

CRCE Briefing Paper

Hoodwinking Churchill

By Peter Batty

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About the Author

Peter Batty is a newspaper journalist who was also the editor of BBC TV's Tonight programme. He scripted and produced 6 episodes of the internationally praised TV series The World at War. At the time of the break-up of Yugoslavia he made 2 films on Tito for the BBC which proved controversial and led to his book, *Hoodwinking Churchill, Tito's Great Confidence Trick*, Shephard-Walwyn, London, 2011

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My talk is entitled "Hoodwinking Churchill" and it concerns the decision Winston Churchill made in December 1943 to drop Draza Mihailovic's anti-communist resistance group and to

back wholeheartedly Tito's communist partisans – and in particular the roles Sir Fitzroy Maclean, Baronet, and Sir William Deakin played in that decision-making. Deakin, a young Oxford don who had helped Churchill research some of his books, had been sent out to Tito in May 1943 on a fact-finding trip and Maclean in the September as head of a full-scale official mission to Tito who would prepare an in-depth study of Yugoslav resistance as a whole. Maclean was a diplomat and a Conservative Member of Parliament who had had an adventurous war so far in Iraq and Libya with the Special Air Services (SAS). Maclean claimed he had been told to consider himself Churchill's "own personal representative with the Partisan command". It was certainly as a result of Maclean's so-called Blockbuster Report of November 1943 that Churchill's fateful decision was made.

When I joined BBC Television in March 1958 – I joined the so-called Talks Department (the name was a hangover from radio) which was based then in Lime Grove in Shepherd's Bush. Its output included everything except news, sport, drama and light entertainment – Fitzroy Maclean was a frequent visitor there then. He was on social terms with many of the senior executives. My immediate head of department, Grace Wyndham Goldie, was a widow and Fitzroy often escorted her to receptions and such like. He was invariably present at her monthly programme lunches. He was very charming and well liked, particularly by the ladies. My wife was a ballet dancer and he and Grace once came with us to Covent Garden. He was then trying to get into television either as a presenter or as a maker of programmes. One of the cameramen on the programme I then worked on – Tonight – taught him how to use a 16mm camera, which we loaned him, and he went off to places like Georgia in the Caucasus to make films for us, based on his experience there as a British diplomat before the War. His view of wartime events in Yugoslavia was the accepted one within BBC Television then. I remember an hour-long programme entitled *The Life and Times of Marshal Tito*, fulsomely narrated and presented by Maclean, that included a particularly reverential interview with Tito himself.

The BBC had of course played a prominent role in promoting Tito and his Partisans during the war and in sustaining the Partisan myths after 1945. I must admit that I too had swallowed those myths and didn't countenance any contrary point of view - not that in the late '50s and early 1960s when I was involved with *Tonight*, becoming its editor in 1963, that what had happened in wartime Yugoslavia was much discussed.

I was wooed away from the BBC by Lew Grade and after working 4 years with him as an executive producer I founded my own independent production company, making, for instance, 6 of the episodes of Thames TV's *World at War* series, also a series on the Algerian War for Channel 4, and one on the American Civil War for them too, and lots of other single documentaries on ballet and wine, as well as on historical subjects for ITV, the BBC and American, German and Japanese networks. In 1990, when the Iron Curtain was no more and one could access Eastern Europe relatively easily, my wife and I drove down the Danube from its various sources in the Black Forest to its Delta on the Black Sea, something we had always longed to do. Following this I put up an idea to Channel 4 for a short series of films on the Danube, but apparently they were already thinking of doing such a series with Bernard Levin, though in fact it never happened. I then tried to interest them in a series about the Balkans in general, but the particular commissioning editor there handling such programming turned down the idea with the riposte Who on earth is interested in the Balkans? A few months later, the Balkans, and Yugoslavia in particular, imploded.

