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Source: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Jan., 2001), pp. 127-141

Published by: the [Modern Humanities Research Association](#) and [University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4213157>

Accessed: 24/12/2010 05:59

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# Yugoslav anti-Axis Resistance, 1939–1941: The Case of Vane Ivanović

DEJAN DJOKIĆ

STUDIES of Yugoslav anti-Axis resistance usually focus on the two movements which emerged after April 1941 when Yugoslavia was drawn into the war — that of the Communist leader Josip Broz-Tito and that of the Yugoslav army Colonel Dragoljub-Dražica Mihailović.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, this work seeks to shed some light on the Yugoslav contribution to the Allied war effort between the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939 and the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, when the country was neutral. The policy of neutrality was directly linked to the shift away from Belgrade's traditional allies. Feeling abandoned by the British and the French, the Yugoslavs, under the governments of Milan Stojadinović (1935–39) and Dragiša Cvjetković (1939–1941), had moved closer to Germany and Italy. The fall of

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The author would like to dedicate this short work to the memory of Vane Ivanović and to thank him for opening his private archives to him as an unknown historian, never attempting to influence arguments and conclusions in this work and always having the patience to answer countless questions even when on holiday and even when not feeling well. He would also like to thank Ivanović's son Božo, who let him use his office space in order to study some of his father's private papers stored there.

This work was presented at the 'Themes in Balkan History' seminar (convened by Dejan Djokić, summer term 1999), Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 4 June 1999. An earlier version of the article was published in Serbo-Croat: 'Jugoslavenski Lloyd kao britanski saveznik', *Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis* (Belgrade), vol. xxxii, 1999, no. 1–2, pp. 163–82. The author is grateful to the following persons, who either read the present article or the earlier version in Serbo-Croat and made many valuable suggestions: Dr Wendy Bracewell, Sir Alexander Glen, Dr Dejan Jović, Professor Aleksandar Pavković, Professor Stevan K. Pavlowitch, Dr Peter Siani-Davies, Desimir Tošić, Dr Mark C. Wheeler and Dr Heather Williams. The responsibility for the present version is, of course, solely the author's.

<sup>1</sup> To mention but a few: Vladimir Dedijer, 'Prvi masovni ustanak u okupiranoj Evropi' (and the subsequent five chapters on various aspects of the Second World War in Yugoslavia), in Ivan Božić, et al., *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Belgrade, 1972; Milan Deroc, *British Special Operations Explored: Yugoslavia in Turmoil, 1941–1943 and the British Response*, Boulder, CO, 1988; Jovan Marjanović, *Ustanak i narodno-oslobodilacki rat u Srbiji 1941*, Belgrade, 1963; Walter Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies, 1941–1945*, 2nd edn, Durham, NC, 1987; Simon Trew, *Britain, Mihailović and the Chetniks, 1941–1942*, Basingstoke, London and New York, 1998; Mark C. Wheeler, *Britain and the War for Yugoslavia, 1940–1943*, Boulder, CO, 1980 (hereafter *Britain and the War for Yugoslavia*).

Czechoslovakia seemed to have justified their fear that the Western democracies would do little to protect their smaller allies. By the time war broke out in September 1939, Yugoslavia, like other East-Central European states, had become increasingly tied to Germany.<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that any individual case of Yugoslav anti-Axis resistance between 1939–41 should be understood.

The traditional approach seems, at first sight, fully justified. The last week of March and the first half of April 1941 represent a turning point in Yugoslavia's history. During this brief period the Yugoslav government which signed the Tripartite Pact in Vienna on 25 March, was overthrown by a military coup in Belgrade two days later, and, as a consequence, the country was invaded. The army which was unprepared and outnumbered was defeated and Yugoslavia's occupied territory was partitioned between Germany, Italy and their allies, both outside and inside Yugoslavia. The army's defeat meant the *de facto* end of the country, but Yugoslavia nevertheless continued nominally to exist, through its exiled 'revolutionary' government and young king, and also as an idea.<sup>3</sup> The two resistance movements that emerged in the months following the Axis invasion both fought in the name of Yugoslavia, albeit imagining it in mutually exclusive ways. By the end of 1941 conflicting ideas of a restored Yugoslav state, as well as radical differences in tactics and ideology, were the main reasons why the two movements were embroiled in civil war, revolution, and resistance to foreign occupiers and their collaborators.<sup>4</sup>

As already stated, this article is concerned with those Yugoslavs who joined the Allies while Yugoslavia was still a neutral country. An attempt is made to analyse, for the first time, the little known role of Vane Ivanović, a shipping magnate and an eminent Yugoslav sportsman, who belonged to neither of the two resistance movements, but who joined the British well before April 1941. Already on 4 September 1939, 'the first working day of the war',<sup>5</sup> Ivanović had placed ten ships in British service, acting on behalf of Božo Banac (1883–1945), his

<sup>2</sup> For Yugoslavia's international position in the late 1930s see Jacob Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934–1941*, New York and London, 1962, especially pp. 170–201.

