* which would neutralise Bulgaria as an active enemy. The FO liaison at the Middle East Headquarters Kit Steel admitted that he looked upon the Partisans as an instrument of pressure on the present Government: 'What happens after Bulgaria turns on Germany... is no concern of ours so long as the damage to the Germans has been done'.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, strict instructions were dispatched to the BLOs in Bulgaria not to get involved in internal Bulgarian affairs at all. In propaganda too, the FO insisted on strict neutrality regarding Bulgarian politics. As late as the summer of 1944, they did not wish to appear to be promoting the image even of their known collaborator, the Agrarian G.M.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the initial optimism about the importance of the Partisans was wearing off and the

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<sup>55</sup> Dragoicheva, Ts. *Povelya na dulga*. vol.3. Sofia: Partizdat, 1980. p.495-496; *Rabotnichesko Delo*, 26.11.1947; Lebedev, N.S. *Comintern*...p.425, 443

<sup>56</sup> The accusation was initially publicised in the early Cold War period by the Bulgarian Partisan leader General Slavcho Trunski in *Rabotnichesko Delo*, 26.11.1947. It was tirelessly repeated by Bulgarian Communist historiography and recently re-surfaced in Thompson, E.P. *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission*. Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> FO371/43579, R3646, Steel to Howard, 24.02.1944

<sup>58</sup> FO371/43587, R2808, SOE plan, 4.02.1944; FO371/43585, R6050, FO to Cairo, 9.04.1944; FO371/43586, R9693, Clutton, 21.06.1944



constantly changing plans for Bulgaria foresaw that ‘...the odd bands of Partisans can be called to carry out extensive murder of the officers’ corps and general sabotage. They will not be worth more.’<sup>59</sup>

The same utilitarian principle reigned while high-ranking SOE officers in Cairo and London were assessing SOE actions in Bulgaria after Mostyn Davies was killed in battle and Frank Thompson captured and executed by the Bulgarian army in June 1944. By then the initial high hopes had evaporated. The review concluded that the Bulgarian Partisans’ actions had a negligible influence on the military configuration in the Balkans. The Partisans’ inability to engage in serious warfare with the German or Bulgarian army was the primary cause for Britain’s decision to cease contacts. By August 1944 Lord Moyne, the Minister Resident in the Middle East, had professed that the Bulgarians ‘had shown themselves immune to our attempts to build up serious resistance movement in Bulgaria proper such as would have appreciable influence on events there’. He concluded that ‘the Bulgarian Partisans were incomparable with the Yugoslavs in terms of conquering free zones’. For Lord Moyne, a high proportion of the Bulgarian guerrillas were ‘simply traditional brigands: risking the life of spirited young officers not to speak of arms deliveries to most undesirable elements are not worth the candle’.<sup>60</sup>

The harsh assessment was justified in view of the fact that the situation had changed negligibly after British intervention. Yet, neither the nature nor the actions of the Bulgarian Partisans had suddenly altered in the span of a year. After the two BMM leaders perished and some of their surviving subordinates were taken prisoners-of-war, Britain sent no more personnel into Bulgaria and practically lost all contact with the resistance movement. This was as much a result of the physical difficulties as of the fact that the temporary alliance with the Bulgarian Communists had not produced any military or political benefits for Britain. Losses had to be cut but this meant also an end to the hope of engendering the good will of the Bulgarian Left. This fact itself, despite the real logistic problems, determined the final negative result of Britain’s direct involvement in Bulgaria. Its longer-term strategic implications became obvious only as the Communist steadily emerged as serious contenders for post-war leadership in Bulgaria.

### ***Bombing Bulgaria: Helping the Partisans?***

Another element of Britain’s war-time strategy towards Bulgaria, bombing, was relatively more successful than engagement with either the Bulgarian politicians or Partisans. Arguably, bombing was the one activity

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<sup>59</sup> HS5/180, D/H849 observations, 9 March 1944

<sup>60</sup> FO371/43579, R12750, Lord Moyne to FO, 15.08.1944

which produced instant results – in the form of Bulgarian peace feelers. The origins of the idea are not very clear although it could quite naturally occur to military planners, once the country was within the Allied airforce's range. Significantly, it emerged at roughly the same time as contacts with the Partisans were sought. At the height of British optimism, sabotage and bombing together with propaganda, were all rationalised as mutually reinforcing aspects of the pressure applied on Bulgaria to abandon the Axis.

