

Jędrzej PASZKIEWICZ

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

paszje@wp.pl

THE MACEDONIAN ISSUE IN THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE BALKANS IN THE 20^S OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN THE LIGHT OF BRITISH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

ABSTRACT The article shows the attitude of the Great Britain towards controversies connected with the so-called Macedonian issue during the inter-war period, using British archival and published sources. From the point of view of Great Britain the Macedonian issue should be eliminated from the international politics of those times. Its instrumentalization through individual revisionist countries of the region and powers could lead to destruction of the interwar political order in the region. The Macedonian case was treated by British diplomats as a result of political manipulation and unfulfilled aspirations of circles, dissatisfied with the political *status quo* of those days. The demands to recognize the Macedonian population as an ethnic minority were ignored by the British diplomacy, treating them as an expression of revisionism. The British hope was in the long-term assimilation of the population within Yugoslavia and Greece. British diplomacy insisted that Bulgarian authorities restrict the influence of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) on relations with Yugoslavia. On the other hand, Yugoslavia should give up supporting Bulgarian emigrants who found refuge there after the coup in September 1923. Moreover, British diplomacy cared about no influence, in any form of the controversy related to the Macedonian issue, on the League of Nations.

Key-words: Macedonian issue, Foreign Office, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia

In the whole picture of the British foreign policy the Macedonian issue was treated in terms of a political phenomenon, which in case of occurrence of unfavourable international circumstances could lead to destabilization of the Versailles Order in the South-East Europe. There were opinions that the territorial division of the Macedonian lands that was made as a result of two Balkan Wars and World War I required strengthening due to the activity of a variety of environments aiming at a revision of that situation in the Balkans. The dispute between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was considered particularly dangerous from the point of view of international security in the Balkans. It was especially related to the issue of security of the common border, which was linked to terrorist activities of a pro-Bulgarian *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization* (IMRO) and the national nature of the Yugoslav part of Macedonian population.¹ British diplomacy referred all these problems to bilateral relations, assuming that they would gradually normalize under the influence of assimilation processes occurring within individual countries. Although the IMRO leaders proclaimed a program of unification of Macedonia, also at the expense of Greece, in most British diplomatic reports the Macedonian issue was identified with the Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations.²

Officially, British diplomacy did not recognize the existence of a Macedonian nation nor Bulgarian national minority in Yugoslavia on the assumption that supporting such a point of view would mean to instigate a conflict with consequences that would be difficult to foresee. Opening a debate on national identity of the Yugoslav Macedonia Slavs could have led to the violation of borders in the region, not only the Bulgarian-Yugoslav border but also the Greek-Yugoslav and Albanian-Yugoslav borders. In the words of a diplomat John Balfour, Great Britain rejected the existence of a separate Macedonian nation since such a concept assumed either the creation of an independent Macedonia or its inclusion in Bulgaria. In all cases it would be unacceptable for Yugoslavia, which was recognized by Great Britain as one of the most important elements of the existing *status quo* in the Balkans. In the language of British diplomacy of the Interwar Period the term Macedonia basically applies to ancient geography and history. It was not used in explaining political and ethnic controversies back then. The term Macedonians was approached with caution.³ In fact, in the Foreign Office thought the Yugoslav King Alexander was right by stating in 1924 that a Macedonian, that is a Slavic resident of Macedonia, should relatively fast transform either into a Serbo-Macedonian or into a Bulgaro-Macedonian and permanently settle in one of these countries.⁴ Although in

¹ M. Skakun, *Jugoslovensko-bugarski odnosi*, Beograd 1979, pp. 35-40.

² In 1922 general Alexander Protogerov in his press statement projected the creation of an autonomous Macedonia with its capital in Thessalonica to be a part of the Kingdom of Bulgaria. National Archives, Foreign Office, London [NA, FO], 371/7375 (10 May 1922). Furthermore, the attention was drawn to active organizing Bulgarian immigrants from the Greek Western Thrace of the Macedonian movement. Ibid., 371/7375 (26 May 1922).