<sup>3</sup> Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Yugoslavia*, London and New York, 1971 (hereafter *Yugoslavia*), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> There is not to this day a good, general study of Yugoslavia in the Second World War. For a concise analysis see Pavlowitch, *Yugoslavia*, Chapter 3: 'The Chaotic Gap: 1941–45', pp. 107–172 and John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, Cambridge, 1996, Chapter 7: 'World War and Civil War, 1941–1945', pp. 197–228. Two memoirs, one by a leading Communist and the other by a close aide of Mihailović's stand out for their balance and insight: Milovan Djilas's *Wartime*, London, 1977, and Zvonimir Vučković's two volumes, *Sećanja iz rata*, London, 1980, and *Od otpora — do građanskog rata*, London, 1984, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> As Ivanović liked jokingly to say (interview with Vane Ivanović, London, 2 July 1998).

stepfather and chairman of Yugoslavia's then largest shipping company, *Jugoslavenski Lloyd* (Yugoslav Lloyd). On 25 March 1941 Ivanović placed the rest of his fleet of twenty-two ships under Allied command, refusing to follow his Government's decision to join the Axis. In the wake of the coup of 27 March and throughout April 1941 he played an instrumental role in organizing Yugoslav shipowners into the Yugoslav Shipping Committee. The Committee's immediate task was to prevent the handing over of Yugoslav mercantile ships in neutral waters to the Axis.

The topic is approached from an unusual perspective in that it does not take account of what happened after Yugoslavia was forced into the war, but is instead solely concerned with the period from September 1939 until April 1941. Apart from provoking further thought on the variety of methods which may be applied in studying the past, this work seeks also to draw attention to the need to 'relieve' (Yugoslav) history from its ideological and/or nationalistic burden.<sup>6</sup>

## I

Ivan Stevan Ivanović, better known as Vane Ivanović, was born on 9 June 1913 in Osijek to a Croat father and a Serb mother.<sup>7</sup> His father, Ivan Rikard Ivanović (1880–1949), a Vienna-educated lawyer, was one of the founders of the National Progressive Party (NNS) and a deputy in Croatia's *Sabor*. His mother, Milica (1888–1969), was a sister of Dušan Popović who, alongside Svetozar Pribičević, was a leading Serb politician in the ruling Croato-Serbian coalition, which also included the NNS.<sup>8</sup> Pribičević was the best man at Rikard's and Milica's wedding, and Ivan Lorković, the NNS leader and the leading Croat in the Coalition, was the godfather to their first-born son, Ivan Stevan — Vane.

<sup>6</sup> This study was completed before Vane Ivanović died on 4 April 1999.

<sup>7</sup> The following biographical data are based on Ivanović's memoirs, *LX: Memoirs of a Yugoslav*, London, 1977 (hereafter *LX*). Two years later, the section dealing with the Second World War in Yugoslavia was published in Serbo-Croat as a separate book, under the title *Drugo zvono: Jugoslavija u ratu, 1939–1945*, London, 1979 (hereafter *Drugo zvono*). An updated translation in Serbo-Croat of the (whole) original, *LX*, entitled (just) *Drugo zvono*, was published first in Croatia (Zagreb, 1993), and than in Serbia (Belgrade, 1995; second edition, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> It is still unclear why Dušan Popović left politics immediately after unification. One of the ablest champions of the Yugoslav cause in the Habsburg Empire, Popović was expected to play a prominent role once a Yugoslav state became a reality. There are several possible answers, including the belief that with Yugoslav unification his political activity had achieved its ultimate aim, or disagreements with Pribičević or family reasons.

After Vane's parents divorced in 1921, Vane and his brother and sister moved to London, where Milica's second husband, Božo Banac, was based. Banac was a leading Yugoslav shipowner, expanding his father's small, Dubrovnik-based, shipping business so successfully that, in 1905, he had moved his office to London and joined the Baltic Shipping Exchange.<sup>9</sup> Like many Dalmatians of his time, Banac was a strong believer in Yugoslav unity.<sup>10</sup> In July 1914, following the Austro-Hungarian attack on Serbia, he had visited the Serbian Legation in London and asked for Serbian citizenship, placing his mercantile fleet under the flag of the land-locked kingdom. During the war Banac collaborated with and financially supported the Yugoslav Committee, a group of exiled Croat, Serb and Slovene intellectuals who propagated the Yugoslav cause from their headquarters in London.<sup>11</sup> He also helped create the British Adriatic Mission, which facilitated the safe passage of the retreating Serbian troops from northern Albania to the Greek island of Corfu in January 1916.<sup>12</sup> After the First World War Banac had been a member of the Delegation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at the Paris Peace Conference, heading its section for shipping matters at the beginning of 1919,<sup>13</sup> and participating in unofficial negotiations with Italy over the succession of the former Habsburg fleet.<sup>14</sup> Apart from helping his fellow South Slavs, Božo Banac had also therefore indirectly contributed to the British war effort — something he was to repeat in 1939, both in his own right and through his stepson, Vane Ivanović.

Brought up in a milieu which not only believed in the idea of Yugoslav unity but which also very much participated in the creation of the 'first' South Slav state in 1918, it is no surprise that Ivanović developed a Yugoslav identity — a feeling of belonging to the Yugoslav

<sup>9</sup> Ivanović, *LX*, pp. 123–24.