While researching the Balkans series, I had come across Michael Lees's book *The Rape of Serbia* which had just been published and which was an eye-opener for me. I contacted him

and he invited me to lunch at his home in Dorset. He told me how no publisher in the UK would touch his book because of the Lord Aldington/Nikolai Tolstoy libel case over the release by the English in May 1945 of the Cossack prisoners to the Russians and their subsequent murder, and that he had had to seek a publisher in the United States. He was about to go to Belgrade, against the advice of his wife Gwen, for the launching of a Serbo-Croat edition of his book. He was far from well. Gwen persuaded me to accompany them which I was only too delighted to do. This was the spring of 1991 when Milosevic was coming into his prime. Lees was treated as a hero by the Serbian nationalists. They met us on the plane and carried him head-high to a cavalcade of cars, many decked with flowers and flags – I don't remember going through immigration or customs – and there was wild honking of car horns all the way in to our hotel. Indeed everywhere we went in Serbia Michael Lees was received rapturously. The final presentation of his book was at Belgrade University, and because a large part of his audience were young English-speaking students he persuaded me to join him on the top table, as it were, and I became a butt of some of the questioning, especially because of my BBC links. These students were angry that Churchill's falling for Tito's duplicity had condemned them to 40 years of communism. They blamed all their woes on Churchill's decision to drop Mihailovic and to back Tito. They felt that history, and the English in particular, had not been kind to them. I came to feel that I owed it to them to try to put the record straight in some way.

Knowing the BBC's penchant for anniversaries – I had discovered that 1992 was the centenary of Tito's birth - I put up the idea to BBC-2 on my return to do a couple of programmes on Tito for their *Timewatch* slot. I made it clear that mine would be a revisionist approach – indeed the proposal sheet was headed *The Great Tito Confidence Trick*. However it was not until the late summer of 1991 that I got the go ahead, such that the autumn was frantically spent filming in Serbia, Montenegro, America, Switzerland, and the UK. At first the Beeb were interested in only 1 programme but then during the editing when they realized the amount of material I had assembled they agreed to two programmes. I had kept the powers-that-be there in touch with my progress and had shown them the rough cuts of the programmes. We had had a few arguments, but nothing of great principle, though I remember being slightly alarmed when one of them told me Maclean had been one of his “boyhood heroes” and that he thought *Eastern Approaches* one of the best books he had ever read. The programmes were due for transmission in late February and early March 1992, so completing them in the time allowed was a bit of a rush. However they were both finished well on schedule and handed in, edited, dubbed, and ready for transmission.

Imagine my horror when I discovered that behind my back the first one had been heavily censored: criticisms of Maclean and William Deakin were softened, especially the criticisms of Maclean's 1943 Blockbuster Report. Mentions of Ustasha atrocities against Serbs had been removed and references to the notorious Soviet spy James Klugmann's skullduggery in Cairo cut or watered down, as were references to Tito's anti-British attitudes during the war. Even hints of Churchill's ill-health in December 1943 had been removed. Deakin's personal relationship with Churchill was downplayed and Maclean's extravagant claims of elite German divisions allegedly tied down by the Partisans went unchallenged. Maclean was said to have spent “a few months in Yugoslavia” before writing his Report whereas in fact he was there barely a few weeks. And so on, and so on. The film-editor told me that almost 200 changes had been made. He had been forbidden to talk to me. Indeed for a while I was denied access to BBC premises when my pass-card was electronically cancelled.

Apparently the BBC had feared legal action by Maclean – clear evidence of his continuing

sway there even then. This was when John Birt ruled supreme in the Beeb and lesser programme executives feared for their futures. Morale there was at an all-time low, as I had all too easily noticed. When I mentioned this to Maclean's friend and former wartime colleague Sir Alexander Glen, who had also participated in the programmes, he assured me that Fitzroy was not a litigious individual, preferring more subtle means of getting his own way. Besides, he said, Maclean was too shrewd a chap to put himself at risk of lawyers finding skeletons in his cupboard. I told the BBC people that Maclean was disinclined to issue writs, whereas some of the other participants might be less reluctant, but I was not listened to. However, I had stirred up enough fuss, such that the second programme went out almost untouched.

