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Article

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Rooting for a Serbian-Dominated Yugoslavia? The United Kingdom and the Recognition of Slovenia and Croatia

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Abstract: The recognition of Slovenia and Croatia was a defining moment in the history of the post-Cold War order in Europe. From the outset, this step was a controversial one, and scholars focussing on the role of the United Kingdom often claim that London's responses to the collapse of Yugoslavia can be explained by a long British tradition of pro-Serbian sentiment, the Foreign Office's realpolitik approach, or Britain's neocolonial interests. This article analyses British foreign policy on the basis of recently declassified documents in order to critically discuss such assumptions about the motives of British foreign policy and thus contribute to the international history of the Yugoslav Wars in the early 1990s.

Keywords: United Kingdom; Yugoslav Wars; international history; state recognition

Introduction

There is a minute written on 24 January 1992 by the head of the Policy Planning Staff of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Robert Cooper, with a rather unusual title for a diplomatic document: "Yugoslavia: How Did We Get into This Mess?" Cooper is referring to the recognition of the former republics of the Yugoslav Federation, after a decision by the members of the European Community (EC) on 16 December 1991 had paved the way for the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia by all EC member states on 15 January 1992 and placed the question of Macedonian and Bosnian independence on the international agenda. According to Cooper, this

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decision was the result of pressure by Germany, which had "helped Britain and others at Maastricht" and had then "called in the debt". The secession of Croatia and Slovenia might have been "inevitable", but it was still a "question […] of timing". In the view of the Foreign Office, it happened too early. When it came to Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Macedonia, however, the independence of the first "could still precipitate another civil war", while the independence of the second "could lead to international problems". Cooper lamented that "until 16 December 1991 we had a sound, objective doctrine of recognition, based on states, not governments. We seem, at least temporarily, to have abandoned this just as it acquires new relevance."[1]

Indeed, the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia was a defining moment in the history of the post-Cold War order in Europe. The EC member states set a precedent for the international management of a collapsing multi-ethnic federation, declaring that in such cases, the countries of the EC would recognize the individual republics based on the existing internal borders and would not accept any border changes by force. Yet they stipulated that the successor states adhere to clear rules regarding the protection of minority rights to assuage the members of national groups that did not constitute a majority in the newly independent nation-states (Caplan 2005). Such a course of action was strongly advocated by Germany, the most important supporter of Slovenia and Croatia on the international stage. France and the United Kingdom (UK), on the other hand, are usually portrayed as opponents of the German position, eventually being pressured by an increasingly assertive Bonn into accepting the independence of the two northern Yugoslav republics.

From the outset, the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia has been a controversial subject, and scholarly opinion differs sharply regarding the consequences of this step. While researchers defending Germany's position portray recognition as a necessary and justified response to the Serbian aggression against Croatia, arguing that it brought the fighting between Serbs and Croats to an end in early 1992 (Conversi 1998, 14; Glaurdić 2011, 274–7), Bonn's critics, in contrast, depict the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia as a decisive factor in the outbreak of the Bosnian War later the same year (Calic 2014, 310–1; Mappes-Niediek 2022, 131, 158).

Adherents of the latter position implicitly or explicitly endorse the British government's line, as London was in favour of delaying the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia until an overall settlement for all former Yugoslav republics, agreed by all parties, could be found. Research that focuses on the role of the UK, however, often sympathises with Bonn's policy and depicts British motives in a very unfavourable light by situating London's actions in response to the collapse of Yugoslavia in a long

1 The National Archives, London (TNA). FCO 175/408. R F Cooper. Yugoslavia: How Did We Get into This Mess?. 24 January 1992. The document itself is dated "24 January 1991", but this is definitely a typographical error.

tradition of pro-Serbian sentiment (Simms 2002, 12). For example, Daniele Conversi (1996, 244) claims that the UK was among the "most fervent supporters of a Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia", arguing that pro-Serb experts, propaganda from Belgrade, and the Serbian diaspora shaped decision-making in London. This pro-Serb inclination was further strengthened by the belief "that a strong, centralized Yugoslavia – or Serbia in its place – could restrain Germany's strength" in the Balkans (Conversi 1996, 264). Similarly, Carole Hodge (2006, 22) concludes that London accommodated the Serbian regime because "Serbia, now in control of one of the largest armies in Europe, and enjoying a dominant geostrategic position, had been perceived as an ally in both world wars, and might again prove useful to Britain in a new, as yet undefined, post-Cold War Europe". Consequently, the UK sought to frustrate any military intervention that aimed at punishing the aggressor (in contrast to a neutral peacekeeping force) and supported an international arms embargo that de facto favoured the well-armed Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslovenska narodna armija*, JNA) and Serbian troops (Hodge 2006, 11–23).