<sup>10</sup> Banac's Yugoslavism must not be confused with the official Yugoslavism, introduced with King Alexander's dictatorship in 1929. A leading businessman, he was one of those genuine Yugoslavs who was not close to the Royal Court. London, Public Record Office, Foreign Office, FO 371/23880 'Note on personality of Božo Banac'.

<sup>11</sup> 'Božo Banac to R. W. Seton-Watson, Rome, 10 December 1914' and 'R. W. Seton-Watson to Ante Trumbić, London, 13 March 1915', in Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson et al. (eds), *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs: Correspondence 1906–1941*, 2 vols, London and Zagreb, 1976 (hereafter *Correspondence 1906–1941*, 1, pp. 189–90 and p. 198, respectively; Ljubinka Trgovčević, *Naučnici Srbije i stvaranje Jugoslavije, 1919–1920*, Belgrade, 1986, p. 161; Ivanović, *Drugo zvono* (1998), vol. 1, p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> 'Božo Banac to R. W. Seton-Watson, Rome, 26 November 1915' and 'Božo Banac to R. W. Seton-Watson, Rome, 9 December 1915', in Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson et al., *Correspondence 1906–1941*, 1, pp. 252–55. For the British Adriatic Mission see C. E. J. Fryer, *The Destruction of Serbia in 1915*, Boulder, CO, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> London, Vane Ivanović Papers (hereafter VIP): 'Délégation du Royaume des Serbes, Croates et Slovènes à la Conférence de la Paix'; Andrej Mitrović, *Jugoslavija na Konferenciji mira, 1919–1920*, Belgrade, 1969 (hereafter *Jugoslavija na Konferenciji mira*), pp. 30–31.

<sup>14</sup> Mitrović, *Jugoslavija na Konferenciji mira*, p. 32.

nation. Life in Britain and the education he received there (Westminster School, London, and Peterhouse, Cambridge, where he read Economics), had undoubtedly bolstered yet another identity — that of a special attachment to the British — which partly explains his later action. During the mid-thirties, Ivanović returned to Yugoslavia to do his military service (1933–34), afterwards spending some time working in the Trepča mines in present-day Kosovo, which at that time were under British ownership. He also participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a member of the Yugoslav team, running the 110-metre and 400-metre hurdles.<sup>15</sup>

When World War Two broke out, Ivanović was in charge of Yugoslav Lloyd's London office. As this was the second most important office (after the one in Yugoslavia), he was *de facto* the deputy-director of the company. On his stepfather's instructions, Ivanović had on 4 September 1939 contacted the Ministry for War Transport, which was still being formed, offering to place ten ships under British command. Thus, Banac and Ivanović were the first shipowners from any neutral state to join the British. To avoid an open conflict with the Yugoslav government, Banac formed a separate British-registered holding company, Crest Shipping Company Ltd, which was operated by Ivanović. Two new ships with British crews were bought to form the company's small fleet.<sup>16</sup> Dealings with the British could be covered by this company, but it was also used to provide British seamen for the Yugoslav Lloyd ships, in those rare instances when Yugoslavs refused to sail in war-zones on grounds that their country was neutral.<sup>17</sup>

But, even neutral ships were not safe. On the night of 13/14 November 1939, a mine sunk the *Carica Milica*, a vessel of Yugoslav Lloyd's mercantile fleet and one of the largest Yugoslav steamers in the inter-war period.<sup>18</sup> Milorad Miljević, the ship's captain who, along with the rest of the crew survived the sinking, told BBC radio that the ship had been sunk by a German mine. Soon the Yugoslav Minister to London, Ivan-Vanja Subbotić, telephoned Ivanović's office, protesting

<sup>15</sup> In the 110-metres he reached the semi-finals in Berlin. In both disciplines Ivanović held Yugoslav records, in the 400-metres for as long as seventeen years (1936–53). Ivanović, *LX*, pp. 156–59.

<sup>16</sup> Telephone conversation with Vane Ivanović, London, 13 July 1998.

<sup>17</sup> VIP: Untitled typescript by Vane Ivanović, no date, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> All mercantile vessels in the inter-war period were steamships. Built in 1928, *Carica Milica* had a capacity of 9,950 tons. At the time it was sunk, it was carrying coal from Britain to Yugoslavia. Ivo Šišević, 'Naša trgovačka mornarica za vrijeme II svjetskog rata', *Pomorski zbornik: povodom 20-godišnjice mornarice i pomorstva Jugoslavije 1942–1962*, Zagreb and Zadar, 1962 (hereafter *Naša trgovačka mornarica*), 1, p. 814. Šišević incorrectly states that *Carica Milica* was the largest Yugoslav ship of that period. Two other ships, *Triglav* and *Avala*, also owned by the Yugoslav Lloyd, were larger, though *Carica Milica* was the most modern Yugoslav ship of that time. Vane Ivanović to Dejan Djokić, fax, Dubrovnik, 2 August 1998.

at Miljević's open accusation of Germany. 'Don't you know that we are neutral?!' Subbotić asked angrily. Ivanović shouted back: 'You and your government may be neutral, but I am not!'.<sup>19</sup>

