

# “Melancholy Courage and Peasant Shrewd Cunning”: The Recruitment of Yugoslav-Canadians for Special Operations Executive Missions during the Second World War

Michael Petrou

Volume 29, numéro 1, 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065713ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065713ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)  
1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Petrou, M. (2018). “Melancholy Courage and Peasant Shrewd Cunning”: The Recruitment of Yugoslav-Canadians for Special Operations Executive Missions during the Second World War. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 29(1), 39–71.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065713ar>

Résumé de l'article

*Durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les services secrets britanniques ont recruté plus d'une trentaine de Canadiens yougoslaves pour infiltrer les Balkans et assurer la liaison avec les groupes de résistance en tant que membres de l'exécutif des opérations spéciales. Ces hommes étaient des immigrants et des radicaux politiques. La plupart étaient membres du Parti communiste du Canada. Cinq d'entre eux avaient combattu pendant la guerre civile espagnole. Ils vivaient des vies marginalisées au Canada, faisaient l'objet de harcèlement policier et risquaient d'être expulsés. Pourtant, leur recrutement dans une organisation dirigée par la classe dirigeante britannique s'est fait avec la collaboration enthousiaste du Parti communiste du Canada. Le parti et les recrues elles-mêmes ont reconnu qu'ils partageaient avec les gouvernements britannique et canadien le désir de combattre le fascisme en Yougoslavie et que, malgré leurs idéologies politiques divergentes, cet objectif commun justifiait une collaboration étroite et ciblée.*

# **“Melancholy Courage and Peasant Shrewd Cunning”: The Recruitment of Yugoslav-Canadians for Special Operations Executive Missions during the Second World War**

**MICHAEL PETROU**

## *Abstract*

*During the Second World War, the British Secret Intelligence Service recruited more than thirty Yugoslav-Canadians to infiltrate the Balkans and liaise with resistance groups there as members of the Special Operations Executive. These men were immigrants and political radicals. Most were members of the Communist Party of Canada. Five had fought in the Spanish Civil War. They lived marginalized lives in Canada, were subject to police harassment and at risk of deportation. Yet their recruitment into an organization run by the British ruling class took place with the enthusiastic cooperation of the Communist Party of Canada. The party, and the recruits themselves, recognized that they shared with the British and Canadian governments a desire to fight fascism in Yugoslavia, and that, despite their divergent political ideologies, this common goal justified close and focused collaboration.*

## *Résumé*

*Durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les services secrets britanniques ont recruté plus d'une trentaine de Canadiens yougoslaves pour infiltrer les Balkans et assurer la liaison avec les groupes de résistance en tant que membres de l'exécutif des opérations spéciales. Ces hommes étaient des immigrants et des radicaux politiques. La plupart étaient membres du Parti communiste du Canada. Cinq d'entre eux avaient combattu pendant la guerre civile espagnole. Ils vivaient des vies marginalisées au Canada, faisaient l'objet de harcèlement policier et risquaient d'être expulsés. Pourtant, leur recrutement dans une organisation dirigée par la classe dirigeante britannique s'est fait avec la collaboration enthousiaste du Parti communiste du Canada. Le parti et les recrues elles-mêmes ont reconnu qu'ils partageaient avec les gouvernements britannique et canadien le désir de combattre le fascisme en Yougoslavie et que, malgré leurs idéologies politiques divergentes, cet objectif commun justifiait une collaboration étroite et ciblée.*

On 7 May 1942 Paul Phillips, a leading member of the Communist Party of Canada, wrote a letter to Colonel S. W. (Bill) Bailey, an officer with British Security Coordination (BSC), an arm of the British Secret Intelligence Service that had been set up at the Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. Bailey had earlier approached Phillips with a plan to recruit left-wing immigrants to Canada for secret work in Nazi-occupied Europe. In his letter Phillips pledged full support. "I wish to assure you that my friends and I are eager to cooperate with you in every possible way ... Everything we can do will be done to find the suitable 'candidates' as speedily as possible," he wrote, ending his letter with a blue-ink signature and the closing: "Yours for Victory."<sup>1</sup>

It was from the beginning an unlikely partnership. Phillips at the time believed he had an arrest warrant hanging over his head. He avoided the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and tried not to appear in public during the day. The "friends" to which he referred were, like him, Communists, members of an officially-banned political party. Phillips, a Ukrainian immigrant to Canada, was treasurer of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), but his more important role was as a sort of outreach officer to radical members of Canada's various minority communities. Only five years earlier, hundreds of these men had defied Canadian law to volunteer as members of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. Others had been arrested during the 1930s for strike activity and demonstrations against unemployment. They worked as lumberjacks and miners, their muscles knotted from hard labour and their lungs scarred by silicosis. Their status in Canada was precarious and not helped by their political agitation. Some who had fought in Spain had volunteered to serve in the Canadian army and been rejected. They were marginalized within Canadian society and distrusted by the country's authorities.<sup>2</sup>

Bailey, in contrast, came from the ranks of the British establishment. Before the Second World War, he worked as a metallurgist at a British-owned mine in Yugoslavia, where he became fluent in Serbo-Croatian. Soon after it began, he joined the Secret Intelligence Service's Section D, which was tasked with investigating and carrying out sabotage, propaganda, and other covert operations.<sup>3</sup> British intelligence secretly supported opponents of Yugoslavia's regent, Prince Paul, and encouraged the coup against him on 27 March 1941, after his government signed the Tripartite Pact allying Yugoslavia with Germany. The coup was successful in deposing Paul, replacing him

with King Peter II.<sup>4</sup> Ten days later, however, Germany, Italy, and Hungary invaded, and quickly overran, Yugoslavia. The invading powers annexed Yugoslav territory, as did their ally Bulgaria. They also established the puppet “Independent State of Croatia.” A rump Serbian state remained under German military occupation.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Bailey was sent to the British Security Coordination in New York as a member of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a body formed in 1940 to encourage resistance among the occupied peoples of Europe — or, as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill defined its task, to “set Europe ablaze.”<sup>6</sup>

The SOE was a creation of the British ruling class. Its leading members studied together as boys at the same public schools, attended Cambridge and Oxford, and got jobs in the City of London, academia, journalism, and the more exclusive departments of government. Some recruits were found when inquiries regarding members with foreign language skills were made to other branches of the armed services. “The more usual, safest and fastest way of finding recruits was to bring in those who were known already to the original staff,” wrote M. R. D. Foot, author of the official history of the SOE in France.<sup>7</sup> It was in many ways an “old boy network.” One agent described it as “a kind of club: you were invited to join.”<sup>8</sup>

This snobbery could narrow the pool of potential recruits. But the SOE was also pragmatic. “SOE was ready to work with any man or any institution, Roman Catholic or masonic, Trotskyist or liberal, syndicalist or Catholic, radical or conservative, [S]talinist or anarchist, gentile or Jew, that would help it beat the Nazis down,” is how Foot described its outlook.<sup>9</sup> So, the SOE looked to Canada, to men like Phillips and his friends among the radical and marginalized immigrants who lived there.

This article is about the recruitment of these men. It explores why leading members of the CPC participated in the recruitment process, and the extent to which Canadian authorities, including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, cooperated. It begins by discussing the challenges involved in researching the Yugoslav-Canadians who served in the SOE. This is followed by an examination of the roots of radicalization for so many Yugoslav migrants to Canada before the war. The paper then outlines the SOE’s role in Yugoslavia, and explores the relationship between the SOE and the Yugoslav-Canadians it cooperated with and recruited. It concludes by discussing the motivation of the recruits themselves, and the impact they had on the war.

The story that emerges is one of clear-eyed recognition on the part of party leadership, the Yugoslav-Canadian recruits, and the SOE that, on the question of fighting fascism in Yugoslavia, their interests converged. Despite their divergent ideological convictions and personal histories, this paramount reality justified close and focused cooperation. British intelligence officers did not try to turn the Yugoslav immigrants they enlisted away from Marxism. In fact, when one recruit was too badly injured to proceed on his mission, his friends in British intelligence decided to present him with a portable typewriter so that he might make a living in journalism — almost certainly writing for radical publications, which he had done prior to his recruitment.<sup>10</sup> Party leadership did seek minor ancillary benefits from their cooperation, notably relief from police harassment, but they, along with the recruits themselves, appear to have been led primarily by a desire to help the struggle against fascism and Nazism in Yugoslavia — and to support the Partisans, the largely Communist forces there led by a former recruiter of Yugoslav volunteers for the International Brigades named Josip Broz, more commonly known as Tito, who were doing much of the fighting. The Canadians were an important factor in the success of British efforts to strengthen ties with Tito's Partisans, but their influence on Britain's larger strategy in Yugoslavia was negligible.