³ Ibid., 371/15896 (14 June 1932).

⁴ Ibid., 371/9719 (24 January 1924). As a result of the ascertainment that the Slavic population of Macedonia was neither Serbian nor Bulgarian one of the reports of the British Embassy in Belgrade

the correspondence from Sofia the term Macedonian was sometimes used to describe the pro-Bulgarian attitude of the population from Yugoslav Macedonia, generally the demand to recognize Macedonians as a separate national group was rejected. According to the Under Secretary of the Department for Central Europe Orme Sargent, the concept of a separate Macedonian nationality was unrealistic because it contradicted the general political evolution in the Balkans. In the opinion of the diplomat, the essence of the political events of those times was the reinforcement of the partition of the state based on the Slavophone population assimilation process with – as described by O. Sargent – the expansive and leading Yugoslav race.⁵

Based on the principle of Great Britain's non-intervention in inter-Balkan relations, the Foreign Office, in the Twenties of the twentieth century, adopted the following rules aiming at eliminating the risks associated with the Macedonian controversy. Firstly, the possibility to revise the Peace Treaty of Neuilly (27 November 1919) was rejected in dealing with the political circles in Belgrade and Sofia. Secondly, British diplomacy insisted that Bulgarian authorities restrict the unfavourable influence of IMRO on relations with Yugoslavia. On the other hand, Yugoslavia should, however, give up supporting Bulgarian emigrants who found refuge there after the coup in September 1923.⁶ Thirdly, British diplomacy cared about no influence, in any form whatsoever, of the controversy related to the Macedonian issue on the League of Nations. In London they feared that these could become an instrument in the hands of the forces aimed at both the revision of the borders and the international order of those days. For this reason Great Britain tried to pacify the trials to elevate the disputes on the Macedonian issues in the multilateral forum, it rejected the statements on Macedonian national identity and emphasised the need to regulate these controversies only with the involvement of the interested parties. In the recommendations for British diplomats in the Balkans, formulated by the authorities responsible for the coordination of political activities of Great Britain, the Department for Central Europe, and since 1933 also the South Department, emphasised the need to maintain *verbal distance* towards regional issues. Diplomats were instructed to, in dealing with local authorities, express their opinions in a moderate manner and not to get engaged on the side of the interests of either country. If, however, the situation – as described in one of the letters – *slipped out of hand*, the representatives of the United Kingdom were authorized to use harsher language.⁷

used the term Slavo-Macedonian. Ibid., 371/10667 (26 November 1925). See also: 'Macedonia of the Serbs, 1870-1941: from Old Serbia to Southern Serbia' in I.D. Stefanidis V. Vlasidis, E. Kofos (eds.), *Macedonian Identities through Time. Interdisciplinary Approaches*, Thessaloniki 2008, pp. 162-183.

⁵ NA, FO, 371/15173 (11 November 1931).

⁶ Ibid., 371/15172; *ibid.*, Central Department (1 July 1930), The Origins of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation and its History since the Great War, p. 16. In British reports the attention was drawn to IMRO's efforts to create an alliance of movements hostile towards Yugoslavia. The aim of this undertaking was to coordinate the fight against the Yugoslav state using nationalist circles with separatist or irredentist views, Albanian, Croatian, Montenegrin. NA, FO, 371/8569 (7 July 1923).

⁷ Д. Митев (ed.), *Цар Борис III в британската дипломатическа кореспонденция, 1919-1941*, Vol. 1: 1919-1934 г., София 2005, pp. 262-264; D. Livanios, *The Macedonian Question. Britain and the Southern Balkans 1939-1949*, Oxford 2008, pp. 55-56 (*Oxford Historical Monographs*).