Partly overlapping with such an interpretation, other authors explain London's policy with a specific "British brand of political realism" (Glaurdić 2013, 560; similarly Simms 2002, 7, 11), arguing that decision-makers believed that stability in the area could only be maintained – or recovered – by relying on the strongest actor in the region, Belgrade. Thus, for Brendan Simms (2002, 19), the "policy of withholding recognition, in fact, only made sense as a strategy of bludgeoning the weaker side, the Croats, into territorial concessions". The preference to uphold Yugoslav unity – or later to support a strong Serbia – is often attributed to the "contemporary system of international relations", according to Josip Glaurdić (2013, 547) "a conservative endeavor with a strong emphasis on stability and the maintenance of status quo", a "tendency" that "has been particularly strong in Britain" with its "status as a former colonial power". Glaurdić does consider it "surprising" (547) that such a preference should still prevail at the end of the Cold War, pointing also to concerns over the break-up of the Soviet Union and a stronger, reunified Germany to explain London's inclination to resist change.

In this regard, Glaurdić differs from Conversi (1996, 271), who emphasises colonial continuities and argues that Britain and France shared the "conceit that Yugoslavia's disintegration was a 'disease' likely to 'infect' their neocolonial satellites, particularly in Africa. If the international state system is naturally conservative and on guard against secession, such is particularly the case among those countries that thrive on (neo)colonial liaisons." Also taking recourse to colonial history, but from a different angle, Beverly Crawford (1996, 519) claims that British and French interpretations of the Yugoslav crisis "were shaped largely by the decolonization process, which emphasized the right of self-determination for movements of independence from colonial rule and deemphasized the right of self-determination for separatist movements demanding territorial separation within a single state".

Indeed, during the Cold War, an anti-secessionist consensus had emerged in the United Nations, and separatist demands were frequently denounced as illegitimate threats to the international order. However, on the world stage, Afro-Asian states were the most vocal backers of the inviolability of international borders and primarily responsible for strengthening the territorial integrity norm during the Cold War (Methfessel 2025). Western countries, on the other hand, frequently supported breaches of the norm when it suited their interests. For example, during the Congo crisis (1960–1963), the separatist province of Katanga had many sympathizers in London. Although the British government did not recognize Katanga, it repeatedly tried to obstruct UN efforts to end the secession through military means (James 1996, 120–56). Furthermore, during the Bangladesh War (1971), when New Delhi intervened militarily to support the secessionist movement in East Pakistan, London was among the few countries in the United Nations not demanding India's withdrawal and was keen to recognise Bangladesh soon after the war. Good relations with India were perceived as more important than going along with the overwhelming majority of UN members who condemned any secessionist ambitions (Smith 2010; Debnath 2011).

Hence, London's policy of opposing the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia can only be understood in the context of the transformation of Europe at the end of the Cold War and the specific perception of the collapse of the Yugoslav federation at this time rather than being attributed to a British anti-secessionist tradition. This article aims to do just that by investigating newly declassified documents from the British National Archives. It focuses on the motives and perceptions that guided Britain's foreign policy response to the contentious issues surrounding the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia. Other questions, such as the equally contentious subject of external military intervention and the deployment of peacekeeping forces, are only discussed to the extent that they had a direct impact on the recognition debate. Moreover, the consequences of the decision to recognise (or the potential consequences of not recognising) the new states for the course of the Yugoslav Wars are not the subject of this article – such an analysis would require much closer attention to the decision-making processes and actions of key players in the conflict region. Nonetheless, the article will discuss to what extent concerns that "premature" recognition could lead to an escalation of violence played a role in British policy formulation.

British Policy at the Onset of Yugoslavia's Disintegration

Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic federation consisting of six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Serbia, the largest republic, also encompassed two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina. In the 1980s, nationalism was on the rise, and Slobodan Milošević, the de facto leader of Serbia since 1987 and Serbian president since 1989, became the champion of the new political mood in the republic. Harnessing popular outrage over alleged discrimination against the Serb minority in Kosovo, which was inhabited mainly by ethnic Albanians, he revoked the province's autonomous status and violently crushed any opposition. In addition, he questioned the balance of power between the republics established by the 1974 Constitution and advocated for a more centralised system that would give Serbia a hegemonic position within Yugoslavia (Silber and Little 1997, 31–69; Mappes-Niediek 2022, 35–45).