### Research Challenges

Following declassification in the 1970s of British Foreign Office papers pertaining to Britain and Yugoslavia during the war, historians were able to piece together in much more detail London's wartime strategy related to the Balkans and its relationships with resistance groups there.<sup>11</sup> Resulting publications cover British missions to the Partisans, but if Canadian members of those missions are discussed, it is usually in a peripheral manner. Yugoslav-Canadians and Americans do show up in the memoirs of British liaison officers and others involved in the SOE, but again, it is usually only on the margins. "No one in British authority was ever going to thank them for doing it, of course," wrote Basil Davidson, head of the SOE's Yugoslav section in Cairo, Egypt, referring to the contact the Canadian Yugoslavs made with Tito's Partisans, "for they were unimportant persons and were only going, after all, where they had wished to go."<sup>12</sup> He might as well have been commenting on how postwar historiography of the SOE in Yugoslavia has viewed them.

Almost forty years after its first publication, Roy MacLaren's *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines: 1939–1945* remains the essential introduction to Canadians in the SOE and other secret wartime organizations.<sup>13</sup> His chapter on Yugoslavia is strengthened by his correspondence with at least one Canadian who had parachuted into Yugoslavia, and conversations with Tommy Drew-Brook, a Canadian working for BSC in Toronto. But SOE files on Yugoslavia were not open to non-official historians until 1997, after MacLaren conducted his research.<sup>14</sup> His book is remarkably detailed given the documents available at the time.

Some of those files are now accessible at the National Archives in Kew, London — although many SOE documents did not survive the organization's closing in 1946, and some are still classified. Historians who have consulted them have greatly increased our understanding of the SOE's role in Yugoslavia, but they generally say little about recruitment efforts in Canada.<sup>15</sup> A rich source among the SOE papers is the personnel files of the individual recruits. These are typically declassified when the National Archives receives proof of the recruit's death — or, if a birthdate is known, 100 years after birth. The passage of time has meant that many of these have recently been opened.

What's largely missing from both the archival record and secondary sources are the voices of the Yugoslav-Canadians themselves. Only two, Pavle Pavlić and Boza Prpić, wrote memoirs of any kind, and Pavlić's is a seven-page essay. Both accounts were written in Serbo-Croatian and published in Yugoslavia, where the two men settled after the war.<sup>16</sup> Archival records often tell us more about those with whom the Yugoslav-Canadians interacted — their officers, recruiters, and examiners — than they do about the volunteers. Trying to understand them as an historian is like trying to discern someone's likeness by examining tiny pieces of his reflection in a shattered mirror. Fortunately, enough pieces remain so that at least some of the picture may be carefully reconstructed.

### My Brothers, Great is our Suffering

The political radicalization of the Yugoslav immigrants to Canada who would eventually join the SOE had its roots in their immigration to and experiences in Canada during the 1920s and 1930s. Yugoslav immigration to Canada sharply increased during the second half of the 1920s, a result of a more restrictive immigration policy in America

that began in 1923 and a gradual loosening of Canada's approach. While only 137 Yugoslavs arrived in 1922, more than two thousand came in 1924 and 1925, and more than four thousand in 1926 and 1928.<sup>17</sup> Most of these Yugoslavs were single men, or men with wives and children back home.<sup>18</sup> They faced a certain amount of discrimination. Canada's immigration policy at the time still favoured migrants from northern Europe, especially Britain, over those from southern or eastern Europe, who may have had darker skin. Yugoslavs were a particularly troublesome group to sort out for Canadian immigration officials and recruiters from Canada's two transcontinental railways, the Canada Pacific Railway (CPR) and Canada National Railway (CNR): Some South Slavs were sufficiently white; others were not. "The pure Slav, Serb, Croat and Slovene can fairly well be recognized as fair skinned, and by other features," CNR official and expert on central European agricultural F. W. Baumgartner wrote to his boss in July 1927, "but they themselves are not uniformly blond and fair, and in addition there are all degrees of blends to which this centuries' long mixture of races has led, and it is not always easy to decide just where to draw the line, the less as this line does by no means always correspond with agricultural fitness and other qualifications of Canadian immigrants." He added that since that April, "*absolutely no passenger has been given a certificate* from any part of Southern Serbia or Dalmatia, or of in a slight degree of dark shade."<sup>19</sup>

Baumgartner was trying to reassure Canadian government officials who feared an influx of dark-skinned migrants who could not assimilate. In a November 1926 memo, J. Bruce Walker, director, European Immigration, lamented that transportation companies were trying to pass off as Serbs Macedonians "who are really Turks in origin and custom," among other instances of purported deception. "These emigrants are all of the dark type, and not by any means desirable for Canada. They are themselves willing workers, but leave the hard tasks for their wives while they sit at home and rest themselves."<sup>20</sup> These attitudes might have contributed to the predominance of supposedly lighter-skinned Croatians among immigrants from Yugoslavia for a few years. But such racial barriers to South Slavs immigrating to Canada appear to have been dismantled by 1928, and single men poured in from all over the Yugoslavia.<sup>21</sup>

These migrants rarely penetrated the mainstream of established Canadian society. They worked in mines and lumber camps and on frontier railways, often in work gangs drawn from the same extended



family or village. They lived dangerous lives among blackflies and filth. Edmund Bradwin, writing of migrant railway workers a generation earlier, noted that behind each work camp were typically crosses erected on a hill. "Some Russian is buried there," the living would say, which "usually meant some foreign-born worker of Slav or Balkan extraction."<sup>22</sup>

A Croatian miner in northern Québec captured what life was like in a free verse poem, titled "My God How the Lowly Suffer," published in *Kanadski glas*, a Canadian Croatian-language newspaper:

My brothers, great is our suffering  
When we have fallen into foreigners' hands!  
Heavy work, we cannot speak the language,  
And you should see how we suffer!

And they were lonely. The miner's poem continued:

He sends money to his faithful wife  
So that she could take care of home.  
There are good wives, but by God and bad ones too  
For which even a factory could not supply enough cash  
Many women have lovers at home  
While their husbands here suffer in the stench....<sup>23</sup>

And yet these mostly single male migrants had left behind worse poverty in Yugoslavia. The country had been formed in 1918 out of territory previously in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that was merged with the formerly independent kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro. It was initially called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, a name that encompassed some of its major constituent ethnic groups while leaving out others, such as Bosnian Muslims, Albanians, and Macedonians. Renamed Yugoslavia, meaning Land of the Southern Slavs, by King Alexander I in 1929, its population was divided along ethnic and religious lines. Its parliament, reflecting these divisions, did not function well. In January 1929 Alexander abolished the constitution, prorogued parliament, and established a personal dictatorship, which lasted until 1931, when a new constitution was decreed. Most Yugoslavs were subsistence peasants on land that lacked basic infrastructure and could not provide work for the number of people living on it.<sup>24</sup> Migration was an escape. For all its hardships, Canada offered a reason to be hopeful about the future. Then Canada's economy collapsed, and those who had gambled on starting a new life in it were cast adrift.



The Great Depression devastated Canadians from all walks of life. But it was particularly punishing to new immigrants with little capital and few established connections or support networks outside their own ethnic communities. There were hundreds of itinerant labourers in the 1920s. During the 1930s, there were thousands, riding back and forth across the country in or on railway boxcars, sleeping in hobo jungles outside rail yards, or grudgingly gathering in so-called relief camps that were established to house and provide work for single unemployed men who were paid 20 cents per day. Work that was available was dangerous. In July 1930, a barge working on the St. Lawrence Canal exploded and killed twelve men from a single village in Croatia. Eight more Croats were among the 40 dead in a mine explosion later that summer near Princeton, B.C.<sup>25</sup>

The CPC and affiliated unions seized the opportunity to agitate and spread their message among miners and in relief camps. The camps were especially fertile ground for political radicalization. Party activists did not have to work hard to convince camp workers that capitalism crushed and exploited the poor. That much was self-evident. And while in the 1920s it might have seemed as though things would soon get better, there was little optimism a few years later. “They see their useful years passing, and are impatient, thinking that radical change offers them more chance of betterment than patient waiting,” as A. E. Graham, member of a Liberal-government-appointed committee to investigate the camps wrote in 1935: “Considering them as despairing human beings, can you blame them for their attitudes?”<sup>26</sup>

Immigrant Canadians continued to face discrimination on top of poverty. After a violent and bitter strike in Rouyn-Noranda in 1935, scores of Croatian miners were deported or otherwise lost their jobs. The local press approvingly reported on the reduced number of “Yugoslavs” following the strike, and that their jobs were now held by English and French Canadians.<sup>27</sup>