As expected, many of the participants were horrified when they found out what changes had been made to the first film – the BBC not having had the courtesy to inform them of what had happened. Michael Lees, who, perhaps inevitably, had been censored the most, immediately posted a complaint from his Dorset home. Alas, on his way back from the mailbox, he suffered a heart attack and died. His widow persisted with his complaint which found its way to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission where it was upheld in part, as was a similar complaint from Jean Howard of Bletchley fame, another participant whose contribution had been totally cut out.

I promised myself then that I would one day set the record straight, but no publisher at that time was interested enough to commission me to write a full account. They were still running scared from the Aldington/Tolstoy libel case. Another ten years would go by, when, after the death of my wife, friends encouraged me to take up a project that might sufficiently engross me to ease the grieving. After considering several, I decided on this book *Hoodwinking Churchill: Tito's Great Confidence Trick* which has been 8 years or so in the researching and writing.

I was intrigued by Maclean's involvement and even more so by William Deakin's. Although charming and courteous, Maclean had always struck me as an ambitious, vain, unscrupulous fellow with not very much up top, so perhaps it was not really surprising that he should swallow the Tito line, believing that that was his way to fame and fortune, convinced as he apparently was that Churchill wanted to believe it too, because of his intense interest in guerrilla activities, as a result of his Boer War experiences. Guerrilla warfare appealed to Churchill's romantic nature, and as Yugoslavia was the only war-theatre then with substantial guerrilla activity he became absorbed in that country. The accounts by Deakin and Maclean of the seemingly reckless heroism of the Partisans clearly beguiled him. Churchill was adventurous by nature, hence the appeal to him of adventurers like Fitzroy Maclean. This led him in turn to be fascinated by Tito – “the great guerrilla” in his lexicon, “hardy and hunted” - a figure seemingly out of a feudal past, living in caves and forests, perpetually on the move, achieving deeds of derring-do. Deeds he would have liked to be doing himself, but as a desk-bound warrior could not. And an increasingly frustrated desk-bound warrior as the Americans and Russians came to dominate the war. Churchill had always been drawn to mavericks and buccaneers. He had a romantic enthusiasm for the unorthodox and the quirky, for people who defied convention. He delighted in the irregular. Cloak-and-dagger operations appealed to his vivid imagination. He enjoyed meeting secret agents. He was also an impatient man, hence his irritation with Mihailovic for seemingly wanting to wait until the Germans were on their knees before issuing his call for Serbs to rise up against them. Churchill was always for immediate action at all costs.

Michael Lees, a cousin of Maclean's, was convinced Churchill only gave Maclean the job of heading the liaison mission to Tito because he had promised to take his troublesome son Randolph along with him, and thus get him out of his father's hair. Randolph had become particularly bothersome with his father who could no longer manage him and he was disliked intensely by Churchill's staff. The Foreign Office head, Sir Alexander Cadogan, described him in his diary as "a dreadful young man" while Harold Macmillan confided to his diary how Randolph "always manages to have a row or make a scene wherever he goes". But it was of course a stroke of Public Relations genius on Maclean's part to take Randolph Churchill along with him. The import of Churchill sending his only son was not lost on the Partisans. For Churchill, having his son with the Partisans allowed him, as it were, to participate in guerrilla warfare by filial proxy. Churchill had penned Tito a personal note concerning Randolph, and added: "I wish I could come myself, but I am too old and heavy to jump out on a parachute". Tito made sure that whenever Randolph visited a village the commissar accompanying him was instructed to organize a mass reception and to introduce him always as Winston Churchill's son, which impressed everyone, most of all his political opponents. Randolph's presence tied the Churchill family to Tito's cause. Randolph was an instant channel to the top. Maclean was able to pepper his signals with phrases like "Randolph well and sends his love", knowing they would immediately find their way to Winston. Maclean arranged too for Lord Birkenhead to be sent out as the Political Warfare Executive's (PWE) representative at Tito's headquarters. That he was Churchill's godson was perhaps not a coincidence. Evelyn Waugh, who had just completed *Brideshead Revisited*, was another celebrity who joined Maclean's mission in early 1944. John Henniker-Major, a member of that mission who later became a senior diplomat – Britain's Ambassador first to Jordan and then to Denmark - revealed their true significance when he described them in his own memoirs as "markers on the board" that "gave the mission prestige and a higher profile back home, and added to the impression that Fitzroy had a lot of people on his side". Maclean of course had had close links to the Churchill family. His father had been with Winston at Sandhurst, and he and Randolph had been at Eton together. He had enjoyed hospitality from Winston and his wife on many occasions, and had even for a time dated their niece Clarissa who was eventually to marry Antony Eden, Churchill's Foreign Secretary.