Serbia's new course caused concern within the other republics, with Slovenia and Croatia in particular opposing the Serbian drive for hegemony. In January 1990, tensions escalated at the 14th Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, when arguments between the Croatian and Slovenian delegations, on the one hand, and the Serbian delegation, on the other, resulted in the dissolution of the Communist Party. A few months later, the first democratic elections were held in Croatia and Slovenia, and the victorious opposition parties formed governments that claimed the right to self-determination for their republics. While the rise of nationalism and conflicts between the republics dominated Yugoslav politics, the federal government of Prime Minister Ante Marković, keen to preserve the unity of the country by transforming Yugoslavia into a democratic federation, proved unable to change the course of events and steadily lost its already limited power (Silber and Little 1997, 70–91; Mappes-Niediek 2022, 58–67). Moreover, in May 1991, Serbia blocked the rotation of the chair of the collective presidency, an institution created after Tito's death composed of representatives of all Yugoslav republics and autonomous provinces. According to the rotation schedule, the Croat Stipe Mesić was due to take over the position. Instead, Yugoslavia was left without a functioning head of state (Woodward 1995, 143; Gow 1997, 19–20).

In response to the increasing conflicts within Yugoslavia, the West endorsed Yugoslavia's unity and opposed the secessionist ambitions of Croatia and Slovenia (Eisermann 2000, 31–4). A Foreign Office note from 9 May 1991 for Prime Minister John Major declared that the "Helsinki principle that borders can be changed only peacefully is thus of crucial importance. […] we and our Western Partners have no interest in encouraging secession." The line Britain was to take was therefore to

"regularly make clear our strong preference for the continued existence of Yugoslavia as an entity. An eruption of mini-states in this region would be destabilising."[2]

The British government upheld its support for the preservation of the federation, even though internal assessments of the situation were rather pessimistic about Yugoslavia's future. A report from 5 March 1991 by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Douglas Hogg following the visit of a British diplomatic mission to Yugoslavia opened with the sentence: "Yugoslavia as created by President Tito is finished." After outlining all the conflicts that plagued Yugoslavia, the report concluded that "the economy is in a shambles and the risk of civil war is very real. […] This is not a time to 'buy futures' in Yugoslavia."[3]

Consequently, the British government publicly backed the federal government but was hesitant to provide financial aid to support the economic reforms Prime Minister Marković had initiated to keep Yugoslavia together (Glaurdić 2013). In reference to Western and British interests, the abovementioned note from 9 May 1991, argued that "Yugoslavia is less important in East/West relations than during the Cold War". Having lost its former geopolitical relevance as a buffer state and leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, there were simply fewer incentives to strengthen Yugoslavia, even though – the note added – "the region remains sensitive because of the many potential claims to Yugoslav territory (by virtually all of the country's neighbours)".[4] In the British perception, encouraging secessionism could only increase this risk of outside interference. Furthermore, a breakup of Yugoslavia was regarded as a dangerous precedent for the Soviet Union, where the Baltic states in particular were striving for independence. Thus, London continued to warn against a dissolution of Yugoslavia. But as there seemed to be no vital interests at stake, no serious efforts were made to keep the country together.

London's support for Yugoslav unity, however, by no means stemmed from a rosy picture of Serbia under the leadership of Milošević. There are no signs of British assessments having been influenced by a long "Serbophilic" tradition. Rather, the Serbian government was usually depicted as communist, nationalist, and aggressive. An analysis from 6 July 1990, by Percy Cradock, John Major's foreign policy adviser and chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, stated that "the situation has worsened" due to the recent Slovenian declaration of sovereignty, but went on to describe the Serbian government's steps to curb Kosovar autonomy as "more threatening".[5] In a minute from 4 October 1990 on the escalating violence in the Serb

2 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Yugoslavia. 9 May 1991.

3 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Douglas Hogg. Visit to Yugoslavia (Belgrade and Zagreb): 24-28 February. 5 March 1991.

4 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Yugoslavia. 9 May 1991.