Their expulsion from Canada was part of a broader pattern involving the deportation of radical immigrants during the 1930s. Because Canadian authorities, and many citizens, saw communism as a foreign ideology that threatened Canadian identity and culture, immigrant supporters of the party were particularly vulnerable.<sup>28</sup> Section 98 of the Criminal Code, introduced in 1919 in response to widespread labour revolt and repealed in 1936, was aimed at “unlawful associations” that sought to bring about “any government, industrial or economic change” through the threat or use of force. But as Dennis

Molinaro has written, what constituted a threat or force was “ambiguous at best.”<sup>29</sup> Section 98 existed in addition to other legislation in the Immigration Act that allowed for deportation for reasons such as “immoral behaviour” and taking unemployment relief. Combined, these laws gave Canadian authorities wide remit to get rid of unwanted migrants. And because deportation was an administrative rather than a judicial matter, those affected had limited legal recourse.<sup>30</sup>

On the surface, the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in July 1936, had little to do with the struggles of Yugoslav-Canadians and other downtrodden workers and unemployed young men during the Great Depression. But many of them saw in the cause of the Spanish Republic a reflection of their own fight against camp bosses and strike breakers in Canada. For Yugoslav immigrants, particularly Croatians, the war had added relevance. Italy’s Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was backing the Spanish rebels led by Francisco Franco. And it was Mussolini’s forced Italianization policies in Istria, territory awarded to Italy after the Great War, that led to the emigration of tens of thousands of Croats and Slovenes.<sup>31</sup> This fueled resentment of fascism and an attraction to the Communists who seemed its strongest opponents. Fighting in Spain was a chance to act on these convictions. Prpić recalled a 1938 meeting in Toronto at which Juraj Krnjević, a leading member of the Croatian Peasant Party, chastised progressive Croatian emigrants for their preoccupation with the civil war in Spain. He was shouted down by audience members who told him: “Croatian workers in Spain are fighting for the freedom of the Croatian people!”<sup>32</sup>

More than 100 Yugoslav-Canadians would fight in Spain, of whom at least 60 were Croatians.<sup>33</sup> That so many volunteered reflects the radicalization that had already taken place within a segment of the Yugoslav immigrant community as a result of the Great Depression and the strikes, hunger, and discrimination so many of them had lived through. But Spain also hardened the political convictions of those who fought there and survived, and those who supported them in Canada. Communists were a minority among Yugoslav-Canadians. But, after Spain, they were a minority that included those who had proven themselves willing to risk dying to fight fascism abroad.

### The SOE in Yugoslavia

Churchill’s admonition to the SOE to “set Europe ablaze” obscured a grimmer reality at the organization’s founding in 1940. At that time,

Britain stood largely alone against the Axis along with her empire and allied dominions. British war planners believed their only hope for victory lay in the combination of a naval blockade, bombing campaign, and local uprisings. The SOE, headquartered on Baker Street in London, would be responsible for the latter by infiltrating agents into occupied areas to liaise with resistance groups, coordinate air drops of arms and other supplies, and report back to London regarding the situation on the ground.<sup>34</sup>

This calculation changed in 1941, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June and America joined the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December. Suddenly, it seemed possible for Britain to contemplate winning a land war in Europe. The SOE's strategy shifted accordingly but varied by location. In France it focused on preparing for sabotage and risings in support of an eventual Allied invasion. French resistance groups were generally discouraged from violent confrontations until the moment of liberation was at hand, so as to avoid reprisals. But in Yugoslavia the British desired ongoing violent resistance — to tie down German and Italian troops who might otherwise be fighting elsewhere, and to cut supply routes through Europe to Greece and North Africa. An Allied invasion of Europe through the Balkans had been considered but was ruled out by 1943. This did not diminish British appetite for guerilla warfare in Yugoslavia, a vast and mountainous country well suited for it.<sup>35</sup>

But the British were unsure as to how they might best confront the Germans there. They had begun their involvement with Yugoslav resistance groups by backing those known as the Chetniks. Mostly Serbs, the Chetniks were supported by Yugoslavia's exiled king and government and were led by a former Royal Yugoslav Army general named Draža Mihailović.<sup>36</sup> The British knew little about the rival Partisans, despite fleeting contact with them not long after the German invasion. That came when British officer Bill Hudson slipped into Montenegro by submarine in September 1941, along with three Royal Yugoslav Army personnel. Hudson's mission was to investigate resistance groups on the ground and to try to foster cooperation among them.<sup>37</sup> He reached Tito and the Partisans, but his radio soon stopped working, so for months little was known of him or what he had learned. Another agent, Terrence Atherton, was dropped in to find out what was going on. He, too, made contact with the Partisans but then, in April 1942, set off to find Hudson, who had left Tito for Mihailović, and was murdered along the way.<sup>38</sup> Yugoslavia

still appeared to the British as potentially rich ground for resistance, but they needed better information, and that required more men in the country.

### Strange Bedfellows

Efforts to find men who might help with the task of liaising with Yugoslav resistance groups had already begun. William Yull Stewart, a Canadian working for Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, pulled his first Yugoslav recruit out of a Québec City prison in late 1941, a French-Serbian seaman and veteran of the Spanish Civil War named Branislav Radojević. He had been detained that September for inciting a strike among the crew of a ship that had sailed from New York. Radojević joined Hudson's mission with Mihailović the following summer. He reportedly made himself unpopular there because of his "complete inability to refrain from political activity," as a post-war note in his personnel file put it.<sup>39</sup> Sent to a British sub-mission with the Chetniks elsewhere, Radojević tried to bribe two soldiers to defect to the Partisans with him. He then undertook a mission with two British officers to negotiate peace between the Chetniks and a nearby Partisan unit. The Britons were captured by Serbian collaborationists and handed over to the Gestapo. Radojević escaped. He eventually managed to join another Partisan group but disappeared. Although he is identified as a Communist in his SOE personnel file, historian Heather Williams says Radojević had fought with the anarchists during the Spanish Civil War and was likely executed by Partisans because they thought he was a Trotskyist.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, the SOE was already looking for potential recruits in America. By the summer of 1941 William Donovan, a recipient of the Medal of Honor because of his actions during the First World War, was building what would become the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) intelligence agency. That work put him in touch with Milton Wolff, the tall and well-liked commander of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. Donovan connected Wolff with William Stephenson, the Canadian head of BSC in New York, who was looking to recruit Balkan immigrants to America. Wolff, with the help of comrades from the Spanish Civil War, Mirko Marković and Tomas Babin, assembled a party of 11 Yugoslavs and three Greeks who were met by Bailey at the end of the year. Logistical and bureaucratic red tape prevented the quick transfer of these

men to STS 103, a training school established in farm country east of Toronto. They would eventually be trained at an OSS facility in Maryland and would not reach Cairo until February 1943. The experience soured Bailey on further recruitment in America, and so the British looked north.<sup>41</sup>

"I request your authority to extend the work of my section to Canada," reads a 9 April 1942 note to London from BSC in New York, written by Alexander Halpern (Aleksandr Yakovelich Galpern). Galpern was a former Russian revolutionary who had joined British intelligence and, in New York, worked on issues pertaining to ethnic minorities.

Canada now has a large number of representative leaders of various nationalities. It has branches of the so-called Free Movements. They should be watched, nursed, and contacted. S.O. [Special Operations] and S.I.S. recruits could be found there if we approach the various racial groups through their recognized leaders. Any recruit we find and train there will have the advantage that we shall not be dependent on the Americans either as regards the training or as regards the incorporation and management of the recruits.<sup>42</sup>

Two weeks later, on 23 April, Bailey was informed that SOE in Cairo had requested he find one or two Bulgarians and one or two Croats to be infiltrated into Croatia and Bulgaria that summer. The telegram said the recruits would be trained in the Middle East and should be sent there as soon as possible.<sup>43</sup>

Bailey was in Toronto by 2 May and would return for another meeting on the seventh. His first contact was with Kosta Todoroff, a Bulgarian Communist and longtime SOE contact who put him in touch with Phillips; Joseph Yardas, a Croatian Communist; and Marko Šikić, a Montenegrin who had illegally entered Canada in 1937 and whose real name was Nikola Kovačević. These three would be Bailey's primary partners in his recruitment efforts over the subsequent months. "From the conversations held it is clear that these three people represent an important section of the progressive movement in Canada — the name under which the communist party is forced to exist there," wrote Bailey in a report of his meetings. "I formed the highest opinion of their political integrity, and of their sincerity. Their desire to help is unquestionable and they, having been engaged in subversive activities for many years, have a very clear impression of our needs."<sup>44</sup>