But William Deakin's role in the decision-making is less easy to understand or to justify. He too was close to Churchill, having helped him in the 1930s as a young Oxford history don to research Churchill's *Life of Marlborough* and later his *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. Churchill had maintained a close and warm relationship with Deakin. They had had lunch together in August 1940 when Churchill had encouraged him to join SOE, the Special Operations Executive, meant, in Churchill's own words, "to set Europe ablaze", through sabotage and subversion behind the lines in German-occupied Europe. Deakin duly joined, initially being sent to North America on its behalf, before being posted to SOE Cairo in late 1942.

Deakin after all was a professional historian, meant to be sober and impartial in his judgments and diligent and detailed in his researches. I had much admired his *The Brutal Friendship* – the story of Hitler and Mussolini's relationship. Yet, in his own memoirs *The Embattled Mountain*, published in 1971, he, for instance, makes no mention of his lunch in Cairo with Churchill on the 28th of January 1943 at which he pressed Winston to take more notice of Tito's efforts and persuaded him to meet that same day Deakin's boss, Colonel Keble, SOE Cairo's Chief of Staff, and to commission him to prepare a report on the respective fighting abilities of the various resistance groups in Yugoslavia – events which Martin Gilbert in his official biography of Churchill said "were to be decisive for British policy towards the

resistance forces in German and Italian occupied Yugoslavia". Deakin does not mention Keble at all in his memoirs, nor his assistant James Klugmann, the infamous Soviet spy in SOE Cairo who helped to write Keble's Report and was to do so much damage to Mihailovic's cause with his doctoring of documents and messages to London from the British liaison officers with Mihailovic's forces, and his faking of maps to exaggerate the extent of Partisan influence, and his skimping of supplies to Mihailovic in preference to Tito. Deakin in those memoirs gives scant mention of the Ustasha atrocities against the Serbs in Croatia, and of their impact on Serbs in Serbia, leading to their enhanced suspicion of Croats in general. This was in line with Churchill's own attitude then of course.

Nor was Deakin prepared to give any weight to the "reprisals" argument when considering Mihailovic's attitude to sabotage, in particular his concern not to furnish the Germans with an excuse to exterminate the Serbs, as nearly happened in the First World War. The Germans were killing 100 Serbs for every German killed and 50 for every one wounded. The reprisal order did not apply to non-Serb activity elsewhere in Yugoslavia, such as in Bosnia where Tito was based for most of the war. Indeed Churchill and his advisers seem not to have worried much about reprisals against Serbs, though they were concerned about retribution against the French, for instance. The *Maquis* were often enjoined to avoid civilian casualties by not killing Germans. There are very few mentions of the reprisals in Deakin's writings.