Nevertheless, in British diplomatic circles, however, tensions arising from the differences of opinions about the extent to which British diplomacy should be involved in the Yugoslav-Bulgarian affairs were visible. Some diplomats involved with Balkan institutions felt that due to lack of direct political and economic interests in the Balkans, Great Britain would be the most effective mediator in the dispute between the two countries. As stated by Rowland Sperling, who acted as the British representative in Sofia in the period 1928-1929, if the Balkan controversy does not affect the policies of a more general nature directly related to the interests of the British Empire, every effort should be made to finalise them. This view was opposed by Orme Sargent, considered to be one of the most important moderators of British politics in South-East Europe.⁸ According to him the Balkan political question was extremely sensitive to interference from the outside and one needed to be careful in its modelling. O. Sargent pointed out that in the circumstances of strong competition for influence in the Balkans between France and Italy, Great Britain could run the risk of being involved in the affairs that did not concern its *raison d'état*. He saw Bulgaria as a country embroiled in a relationship with the revisionist Italy and willingly looking towards Germany. On the other hand, Yugoslavia was perceived by London as a country with strong ties with France; at least till the times of M. Stojadinović's government (1935-1939). O. Sargent also warned against the dangers of internationalization of the sensitive national issue in Macedonia as part of the system of minority rights protection under the aegis of the League of Nations. In his opinion British diplomacy should be limited to procedures aiming at strengthening political order introduced on the basis to the Treaty of Neuilly so that Bulgaria would not be able to deal with territorial controversy in a multilateral forum. Every war in the Balkans will lead to disorders in Europe – warned the diplomat who advised far-reaching temperance in becoming involved in the affairs of the Balkan geopolitics to various ambassadors.⁹

Official British positions stressed that Britain's support for the united Yugoslav state was not tantamount to discrimination of Bulgarian interests. As pointed out in the British diplomats' statements in 1924, Bulgaria should be treated fairly by other countries and even with a certain degree of understanding, although during World War I it fought with the Entente Powers.¹⁰ In the first half of the Twenties Great Britain hoped that Bulgarians would renounce revisionism in exchange for loosening of the peace resolutions of Neuilly concerning disarmament and the reduction of the amount of war reparations. The position that Great Britain should keep distance from the prejudices related to World War I was to create an impression in Sofia that British diplomacy understood the frustrations of the Bulgarian society and tried to diminish them. In the

⁸ The diplomatic career of Orme Sargent, who had had no significant experience related to any service abroad, developed in the offices of the Foreign Office. His role was to construct a British strategy towards South-Eastern Europe on the basis of the material received from diplomatic missions. See: K. Neilson, 'Orme Sargent, Appeasement and British Policy in Europe, 1933-1939', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2010), pp. 1-28.

⁹ D. Livanios, *The Macedonian Question...*, p. 56.

¹⁰ NA, FO, 371/10671, Bulgaria. Annual report 1924, pp. 3-4.

mid-Twenties, however, prevailed a view that it should adopt a stricter policy towards Bulgaria, especially regarding pacification of IMRO.¹¹

Without a doubt, the position of the Foreign Office headquarters as to Macedonian controversy evolved under the influence of the opinions formulated by British diplomats in Balkan capitals. In addition to annual reports on the political and economic situation of the countries of that region, they sent to London their analyses on isolated events or socio-political phenomena which were full of suggestions as to the actions undertaken in the Macedonian case. Observations sent from Sofia were quite often in contradiction with the observations coming from Belgrade and Athens. These discrepancies concerned the assessment of the international situation in the Balkans as also the interpretation of particular events. When in 1930 the attacks carried out by IMRO activists in the Yugoslav Macedonia undermined the governmental agreement on securing the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border the ambassador in Belgrade, Neville Henderson believed that Great Britain should punish Bulgaria for supporting terrorism. In his opinion the change of the Yugoslav attitude towards its neighbour was possible only after the defeat of terrorists.¹² A completely different optics dominated in the reports from the British Embassy in Sofia. In 1928 Rowland Sperling and in 1929 Sydney Waterlow believed that Yugoslavia was treated by the Foreign Office in a privileged way, although it was responsible for a number of the conflicts in the Balkans.¹³ It allowed Bulgarian people's party to make coalitions directed against Bulgarian authorities and oppressed the people in South Serbia. S. Waterlow even speculated that the attacks of 1930, which led to the failure of the agreement of Pirot (1929), were probably inspired by Yugoslav intelligence in order to show the Bulgarians in the worst possible light. In this situation O. Sargent tried to reconcile the extremes stressing that the essence of the British engagement in the Macedonian issue was solely the reassurance of the Peace Treaty of Neuilly, which constituted the most important guarantee of peace in the region.¹⁴