Bailey's high opinion of his new Communist friends would not waver over the coming months, and appears to have been reciprocated, at least by Phillips, whose surviving correspondence seems almost affectionate. It raises the question whether there was a Soviet matchmaker at play in this affair. Historian Mark Wheeler has said it is "virtually inconceivable" that the American and Canadian Communist parties would have cooperated with SOE without Moscow's approval.<sup>45</sup> Kovačević, according to Williams, was in fact a Soviet agent.<sup>46</sup> And Babin allegedly reported to Soviet military intelligence about his recruitment activities.<sup>47</sup>

And yet Canada was not a priority for the Comintern and, during the war, it was not quick to respond to events there.<sup>48</sup> There is also circumstantial evidence suggesting the Soviets were not fully informed about what the British and their American and Canadian recruits were up to. When Canadians Pavlić and Petar Erdeljac, along with British Alexander Simić-Stevens, parachuted into western Croatia in April 1943, they were met by local peasants and eventually taken to Partisan headquarters for Croatia. There, Tito was cabled and asked what should be done with them. Tito, apparently surprised to get the news, contacted the Comintern and asked them to investigate the identity of his guests through the Communist Party of Canada. It took the Comintern a while to reply. When it did, it denied all knowledge of the Communist Party of Canada's involvement in the recruitment of agents and advised Tito to be cautious and to work to establish the true identity of the parachutists.<sup>49</sup> The Comintern may have been lying to Tito, but it is difficult to see what it may have hoped to gain by doing so.

An incident that took place early in the recruiting process further suggests a certain amount of independence on the part of Canadian Communist recruiters. Following Bailey's second visit to Toronto on 8 May, he met again with Wolff, who asked him whether he noticed a lack of enthusiasm among his Canadian contacts during his visit. Bailey told him no, but allowed that Phillips had not met with him as planned. "Wolff then informed me that our friends in Canada had approached New York for certain information; whether similar recruiting was being carried on in America; if so under whose auspices; and in particular what 'line' the Party Executive in America was taking," Bailey wrote in a 15 May memo to Halpern. He added that Wolff believed Phillips had avoided meeting Bailey because he would not commit himself until matters were settled in America — a refer-

ence to trouble SOE was having recruiting in America because of the reluctance of officials there to condone BSC's enlistment of American Communists.<sup>50</sup>

This worried Bailey. "I have no doubt that that solidarity of purpose and mutual loyalty between the radical organization in Canada and New York will be the deciding factor in my negotiations in Canada. We may deplore this, but we cannot ignore it. Unless, therefore, we can persuade the Americans to adopt a more cooperative and realistic attitude towards the communists here, we shall get no cooperation from their comrades in Canada; this in my opinion will mean the abandonment of recruiting operations in the Dominion."<sup>51</sup> Bailey's fears were overblown. He met with Phillips on his next visit to Toronto on 16 and 17 May. Phillips assured him that Canadian Communists were ready to cooperate regardless of the attitude of their American comrades and were furthermore prepared to try to persuade the Americans to do the same.<sup>52</sup>

Todoroff, Phillips, and the others might also have concluded on their own that cooperating with the British in Yugoslavia against the Germans could benefit the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of German troops were needed to occupy Yugoslavia, and the more deployed there and elsewhere in the Balkans to battle local resistance groups, the fewer would be available to throw at the Russians on the Eastern Front. Todoroff hinted at as much in a letter of introduction he provided to Bailey for a Bulgarian immigrant and Spanish Civil War veteran named Bojan Nikoloff:

Dear Boris [sic]

I received your letter. And now I am recommending you for something which I think you will like, which is exceedingly dangerous but of the very greatest importance for Bulgaria. Your wife will be well looked after, so that there is no need for you to worry about her.

The person who will present this letter to you will explain the whole business, and inform you with whom you will be working. Anyway, you have always been a fighter for liberty, and I know you will always fight wherever it may be necessary.

The work is exceedingly [one word illegible] but glorious. You will be working for Bulgaria, for the Allies, and for Soviet Russia. I hope and believe that wherever you may be offered work, you will accept the offer and that you



will carry out all the tasks allotted to you in the same way  
that you behaved over there in Spain.

With warm greetings,

[Signed]

Kosta Todoroff<sup>3</sup>

Despite their eagerness to help, Phillips and Kovačević did not offer unconditional support. At their first meeting with Bailey, which he later summarized, they said they required a number of assurances. It was necessary, they said, that their work be carried out with the knowledge and tacit approval of the Canadian authorities. They asked that SOE not try to influence the political convictions of any of the recruits, and that a recruit's Communist convictions not militate against him during or after his service. They wanted confirmation that recruits who were Canadian citizens would not jeopardize that status through their work with SOE, and recruits would be free to return to Canada at the conclusion of their service. For recruits not yet qualified for naturalization, Phillips and Kovačević asked that service with SOE would count as time spent in Canada. They also wanted assurance that compensation would be paid to dependents if a recruit was killed or disabled. Bailey said he considered all these demands justifiable.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond such requirements, Phillips had other goals he hoped to advance by his involvement in the recruitment process. Party members at the time were continually harassed by the police, he said. Phillips told Bailey the situation was especially bad in Toronto because of someone he identified as a local RCMP assistant commissioner by the name of Draper. This was Brigadier-General Dennis Draper, who was not a member of the RCMP but was chief constable of the Toronto Police Department. Draper was a decorated Great War veteran and of United Empire Loyalist stock. His efforts to stamp out Communism in Toronto a decade earlier included employing a "Red Squad" of officers who physically abused prisoners and the prohibition of public meetings in any language other than English.<sup>55</sup> Phillips told Bailey that Draper had recently attempted to persuade the manager of a hotel to deny "radical elements" accommodation for one of their conventions. "The request was turned down because it was made unofficially and was unfounded in law; but it indicates Draper's attitude towards the people with whom we are now in close contact," Bailey noted in a 21 May report to Halpern.<sup>56</sup>

By cooperating with the SOE, Phillips hoped to win the party some breathing space. "Also, should their collaboration with us yield results of value, they wish to receive due credit at such time as this can be done without jeopardising the secrecy of our operations and the safety of our operators," Bailey continued in the same report, adding: "This seems a natural and reasonable demand."<sup>57</sup>

Phillips had other suggestions regarding additional areas of cooperation, although he did not require that these be met as a prerequisite for his support in the recruiting process. He said he wanted to pass on information about "internal affairs" in Canada, presumably a reference to fascist-supporting groups in the country. He proposed using immigrant "language groups" in Canada to make propaganda directed at those in occupied Europe. And he suggested propaganda and recruiting activities could be conducted among immigrants in South America.<sup>58</sup>

Phillips made no demands for himself, although he did tell Bailey that he feared getting arrested and limited his travel accordingly. That Phillips was so restricted irritated Bailey for practical and moral reasons. "Another argument for allowing Phillips freedom of movement ... is that it is paradoxical for him to endeavour to recruit personnel for our particularly dangerous work 'in the name of democracy' if he himself is being hounded by the authorities for his political views," he wrote in June. "The propaganda value of this situation (adverse to us) is too important to be ignored."<sup>59</sup>

Bailey and his colleagues tried to intervene with Canadian authorities on Phillips' behalf, securing assurances from Norman Robertson, under-secretary of state for the Department of External Affairs, that Phillips could safely travel without fear of arrest. Robertson told them there was in fact no outstanding arrest warrant for Phillips. Herbert Sichel, a colleague of Bailey's at BSC, thanked Robertson, promising him he would not tell Phillips about the lack of a warrant for his arrest but noting that he would confidentially let Phillips know he could travel freely.<sup>60</sup> British intelligence appears to have had a less cooperative and transparent relationship with the RCMP. "I made no contacts at all in my hotel, and the interviews were carried out in four different houses, in different parts of Vancouver," Bailey wrote of a recruiting trip in July 1942. "I do not therefore think that my activities or my connection with Phillips can possibly have come to the attention of authorities there. I mention this point, since it appears ... that our relations with the R.C.M.P. in British Columbia are far from satisfactory. It would therefore do us no good at all if it came to the notice of officials there that we

were dealing with the radicals.”<sup>61</sup> It seems unlikely, then, that Bailey was able to do much to ease RCMP pressure on his Communist partners.