Later in life he was to try to explain his high regard for Tito by reminding people that he and Tito had been wounded by the same bomb that had killed Deakin's deputy and Tito's chief-bodyguard. As a result he felt they had become sort of blood-brothers. Indeed in his memoirs, while detailing the German attacks on the Partisans at this time and the terrible conditions in which they were all living, he was to admit that he "had taken on by stages a binding and absolute identity with those around" him. Deakin certainly swallowed hook, line and sinker the Partisan myths and took advantage of his close relationship with Churchill to help promote them. Like Maclean, he did not speak Serbo-Croat and hence relied almost entirely on information passed to him by the Partisans which, as a professional historian, he must have realised would be partial and therefore needed to be supported by other, less subjective sources. That Tito might want Mihailovic eliminated, not for the better pursuit of the war but for purely political reasons, seems never to have troubled Deakin. Tito was later to say how surprised he had been to find Deakin and Maclean such willing tools in his desire to liquidate his political opponents. He honoured Deakin in 1969 with the Partisan Star First Class "for special services in the People's Liberation War". Deakin had already received from the Russians in 1944 their Order of Valour. Maclean of course had been deluged with much higher awards. According to *The Times* obituary of him, Maclean had been given by Tito a "summer home in Korcula, a Croatian Adriatic island, which Tito allowed him to own despite foreigners being forbidden to possess property in communist Yugoslavia". It comprised two small Venetian 17th century palaces which the Maclean family still own.

Deakin after the war helped Churchill write his wartime memoirs, which for a loyal generation became the accepted version of that war. Vane Ivanovic, a Yugoslav who worked for the Political Warfare Executive during the war, was at school with Deakin and, despite their differing viewpoints, maintained a close relationship with him for the rest of his life, observed in his own memoirs published in 1977: "There has been no symposium or discussion in Great Britain or elsewhere in Europe on the role of SOE in the last war in which Deakin has not taken a prominent part. In each of these, the version of events in Yugoslavia that has been aired is that of the victorious pro-Partisan faction inside SOE. On the British side, I have not come across any views or interpretations of the other side within SOE".

Indeed, Deakin was to remain for another generation Britain's most widely recognized expert on wartime Yugoslavia. Sir Michael Howard in his obituary notice of Deakin in *The Independent* said that it was largely his experience and advice that persuaded Winston Churchill to support the Communist partisans in Yugoslavia. *The Times* obituarist went further in stating: "It was largely as a result of Deakin's reports of the partisans' effectiveness and perhaps, too, of the faith which Churchill personally had in Deakin's judgment, that the British Government decided to withdraw its support from the Chetniks and to concentrate on helping the partisans".

I had dinner once with Deakin at his club Brook's in St James's during the autumn of 1991. I had been trying without success to get him to take part in my programmes for the BBC. He was living then in France and hadn't mellowed, nor was he prepared to admit any mistakes along the way. He did say though that the generals in December 1943 were more interested in tying down German divisions in Yugoslavia, and hence keeping them away from possible use against the coming Allied landings in France, than in which of the resistance groups was killing the most Germans. For me the evening was memorable for a Tory grandee the worse for drink lumbering over to our table and asking "Bill" if he could introduce him to his guest, who was equally inebriated, which he did with the words "Please meet Bill Deakin the man most responsible for the effing mess Yugoslavia now finds itself in". He didn't actually say effing, but ladies are present.

Stevan Pavlowitch who had hoped to have been given the commission to write the official history of the SOE in Yugoslavia, but was passed over because the powers-that-be thought that, with his particular ethnic background, he could not be impartial – the history has still to be written – once argued to me that in questioning Tito's rise to power it was not enough to look simply to the left-wing influences, to the communist moles within the secret services who clearly had cooked the books. As he graphically put it: "It's not so much the reds under the bed that were the more influential, as the blues IN the bed". As we have seen, Tito's most loyal and loquacious supporters were pillars of the British Establishment.

Michael Lees told me that many of the liaison officers who had been with Mihailovic were ostracised at SOE's own social venue, the Special Forces Club, when it was established in Knightsbridge after the war. The Club became, in his terms, a fortress of the "received wisdom" – though he agreed with me that perhaps "perceived history" was a better description. It was the liaison officers who had been with Tito who shaped the writing of history on Allied involvement in Yugoslavia during the Second World War. Not just because of their personal relationship with Churchill and the fact that they wrote bestselling books, but because the official position came to coincide with their version of history. As has happened down the ages, it is the Victors who make their own history, while the vanquished must endure in silence. I am glad now to be numbered among those who are helping to break that silence.

Note: This is the text of a talk given by the Author at the CRCE in May 2012