5 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Percy Cradock. Yugoslavia. 6 July 1990. Cradock is referring to the Slovenian declaration of sovereignty of 2 July, which stipulated the supremacy of Slovenian over federal law. At

communities in Croatia, Cradock commented that the "new Croatian government has until now acted responsibly" and the "local Serbian claims of discrimination have been exaggerated".[6] The abovementioned report by Douglas Hogg on his visit to Yugoslavia declared that "in Serbia an essentially communist (and deeply nationalistic) government was elected. The President is a brute." In Slovenia and Croatia, on the other hand, "the governments are more democratic and free market in character", but also "profoundly nationalistic".[7] Similarly, the Foreign Office note from 9 May 1991 stated that Milošević "has advocated Serbian nationalism and old-fashioned communism".[8]

This view of the Serbian leadership was further reinforced by the Yugoslav ambassador in London, Svetozar Rikanović. Despite being a Serb himself, Rikanović, "speaking personally" with the assistant under-secretary of state for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Michael Tait, on 20 March 1991, described Milošević as "an old-fashioned Serbian nationalist, whose objective was to establish a Greater Serbia" and warned that "Milošević's policy was entirely unrealistic and could only lead to a bloodbath".[9]

The Slovenian War: From British Encouragement for a Military Solution to Calls for a Peaceful Settlement

The crisis became more acute after the JNA's military intervention in response to the Croatian and Slovenian declarations of independence on 25 June 1991. Unlike Croatia, Slovenia had not only declared its independence but also seized control of border posts and the airport. In response, the JNA advanced to reclaim these spaces, which represented the sovereignty of the federation (Silber and Little 1997, 154–6; Mappes-Niediek 2022, 15–18). The British government has been accused of encouraging the JNA intervention by repeatedly making ambiguous statements that, on the one hand, warned against a military crackdown on the democratically elected governments in Croatia and Slovenia but, on the other, conceded that the JNA might play a role in

the time, Slovenia had not yet declared full independence but advocated a confederation of sovereign states as a solution to the Yugoslav crisis (Jović 2008, 267–8). On 5 July, the Serbian government had dissolved the provincial parliament in Kosovo (Woodward 1995, 120–1).

6 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Percy Cradock. Yugoslavia: Clashes Between Serbs and Croats. 4 October 1990.

7 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Douglas Hogg. Visit to Yugoslavia (Belgrade and Zagreb): 24–28 February. 5 March 1991.

8 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Yugoslavia. 9 May 1991.

9 TNA. FCO 28/10851. FCO to Belgrade. 20 March 1991.

establishing order after the outbreak of conflicts (Glaurdić 2011, 162, 176; Glaurdić 2013, 558). For example, in the House of Commons, on 22 May 1991, Hogg replied to a question that a military solution to the country's problems would be "a disaster", and that the JNA "should be used only as a genuine peace-keeping force within Yugoslavia".[10] After the launch of the military intervention, on 27 June, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Mark Lennox-Boyd, then declared that

> we have repeatedly made it clear to the Yugoslav authorities that we would deplore the use, or the threat, of force to intimidate or coerce the democratically elected Governments of Slovenia and Croatia. I must add, however, that the Yugoslav federal army might have, under the constitution, a role in restoring order if there were widespread civil unrest.[11]

Recently declassified Foreign Office documents disclose that British encouragement for the military intervention went beyond ambiguous public statements, however. On the day before the intervention, the Yugoslav ambassador had met with Tait and explained to him that "the decision to secure Yugoslavia's borders would increase pressure on the Slovenes and Croats to take part in fresh negotiations on the country's future", expressing the hope that London would not "simply issue appeals to all sides to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis when it was clear that the Slovenes and Croats, and not the federal government and the JNA, were the provocateurs". In response, Tait "reiterated our preference for a single Yugoslav entity" and recognised that the "JNA's move to secure Yugoslavia's border was a measured response and not an attempt to clamp down on the Slovenes".[12]

When the British cabinet met the following day, Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd informed his colleagues about the recent developments, adding that the federal authorities in Belgrade had deployed troops to control the borders of Slovenia. The discussion that followed did not, however, focus on the military intervention but rather on the need to discourage outside intervention. And while it was argued that "Slovenia and Croatia were more democratic […] than the Government in Belgrade which was still dominated by Serbians with a nationalist, populist and Communist outlook", it was also "pointed out that any encouragement of secessionist pressures could have serious repercussions elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe and that every effort should be made to preserve stability in the region".[13] As mentioned

10 House of Commons Debate. 22 May 1991. https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1991-05-22/debates/559bb180-f6a3-4d4a-ae58-c329ca96450e/Yugoslavia (accessed 14 January 2025).

11 House of Commons Debate. 27 June 1991. https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1991-06-27/debates/69780e1e-2abe-443b-83f4-9be33bbeefb8/Yugoslavia (accessed 27 May 2025).