A direct attack on Hitler's Eastern European satellites possessed distinct advantages for the Allies. Some contemporary British observers even thought that a limited but skilful and well-timed action could bring about the surrender of the whole of South Eastern Europe in weeks, as the collapse of one Axis satellite would immediately affect the others. This in turn would be fatal for Germany which was becoming increasingly dependent on the resources of its East European allies in late 1943 and in 1944. According to such logic, the denial of the Romanian oil fields, Germany's only substantial source of natural oil, could have far-reaching repercussions. So, Bulgaria's strategic importance lay in the fact that the Balkan range was the forward bastion guarding the Danube, the essential transport route for Romanian oil.<sup>61</sup>

Bulgaria itself had few targets of intrinsic value and in fact the first raids over its territory took place when weather or other obstacles did not permit attacks over Romania. However, in the autumn of 1943, attention to air-raiding Bulgaria gradually increased partly because bombing German troops on Yugoslav or Greek territory – which had been mooted too – carried the danger of inflicting casualties on the civil population of Allied Governments.<sup>62</sup>

Bombing Bulgaria was first officially recommended by the British Chiefs of Staff in early October 1943 and soon taken up by the Defence Committee presided over by the Prime Minister on 19 October 1943. At the latter forum it was confirmed that not only did Bulgaria have eight divisions helping the Germans to garrison Yugoslavia and Greece and but it also employed forces against 'guerrillas who are our friends and whose resistance is growing daily'. Churchill spoke in very harsh words insisting that the activities of the 'Bulgarian jackals' could not be tolerated any longer, 'however much they might be under the heel of the Germans'. A sharp lesson had to be administered to Bulgaria with the primary objective of making its troops withdraw from occupied territories and therefore stretching German forces even further.<sup>63</sup> The Defence Committee 'carefully considered the best method of bringing the Bulgars [sic] to heel. All agreed that surprise air attacks on Sofia, accompanied by leaflets citing the fate of Hamburg and Hanover, would have best and most immediate effect.' The prevailing belief was that a

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<sup>61</sup> FO 37173, R5514, *The Observer* excerpt, 20.06.1943; FO371/43587, R2808, Force 133 appreciation, 4.02.1944

<sup>62</sup> Boll, M.M. *Cold War...* p.17; Miller, M.L. *Bulgaria...* p.166

<sup>63</sup> FO371/37161, R12382, Air Ministry to Washington, 20.10.1943

'relatively small diversion of air resources' would be 'well worthwhile'. The logic applied here was similar to that informing discussions of supplies to the Partisans. All the more so as it could also bring significant political results, especially since the death of King Boris III in August 1943 had destabilised the internal situation in Bulgaria.<sup>64</sup>

The first raid on Sofia was carried out on 14 November 1943 when the marshalling yards, the airfield and a number of civilian buildings were hit. The raid's general effect was judged by a number of observers in London to have been 'out of all proportion to the military significance of the target'. The Bulgarian Government was seen as seriously concerned with both further bombing and the sharp decline in public morale. It was even suspected that continued raids might result in internal upheaval 'such as would constitute a grave embarrassment and threat to Germany's whole military structure in the Balkans'.<sup>65</sup>

Further attacks in December 1943 and January 1944 were estimated to have satisfactory results as the inefficiency of the Bulgarian air defence was exposed, life in Sofia was brought to a virtual standstill and evacuees spread panic and anger in the countryside against the Government and Germany.<sup>66</sup> In consequence of the raids, at the beginning of 1944 Bulgaria appeared to have become the most vulnerable of the three Axis countries in Eastern Europe: civil discontent was growing and the morale of the army was falling. In early February 1944, an appreciation by the SOE Balkan team forecast that a concentrated attack 'may be able to break Bulgaria within a few months – possibly in the summer'.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the Middle Eastern Command which supervised the operations decided that the geographical scope of the attacks should be extended before Sofia was allowed to recover. Additionally, the Commanders of the Navy suggested attacks on Black Sea ports and traffic.<sup>68</sup>

That Allied bombing was co-ordinated with the Bulgarian Partisans is a fact virtually unknown in the history of Bulgaria's involvement in the Second World War. Elisabeth Barker only remarked that the Partisans favoured more raids, preferably with themselves given advance warning.<sup>69</sup> From the British perspective, the effects of bombing were considered to complement Partisan activities as both contributed towards Britain's ultimate goal of forcing Bulgaria out of the Axis. For instance, there was a good strategic argument that Plovdiv and Kazanluk should be bombed. Both were important railway centres within twenty miles of which Partisans were operating. The latter 'would no doubt