Without a doubt, it was in the interest of British diplomacy to strengthen Yugoslavia, which was treated in London as an integral element of international stabilization process in the Balkans. The reports on the internal situation of this country most commonly criticize the standpoint of the Bulgarian nature of Macedonian population at the same time stressing that the authorities should ensure its safety and enable its civilization advancement. Theories of ethnic affinity between Serbs and Macedonians were copied with much enthusiasm. Also lack of independence type aspirations among the Macedonian population was stressed. As explained in one of reports of 1927 coming from the British Consulate in Skopje, some Macedonians showed indifference to

¹¹ Ibid., 371/14326, Bulgaria. Annual report 1929, pp. 13-14.

¹² Д. Митев (ed.), *Цар Борис III...*, pp. 183-184, 188-189, 267.

¹³ Sydney Waterlow was the British ambassador in Sofia in the period 1929-1933 and in Athens in the years 1933-1939.

¹⁴ D. Livanios, *The Macedonian Question...*, p. 63. On the other hand, O. Sargent admitted that Great Britain revealed some sympathy for the interests of Bulgaria, which, in his opinion, was related to the activities of the Balkan Committee and the publications appearing in the journal *Near East*.

Serbian and Bulgarian national pressures, although Bulgarian sympathies dominated among the intelligentsia.¹⁵ According to British observers, the Yugoslav administration as also Serbian colonists quite often encountered passive resistance from the locals who, in principle, did not aspire to political independence. The Serbs were considered conquerors and even undesirable aliens. The best way to overcome the gap between the rulers and the ruled ones would be the economic development of the region, which, however, in the opinion of Britain, was difficult to achieve.¹⁶ A vast part of the reports deals with the corrupt and militarized administration that failed to avoid repressions towards civilians suspected of pro-Bulgarian sympathy. According to the Vice-Consul in Skopje, John Footman, the Yugoslav state did very little to convince the locals to its rule. National pressure brought no encouragement of economic nature, Serbisation did not bring any *noticeable results*, neither in culture nor in economy or settlement. The Serbs regarded Macedonia their national territory that was subordinated to their interests, preventing self-governments from operation. J. Footman highlighted incompetence of Yugoslav military police, which in his opinion harassed civilians far too much, discouraging them from cooperation with the authorities.¹⁷

On the other hand, the British Embassy in Belgrade sent to London assurances that Yugoslav authorities recorded a success in the process of assimilation of Macedonians. A British military attaché, Walter Oxley, admitted that the military and police were the most important element of the Yugoslav security policy in Macedonia but he stressed that the number of armed units he had met was decreasing along with the British inspectors going further away from the Bulgarian border. In his opinion, the situation normalized also in terms of transport and education infrastructure.¹⁸ In turn, according to Howard William Kennard, a Yugoslav representative in the years 1925-1929, Serbisation of Macedonia accelerated as a result of it being cut-off from the influence of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, which was the centre of radiation of Bulgarian national identity. Although he was also among those who criticized the weakness of the administration and repressive activities of the army standing in the way of peaceful assimilation of Macedonians, in his opinion, however, their Serbisation was a foregone conclusion. The diplomat pointed to the experiences of the northern part of Greece, where Hellenisation of the population supported by mass settlement action and migration had led to eradication of the Macedonian issue out from the Greek political life. If similar activities will be carried out in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, Macedonian controversy will completely disappear from the political map of the Balkans – argued H.W. Kennard.¹⁹ It seems, that the point of view, placing the Macedonian issue as the problem of Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations was also shared by the other British diplomats. From their side,

¹⁵ NA, FO, 371/14317 (23 July 1930).