12 TNA. FCO 28/10851. FCO to Belgrade. 27 June 1991; FCO to Belgrade. 28 June 1991.

13 TNA. CAB 128/100/3. Conclusions of the Cabinet. 27 June 1991.

above, later the same day, Lennox-Boyd made an ambiguous statement on the role of the JNA in the House of Commons.

It soon came to light, however, that the British government had misjudged the situation, as things on the ground escalated quickly and the JNA's use of force turned out to be more controversial than expected. The Yugoslav military leadership had anticipated that limited action would be enough to re-establish some form of federal authority and was surprised by Slovenia's strong resistance. In response, most British papers and the BBC blamed the JNA for the escalation of violence and depicted the Slovenian War as a David vs Goliath fight (Symvoulidis 2005, 54–7). On 28 June, the *Daily Mail* mocked Lennox-Boyd's speech and described him as a "rabbit confronted with a stoat";[14] on 1 July, it commented that "Croatia and Slovenia have voted massively in favour of independence. And no attempt by the Communist strongman of Serbia to lock them in by armed force should be underwritten by Western diplomacy or Western aid."[15]

In line with the public mood, the British government adjusted its position and condemned the use of force. Shortly before the EC summit in Luxembourg on 28 June, in an interview with BBC Radio, Hurd argued "that although we think there is a great deal to be said for holding Yugoslavia together by consent, that cannot be done by sending tanks in to fire on people".[16] At the summit, the EC members tasked a "troika" consisting of the foreign ministers of Italy (Gianni de Michelis), Luxembourg (Jacques Poos), and the Netherlands (Hans van den Broek) with mediating in the conflict. Over the course of several trips to Yugoslavia, the foreign ministers demanded the appointment of Stipe Mesić to resolve the crisis of the federal presidency, the suspension of the independence declarations for three months, and the observance of a ceasefire by all parties (Gow 1997, 46–51; Glaurdić 2011, 179–84).

In the early hours of 1 July, with the appointment of Mesić, the first demand was met (Silber and Little 1997, 162). Later the same day, Hurd had a meeting with the Yugoslav ambassador at which he took a very different line than his assistant undersecretary had a few days ago, telling Rikanović "that although the prime minister and I were firm in our wish to see Yugoslavia continue as a political entity this would not be achieved by the use of force. Our statements of support for Yugoslavia should not be taken as giving the federal authorities carte blanche to achieve their purposes."[17]

Subsequently, Mesić and the Slovene government agreed on a ceasefire, but the JNA continued its attacks on Slovenia. In a phone call with Hurd on 3 July, Mesić

14 Welch, Colin. "Sympathy for the Devil." *Daily Mail*. 28 June 1991.

15 "The Ballot Box or the Tank?" *Daily Mail*. 1 July 1991.

16 TNA. FCO 28/10863. Transcript of Interview Given by the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Douglas Hurd, in Luxembourg, on Friday, 28 June 1991.

17 TNA. FCO 28/10851. FCO to Belgrade. 1 July 1991.

complained that the "army had gone out of control". Hurd promised that the EC member states "would do all they could to deter the army and to support the president's authority and the rule of law".[18] On the same day, he had another phone call with German Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Hans-Dietrich Genscher. During this call, Hurd expressed – at least according to the German record – that he was open to the idea of threatening to recognise Slovenia and Croatia in the event that the JNA did not cease the fighting.[19] And a message Hurd sent to the Yugoslav Defence Minister, Veljko Kadijević, warned "that a military venture of this sort is bound to fail, with most serious consequences for the future of your country".[20] In a House of Commons speech on the afternoon of 3 July, he informed the audience of his diplomatic activities and made an ambiguous statement on the future of Yugoslavia: "It may no longer be possible to hold the whole country together, though it is equally hard to see how the dismemberment of Yugoslavia could be brought about by peaceful means."[21] When covering the debate, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* concluded that even the UK was no longer ruling out the option of recognizing the secessionist republics.[22]

However, by the time these articles appeared, the JNA had agreed to a ceasefire and international opposition to the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia had hardened again. In the cabinet meeting of 4 July, Hurd argued that the "disintegration of Yugoslavia would have serious and long-lasting consequences for the region".[23] When the EC foreign ministers met in the Hague on 5 July (Britain was only represented by Minister of State Hogg), Genscher proposed a joint warning to the JNA that a return to the use of force could lead to the recognition of Slovenia, but his proposal was only supported by Denmark.[24] Two days later the Slovenian War ended with the Brioni Accord, an agreement based on the demands of the EC troika (Baker 2015, 51).