Kovačević likewise asked for little in return for his help, and indeed, despite being over 50 years old, seemed primarily concerned with joining those recruits training for infiltration into Yugoslavia. He had not been there since 1928 and since then had lived illegally in various parts of Europe and in the United States in addition to Canada, supporting himself through radical foreign-language journalism. “There is nothing to add to the life history, which speaks for itself of unswerving loyalty to a political ideal, at great personal risk and sacrifice,” reads a note in his personnel file, compiled before he left Canada for SOE’s Middle East headquarters in Cairo.<sup>62</sup>

Kovačević wanted to conduct his work for SOE using his real name, rather than the Marko Šikić alias he had been using in Canada. This presented Bailey with a dilemma that highlights BSC’s lack of candour with its Canadian partners. “To allow this, it would be necessary for us to tell the Canadians frankly that he has been in Canada illegally, and ask them to overlook this fact in view of his impending departure,” Bailey wrote. “They may of course in this event object to guaranteeing re-entry, but I think that Shikitch himself would not mind this, as all his ties and connections are in Montenegro. If the war comes to a successful conclusion, he will undoubtedly want to stay there. If the war comes to an unsuccessful conclusion, it is extremely unlikely that he will ever be able to leave the country alive. In either case, his eventual return to Canada is most improbable.”<sup>63</sup>

Kovačević, it seems, was willing to run that risk because, whatever loyalty he might have felt to the party and the Soviet Union, he also believed in the anti-fascist fight and in the liberation of Yugoslavia from Nazi occupation. Events would prove how dangerous acting on such convictions could be. In November 1942 an enemy submarine torpedoed and sunk the Greek freighter *Andreas* on which Kovačević was sailing for Egypt and machine-gunned the survivors. Shot in the leg, Kovačević was too injured to continue with his mission and was returned to Canada.<sup>64</sup>

### To Help the Fatherland and Fight Fascism

And what of the other recruits, the miners and factory workers recommended by Kovačević and his colleagues—what motivated them to accept Bailey’s offer? The explanation Prpić gives in his memoir is

straightforward. He and his fellow recruits, the first batch to leave Canada, had one aim: “to help the fatherland and their nations to fight against German and Italian fascist occupiers and domestic traitors — Ustashas and Chetniks.” If military authorities would have allowed more volunteers, he adds, there would have been tens of thousands more.<sup>65</sup>

This nod to an immigrant’s love for his homeland might have been true, but it is surely not the whole story. Many immigrants loved the homes they left. Not all of them were so willing to return to fight there in the 1940s. The SOE wanted to tap other immigrant groups for recruits; for a while they believed they would be successful. Halpern’s 9 April 1942 request to start recruiting in Canada optimistically noted the large numbers of Czechs, Romanians, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Austrians, and Italians living there.<sup>66</sup> Such optimism was misplaced.

“The results of our efforts to recruit Roumanian, Hungarian and Bulgarian personnel in Canada have been disappointing,” wrote former British oil executive and SOE member Alfred Gardyne de Chastelain of a subsequent recruitment drive in August 1943. The disappointment he speaks of was partly because by the summer of 1943 most men who wished to fight the Nazis had already joined the regular Canadian forces. But, de Chastelain also said Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, as Axis allies, had not been occupied by the Germans, and their emigrants in Canada lacked the same incentive for revenge held by Greeks, Yugoslavs, and Norwegians. Ties to the lands of their birth also seemed weaker, de Chastelain added. “Very few of the men interviewed were interested in assisting their countries of origin, but some volunteered for our mission to have an opportunity to come to grips with the axis without considering how or where they were going to be employed.” De Chastelain wrote off one Romanian congregation in Windsor because its priest kept them locked in the past. “They are all people who came to Canada in 1906, 1907, now average over 50 years of age, have refused to adopt the new calendar and continue to live their apparently useless lives in accordance with the Greek calendar. For our purpose the entire community is useless.”<sup>67</sup> De Chastelain would eventually find Hungarian Canadian recruits among serving soldiers, and he himself would parachute into Romania.<sup>68</sup>

Yugoslav-Canadians were receptive to SOE recruiting efforts. Part of the explanation why must lie in the political radicalization of a significant minority of them during the 1930s. Recent arrivals to

Canada, their experiences as immigrants during the Great Depression nurtured a commitment to the Communist Party and to the broader anti-fascist movement. The uprising in Yugoslavia — like the war in Spain a few years earlier — seemed part of that struggle. That Communist leaders in Canada encouraged potential recruits to cooperate with the British, and that these immigrants still felt connected to a place they had left not that long ago, surely made the decision to enlist in the SOE a little easier.

British and Canadian recruiters and trainers, for their part, also wanted to understand what influenced recruits, as we can see in their discussions surrounding motivations in reports and personnel files. Among Yugoslav-Canadians they saw evidence of patriotism, anti-fascism, loyalty to the Communist Party — and, on occasion, baser and more personal aspirations. One of Stevan Serdar's examiners concluded that regardless of the instructions he was given, Serdar would try to make contact with Russian agents in whatever country he was sent.<sup>69</sup> Peter Erdeljac's examiner worried Erdeljac might try to avenge himself on his wife in Yugoslavia for her alleged infidelity. She had reported him to the police and broke off contact because of his habit of sending their children Communist literature. In his SOE personnel file, Erdeljac's examiner noted with alarm that one of the children was only ten at the time.<sup>70</sup> The SOE infiltrated both men into Yugoslavia anyway. "The urgencies of wartime are easy to forget in an era of nominal peace," Foot wrote in his history of the SOE. "Sometimes they condemned SOE to send into action men and women whom it might have been more sensible to train for longer or not to send at all."<sup>71</sup>

It is an elemental desire to fight the Germans and their allies and collaborators that emerges as most prominent among the Yugoslav-Canadians' motivations. "A first class type," reads an examiner's note about Pavle Pavlić. "Intelligent, steady, feels very strongly about the Fascist invasion of his country and keen as mustard to get at the Germans. Deplores misunderstanding between partisans and Mihailović but only anxious to fight Fascists — let the rest wait."<sup>72</sup>

One examiner wrote of Erdeljac, another veteran of the Spanish Civil War: "There is no doubt about his melancholy courage and political integrity; he is fully aware of the possible consequences of an excursion, in view of the police records which doubtless still exist in his country of origin, but is nevertheless more than eager to return whatever the consequences." The same report also drips with class prejudice and stereotypical tropes about stolid and wily Slavs. "Is undoubtedly

intelligent beyond his station,” it reads. “Is probably crafty rather than clever, with well-developed, native, peasant, shrewdness.”<sup>73</sup> Similar references to peasant cunning are scattered throughout SOE reports about North American Yugoslav recruits. Examiners seemed incapable of concluding that these Communist migrants, men from frontier bunkhouses and northern gold mines who would be assigned delicate and difficult work, might have been as smart as those who would dispatch them.

SOE files on the recruitment of Canadian and American agents for work in the Balkans and Central Europe suggest an aversion to enlisting Jews. A December 1941 telegram from London relays a message to BSC in New York from SOE in Cairo asking for alert and intelligent men for special radio work in the Middle East: “Candidates should be nations of Yugo Slavia, Bulgaria, Roumania, Greece, Hungary, preferably not repeat not Jews.”<sup>74</sup> A report on recruitment in Canada from September 1943 notes the need for a Czech speaker “who should be non-Jewish” for translating and decoding work.<sup>75</sup> As it appears that the candidate would not have been infiltrated into Europe, it does not seem plausible that the non-Jewish criterion was related to a desire to protect him from harm if captured. Such an explanation would seem a stretch anyway, as captured SOE agents could expect to be shot. Yet another September 1943 memo, from Sichel at BSC in New York to Drew-Brook in Toronto, notes, “We cannot take any Hungarians or other recruits who have Jewish appearance.”<sup>76</sup>

The SOE’s seeming reluctance to recruit North American Jews is puzzling given that many of its agents from elsewhere were Jewish — although not always openly so. Among the first agents to contact Tito’s Partisans was Peretz Rosenberg, a radio operator from British Mandate Palestine who had joined the British army and dropped into Yugoslavia in May 1943. He was part of a team led by William Deakin, a literary assistant to Winston Churchill, that included Yugoslav-Canadian Ivan Starčević. Rosenberg went by the name “Rose” in Yugoslavia. Writing of Rosenberg’s identity as a “Palestine Jew of German origin, from one of the founding settlements in that mandated territory,” Deakin noted that Rosenberg “revealed this to me later in his own time.” Deakin didn’t learn of Rosenberg’s real name until he visited him in Israel twenty years after the war.<sup>77</sup> Rosenberg’s bosses in the SOE, however, must surely have been aware of his faith.