## II

At the beginning of World War Two, Yugoslav Lloyd was worth around \$1,200,000. Božo Banac was the major shareholder, with around 40 per cent of the company's stock, worth approximately \$480,000.<sup>20</sup> By placing their fleet under the Allied flag, Banac and Ivanović were not only risking a confrontation with the Belgrade government, but also putting all this capital at risk.<sup>21</sup> Their actions were due to their anglophilism, disagreements with Yugoslavia's foreign policy and their belief that Britain was the best guarantor of the trading interests of small states. As Ivanović later recalled, Banac's view was that 'So long as Great Britain dominated the oceans and seas, the small nations, like ours [Yugoslav], will be allowed to sail freely. A German victory [. . .] would mean an end of free passage for small nations'.<sup>22</sup>

Božo Banac was in France when Germany invaded. After being cut off for several months in the south of the country, he eventually managed to move to Switzerland. During this period, the company was completely operated by Ivanović.<sup>23</sup> The fall of France in June 1940 meant it was only a matter of time before London was attacked from the air. As it would have become impossible to remain in constant touch with his fleet, Ivanović decided to move to Yugoslav Lloyd's office in New York, in the neutral United States.<sup>24</sup> An additional reason for Ivanović's departure to the United States was preventive in nature. A majority of Yugoslav Lloyd's assets were already there and were in danger of being frozen by the US Government in the event of an Axis attack on Yugoslavia. Ivanović hoped that his presence would prevent this from happening.<sup>25</sup> The departure from London of the young heir to Yugoslav Lloyd did not go unnoticed by the Foreign Office.<sup>26</sup> Ashley

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Vane Ivanović, London, 10 July 1998. See also *Drugo zvonu* (1979), p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Vane Ivanović, London, 10 July 1998; VIP: Untitled typescript by Vane Ivanović, no date, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Even those ships not placed directly under British command were used indirectly to aid Allied interests. For example, four of Yugoslav Lloyd's ships were hired by the Australian government, though the Japanese had offered a more favourable deal. See FO 371/29772, Božo Banac to the British Legation in Bern, Geneva, 31 March 1941.

<sup>22</sup> Ivanović, *Drugo zvonu* (1979), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> VIP: Untitled typescript by Vane Ivanović, no date, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 3; Ivanović, *Drugo zvonu* (1979), p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Ivanović, *Drugo zvonu* (1979), pp. 24–25.

<sup>26</sup> FO 371/28789, Weston to Sparks, London, 24 August 1940.

Sparks of the British Embassy in Washington was informed that Ivanović had been responsible for the transfer of 'one half of [the] Banaz fleet', and that the Foreign Office would like to be kept informed of his activities.<sup>27</sup>

### III

When it became likely that Yugoslavia would sign the Tripartite Pact, Ivanović appealed from New York to Prince Paul not to do so. He even, rather naively, offered his mediation in renewing close links between Belgrade and London.<sup>28</sup> Ivanović also telephoned his cousin Mara, Yugoslav Prime Minister Cvetković's wife, asking her to try to dissuade her husband from binding the country to the Axis.<sup>29</sup>

When the Yugoslav government signed the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941, Vane Ivanović was still in New York. Upon hearing the news, he immediately flew to Washington to meet the Yugoslav Minister there, Konstantin Fotić. Together with Vladimir Rybař of the Yugoslav Legation, Ivanović met on the same day with Frederick Hoyer-Millar, Councillor of the British Embassy in Washington.<sup>30</sup> He told Hoyer-Millar that he did not intend to respect his government's decision to join the Axis and that from that moment all ships under his command were to be considered Allied ships. He also added that he was hoping the situation in his country might be reversed.<sup>31</sup> Other Yugoslav shipowners in the United States expressed similar discontent, and the *New York Times* published a first-page article on the Yugoslav shipowners who were offering their help to the British.<sup>32</sup> In support of his action, Ivanović declared that it was his duty as an individual to fight for freedom and peace, and that he believed that it was also in the best interests of his own country.<sup>33</sup>

The Foreign Office, however, was still unclear as to what to do with the Yugoslav-owned ships in neutral waters. Viscount Halifax, Britain's Ambassador to Washington, was asked to advise the Yugoslav shipowners to instruct their captains not to surrender their ships to the Axis and

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ivanović, *Drugo zveno* (1979), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> FO 371/28789, Viscount Halifax to Foreign Office, Washington 25 March 1941. The staff of the Yugoslav Legation in Washington were also against the government's decision, and Fotić promptly resigned in protest after the news from Belgrade was confirmed. He was soon to withdraw his resignation.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.; Ivanović, *Drugo zveno* (1979), p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> 'Yugoslavs in U.S. ready to transfer 25 ships to Britain', *The New York Times*, 27 March 1941.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

to avoid neutral waters, except those belonging to the US.<sup>34</sup> After the Belgrade coup the situation changed, as it was no longer necessary, in the British view, to transfer the Yugoslav ships directly to the British.<sup>35</sup> The Yugoslav shipowners were, nevertheless, advised to stay in direct contact with Ashley Sparks of the British Embassy in Washington.<sup>36</sup>