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, Air Ministry to Commander-in-Chief ME, Sargent, 26.10.1943

<sup>65</sup> FO371/37161, R12466, PWE memorandum, undated

<sup>66</sup> HS5/173, FORD memorandum, 25.01.1944

<sup>67</sup> FO371/43587, R2808, Force 133 appreciation, 10.02.1944

<sup>68</sup> AIR9/462, Cairo to Resident Minister Algiers, 28.01.1943

<sup>69</sup> Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.219

secure valuable recruits and encouragement from a breakdown there similar to that at Sofia'.<sup>70</sup>

The Communists themselves were careful never to admit their association with British air-raids over Bulgaria. But when informed through the BLOs, the Partisan leaders approved of bombing in general. Moreover, they asked that such points in Sofia and the country were struck so as to incur severe damages of the Government in both material and political terms. Simultaneously, they warned the Allies to avoid the working-class quarters of Sofia so not to inflict casualties on that part of the population best disposed to the resistance movement.<sup>71</sup> As much as they could, the Allies obliged, seeing this as a real contribution to a mutually beneficial relationship with the Bulgarian Partisans. As the possibility of direct military attack on Bulgaria was becoming remote in the spring of 1944, Britain was eager to strengthen its contacts with the Bulgarian guerrillas and give them some evidence of good will. This all fitted well into the pattern of benevolent British attitude to Bulgarian resistance in late 1943 and the first half of 1944. Later disillusionment and detachment were the result of practical considerations, not political prejudices.

As bombing was an aspect not only of British but also Allied policy to Bulgaria, Britain also sought Soviet concurrence. While air-raids over Bulgaria were being discussed at different levels in London in October 1943, Eden suggested that Stalin should be informed. Indeed, both he and Churchill were pleased that Stalin turned out to be 'surprisingly forthcoming' with regards to the plan. This was despite the fact that Stalin's permission had not been necessary as the USSR was not at war with Bulgaria. The FO also appreciated Stalin's 'being in the business' and wanted to capitalise on it by making Soviet support for the bombing of Bulgaria known to the country. However, on this the Soviets were rather elusive and resisted being openly associated with the Allied bombing. Such a step could diminish Soviet prestige in Bulgaria just at the moment when known Anglophiles were reorienting towards Moscow precisely as a result of the devastation of the air-raids.<sup>72</sup> The furthest the Soviets were prepared to go was giving the Bulgarian Government the cold shoulder when it approached the Soviet Embassies in Sofia and Ankara for mediation to stop the air-raids.<sup>73</sup> This increased Soviet pressure on Bulgaria, and simultaneously helped the Allies politically. Nevertheless, the Soviet Government remained untainted in the eyes of the majority of Bulgarians, unlike Britain.

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<sup>70</sup> AIR9/462, Cairo to Resident Minister Algiers, 28.01.1943

<sup>71</sup> HS5/180, Bulgaria situation report, 23.02.1944

<sup>72</sup> FO371/37161, R12382, Moscow to FO, 23.10.1943, PM to Eden, 24.10.1943; FO371/43589, R7420, Clutton, Sargent, 22.03.1944; Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.216-218; Boll, M.M. *Cold War...* p.22

<sup>73</sup> Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.210 211, 216, 219

Similarly, the US Government's position was softer than the British - even though US bombers had taken part in the attacks on Bulgarian targets. In February 1944 an OSS mission in contact with unofficial Bulgarian representatives in Istanbul put forward the suggestion that bombing should be temporarily ceased so that a Bulgarian peace mission could be sent out. The idea advanced all the way to Churchill, who then turned it down flatly.<sup>74</sup> His view of the Bulgarians only playing for time was largely correct but his intransigence tarnished further Britain's image among Bulgarian policy-making circles.

Despite Churchill's determination, the importance of Bulgarian targets - subject to frequent reviews - was clearly falling. By April 1944, without eliminating Bulgaria as a possible target, priority was given to bombing Romania and Hungary in an attempt to force the withdrawal of their troops from the Eastern front.<sup>75</sup> The cumulative effect of bombing Bulgaria then may be judged as partially counterproductive: Britain was almost exclusively identified with it among the three Allies, reaping hostility from the population and elite without much practical benefit to its military objectives or political standing.