The SOE also saw the value of working with Jews in the territories in which they operated. Canadian Steve Markos, for example, was infiltrated into Hungary with instructions to install himself in a

large town and prepare for the arrival of a wireless operator. He was to receive further instructions by coded messages broadcast on the BBC. "Purchase of good Radio capable of receiving London would possibly arouse suspicion," reads a handwritten note added to a draft briefing for Markos regarding the purpose of his mission. "Might be necessary to contact person who can be trusted + already possesses Radio. Jew?"<sup>78</sup> The briefing was prepared in 1943, when Hungary was allied to — but not yet occupied by — Germany. Hungarian Jews suffered discrimination, and some Jews who could not prove longstanding legal residency were deported to their deaths at German hands. The Hungarian army also shot Jews in newly Hungarian-occupied regions of Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, the Hungarian government resisted German pressure to deport Hungarian Jews to extermination camps. Most survived until Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944 and installed a more pliant government.<sup>79</sup>

SOE recruiters might have been acting on concerns about the anti-Semitism of the Yugoslavs hosting their agents. While some Chetnik bands had murdered Jews, Jews also fought as members of the Partisans. In the fall of 1943, following the armistice between Italy and the Allies, the Partisans evacuated some 2,500 Jews from a former Italian concentration camp on the Adriatic island of Rab. The freed Jews were invited to join the Partisans. Many did, and those who did not lived in Partisan territory until the end of the war. Most of them survived. According to historian Emil Kerenji, the rescue was motivated by the Partisans' belief that Jews belonged in the future pluralistic political project of the Yugoslavia they were trying to build. "As such ... they needed to be included in the ranks of the struggle for national liberation, the only way to achieve that goal."<sup>80</sup>

A disinclination to recruit Canadian and American Jews also seems to clash with the SOE's pragmatic attitude in most of its work. The organization sought out potentially useful men and women regardless of their background or politics. As we have seen, the British were especially keen to tap recruits who had been involved in subversive activities, illegal organizing, and who had combat experience in the Spanish Civil War. This approach reflected the vision of SOE's founder, Hugh Dalton, who was minister of economic warfare in Britain's coalition government from 1940 to 1942:

We must organise movements in every occupied territory comparable to the Sinn Fein movement in Ireland, to the Chinese guerillas now operating against Japan, to the



Spanish Irregulars who played a notable part in Wellington's campaign or—one might as well admit it—to the organisations which the Nazis themselves have developed so remarkably in almost every country of the world. We must use many different methods, including industrial and military sabotage, labour agitations and strikes, continuous propaganda, terrorist acts against traitors and German leaders, boycotts and riots.<sup>81</sup>

An example of SOE's open-minded attitude regarding recruitment can be found in the case of Edward Cecil-Smith. Cecil-Smith had led the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of Canadian and American volunteers in the International Brigades. When the Second World War began, Cecil-Smith volunteered to lead Canadian veterans of Spain back into battle against Hitler—this at a time when the official line from the Soviet Union and the Comintern was that the war was an imperial contest that good anti-fascists should avoid. Cecil-Smith then enlisted in the regular Canadian army and was judged by his commanding officer to be a “model outstanding Soldier.” He was nevertheless discharged on account of his Spanish Civil War and party activities, depriving Canada of a potentially valuable military asset.<sup>82</sup> The SOE sought out Cecil-Smith during later recruitment efforts led by de Chastelain in 1943.<sup>83</sup>

And yet, despite the SOE's pragmatism, and the admiration and affection expressed by men like Bailey for the immigrant radicals with whom they worked, one still gets the impression that other members of the SOE never quite accepted the Yugoslav-Canadians as equal colleagues. Davidson, who had remarked in a 1980 book that no one in British authority was ever going to show gratitude to the immigrant recruits who helped the British contact Tito's Partisans, returned to the topic years later after attending the unveiling of a plaque in Westminster Abbey dedicated to SOE casualties. “I do not know if anyone ever thanked those Canadians,” he wrote in a 1996 *London Review of Books* article.<sup>84</sup> Clearly, it bothered him.

### A Fight they Chose

It's unlikely, however, that the Yugoslav migrants who enlisted in the SOE were looking for thanks. They wanted to join a fight against fascism in their homeland, and, as Davidson also pointed out, they

got what they wanted. He remembered them smouldering with impatience in Cairo while awaiting transport to Yugoslavia. They lived in a villa near the Mena House Hotel on the outskirts of the city that he said had once been a high-end brothel that serviced discerning pashas. It still housed pink lamps, now covered in dust. They were “craggy men with huge shoulders,” he said, “hard of face, their hands clawed with toil, and as stubbornly powerful in their convictions.”<sup>85</sup>

They would almost all leave, eventually. Pavlić describes in his memoir the nighttime flight over the Mediterranean, the plunge through the floor of a lone bomber, his parachute catching him in a tree well off the ground, a dawn encounter with the frightened peasant men who find him. He gives cigarettes to the men and his scarf to a young girl who arrives soon after. They bring him to a house that had been burned, possibly during a reprisal attack, roughly repaired with new boards of wood. They feed Pavlić hot milk and ham. Then they take him to a nearby Partisan detachment, where he sees Erdeljac and Simić-Stevens.<sup>86</sup> Others would follow. More than 20 Yugoslav-Canadians infiltrated the Balkans as agents of the SOE, of whom at least five died. Two more, Luka Biljan and Emil Vrkljan, perished in the South Atlantic submarine attack before they could get to Europe.<sup>87</sup>

In his official, and until recently secret, history of the SOE, William Mackenzie writes that resistance groups in Yugoslavia contained an “impressive” number of Axis divisions that might otherwise have been deployed on other fronts. He also notes that Britain’s contribution to armed resistance in the country was mostly symbolic until the spring of 1944, when it began supplying Tito’s Partisans on a large scale, allowing them to dominate their Chetnik rivals and more forcefully confront the Germans.<sup>88</sup> The SOE facilitated this process by “pushing liaison officers to strange places, establishing communication, and following it with supplies.”<sup>89</sup> The Yugoslav-Canadians who were part of such liaison missions, and often the only members able to communicate with their hosts, therefore contributed significantly to Britain’s tactical success in Yugoslavia.

As for Britain’s strategic choice to end support for Mihailović and back Tito exclusively, it is unlikely that the Canadian SOE agents on the ground had much of an impact. That decision was shaped largely by the reports and arguments of Oxbridge men William Deakin and Fitzroy Maclean (who also led a British mission to Tito), combined with intelligence gleaned by decrypting German signals.<sup>90</sup> Some Yugoslav-Canadians on the ground certainly tried to push the British

in that direction, as a 24 May 1943 memo from SOE in Cairo based on telegrams from Pavlić, Erdeljac, and Simić-Stevens about the Partisans they had encountered in Croatia and their actions and organization suggests. It reads: "Almost the first comment by this sub-mission was 'we think you are badly informed of the whole situation.'"<sup>91</sup> The British were still supporting Mihailović at that time. Jimmy Pearson, head of the Balkan and Middle East section at Baker Street, was somewhat dismissive. "When reading this memo you will no doubt bear in mind that the mission consists of three Canadian Yugoslavs who, though intelligent, are biased toward the Left," he wrote to a colleague. "The telegrams, however, are interesting, and on receipt of further telegrams, we shall be in a better position to judge the relative strength of the forces opposing the Axis in Yugoslavia."<sup>92</sup>

Biased or not, the Canadians' views on Tito and the Partisans and whom the British should support would eventually carry the day in London. For a while, the British sent weapons and liaison officers to both the Chetniks and the Partisans and tried to get them to cooperate with each other. In December 1943, however, after meeting with Maclean and Deakin in Cairo, Churchill declared he wanted Mihailović removed by the end of the year.<sup>93</sup>

Britain's abandonment of Mihailović for Tito remains controversial. Put simply, London concluded that the Partisans were far more active and effective fighters, and that the Chetniks were at best passive and at worst actively collaborating with the enemy. It might be said in their defence that the Chetniks were motivated in large part by self-preservation. Yugoslavia's Serbs had suffered tremendous atrocities at the hands of the Nazis and Croatian fascists early in the war. Mihailović's Chetniks wanted to avoid triggering further reprisal attacks on Serb villages. They were also conserving their forces for a showdown with the Partisans over who would rule Yugoslavia following the Axis defeat.<sup>94</sup> The Partisans, for their part, had a revolutionary current to their politics. They were not fighting simply to defeat those occupying their country and return to the situation that had existed before the war, but for a new world — or at least a new Yugoslavia. They, too, knew a confrontation with Mihailović, who represented that old order, was inevitable. In the meantime, they were enthusiastic killers of Nazis, which is what mattered most to London.

