

Carole Hodge, *The Serb Lobby in the United Kingdom*, Donald W. Treadgold paper No.22, School of International Studies, University of Washington, September 1999, reviewed by James Pettifer.

This booklet opens up discussion of an important subject, the influence – or lack of it – of the Serb lobby in the UK during the last ten years. It arose, the author states in the Acknowledgements, from a seminar given at St Antony's College, Oxford in autumn 1997. Although there is some material on the period of the Croatian and Bosnian wars, and in essence is a critique of the way the Conservative government of that time in London appeared to have a special sympathy for the Serbian case, and was unduly influenced in policy questions by pro-Serb lobbyists. It is written from a fairly strong anti-Serb viewpoint, and in general takes the line that this influence was illegitimate, and ought not to have existed in the way that it did.

Although the booklet contains much valuable research into the subject, and will be a very useful reference work in the future, there are some major problems with the approach. Apart from the political line taken there is a marked lack of historical introduction, which is essential to understand the subject properly –

whatever view is taken of the lobby. The name of Seton-Watson is hardly mentioned, or any of the necessary basic information given about the way British help was vital at the time of the First World War and Versailles treaty in setting up Royalist Yugoslavia. Nor is there any mention of the large economic life of the inter-war period, so that, for instance, the Trepca mines in Kosovo were opened up in their modern form by the Selection Trust company, and in some important economic aspects, the whole of the pre-1939 Yugoslav economy was intimately linked with that of the British Empire. As a result, the existence of the lobby is mistakenly seen as a phenomena almost entirely based on the Titoist period, and sentimentality for Titoism has remained extraordinarily strong among the key sections of the British political and military establishment up to the present day. The Milosevic government, however unsatisfactory, was seen as the inheritor of Titoism by the Conservative government in the early 1990's, and thus entitled to instinctive sympathy, however deserved or undeserved.

Ms Hodge is very good on the internal lobby within the Conservative party, perhaps the best part of the text. Many British Conservatives of the older generation seem to have been swayed by a mixture of anti-Islamic feeling, money, memories of World

War alliances and a feeling that the Milosevic government had quite a lot to put up with, in terms of attacks from other ethnic groups. Serbs were seen, in the words of the late Alan Clark MP, as 'Christian gentleman', with the unspoken sub-text that most Balkan people were more or less gypsies who had to be kept in order somehow and the Serbs had traditionally been our friends who were rather good at doing it.

Although convenient at the time for the Milosevic government, and very effective at influencing policy in the 1992-1995 period, pre-Drayton, it is doubtful how far it was a very good basis for Serbia to be understood in the UK.

She is less good on the entrenched pro-Serb position in the Foreign Office and the intelligence and security apparatus, although there is quite a large quantity of material in the public domain already about this, which could have been included in her study. Much more will no doubt emerge as memoirs of the period are published. Influence in the media is nowadays a key priority for intelligence officers, and the writings of Ed Vulliamy and others on this subject about Sarajevo and the Bosnian war could have been more fully used.

Yet in the end, much of the lobby activity was futile and an ultimate failure. For the under-fifties, the Second World War period and Tito

meant little or nothing. Yugoslavia was no longer a fashionable concept in the universities, fear of Islam is not the major factor in British culture that it is in France, or in Zionist-influenced circles in the US State department, and Serbian history is not widely studied. It is an awful long time ago since the Serbian national anthem was sung in British theatres and cinemas in the First World War.

The Milosevic regime's main mistake was in failing to understand this, and was thus quite unprepared for the new orientation of the Blair government, and the changes in policy that have followed. The 'lobby' as seen by Ms Hodge, was essentially an elitist and limited campaign, and left the field wide open for commentators who did not share basic Yugoslavist assumptions. Her documentation of it, although incomplete and with some important errors, particularly over Kosovo (why should the well-known historian of Albania, Miranda Vickers, be seen as pro-Serb, simply on the basis of an out-of-context quote about the wider ambitions of the KLA?) is very useful.

The booklet is a valuable start to study of the much wider issue of the battle of ideas about Yugoslavia in the wartime periods, where it feels almost certain that many good PhD's and future books will emerge.