### ***Secret Operations in Bulgaria and the Allies.***

Just as overall British policy to Bulgaria was not formulated in isolation from the other Allies, British special operations also required co-ordination with the relevant US and Soviet services. The nature of such contacts was indicative of wartime relations in the Grand Alliance. The Soviet attitude in particular proved at times crucial for the accomplishment of British plans and thus had a bearing on long-term British involvement in the country.

Until halfway through the war the US High Command displayed little interest in Bulgaria in line with its preference not to interfere too prominently in the Balkans. In September 1942, the newly formed US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agreed to become *de facto* subordinate to the more experienced SOE in the Middle East, including the Balkans. The arrangement worked smoothly until in the autumn of 1943 Colonel William Donovan, the Head of the OSS, proposed to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff 'a long-range plan' for Bulgaria. Its general objective was to secure the Bulgarian Government's

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<sup>74</sup> FO371/43587, R2160, Resident Minister Algiers to FO, 1.02.1944, R2333, FO to Washington, 12.02.1944

<sup>75</sup> AIR9/462, Air Ministry to AFHQ Algiers, 4.04.1944; HS5/180, situation in the Balkans, 4 March 1944

withdrawal from the war. Its tactics foresaw subversion including 'organisation and direction of guerrilla warfare' and propaganda.<sup>76</sup>

The British were anything but pleased at the sudden US interest in Bulgaria: Churchill himself was vehemently opposed to any US actions in the Balkans outside British command and control. The FO and the SOE were united in their scepticism for the US initiative.<sup>77</sup> Underpinning the grim reaction to the OSS proposal was British certainty of their own superior knowledge of the Bulgarian and Balkan situation. However, the fresh US initiative also sharpened the British sense of dissatisfaction with the negligible results of their own work until then. Above all, the British became aware how little would be sufficient to threaten their whole precarious position in the country which could then have serious regional repercussions. Yet, there were also rare moments when in its frustration the SOE foresaw an easy way to get rid of the Bulgarian stalemate:

Probably the best chance is to let loose the Americans... They will all be killed of course but they might achieve some minor sabotage. The US have more good will in Bulgaria.<sup>78</sup>

Alert to the potential rivalry with the US special services, the FO and SOE however soon understood that the opportunities for the full implementation of 'the long-range plan' were minimal as few US servicemen were actually stationed in or near the Balkans. In fact, in Bulgaria the OSS itself focused on diplomacy, leaving the British to press on with the dispatch of military missions and bombing. It could be speculated whether the brief US attention to Bulgaria accelerated the British effort regarding the country in late 1943 and early 1944 - when the BMMs were most active and bombing took place.

This divergence between the Western Allies was of temporary tactical nature and although irritating for both sides, did not signal a profound conflict regarding the northern Balkans. In fact in calmer moments, the SOE acknowledged the benefit of co-ordination with the US services and even welcomed Soviet involvement in its attempts to influence and penetrate Bulgaria.<sup>79</sup> But frictions with the Soviets went much deeper and reflected the increasingly strained bilateral relationship. The British Government could only guess at the intensity of Soviet activities in Bulgaria in view of traditional Russian interests and as a consequence of the unbroken diplomatic relations between Moscow and Sofia. While carefully being forwarded information about British special operations, the Soviets never openly acknowledged their own subversive efforts in Bulgaria to the Allies. Additionally, and traditionally, they

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<sup>76</sup> Boll, M.M. 'US Plan for a Post-war Pro-Western Bulgaria: A Little-Known Wartime Initiative in Eastern Europe.' *Diplomatic History*. vol.7, no.2, 1983. p.125-130

<sup>77</sup> Boll, M.M. *Cold War...* p.11, 15-16, 28; Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.118-120

<sup>78</sup> HS5/180, SOE Cairo, 12 June 1943

<sup>79</sup> HS5/180, D/HT to AD and AD comments, 29 December 1943

also suspected Britain of all sorts of imprecisely defined schemes in which the special services featured as the main proponent. Thus the SOE - and for that matter, OSS - envoys in Moscow had little more than representative functions.<sup>80</sup>

Recognising the limited nature of its own contacts with Bulgaria, at the end of 1943 the SOE approached the NKVD with requests for details on developments in the country. British officials expected that the Soviet services possessed more up-to-date information, as the Soviet Union maintained relations with Bulgaria and had retained its Embassy in Sofia. The reply, however, consisted but of general political outlines, which gave few insights into the immediate situation.<sup>81</sup> In March 1944, SOE Cairo suggested linking Russian help with regards to Bulgaria to British assistance for sending Russian representatives to Italy but the suggestion was vetoed by the FO.<sup>82</sup> Nothing changed until September 1944 when the Red Army appeared on the Bulgarian Danube border.<sup>83</sup> It is difficult to see this as anything other than Soviet unwillingness to share specific knowledge or acknowledge its existing engagements, let alone participate in joint actions with the Western partners.