¹⁶ Ibid., 371/14316 (15 May 1930); *ibid.*, 371/13577, Bulgaria. Annual report 1928, p. 20; *ibid.*, Central Department (1 July 1930), *The Origins ...*, p. 16.

¹⁷ D. Livanios, *The Macedonian Question...*, pp. 67-68.

¹⁸ NA, FO, 371/15173 (3 June 1931).

¹⁹ Ibid., 371/11221 (10 February 1926).

Greece was able to control efficiently the political situation in the Aegean Macedonia due to favourable demographic and ethnic situation in the region.²⁰

While British diplomats in Belgrade hoped that the assimilation of Macedonians with the structures of the Yugoslav state and society was possible, those of Sofia quite often doubted the chance to solve the Macedonian problem through assimilation activities within the borders of that period. In the opinion of R. Sperling, in the interests of Bulgaria was to maintain the tension in the Macedonian issue in the opposition to the existing *status quo*. What is more, nothing could convince the pro-Bulgarian Macedonians to renounce their national aspirations and methods of operation. In the opinion of R. Sperling instead of advising Belgrade to improve its administration, Great Britain should rather consider the possibility of some territorial modifications which could weaken Bulgarian revisionism. S. Waterlow went even further, he said that the creation of a separate Macedonian state was a good idea to stabilize Balkan political relations, which could constitute a link between the *Serbian and Bulgarian Brothers*. The diplomat believed that on this basis it would be possible to think about creating something like a Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation. What is more, part of the lands granted to Yugoslavia after World War I, such as the regions of Tsaribrod and Bosilegrad, should be in Bulgaria because of the dominance of Bulgarian population in the region. S. Waterlow's remarks were roughly criticized by O. Sargent for whom every adjustment to the border in the Balkans was synonymous with a difficult to control international turmoil. Although O. Sargent did not deny that among the so-called Bulgaro-Macedonians could have existed a strong Bulgarian sentiment, he was convinced that the majority of the Macedonian population wanted to live in peace without going into the national debate.²¹ N. Henderson was critical about the Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation projects, he was sceptical about their success and the impact on the stabilization of the Balkans. In his opinion, the creation of such an alliance would upset the political balance in the region. It was calculated to achieve common access to the Aegean Sea at the expense of Greece, which would imply a territorial adjustment and another war in the Balkans. N. Henderson believed that the Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation would be a threat not only to Greece but also to Romania and Turkey, which countries, as a counter balance, would be forced to create some kind of a counter-alliance.²²

There is no doubt that the resistance of British diplomacy to the ideas to undertake a discussion on the Yugoslav-Bulgarian dispute in the League of Nations was dictated by the concerns about unpredictable reactions of the powers. It was understood, after all, that in this case not only Yugoslavia and Bulgaria but also France and Italy were on

²⁰ See: A. Rossos, 'The British Foreign Office and Macedonian National Identity, 1918-1941', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1994), pp. 369-394.

²¹ NA, FO, 371/12856 (22 March 1928; 5 April 1928). In British reports from Yugoslavia there were speculations that a possible enlargement of the territory of Bulgaria by the Macedonian part would encourage Hungary and Albania to intensified territorial claims towards Yugoslavia, would cause the objection of Greece.