Ivanović met Sparks in New York on 26 March, one day after his visit to the British Embassy and a day before the coup in Belgrade.<sup>37</sup> They discussed the transfer of the remaining ships owned or controlled by Yugoslav Lloyd to the British.<sup>38</sup> A second meeting took place the following day, when the news from Belgrade had already reached both of them. According to Ivanović, Sparks welcomed him 'with open arms' and the words, 'My boy'.<sup>39</sup> Ivanović's enthusiasm was not spoiled even when Sparks told him that he was joining the British Navy at the time when it was suffering its heaviest losses.<sup>40</sup> Sparks may have had in mind the loss of the British cruiser York, severely damaged by Italian torpedo boats in Suda Bay, Crete on 25 March, and the sinking of as many as sixteen merchant ships in the Atlantic between 15 and 17 March.<sup>41</sup> Yet, what neither Sparks nor Ivanović knew at the time was that on the very day of their meeting the British had just destroyed nearly all the Italian Navy in the Adriatic in the battle of Cape Matapan.<sup>42</sup>

The speed of events had transformed Ivanović overnight from a shipowner to a hero. Newspaper and radio interviews followed, the American journalists being rather disappointed to learn that Ivanović had not played some part in the Belgrade conspiracy against Prince Paul and his government.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Ivanović, like the majority of Yugoslavs, including both Tito and Mihailović, did not even know of

<sup>34</sup> FO 371/28789, Foreign Office to Halifax, London, 26 March 1941.

<sup>35</sup> FO 371/38789, Foreign Office to Halifax, London, 27 March 1941.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ivanović, *Drugo zovono* (1979), p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ivanović, *LX*, p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> Ivanović offers an interesting account of pro-Yugoslav (or anti-Nazi?) feeling in New York on 27 March, *ibid.*, pp. 206–07. For the enthusiastic reception of the news from Belgrade in the United States, see also *The New York Times*, *The New York Herald Tribune* and *Washington Post* of 28 March 1941.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War*, London, 1995, pp. 162–65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>43</sup> Ivanović, *LX*, p. 206.

the conspiracy's existence.<sup>44</sup> Yet, like many Yugoslavs, he supported the overthrow of the regime which had signed the Tripartite Pact. Anti-Axis demonstrations on the streets of Belgrade, Kragujevac, Niš and other smaller towns conveniently overshadowed the assurances the new Prime Minister, General Dušan Simović, sent to Berlin, that his government would respect the agreement signed by the previous government. Concerned for the country's unity, Ivanović sent a cable to Vladko Maček, leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, appealing to him to join the new government and to stand by the Serbs and the Slovenes, so preventing Germany from using Croatia as a Yugoslav Slovakia.<sup>45</sup>

Simultaneously, the British Legation in Belgrade was instructed by the Foreign Office to urge the Yugoslav government to 'remove to safety' its mercantile navy.<sup>46</sup> It was not stated precisely what was considered 'safety', but from the document it is possible to assume that it was the British-controlled waters in the Middle East. According to the plan, in case of a German attack on Yugoslavia, mercantile ships which had been removed earlier would sail back to the eastern Mediterranean, via the Suez Canal, carrying aid to the Yugoslav troops.<sup>47</sup> The British also proposed the establishment of a shipping committee under the leadership of a renowned Yugoslav shipowner — only Božo Banac was suggested — with its headquarters in London.<sup>48</sup> As there was no reply from the Yugoslav government, the British believed their proposal had been completely overlooked in Belgrade,

<sup>44</sup> Although, since the summer of 1940 Mihailović was aware of the discontent among a group of officers around General Borivoje Mirković, the main architect of the 27 March coup. Mirković invited him to attend meetings at which the officers, disgusted with the government's increasing détente with Germany, planned to overthrow Prince Paul. However, in October Mihailović moved to Mostar, Hercegovina, and only found out what happened when one of the leading conspirators, Major Živan Knežević, telephoned him after the coup. Dragoljub M. Mihailović, *Rat i mir djenerala. Izabrani ratni spisi*. 2 vols, comp. Milan Vesović, Kosta Nikolić and Bojan B. Dimitrijević. Belgrade, 1998, II, pp. 375-76.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Just as in 1941, when he appealed to Prince Paul, Cvetković and Maček, fifty years later in the last months of the 'second' Yugoslavia, Ivanović sent two letters to Presidents Milošević of Serbia, Tujman of Croatia and Kučan of Slovenia, appealing to them to preserve a Yugoslav state, since the alternative could lead to bloodshed. The first was an open letter, published in *Nedeljna Borba* (Belgrade), 26-27 January 1991, while the second was written on 26 June, the day after Croatia and Slovenia declared independence from the rest of the country. In the second letter, Ivanović, as 'the son, nephew and godson of the three Serbs and Croats who had in 1918 been among the creators of the first common, democratic, state of the Yugoslav peoples', offered to organize a meeting in Dubrovnik of the three presidents and other leading politicians, which surely would have been the last attempt to solve the impending crisis at the negotiating table. No one even bothered to reply. For the text of the letters see *Drugo zvono* (1993), pp. 341-47 or *Drugo zvono* (1995), II, pp. 193-201.