18 TNA. FCO 28/10851. FCO to Belgrade. 3 July 1991.

19 "Telefongespräche des Bundesministers Genscher, 3. July 1991." In Wirsching, Creuzberger, and Miard-Delacroix 2022, doc. 226, 926–30.

20 TNA. FCO 28/10851. Message to Veljko Kadijevic. 3 July 1991.

21 House of Commons Debate. 3 July 1991. https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1991-07-03/debates/b71aa1a5-78c6-4d2e-b046-16d5fbe9632f/Yugoslavia (accessed 27 May 2025). The cited sentence did not appear in the draft statement the Foreign Office had prepared for Hurd, which instead contained the following wording: "It is clear that the old constitution is in an advanced state of decay and must be replaced by a new structure, based on democracy, respect for the rights of minorities and the aspirations of all groups within Yugoslavia." TNA 28/10856. C. Hulse. Statement on Yugoslavia. 3 July 1991.

22 "When Tanks Dictate." *The Guardian*. 4 July 1991; Steve Doughty. "Hurd Warns Hard-line Generals." *Daily Mail*. 4 July 1991.

23 TNA. CAB 128/100/4. Conclusions of the Cabinet. 4 July 1991.

The War in Croatia and the Foreign Office Debate about State Recognition and Yugoslavia's Internal Borders

After the JNA's withdrawal from Slovenia, violence in Croatia escalated. In fact, it was the lack of Serbian support for military intervention in Slovenia that forced the Yugoslav High Command to abandon its intervention there. For Milošević, the departure of Slovenia from the Yugoslav Federation was acceptable, even welcomed, whereas Croatia's independence threatened Serbia's core interests (Glaurdić 2011, 177–8). After the electoral victory of Franjo Tuđman's Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ) in May 1990, political representatives of the Serb minority, directed by the Serbian government in Belgrade but also motivated by a fear of the nationalist policies of the HDZ, rejected the authority of the new government and claimed the right to remain within the Yugoslav Federation (Silber and Little 1997, 92–104; Mappes-Niediek 2022, 68–77).

The first violent incidents between Croatian Serbs and the Croatian police were seen in the summer of 1990 (Grandits and Leutloff 2002). After the JNA's military intervention in Slovenia, the conflict erupted into a full-scale war. Beginning in late July 1991, Croatian Serb militias, Serb voluntary forces, and the JNA launched an offensive to create ethnically homogeneous Serb territories within Croatia. Croatian inhabitants of the Serb-controlled territories were violently expelled – the beginning of "ethnic cleansing", a method that became a notorious feature of all subsequent wars in the region. In public, the Serbian government continued to support Yugoslav unity, but Milošević was de facto already pursuing his goal to build a "Greater Serbia", be that by uniting ethnic Serbs in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republic of Serbia into one Serbian state, or by establishing Serbian hegemony in a new (rump) Yugoslavia that could emerge as a result of the war. Consequently, the Serbian government described the borders between the Yugoslav republics as purely administrative lines and argued that, if Croatia were to declare its independence, the Serbian minority would have the right to self-determination and to decide whether their future lay within Croatia or Yugoslavia (Silber and Little 1997, 169–89; Mappes-Niediek 2022, 87–108).

In the meantime, governments around Europe struggled with how to respond to the developments within Yugoslavia. One core objective of the Foreign Office was not to get too involved in the conflicts, not least to avoid the EC having to engage in

24 "Drahterlass der Vortragenden Legationsräte I. Klasse von Jagow und Libal an die Botschaften in den EG-Mitgliedstaaten und die Botschaft in Belgrad, 5. July 1991." In Wirsching, Creuzberger, and Miard-Delacroix 2022, doc. 237, 978–81.

military operations. Already on 3 July, Robert Cooper from the Policy Planning Staff argued that the "most useful role that the EC can play is as a mediator", but "should be careful not to take sides". And in the event that "attempts at a ceasefire/negotiations fail […] our priority becomes to contain the conflicts within Yugoslavia".[25] Likewise, a press article drafted for Hurd by Simon McDonald from the Policy Planning Staff made the case that the "role of the EC will of course be strictly neutral" and that if "the Yugoslavs decide to fight we cannot stop them".[26] Hurd decided against publishing the article,[27] but it accurately described the British government's view on the events in Yugoslavia. Accordingly, the UK blocked subsequent proposals for a military mission of the Western European Union (WEU), an idea advanced by France. Paris was keen to strengthen the defence capabilities of the EC, while London was against any steps that could weaken NATO's relevance (Giersch 1998, 131–3; Glaurdić 2011, 197–8, 220–3).