In mid-1944, despite erstwhile frustrations, the FO agreed that the SOE should reactivate contacts with the NKVD, mainly for the purpose of consultation. By then the Bulgarian section in the Middle East and the SOE at Moscow had separately put forward the idea that Soviet assistance should be requested again. A joint impromptu plan was made to ask the NKVD 'to lend' the Bulgarian Communist political émigré Georgi Andreichin to the SOE. It is not clear how the British proposed to use the Bulgarian and indeed, after some thought the idea was dropped as both risky and unrealistic. Nevertheless, the SOE continued its efforts to obtain operational information, mainly enquiring about possible Bulgarian contacts and dropping points for Allied planes carrying supplies.<sup>84</sup> If received and put to use, this could certainly strengthen links with the Bulgarian Communist resistance and also place co-operation with Soviets on a new footing.

The SOE was right to suspect that Moscow possessed a wealth of information on Bulgaria. Indeed, apart from diplomatic relations, throughout the war the Soviet Government maintained contacts with the Bulgarian

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<sup>80</sup> Deane, J.R. *The Strange Alliance*. London: John Murray, 1947. p.27-33; Smith, B.F. *Sharing Secrets with Stalin: How the Allies Traded Intelligence 1941 - 1945*. Lawrence, Ka.: UP of Kansas, 1996. p.188; HS5/173, FO to SOE Cairo, 9.07.1944

<sup>81</sup> Barker, E. *Churchill and Eden at War*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976. p.274; Mastny, V. *Russia's Road...* p.97-98; FO371/43587, R781, Balfour to FO, 13.01.1944; also in HS5/180, Moscow to FO 14 January 1944; FO371/43579, R775, Talbot-Rice to Dew, 4.01.1944; Daskalov, D. *Zhan...* p.196

<sup>82</sup> HS5/180, Cairo telegrams, 7, 25 - 30 March 1944

<sup>83</sup> HS5/180, various correspondence April -September 1944

<sup>84</sup> HS5/179, report on Bulgaria, 1.03.1943

Communists, through the Comintern and other clandestine channels.<sup>85</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, the Head of the Comintern, also presided over the Foreign Bureau of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party as whose leader he was recognised abroad and inside the country. Dimitrov had wireless links with Bulgaria – one direct and another through Tito. Two radio stations broadcast over Bulgaria from Soviet territory.<sup>86</sup> All directives thus sent to the Bulgarian Communists by different means were approved and, in certain cases, inspired by Stalin and the Soviet leadership.<sup>87</sup>

Early in the war the Soviet Government had forbidden the Bulgarian Communists to prepare for an armed uprising and instead encouraged the gathering of military intelligence and the formation of armed town units and mountain guerrilla bands.<sup>88</sup> Apparently aiming to reinforce the Bulgarian resistance, but also perhaps to control it, the NKVD dropped by parachute and transported by submarine Bulgarian émigrés\* to the Bulgarian Black Sea coast already in 1941 – 1942.<sup>89</sup> Yet the Soviet Government made it clear that it had no arms to spare for the Bulgarian resistance.<sup>90</sup>

Neither the Bulgarian Partisans nor the NKVD related any of this to their British contacts. The latter were not even informed that at roughly the time the BLOs arrived, at least two Soviet-trained Bulgarian-born radio operators were sent in through Yugoslavia.<sup>91</sup> The British special services were also unaware that with Soviet knowledge the BCP established undercover contacts with Bulgarian Opposition politicians. One of these, Ivan Bagryanov, on becoming Prime Minister in June 1944 even promised to soften police and army measures against the Partisans in return for a political compromise with the Communists.<sup>92</sup>

The Soviet Government's unwillingness to work with the British services in Bulgaria stretched to an extent which was detrimental to the interests of the Bulgarian Communists. In March 1944, when the weather finally permitted the dispatch of supplies to the Bulgarian resistance, the SOE asked the Soviet air