<sup>46</sup> FO 371/28789, Foreign Office to the Belgrade Legation, London, 1 April 1941.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

amid the dramatic changes.<sup>49</sup> London had also contacted Božo Banac early in April, inviting him to leave Switzerland for London. Banac's reluctance to come to London was interpreted by the British Consul in Geneva as 'waiting to see which way the Yugoslav cat jumps'.<sup>50</sup> This insinuation was rejected in London, where Banac was seen as 'exceedingly pro-Allied'.<sup>51</sup> The real reason behind Banac's reluctance to come to London was the fact that his stepson, in whom he had full confidence, was due to arrive in the British capital. Ivanović had just been named the president of the Yugoslav Shipping Committee, a newly founded organization of Yugoslav shipowners, with its headquarters in Yugoslav Lloyd's New York office.<sup>52</sup> In any case, Banac's poor health also deterred him from making the trip: a telegram from the British Embassy in Lisbon mentions Banac's heart problems.<sup>53</sup>

#### IV

It is difficult to establish the exact date when the Yugoslav Shipping Committee (YSC) was founded. In his memoirs Ivanović states that he had contacted other Yugoslav shipowners, among them Lujo Radoničić and Frano Petrinović, or their representatives in the USA, on 6 April 1941, immediately upon hearing that Yugoslavia had been attacked by the Axis. He proposed an urgent meeting and suggested that they organize themselves as a committee, based on the model of the Greek Shipping Committee in London.<sup>54</sup> The proposal was accepted, and Ivanović, although the second youngest among them, was elected the first president of the Yugoslav Shipping Committee.<sup>55</sup> Six days later, on 12 April, Ivanović and other Committee members met in Baltimore with Yugoslav officers and sailors to discuss their representation in the Committee. Ivanović proposed that a new collective agreement which

<sup>49</sup> FO 371/28790, 2 May 1941.

<sup>50</sup> FO 371/28789, Kelly to Foreign Office, Bern, 6 April 1941.

<sup>51</sup> FO 371/28789, minutes, 7 April 1941. The British Consul, Livingston, was described as 'somewhat hysterical officer [. . .] undoubtedly exposed to a very considerable sham'.

<sup>52</sup> FO 371/28790, telegram from Lisbon to Foreign Office, 5 May 1941.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Ivanović also mentions Banac's poor health, 'heart ailment, dormant from early youth, [which] had developed into dropsy', *LX*, p. 137.

<sup>54</sup> Ivanović, *LX*, p. 208.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Ivanović explains his election as the recognition on the part of the other shipowners of his unreserved support for Britain since the beginning of the war.

would regulate wages and insurance in war conditions, should be signed between shipowners and sailors and this was accepted.<sup>56</sup>

A slightly different version is given by Ivanović's younger brother Vladimir (1917-63) in his unpublished history of the Yugoslav mercantile fleet during World War Two. According to him, the Yugoslav military attaché in the USA, Colonel Mirko Burja, addressed the Baltimore meeting of 12 April.<sup>57</sup> Two days later, Vladimir Rybař of the Yugoslav Legation in Washington spoke at another meeting of Yugoslav shipowners and seamen in the US waters, and proposed they select their representatives for a shipping committee, which they did.<sup>58</sup> He confirms that the new collective agreement was signed on 29 April.<sup>59</sup> Vladimir Ivanović clearly suggests that the Yugoslav diplomatic and military representatives in America played an important role in the creation of the YSC. If this is true, then the Foreign Office was mistaken in believing that their proposal of early April had been neglected in Belgrade.

It is quite possible, however, that Konstantin Fotić, the Yugoslav minister to Washington, acted independently of his government. All that we know from his memoirs is that he had talked to representatives of the Yugoslav shipowners in America sometime in the second half of March 1941.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps Fotić had his meeting with Vane Ivanović in mind.<sup>61</sup> But neither his memoirs nor the published documents on American foreign relations offer any further clue.<sup>62</sup> The official post-1945 Yugoslav historiography is even less helpful. Apart from concluding that Yugoslav shipowners in neutral and Allied-controlled waters were there primarily for 'commercial interests, class consciousness and war profiteering', we find the false information that the YSC was

<sup>56</sup> Ivanović, *LX*, p. 209. The first collective agreement in inter-war Yugoslavia was not signed until 1938. Until then, relations between shipowners and seamen were regulated on the basis of individual agreements. Most of these agreements were published in *Zbirka najnovijih propisa o pomorstvu i pomorcima*, Dubrovnik, 1938. The new collective agreement was signed on 29 April 1941, and was to remain in force until the end of the war.

<sup>57</sup> VIP: Vladimir Ivanović, typescript in English, entitled *Booklet No. 0103*, completed in New York, June 1944 (hereafter *Booklet No. 0103*), p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Constantin Fotitch (Konstantin Fotić), *The War We Lost: Yugoslavia's Tragedy and the Failure of the West*, New York, 1948. Fotić mentioned this meeting to Sumner Welles, the US Under-Secretary of State, who came on 24 March to dissuade the Yugoslav Minister from resigning his post after the Belgrade government had signed the Tripartite Pact, pp. 70-71.

<sup>61</sup> Although Ivanović went to see him on 25 March and Fotić dates his conversation with Sumner Welles a day earlier, it is very unlikely that the Yugoslav Minister would have met other shipowners without Ivanović, who was not only running the largest Yugoslav mercantile fleet, but who had openly supported the British from the beginning of the war. It seems that Fotić confused the dates.