Several Canadian recruits joined the Partisans during the war. A 23 November 1944 memo from Sichel to Drew-Brook quotes a telegram from the "Mediterranean Area," saying they are: "Endeav-

ouring to liquidate soonest Canadian Croats originally recruited in 1942.” The telegram located 13 of those Canadians in Italy, “and at present unemployed,” seven in the field with the 37<sup>th</sup> Military Mission in Yugoslavia, four believed to be dead or captured, and ten “in field with Partisans having joined Partisan Army but not then unfortunately signed off by SOE.”<sup>95</sup> A note the following July, attempting to track the locations of various recruits “about whom we have no definite information,” cited unconfirmed reports that Marko Pavičić had been killed after joining the Partisans. Pavičić was dead by then. A note on the same page about Josip Sarić indicates he had joined the “JANL” (Jugoslav Army of National Liberation), adding: “Present whereabouts unknown.”<sup>96</sup> Sarić, too, was dead.<sup>97</sup>

Pavlić’s transfer to the Partisans was more formal. His SOE personnel file contains a 16 December 1943 letter to a Commissar V. Bakarić at Partisan headquarters from a British officer who had served with Pavlić in Yugoslavia. “My Dear Commissar,” it begins, and then introduces Pavlić as someone whom Bakarić had met when Pavlić was the British officer’s interpreter, but who now wished to join the Partisans:

He is prompted to take this step purely because of his loyal patriotism, his love for the cause of freedom for which you are fighting, and because of his own honest character. He conscientiously believes it is his duty to join his fellow country-men in their struggle for freedom.

I wish to point out to you that Sgt. Pavlić has given splendid service while he has been with us and we are sorry to see him go. However, we understand Paul and know that he is not happy unless he feels that he is doing is maximum duty. In that sense we are not inclined to stand in the way of his joining the Partizans. We are consoled by the thought that he is still within the family. We have recommended Sgt. Pavlić for the military medal as a modest token for his bravery and good conduct.

We wish Paul every success and happiness in his most worthy and commendable choice of joining the Partizans and trust that you may well be proud of him.<sup>98</sup>

This letter found its way into Pavlić’s SOE file. Pavlić, who stayed in Yugoslavia after the war, brought it to the British consulate-general in Zagreb to complain that he had not been given his pay and allow-

ances, which should have been placed to his credit when he joined the Partisans three years earlier. The British military attaché at the embassy in Belgrade reported that they had no knowledge of Pavlić's service in the British Army but asked that they be told how much to pay him, if the letter was genuine.<sup>99</sup>

All this lay in the future when Pavlić followed the villagers through the spring dawn toward the Partisans he had prepared so long to meet. We can imagine him with Erdeljac and Simić-Stevens, perhaps in a wooded glen, leaves on surrounding trees small and the bright shade of green that comes with April's new growth; or packed into a villager's hut smelling of sweat and wet wool. Gathered about them are curious men dressed in an unmatched variety of stolen and home-made uniforms, bedecked with grenades and pistols, almost certainly pressing rakia, a strong fruit brandy, into their hands. A link, tenuous and ripe with possibility, is established between the Partisans and Allied high command by migrants, who poverty and ambition had driven from Yugoslavia to Canada when they were younger men, and who have now found their way back to build something new.

\*\*\*

**MICHAEL PETROU** is an adjunct professor in Carleton University's Department of History. He was the inaugural research fellow-in-residence in Carleton's Bachelor of Global and International Studies program, and the 2018 Martin Wise Goodman Nieman Fellow at Harvard University.

**MICHAEL PETROU** est professeur associé au Département d'histoire de l'Université Carleton. Il fut le premier chercheur invité en résidence du programme de baccalauréat en études globales et internationales de l'Université Carleton, et il est également récipiendaire de la bourse de recherches Martin Wise Goodman Nieman à l'Université Harvard.

## Endnotes

- 1 National Archives, Kew (hereafter noted as NA) Special Operations Executive papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," Paul Phillips to S. W. Bailey, 7 May 1942.
- 2 For the challenges faced by Canadian immigrants who fought in the Spanish Civil War, before and after that conflict, see Michael Petrou, *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 10–49 and 170–80. David Stafford says that many of the SOE's first batch of Canadian recruits were illegal residents and only a minority had Canadian citizenship. See David Stafford, *Camp X: The Incredible and True Story of Canada's School for Secret Agents 1941–1945* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1986), 173.
- 3 Heather Williams, *Parachutes, Patriots, and Partisans: The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2003), 3. Williams locates Bailey in Belgrade at this time. The SOE's official history, long classified but recently made public, puts him in Istanbul. See: William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of the S.O.E.: Special Operations Executive 1940–1945* (London: St. Ermin's Press, 2000), 15. British intelligence had a substantial presence in Istanbul, but it is probable that Bailey was often in Belgrade as well.
- 4 Elizabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1976), 91–95.
- 5 Williams, *Parachutes*, 39–40.
- 6 David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940–1945: A Survey of the Special Operations Executive, With Documents* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980), 20.
- 7 M. R. D. Foot, *SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940–1946*, (London: Pimlico, 1999), 64.
- 8 Cited in Williams, *Parachutes*, 9.
- 9 M. R. D. Foot, *S.O.E. in France: An Account of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940–1944* (London: H.M.S.O., 1966), 49.
- 10 This was Nikola Kovačević, discussed below. Reference to a gift of a typewriter is made in NA SOE papers HS 9/860/5, Kovačević personnel file, letter from Tommy Drew-Brook to Herbert Sichel, 23 December 1943.
- 11 See, for example Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe* and Phyllis Auty and Richard Clogg, eds., *British Policy Towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1975).
- 12 Basil Davidson, *Special Operations Europe: Scenes from the Anti-Nazi War* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1980), 86.

- 13 Roy MacLaren, *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981).
- 14 Williams, *Parachutes*, ix.
- 15 See, for example, Williams, *Parachutes*.
- 16 Pavle Pavlić, "Iz Kanade u Partizane," in *Četrdeset godina: Knjiga Šesta: 1941–1945: Zbornik sećanja aktivista jugoslovenskog revolucionarnog radničkog pokreta* (Belgrade: Kultura, 1961), 281–7; and Božo Prpić, *Preko Atlantika U Partizane*, trans. privately by Vanja Kahrmanovic (Zagreb: Izdanje Matice Iseljenika Hrvatske, 1955).
- 17 Anthony Rasporich, *For a Better Life: A History of the Croats in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 251, citing statistics from the Canadian Department of Citizenship and Immigration.
- 18 Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 96, cites the 1931 census, which lists 17,110 declared Yugoslavs in Canada, of whom 12,674 were males.
- 19 Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 97, 100.
- 20 Cited in Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 98.
- 21 Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 101.
- 22 Cited in Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 53.
- 23 Cited in Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 105–6.
- 24 L. S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (London: Hearst & Company, 2000), 616–43.
- 25 Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 136.
- 26 Cited in Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 141.
- 27 Rasporich, *For a Better Life*, 143. For broader context regarding state repression of immigrants at this time, including through deportation, see Dennis Molinaro, "State Repression and Political Deportation in Canada, 1919–1936," (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2015).
- 28 See, for example: Dennis Molinaro, *An Exceptional Law: Section 98 and the Emergency State, 1919–1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 57, 96.
- 29 Dennis Molinaro, "'A Species of Treason?' Deportation and Nation-Building in the Case of Tomo Čačić, 1931–1934," *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 1 (March 2010): 70. Molinaro's MA cognate essay is a more expansive treatment of the same topic and has good material on the role of the RCMP: Dennis Molinaro, "Deportation, Nation-Building, and Ethnicity in Canada: The Case of Tomo Čačić, 1931–1934" (M.A. Cognate essay, Pattern II, Queen's University, 2008). Regarding Section 98 specifically, see: Molinaro, *An Exceptional Law*.
- 30 Molinaro, "A Species of Treason," 70–1.
- 31 For a more detailed discussion, see: John Peter Kraljic, "The Croatian Community in North America and the Spanish Civil War," (MA diss., The City University of New York, 2002).
- 32 Prpić, *Preko Atlantika U Partizane*, 12.