While there was a Foreign Office consensus on ruling out WEU intervention, there was some uncertainty on how to formulate a coherent British position towards the unfolding crisis. A minute by J. C. R. Gray from the Eastern European Department from 24 July proposed to hold "the line on non-recognition on Slovenia and especially Croatia" and to discourage changes of the internal borders within Yugoslavia as "it would be wrong to imply approval of Serbia's de facto annexation of areas of Croatia, and would open a Pandora's box of possible territorial claims all over Yugoslavia". As a medium-term policy, Gray supported an EC good offices mission or a round table conference bringing together the Yugoslav presidency and all republics.[28] On the same day, Hogg approved the idea of a round table conference, but added that such an endeavour would need "large input" from the EC.[29] On 26 July, Hurd, too, agreed with Gray's analysis as well as Hogg's comment.[30]

Even though pressure to recognise Slovenia and Croatia had decreased after the end of the Slovenian War, the issue remained on the international agenda. After Germany's failure at the EC meeting on 5 July to mobilise support for its proposal to use recognition as a threat, Genscher continued to blame the JNA and Serbia for the escalation of the violence and Bonn's support for Croatian and Slovenian self-determination steadily increased in the second half of 1991, although there is some debate about when exactly the German government started working towards the goal of full independence for the two breakaway republics (Libal 1997; Korczynski 2005; Mappes-Niediek 2022, 109–22; Martens 2023).

25 TNA. FCO 28/10856. R F Cooper. Yugoslavia: Strategy. 3 July 1991.
26 TNA. FCO 28/10856. S G McDonald. Yugoslavia: Article by the Secretary of State. 25 July 1991.
27 TNA. FCO 28/10856. R H T Gozney, Yugoslavia: Article by the Secretary of State. 30 July 1991.
28 TNA. FCO 28/10856. J C R Gray. Yugoslavia: Next Steps. 24 July 1991.
29 TNA. FCO 28/10856. Pamela Mitchison. Yugoslavia: Next Steps. 25 July 1991.
30 TNA. FCO 28/10856. Gozney. Yugoslavia: Next Steps. 26 July 1991.

The British government observed this development with concern. A telegram sent by Hurd on 16 July to various embassies and circulated within the Foreign Office opened with the sentence: "In view of the sympathy for the Slovene and Croatian declarations of independence in some countries, notably in Austria and Germany, it may be useful to set out the current arguments against recognition by HMG [Her Majesty's Government]." The cable stated that neither Slovenia nor Croatia met "our criteria for statehood": a clearly defined territory, a government exercising control over that territory, full internal autonomy, and independence in external relations.[31] Thus, the legal position taken by London was not based on the anti-secessionist consensus that had emerged in the United Nations in the wake of the decolonisation process. There was a memorandum by a legal adviser of the Foreign Office, Chris Whomersley, analysing the right to self-determination in this context and cautiously concluding that the norm could not "justify secession from an existing sovereign State".[32] But this analysis had no impact on the stance subsequently taken by London. At the time, in public statements as well as in diplomatic correspondence, the British government repeatedly referred to the legal criteria listed above. These criteria were first stipulated in the 1933 Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States (Caplan 2005, 51–2, 60–1), although this treaty was not mentioned by name.[33]

Accordingly, even though issues around the political regime played a role in the public reaction to the Slovenian War, they were not decisive for the Foreign Office assessment of how to respond to the recognition question once the war was over. Certainly, to make its case for recognition, the government in Ljubljana presented Slovenia as a Western and European state, and along with its independence declaration adopted a constitutional law that included a commitment to democratic principles, human rights, and international law (Bojinović Fenko and Šabič 2017, 48–9). But such commitments were not a critical factor as, for the Foreign Office, the Montevideo Convention was the basis to evaluate the question of state recognition. When the Slovenian documents arrived in London with some delay on 25 July, accompanied by a letter from Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel requesting recognition, a Foreign Office official only scribbled on them: "I don't think we should do anything about it, do you?"[34]

Besides a reference to the legal criteria, the telegram from 15 July outlining the British stance on the recognition question also raised political arguments against the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia, contending that such a step would remove any

31 TNA. FCO 28/10856. FCO to Vienna. 16 July 1991.

32 TNA. FCO 28/10856. C A Whomersley. Yugoslavia: Self-Determination. 2 August 1991.

33 Instead, the cable referred to a 1984 speech by Baroness Young in the House of Lords, House of Lords Debate. 15 February 1984. https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1984-02-15/debates/1227572d-913b-4021-b333-d2a02092f3c0/SovereigntyInternationalLaw (accessed 27 May 2025).