<sup>62</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1941, Vol. II: Europe*, Washington, DC, 1959. Documents relating to Yugoslavia are between pages 937-84.

formed in New York at the *end* of 1941.<sup>63</sup> Here we have an excellent example of history-writing not only through the prism of ideology, but also under the influence of events which took place after the episode about which the historian is writing. In the spring and summer of 1941 it was impossible to predict which side would win, and it may be argued that it seemed more likely than that the Allies would lose.

So when exactly was the YSC formed, and who initiated its formation? In his report to the Ministry of Shipping, sent on 4 April 1941, Sparks states that the same morning a group of Yugoslav shipowners, led by Ivanović, had met and formed a committee.<sup>64</sup> The Foreign Office papers do not mention the two meetings of 12 and 14 April. However, Halifax reported on 11 April that an agreement between the Yugoslav Legation, Ivanović and Radoničić, as well as with the Maritime Commission, had been reached the same morning. According to this agreement, all Yugoslav mercantile ships were to be employed in accordance with the interests of the British Ministry of Shipping.<sup>65</sup> The same report states that Ivanović had asked to leave for London in order to organize a YSC branch there, with Radoničić taking charge of the New York headquarters.<sup>66</sup> It seems appropriate, therefore, to say that the YSC was formed between 4 and 29 April 1941, between the first meeting of the Yugoslav shipowners in the USA and the signing of the new collective agreement between the shipowners and their crews. It is also safe to conclude that Vane Ivanović, having rallied with his stepfather, Božo Banac, to the Allied cause in September 1939, continued to play a leading role in organizing other Yugoslav shipowners once Yugoslavia's neutrality came to an end in the spring of 1941.

With the formal capitulation of the Yugoslav Army on 17 April 1941, Yugoslav assets abroad were in danger of being seized by the Nazis. To prevent the seizure of Yugoslav mercantile ships, Ivanović, as the president of the YSC, asked Fotić to requisition the entire Yugoslav fleet in the name of his government.<sup>67</sup> By this measure, the US Government, still neutral, would recognize the 'Yugoslav character' of the fleet, and could use this as an excuse to reject any Axis request to hand over Yugoslav ships. Although they did not know the government's whereabouts at that moment, and even though there was no appropriate law

<sup>63</sup> Šišević, *Naša trgovačka mornarica*, p. 811.

<sup>64</sup> FO 371/28789, Sparks to the Ministry of Shipping, New York, 4 April 1941.

<sup>65</sup> FO 371/28789, Halifax to the Foreign Office, Washington, 11 April 1941.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Ivanović, *LX*, p. 209. Ivanović states that he was advised by Sparks to 'follow the Greek example'.

on requisition in Yugoslavia, Fotić, as the Yugoslav Minister, and Ivanović, as the YSC president, proclaimed the 'requisition'.<sup>68</sup>

## V

All ten ships which Yugoslav Lloyd had placed under British command on 4 September 1939 had either been sunk or captured by 6 April 1941. Because Yugoslavia was still a neutral country, Banac and Ivanović received the insurance money from the British. They used it to build another five ships, but these too had been lost by 1941.<sup>69</sup> Over the next two years Yugoslav Lloyd lost another ten ships, and by 1943 its fleet was down to two steamers.<sup>70</sup> These two ships would survive the war, but were nationalized by the new Yugoslav authorities in 1945.<sup>71</sup> The human cost was also very high. According to the YSC records, between April 1941 and July 1943, 211 sailors of the Yugoslav mercantile fleet were either killed or went missing in action.<sup>72</sup> A majority of them, 135 in all, were citizens of Yugoslavia, most probably of Croat origin.<sup>73</sup> Having lost most of his fleet, Vane Ivanović joined the British Army instead of going to Yugoslavia to join Tito or Mihailović. In his memoirs he spells out the reason for this: 'I had no desire to forget the enemy and engage in a fratricidal war among my fellow countrymen, especially as I did not wholly agree with either side.'<sup>74</sup>

Ivanović was assigned to the Yugoslav section of the Political Warfare Executive (PWE). He spent the remainder of the war between London, Cairo and Bari and was demobilized as a major of the British Army.<sup>75</sup> After the war he re-launched a successful career in shipping and

<sup>68</sup> Ivanović, *Drugo zvon* (1979), p. 43.

<sup>69</sup> Vane Ivanović to Dejan Djokić, fax, Dubrovnik, 2 August 1998.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Ivanović, *Drugo zvon* (1979), pp. 23-24.

<sup>72</sup> VIP: Vladimir Ivanović, *Booklet No. 0103*, Appendix 17: 'Jugoslav Seamen Killed or Missing From Yugoslav Ships Since April 6 1941 till July 1943'.

<sup>73</sup> It is of course a pure speculation, since in Yugoslavia after 1929 there were, officially at least, only Yugoslavs. My opinion that most of them would today be considered Croat is based not only on their names, but also on the YSC list, which gives the place of birth — the majority were born in Dalmatia, where Croats were in an absolute majority over Serbs. Besides, Croats traditionally chose the sailor's profession, as did an admittedly smaller number of Serbs from Dalmatia and Montenegrins. Speculation apart, what is certain is that all these sailors, whether they regarded themselves as Croats, Serbs or Yugoslavs, sailed the ships under the control of the *Yugoslav* Shipping Committee and as such were loyal to the *Yugoslav* Government-in-exile. This is important to emphasize, as it is a popular conception today, paradoxically both in Serbia and Croatia, that only Serbs were pro-Yugoslav and that it was mostly they who fought on the side of the Government-in-exile and the Allies.