THE RECRUITMENT OF YUGOSLAV-CANADIANS FOR SPECIAL  
OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE MISSIONS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

- 33 Petrou, *Renegades*, 22–3.
- 34 A good summary of British strategy as related to the SOE can be found in Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance*, 1–22.
- 35 Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe*, 148–50.
- 36 On Britain's early support of Mihailović, see Williams, *Parachutes*, 59–81.
- 37 Williams, *Parachutes*, 56.
- 38 Williams, *Parachutes*, 65–9.
- 39 NA SOE papers HS 9/1224/5, Junior Commander D. I. Gorrum at the War Office in London to Colonel Clarke at the British embassy in Belgrade, 24 July 1946. See Williams, *Parachutes*, 127–30, for a fuller discussion.
- 40 Williams, *Parachutes*, 127–30. Two British officers with Radojević left with him and were captured by Serbian collaborationists and handed over to the Gestapo.
- 41 Mark Wheeler, "Efforts to Co-ordinate Yugoslav Resistance," in *Special Operations Executive: A new instrument of war*, ed. Mark Seaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 103–15; also: NA SOE papers HS 8/70, "America Balkan Recruiting – Part I" and HS8/ 71, "America Balkans Recruiting – General – Part II."
- 42 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," D.S.C. to G.400, 9 April 1942. The "G" indicates BSC's headquarters in New York. A separate file, HS 8/981, "American Section G and GN Symbols," identifies Halpern as G.400, including in a 1 April 1943 document. I have consulted the HS 8/981 file, as well as HS 8/971, which also reveals code names and symbols, to confirm the identity of other individuals who are identified in documents by identity codes.
- 43 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," from London S. O., 23 April 1942.
- 44 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," D/H 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern), 15 May 1942.
- 45 Wheeler, "Efforts to Co-ordinate Yugoslav Resistance," 115.
- 46 Williams, *Parachutes*, 131.
- 47 John Earl Haynes & Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 181, cited in Kraljic, "The Croatian Community," 112.
- 48 Oleksa Drachewych, "The Comintern and the Communist Parties of South Africa, Canada, and Australia on Questions of Imperialism, Nationality and Race, 1919–1943," (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 2017), 170–219.
- 49 Williams, *Parachutes*, 134–6.

- 50 NA SOE papers HS8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern), 15 May 1942.
- 51 NA SOE papers HS8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern), 15 May 1942.
- 52 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern) 21 May 1942.
- 53 NA SOE papers HS 8/72, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – General Part I." What is quoted here is the translated letter in the SOE papers. The bracketed "sic" and "one word illegible" are included in the translated letter.
- 54 NA SOE paper HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern), 15 May 1942.
- 55 Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band: The Clashes Between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishment in Canada, 1928–1932* (Ottawa: Deneau, n.d. [1982]), 15, 19.
- 56 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern), 21 May 1942.
- 57 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern), 21 May 1942.
- 58 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.400 (Halpern), 21 May 1942.
- 59 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.406 (Herbert Sichel), 4 June 1942. Sichel's identity code is confirmed in NA SOE papers HS 8/981.
- 60 NA SOE papers HS 8/72, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – General Part I," G.406 (Herbert Sichel) to Norman Robertson, 18 June 1942.
- 61 NA SOE papers HS 8/77, "America: Balkans Recruiting in Canada – 2<sup>nd</sup> Party," 12 July 1942 report from Bailey. The SOE worked more closely with the RCMP later, when recruiting Hungarian Canadians.
- 62 NA SOE papers HS 9/860/5, Kovačević personnel file, undated "Personal History Record."
- 63 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," DH/ 2 (Bailey) to G.406 (Sichel), 24 June 1942.

THE RECRUITMENT OF YUGOSLAV-CANADIANS FOR SPECIAL  
OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE MISSIONS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

- 64 Information on the sinking of the *Andreas* and the aftermath can be found in NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I and NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part II. Regarding Kovačević's injuries, see NA SOE papers HS 9/860/5, Kovačević personnel file.
- 65 Prpić, *Preko Atlantika U Partizane*, 5.
- 66 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," D.S.C. to G.400 (Halpern), 9 April 1942.
- 67 NA SOE papers HS 8/64, "America: Recruiting Paramilitary Courses," DH/ 13 (de Chastelain) to M/DH Cairo, 26 August 1943. File HS 8/971 identifies M/DH as Director of Special Operations (Balkans) G(uy) R(ichard) Tamplin, based in Cairo.
- 68 MacLaren, *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines*, 169.
- 69 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Shipwrecked) Part I," "Personal History Record," 1 June 1942.
- 70 NA SOE papers HS 9/436/8, "Personal History Record."
- 71 Foot, *SOE*, 76.
- 72 NA SOE papers HS 8/72, "America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – General Part I," "Personal History Record."
- 73 NA SOE papers HS 9/436/8, "Personal History Record."
- 74 NA SOE papers HS 8/70, "America: Balkan Recruiting – Part I," from London S.O., 25 December 1941. The telegram begins: "Following for G," indicating what follows is meant for BSC in New York.
- 75 NA SOE papers HS 8/66, "America: Balkan Recruiting – Hungarians (A. G. G. de Chastelain)," G.406 (Sichel) to DH/ 13 (de Chastelain), 6 September 1943.
- 76 NA SOE papers HS 8/66, "America: Balkan Recruiting – Hungarians (A. G. G. de Chastelain)," Sichel to Drew-Brook, 4 September 1943.
- 77 F. W. D. Deakin, *The Embattled Mountain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 216–7.
- 78 NA SOE papers HS 9/990/1, Markos personnel file, draft "Briefing for Steve," undated.
- 79 Jeremy Black, *The Holocaust: History & Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 135–6, and Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 234–9.
- 80 Emil Kerenji, "'Your Salvation is the Struggle Against Fascism': Yugoslav Communists and the Rescue of Jews, 1941–1945," *Contemporary European History*, 25, 1 (2016): 74.
- 81 Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931–1945* (London: Frederik Muller, 1957), 368.

- 82 See Petrou, *Renegades*, 174–7.
- 83 NA SOE papers HS 8/65, “America: Balkan Recruiting – General (A. G. G. de Chastelain).” There are several documents in this file from August 1943, including correspondence between Drew-Brook and de Chastelain, indicating interest in Smith, and revealing Phillips’ help in trying to find him. There is no evidence an interview took place.
- 84 Basil Davidson, “Goodbye to some of that,” *London Review of Books* (22 August 1996).
- 85 Basil Davidson, *Partisan Picture* (London, Bedford Books, 1946), 85.
- 86 Pavlić, “Iz Kanade u Partizane,” 284–6.
- 87 Working mostly with SOE files from the National Archives in London, I have compiled a list of more than 30 Yugoslav recruits from Canada, including Branislav Radojević, who was arrested and jailed after the ship on which he worked docked in Québec City and who therefore had scant ties to Canada. Not all of these recruits made it to Europe. At least two were too badly injured in training or in transit, and two died in the torpedo attack on their way to Cairo. That Biljan and Vrkljan died in the torpedo attack is confirmed, among other places, in NA SOE papers HS 8/75, “America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – First Party (Ship-wrecked) Part I.” The other dead men, noted in MacLaren, *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines*, 151, are Josip Sarić, Janez Smrke, Marko Pavičić, Mica Pavičić, and Paul Stichman.
- 88 Mackenzie, *The Secret History of the S.O.E.*, 446–7.
- 89 Mackenzie, *The Secret History of the S.O.E.*, 446.
- 90 On the impact of signals decryption, see Foot, *SOE*, 344; on that of Deakin and Maclean, see Williams, *Parachutes*, 247–8.
- 91 NA Foreign Office (hereafter FO) papers 371/37586, “Yugoslavia File No. 2,” “The Partisan Movement in Yugoslavia,” 24 May 1943.
- 92 NA FO papers 371/37586, “Yugoslavia File No. 2,” “The Partisan Movement in Yugoslavia,” Pearson to D. F. Howard, 25 May 1943.
- 93 Williams, *Parachutes*, 190.
- 94 For a sympathetic portrayal of the Chetniks by a British liaison officer who worked with them, see: Jasper Rootham, *Miss Fire: The Chronicle of a British Mission to Mihailovich 1943–1944* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946).
- 95 NA SOE papers HS 8/73, “America: Balkan Recruiting in Canada – General – Part II,” Sichel to Drew-Brook, 23 November 1944.
- 96 NA SOE papers HS 8/75, “America: Balkans Recruiting in Canada – General – Part III,” J. R. L. to Drew-Brook, 4 July 1945.
- 97 MacLaren, *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines*, 151. MacLaren describes Sarić as having “disappeared in action.” There is no confirmation of his death in his personnel file, but nor is there evidence that he survived the war.

THE RECRUITMENT OF YUGOSLAV-CANADIANS FOR SPECIAL  
OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE MISSIONS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

- 98 NA SOE papers HS 9/1156/4, Pavlić personnel file, D. C. M. to Bakarić, 16 December 1943.
- 99 NA SOE papers HS 9/1156/4, Pavlić personnel file, Major P. K. Wright, for "Colonel, Military Attaché," 11 October 1946. Several other Yugoslav Canadians who had served in the SOE, including Serdar and former lumberjack and fisherman named Nikola Kombol, also chose to live in Yugoslavia after the war. See MacLaren, *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines*, 151.