²² *Ibid.*, 371/18369 (15 March 1934).

the opposing sides of the barricade. In the assessment of British diplomacy there was no chance that the League of Nations would settle the dispute of such a complex nature quickly and without much fanfare. The position of Britain caused the petitions from individuals or associations concerning the protection of interests of the alleged Bulgarian minorities in Yugoslavia were never placed on the agenda of the Council and the Assembly of the League.²³ In the opinion of John Balfour the purpose of this type of correspondence was to disseminate the propaganda spread by IMRO in Europe, which in turns either wrote petitions to the League of Nations or detonated further bombs against Yugoslavia.²⁴

As far as torpedoing the attempts to internationalize the Macedonian issue through the League of Nations basically was not a problem, British diplomacy watched the moves of Yugoslav and Bulgarian governments trying to use Macedonian controversy to present the opponent in the worst possible light. On the occasion of each crisis caused by bombing attacks, of which usually IMRO was suspected, Yugoslav authorities announced that they will ask for an international investigation to be conducted on the alleged links between the Bulgarian government and the terrorists. Bulgaria, in turn, declared that in the end it will make the League of Nations address the issue of the position of Bulgarian minority in Southern Serbia. British diplomacy tried not to interfere with diplomatic skirmishes. However, diplomats were instructed to warn the parties against the transfer of bilateral controversies to the League of Nations, which could lead to instrumentalisation of the Macedonian issue by the powers.

While the British managed to convince the feuding states not to radicalize their positions on the Macedonian issue too much, the attempts to bring a reconciliation in the Macedonian issue were a failure. In the Twenties the inability to pacify the nationalist IMRO by successive Bulgarian governments was considered the most important reason underlying this unsolvable dispute. British diplomats pointed out that this organization was closely linked to political and military structures of Bulgaria. Military activity of the groups associated with IMRO and lack of proper control over the safety of the border areas by the local states caused that the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border remained one of the most troubled in Europe. As S. Waterlow wrote in 1929, almost

²³ D. Livanios, *The Macedonian Question...*, p. 73.

²⁴ NA, FO, 371/12092 (23 November 1930). Great Britain protested against the authorities of the League of Nations considering the petition in defence of Bulgarian minorities. This was the case in 1931, on the occasion of considering the message sent by the former Yugoslav parliament deputy G. Atanasov and the former mayor of Skopje D. Challev. They demanded rights for Bulgarian minorities and the introduction of the Bulgarian language to schools and church liturgy in the Yugoslav part of Macedonia. The members of the committee rejected the petition directed to the Council of the League of Nations believing that its authors were the representatives of *certain terrorist organizations*. Ibid., 371/15173 (30 September 1931; 11 November 1931). The Foreign Office also received abundant correspondence from the communities supporting Bulgarian interests. Particularly active in this field was the Balkan Committee in London with Noel Buxton as the leader. Since 1924 he had sent letters, memos and inquiries to FO regarding the Bulgaro-Macedonian situation in Yugoslavia and Greece. In 1929 it was decided that any correspondence coming from N. Buxton was not to be accepted. D. Livanios, *The Macedonian Question...*, p. 74.