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<sup>85</sup> Lebedev, N.S. *Comintern...* p.72-80

<sup>86</sup> Bell, J.D. *The BCP...* p.58; Daskalov, D. *Zhan...* p.184–185; Dimitrov, G. *Dnevnik...* p.258–282

<sup>87</sup> Issussov, M. *Stalin and Bulgaria*. Sofia: UI 'Sv.Kl.Ohridski', 1991; Daskalov, D. *Zhan...*; Lebedev, N.S. *Comintern...* p.175

<sup>88</sup> Daskalov, D. *Zhan...* p.281; Rachev, St. *Churchill...* p.234; Lebedev, N.S. *Comintern...* p.12; Bell, J.D. *The BCP...* p.60

\* All were Soviet subjects and operatives of the NKVD.

<sup>89</sup> Bell, J.D. *The BCP...* p.59; Valeva, E.L. '*Kurs...*' p.221-222

<sup>90</sup> The first time the Soviet Government did send in weapons and ammunitions was on 8 September 1944, when a Communist seizure of power was imminent. Daskalov, D. *Zhan...* p.281; Rachev, St. *Churchill...* p.234; Lebedev, N.S. *Comintern...* p.12; Dimitrov, G. *Diary*. [

<sup>91</sup> Rachev, St. *Churchill...* p.206

<sup>92</sup> Dimitrov, I. *Ivan Bagryanov – tsaredvoretz, politik, durzhavnik*. Sofia: AI 'Prof.Marin Drinov', 1995. p.65-66



force whether it could help with organising drops of British materiel in eastern Bulgaria. Additionally, the Soviets were asked to provide captured German weapons – which the Soviet army was known to have and the Bulgarian Partisans were familiar with. Months passed before the British appeal received a reply: the Soviet military forces would neither send the weapons, nor provide safe dropping points.<sup>93</sup>

The Soviets showed a similarly obstructive attitude to British efforts at organising deceptive propaganda in early 1944 which would imply an imminent land invasion of the Balkans. Churchill's pet idea of a second front in the Eastern Mediterranean had been supported by the FO but persistently rejected by both the US military and Stalin.<sup>94</sup> But even if a Balkan campaign was not forthcoming, fear of it could still be exploited for both military and political purposes. Through intercepted diplomatic traffic British officials were well-aware of the apprehension of the Bulgarian regime of the entry of Anglo-American forces in Bulgaria. This had been threatened in British leaflets dispersed over Bulgaria as early as 1942 and later in broadcasts from the Middle East.<sup>95</sup> At the beginning of 1943, Sofia viewed the Adana Anglo-Turkish conversations as especially ominous, coming as they did after reversals in North Africa and on the Eastern front.<sup>96</sup> The few Bulgarian diplomats who discounted the possibility of a Balkan invasion were even more pessimistic as they usually forecast some kind of Western understanding with Soviet Russia from which communisation of the region would ensue.<sup>97</sup>

Yet, although Moscow began exerting increasing political pressure on the Bulgarian Government for breaking up with the Axis, the Soviets refused to contemplate the simulation of Allied military activities along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.<sup>98</sup> Such strategic deception in early 1944 would have helped guard the plans for the long awaited by Stalin operation OVERLORD; presumably, it would have also reinforced the Soviet demarches in Sofia. Soviet failure to capitalise on this was at least partially motivated by a desire to keep Britain away from Bulgaria even if this meant a delay in the country's exit from the war. Whether in fact Stalin needed a delay so that the Red Army

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<sup>93</sup> HS5/180, SOE memoranda, 19.03. – 6.04.1944

<sup>94</sup> Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.124; Dilks, D. '*British Political...*' p.28; Kent, J. *British Imperial...* p.9; Barker, E. *Churchill and Eden...* p.282; Campbell, Th. and G.C.Herring (eds.) *The Diaries of Edward R.Stettinius, Jr. 1943 – 1946.* New York: New Viewpoints, 1975. p.214; Rothwell, V. *Britain...* p.201; Kent, p?; Percival, M. '*British - Romanian Relations, 1944 – 1965.*' PhD thesis: University of London, 1997. p.16

<sup>95</sup> Rachev, St. *Churchill...* p. 158–160, 221

<sup>96</sup> TsDIA – AMVnR, f.176, op.15, a.e.48, l.167–168, Ankara to Sofia, 5.02.1943

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, a.e.59, l.35, Madrid to Sofia, 31.05.1943, l.82, 7.07.1943 Budapest to Sofia, a.e.60, l.37, Berlin to Sofia, 24.07.1943, l.75, Bucharest to Sofia, 27.07.1943, a.e.67, l.5, Budapest to Sofia, 11.10.1943

<sup>98</sup> FO371/43587, R2241, Clutton, 11.02.1944; Barker, E. *British Policy...* p.115, 122; Miller, M.L. *Bulgaria...* p.115; Deane, J.R. *The Strange Alliance.* p.19, 41–42, 148

approached and pro-Soviet forces prepared better for participation in government is a question outside the scope of this paper.