<sup>74</sup> Ivanović, *LX*, p. 180.

<sup>75</sup> Ivanović, *Drugo zvon* (1979), pp. 53-61.

became a leading member of the *Demokratska alternativa* (Democratic Alternative), a group of democratic-minded Yugoslav émigré politicians opposed to Tito's regime.<sup>76</sup> Although Vane Ivanović and Božo Banac had been among the first Yugoslavs — and possibly the first neutrals of some significance — to join the Allies, the consolidation of Tito's regime in 1945 meant they could not return to their liberated country. While Banac died just days before the end of the war, Ivanović became a political refugee. The irony is that the very same country Ivanović and Banac had joined in 1939, subsequently provided substantial help to the regime which proclaimed them 'enemies of the people'.

## VI

The main argument of this short study is that there were Yugoslavs who resisted the Axis before 6 April 1941, when Germany, Italy and their allies invaded Yugoslavia. Traditional history argues that the resistance was orchestrated by Tito and/or Mihailović. Great Britain, which 'stood alone', supported, mainly verbally, any resistance to the Axis, just as it had supported and encouraged the Belgrade *coup d'état* of 27 March 1941 and just as it had welcomed Ivanović's action.

By analysing the little known role of Vane Ivanović it is hoped this article has shown that the two main resistance leaders were not the first Yugoslavs to resist the Axis openly and in an organized way. To the present-day student of Yugoslavia in World War Two this argument may seem unconvincing. But, if for a moment we forget the subsequent events of 1941–45, it is not so unthinkable to claim that Ivanović was the first Yugoslav to oppose the Axis. After all, when in September 1939, Ivanović, a well known Olympic athlete and a leading shipowner, placed almost half of his fleet under the British command, Tito was General Secretary of the small and illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia, controlled by the Soviet Union, which was at that time Germany's ally. Similarly, Mihailović was a little known Yugoslav Army colonel. To the average Yugoslav living in the 1930s, Vane Ivanović was a figure of some significance, unlike Tito or Mihailović, of whom they were very unlikely to have even heard. The fact that Tito and Mihailović played much more important roles during the course of the war does not diminish Ivanović's action prior to the war in Yugoslavia.

<sup>76</sup> For the history and activities of the *Democratic Alternative*, see Ivanović (1993), Ivanović (1995), 11, and Vane Ivanović, *Yugoslav Democracy on Hold*, Rijeka, 1996, pp. 94–124. For a brief account of Ivanović's post-1945 activities see my obituary to Vane Ivanović, *The Independent* (London), 9 April 1999.

There are two main conclusions to be drawn from this work. Firstly, in the case analysed here, hindsight has not proved beneficial to the writing of history, because the role of Ivanović, who joined the Allies before Yugoslavia was attacked in April 1941, has been almost completely ignored. Further research on those Yugoslav individuals and groups who joined the anti-Axis resistance before the occupation of their country is necessary. Banac and Ivanović were not the only Yugoslavs who collaborated with the British in this period. For example, the SOE had made contacts with the small (Serbian) Agrarian Party, with the organization of Chetnik veterans and also with some, mostly Serbian, but also non-Serbian military and political figures throughout Yugoslavia.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, this case-study shows that writing history through popular ideology — be it nationalist or internationalist — gives us possibly a coherent but, nevertheless, a somewhat narrow and misleading view. This article is an attempt to break with that tradition.

<sup>77</sup> For a brief summary of Britain's efforts to secure help from various Yugoslav organizations and individuals see Wheeler, *Britain and the War for Yugoslavia*, pp. 24–33. General Borivoje Mirković, who masterminded the 27 March 1941 coup, was a friend of Tom Mapplebeck, Britain's honorary air attaché in Belgrade before the war, and regularly passed him copies of the Yugoslav General Staff's weekly intelligence summaries (I am indebted to Dr Heather Williams, who interviewed Mapplebeck in 1988, when he was 94, for this information). Dr Ivan Cok, a Slovene lawyer who held a nominal post in the Yugoslav Ministry of the Interior and who headed the 'Society of Yugoslavs in Italy' was in touch with Section 'D' (predecessor to Special Operations Executive — SOE) since 1939, and the 'Society' helped with sabotage in northern Italy, Slovenia and Dalmatia after the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941 (London, Public Record Office, Special Operations Executive, HS5/875, Bailey's memo, 24 November 1941. Again, I am grateful to Dr Williams for providing the reference). Another example of Yugoslavs joining the Allies prior to 6 April 1941 was the little known case of three Yugoslav Army lieutenants Zvonimir Vučković, Momčilo Smiljanić and Sava Konvalinka — a Croat, a Serb and a Slovene, who fled to Greece rather than serve a pro-German Yugoslav government, but soon returned after the dramatic events of 27 March 1941. See Zvonimir Vučković's memoirs *Sećanja iz rata*, London, 1980, pp. 40–53.