every terrorist attack could cause a conflict of an extent and consequences difficult to estimate.²⁵ British diplomacy had expressed its conviction of the need to completely liquidate the IMRO since 1924 when the Foreign Office received information that the organization leader, Todor Alexandrov, was preparing squads to take part in a large-scale military action against Yugoslavia. The British representative in Sofia, William Erskine (in years 1921-1927) was then instructed to warn Bulgarian authorities against engagement in those plans. In response, Bulgarian Foreign Minister, Christo Kalfov, informed that the government obliged the army, police and border guards to take action to protect the border against terrorist activities. Indeed, as we learn from the next report of W. Erskine, probably under the pressure from the authorities T. Alexandrov issued an order to withhold military preparations, shortly afterwards, however, he was murdered. It was a result of fractional fights within IMRO.²⁶ In 1926 London received information that Yugoslav prime minister Momcilo Nincić was considering the possibility to attack Bulgaria whose authorities, in his opinion, did nothing to help in punishing the perpetrators of bombings attacks. Fearing escalation of the dispute, the Foreign Office instructed its representatives in Belgrade and Sofia to try to soften the moods. Yugoslav authorities were reminded of diplomatic and political implications of the Greek attack on the Bulgarian city Petrich in 1925 when Greece, who attacked Bulgaria under the pretext of fighting terrorists, had to pay a heavy pecuniary penalty adjudged by the League of Nations.²⁷ Bulgarians, on the other hand, were warned that if they do not cease to support the *outrageous* IMRO activities, they could lose the loan granted for the benefit of refugees and promised by the British government. Another series of attacks culminating in murdering of a Serbian military administrator, general Mihailo Kovatchevitch (Kovačević) in 1927 in Shtip (Štip), forced more decisive actions. On the initiative of W. Erskine, the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Atanas Burov (in years 1926-1931) was visited by a delegation composed of representatives of Great Britain, France and Italy. It is true that under international pressure the authorities introduced a state of emergency in the districts of Kyustendil and Petrich where the IMRO bases were located, however, its leaders were not arrested. As a result of subsequent diplomatic visits to A. Burov, this time without the representative of Italy, a few agitators of IMRO were interned. British reports admitted that diplomatic activities did not bring the expected results in the form of a destruction of the movement that spread confusion in Macedonia. What is more, it was feared that more categorical measures against the organization could result in strengthening its respect in the eyes of public opinion and make the terrorists Bulgarian national heroes. For this reason William Erskine did not demand that Bulgarian authorities tame IMRO – as he called it – *in one day* but rather do something that could indicate willingness to cooperate with Yugoslavia to calm the situation on the border. Otherwise,

²⁵ NA, FO, 371/14326, Bulgaria. Annual report 1929, p. 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 371/10671, Bulgaria. Annual report 1924, p. 5; Д. Мичев (ed.), *Национално-освободителното движение на македонските и тракийските българи 1878-1944*, Vol. 4, София 2003, p. 154.

²⁷ See: NA, FO, 371/12089, Bulgaria. Annual report 1926, pp. 9-10.

the diplomat argued, it would be difficult to dissuade Yugoslavs from an aggressive response.²⁸

In 1929 British reports recorded with hope a gradually improving atmosphere in the Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations. King Alexander opened the border that had been closed by the Serbs since the assassination of a Serbian military administrator in Macedonia, general M. *Kovačević* (1927). Moreover, the king called the Bulgarians to agree on the forms of joint fight against terrorism and to solve unsettled ownership issues in the border region. Although, during the talks held in March in Pirot no agreement was reached on the question of settlement of ownership, a message that further negotiations on this issue were to be expected was spread around the world. The agreement on elimination of "dual ownership" was signed in February 1930. Under this agreement a committee to ensure law and order at the border was brought to life.²⁹ S. Waterlow was visibly satisfied with the event believing that it was also the contribution from British diplomacy watching over the course of the talks and engaging their authority in the resolution of controversies that could hinder the talks.³⁰ On the other hand the diplomat pointed out, however, to visible, on both sides, efforts to wreck the agreement. Although official diplomatic circles tried to maintain balanced reactions to further attacks against Yugoslavia, king Alexander and the Foreign Minister Marinković revealed growing irritation towards Bulgaria, which delayed the retaliatory actions against the perpetrators of the attacks. The report from Belgrade in March 1929 said that the king under the increasing pressure from Serbian military circles was willing to take *matters into his own hands* to force Bulgaria to decisive actions. N. Henderson was instructed to try to keep the Yugoslav nerves in leash and yet another statement was addressed to Sofia.³¹

S. Waterlow admitted, during the period 1929-1931, that the Bulgarian government remained idle even in view of the wave of political murders sweeping through Bulgaria back then, associated with the increasing fractional struggle within IMRO. On the other hand, he highlighted the declining public support for IMRO's methods of operation, maintaining that sooner or later the organization will die a natural death.³² Under the influence of these reports in the first half of the Thirties, in the Foreign Office dominated the belief that the Macedonian issue, determined by S. Waterlow as *Balkan cancer*, will be gradually displaced by the progressive politi-

²⁸ Ibid., 371/12864, Bulgaria. Annual report 1927, p. 5, 28; Д. Митев (ed.), *Цар Борис III...*, p. 136.