The difficulties of the SOE – and the FO - in Bulgaria were certainly not created by the Russians. However, Moscow offered no understanding and help for genuine British efforts to aid the Bulgarian resistance and influence Bulgaria's conduct in the war. Moreover, in the interest of the Alliance Britain could hardly protest or expose the Soviet attitude publicly. Therefore, Britain alone bore the negatives of the Soviet refusal to co-operate.

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The minimal British wartime goal in Bulgaria was the country's detachment from the Axis. The primary instrument for this in 1941 – 1944 were SOE actions which were conceived so as to destabilise the pro-German regime through sabotage, propaganda and political pressure. These efforts in Bulgaria, as in other Axis territories, were undertaken in support of the overall strategy of the Allies: they would be most effective if carried out to supplement regular military operations and diplomatic initiatives. Logically, special operations would fit well into plans for a possible Allied offensive in the Eastern Mediterranean or the Balkan Peninsula as cherished by Churchill and continuously supported by the FO.

Unsurprisingly, all British authorities dealing with Bulgaria during the war prioritised military considerations. Actions were planned and assessed by the amount of physical and political damage they would inflict on the Bulgarian Government and army. Naturally, Britain had its long-term preferences for the overall post-war orientation of Bulgaria which reflected the need to preserve traditional British interests in the region. That this was of distinctly secondary importance is unambiguously borne out by the fact of the proactive SOE association with the Bulgarian left-wing resistance. The British Military Missions to the Communist Partisans were guided by little more than short-term pragmatism. And if the prolonged co-operation with G.M.'s *Pladne* Agrarians contained some promise for increased British influence, Britain failed to capitalise on it.

Britain showed scarce concern as to the ultimate intentions of the resistance groups it supported. The fact that G.M.'s federalist republican outlook had been used as the focal point for early British-led resistance did not prevent the FO from obstructing the exiled Agrarian leaders' attempts to negotiate with the emigré governments of Bulgaria's neighbours. This amounted to a deliberate choice not to support their political aspirations. Such allegedly neutral approach was thought to be most beneficial with regards to the immediate necessity of stimulating resistance inside Bulgaria and would

also not prejudice Britain's post-war vision of the Balkans which was crystallising with considerable difficulty. Accordingly, SOE involvement in Bulgaria was also consciously uninterested in the Bulgarian Communists' program for post-war government or links with Moscow. War-time help to the Communists too could be rationalised as preferable to a total exclusion from Bulgaria but this then explains the utter British perplexity at the lack of co-operation on the part of the Soviets for initiatives in Bulgaria.

The greatest obstacle to a consistent and effective engagement with the Bulgarian resistance was the low and unstable position of the country in the overall Allied strategy. British efforts flourished briefly after the country entered the range of the Allied airforce, factors of time and geography momentarily converging to draw increased attention to the possibility of destabilising Bulgaria. Yet, in less than a year little could be achieved, especially since there had been insufficient preparation, the logistics were difficult and the nature of the Bulgarian resistance was mostly political. The country was then quickly downgraded as an SOE priority in line with the move of military focus elsewhere in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

The limited opportunities for British special operations in Bulgaria were then the result of the commitment of limited resources. The complex relationship with the FO handicapped SOE's initial approaches. The scarcity of favourably inclined elements of Bulgarian society and the inability to establish stable routes into the country led to unreliable contacts and haphazard knowledge about the political situation in Bulgaria. Coupled with the lack of serious political commitment to the future of Bulgaria, this eventually resulted in pragmatic temporary alliances. It can be argued that the SOE connection allowed the Bulgarian Communists to use whatever British aid was sent to their own political advantage. It is deeply ironic that British pragmatism and political neutrality in fact severely prejudiced Britain's position in Bulgaria at the end and immediately after the war.