²⁹ Ž. Avramovski, *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji. Godišnji izveštaji Britanskog poslanstva u Beogradu 1921-1938*, Vol. 1, Beograd-Zagreb 1995, pp. 651-652 (*Plava Biblioteka*).

³⁰ When Ante Pavelić, the leader of Croatian separatists was welcomed in April 1929 in Sofia the enraged Serbs accused Andrey Liapchev's government of supporting terrorists and refused to ratify the provisions of the Conference in Pirot. Under the British and French pressure Belgrade eventually ratified the agreement and Yugoslavia got back to negotiations. NA, FO, 371/14326, Bulgaria. Annual report 1929, p. 15.

³¹ Ž. Avramovski, *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji*, pp. 597-598.

³² NA, FO, 371/14326, Bulgaria. Annual report 1929, pp. 13-14; Д. Митев (ed.), *Цар Борис III...*, pp. 247-249.

cal normalization in the region. This opinion was the result of a misconception that social acceptance for revisionist activities decreased in the Balkans, which could encourage Bulgarian political elites to support the idea of agreements stabilizing the peace order. Meanwhile, by no means did the Macedonian movement disappear, although without a doubt in the late Twenties and early Thirties the form and the political framework of its activities changed. S. Waterlow noted that a considerable part of the Macedonian movement got released from under the control of Bulgarian nationalists, becoming the subject of the Soviet influence whose aim was to support revisionism in the Balkans by promoting the idea of a communist federation under the auspices of the Communist International.³³ The proponents of this trend promoted a Macedonian national program which assumed unification of Macedonian lands located in Yugoslavia, Greece and Bulgaria.³⁴ Although in his opinion realization of the demand to liberate Macedonia as a result of bolshevization of the Balkans was very unlikely and required a number of political and propaganda operations, it constituted a threat to the political peace in the Balkans. In contrast to the nationalist Right, the Left combined national demands with equality of rights slogans in the socio-economic sphere, which, according to S. Waterlow, could convince the people of Macedonia to the ideology of communism.³⁵

From the point of view of Great Britain the Macedonian issue should be eliminated from the international politics of those times. Its instrumentalization through individual countries of the region and powers could have led to the destruction of the interwar political order in the region. The case was treated as a result of political manipulation and unfulfilled aspirations of individual circles, dissatisfied with the *status quo* of those days. The demands to recognize Macedonian population as an ethnic minority were ignored, treating them as an expression of Bulgarian revisionism inspired by IMRO. The hope was in the long-term assimilation of the Macedonian population within Yugoslavia. It was wrongly believed that as a result of the weakening of IMRO and Serbisation of the Macedonians a permanent agreement between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria will be possible. Of course in the Foreign Office scenarios involving autonomy for Macedonia or federalization of Yugoslavia were also taken into account, however, they were considered impossible to achieve within the countries of those days that were ruled on the basis of a centralist and single-nation model. The visions presented by some diplomats regarding the Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation with a separated Macedonia or considerations on the adjustment of borders were not taken seriously. In London dominated a belief was that integration activities in the Balkans had a chance of success only if their participants are internally coherent countries. In those configurations there was no room for Macedonian autonomy or independence, which sooner or later would become the object of fierce interna-

³³ See: E. Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia. Civil Conflict, Politics of Mutation, National Identity*, New Rochelle 1993, pp. 55-56 (*Hellenism: Ancient, Mediaeval, Modern*).

³⁴ NA, FO, 371/16650 (27 February 1933).

³⁵ Ibid., 371/57473 (5 February 1932).

tional competition. British diplomacy had to ensure that its presence in the Balkan policy was visible enough to deter the forces seeking to destabilize the *status quo* of those times. Considering maintaining it as the primary objective of its policy in the Balkans, Great Britain inscribed it in the entirety of its strategy in southern Europe and the Mediterranean Sea.

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