34 TNA. FCO 28/10862. Rupel to Hurd. 25 June 1991.

incentives for Slovenia and Croatia to take part in the negotiations about Yugoslavia's future. Furthermore, it would endanger the stability of the remaining republics. They would be dominated by Serbia and "under anything like the present leadership such a state would be xenophobic, repressive and poor". Thus, "the best prospect for regional stability may be some kind of confederal system".[35]

Still, Slovenian independence was perceived as less problematic than the Croatian equivalent as Slovenia was "ethnically homogenous" while the situation in Croatia was "complicated by the issue of Serbian enclaves".[36] The question of the Serb minority in Croatia was linked to the debate about the border between Croatia and Serbia. In this regard, the British government had already rejected a Dutch proposal from 13 July for changes to Yugoslavia's internal borders in order to settle the national conflicts there (as did almost all other EC members) (Both 2000, 107–8). Thereafter, the UK continued to endorse all declarations by international organisations stating that acquisitions of territory by force would not be recognised. And, as mentioned above, Hurd had approved Grey's memorandum from 24 July that argued against the recognition of the Serbian conquests in Croatia.

Nevertheless, reflecting the Serbian advances in Croatia, subsequent Foreign Office assessments of the situation and speculations about the future of the conflict agreed that the cession of Croatian territory to Serbia was not an unlikely outcome. In his comment on Grey's paper, Tait predicted that if "Croatia follows Slovenia's example, the re-delineation of inter-republican borders will be unavoidable".[37] On 12 August, C. Hulse from the Eastern European Department argued that recognition of Croatia was only possible if "the Croats decide to cut their losses and cede these areas [the Serb enclaves in Croatia occupied by the JNA and Serbian militias]".[38] Three days later, Hulse wrote: "We assumed that some kind of accommodation will be reached between Milosevic and Tudjman, although the latter will have to produce something big in exchange for giving away Croatian real estate." Hulse was thinking of a German and Austrian promise of recognition allowing Tuđman to "sell a deal with Serbia to his supporters".[39] Similarly, according to M. J. L. Kirk from the Security Policy Department, there was no chance of "a peaceful 'independent' Croatia which incorporated the Serbian enclaves" and "Croat leaders will therefore be drawn towards a 'land for the peace' deal".[40]

In line with such expectations, many members of the Foreign Office staff forecast that Yugoslavia would eventually split into three states: Slovenia, a probably smaller

35 TNA. FCO 28/10856. FCO to Vienna. 16 July 1991.
36 TNA. FCO 28/10856. FCO to Vienna. 16 July 1991.
37 TNA. FCO 28/10856. Minute by M L Tait. 25 July 1991.
38 TNA. FCO 28/10856. C Hulse. Yugoslavia. 12 August 1991.
39 TNA. FCO 28/10856. C Hulse. Yugoslavia: The Future. 15 August 1991.
40 TNA. FCO 28/10856. M J L Kirk. Yugoslavia. 16 August 1991.

Croatia, and a rump Yugoslavia dominated by Serbia. According to Hulse, this was "the most likely scenario". This development was by no means favoured by the Foreign Office, and thus Hulse argued that "we would presumably wish to maintain political and economic pressure on Milosevic in order to discourage him from threatening the stability of Macedonia and Bosnia/Hercegovina".[41] And Cooper predicted that if Serbia "swallowed Bosnia and Macedonia […] our relations with Greater Serbia were unlikely to be 'normal' for a very long time".[42]

Therefore, despite some pessimism about the chances of Yugoslavia's survival, the UK stuck to the policy of endorsing a single Yugoslav entity, even though a looser structure and the transformation of the federation into some kind of confederation was now perceived as the only way of keeping the Yugoslav republics together. Correspondingly, London favoured delaying the recognition of new states for as long as possible and supported negotiations and an international conference to settle the Yugoslav conflicts. However, there was also a consensus that vital British interests were not at stake and the issue was not worth risking the lives of British soldiers.[43]

The Peace Conference at The Hague and Wavering British Opposition to Slovenian and Croatian Independence

As favoured by London, the EC convened a round table conference and negotiations in this forum started on 7 September in The Hague under the chairmanship of Lord Carrington, a former British diplomat. A minute from Major's Foreign Policy Adviser Cradock describes British policy at the onset of the conference as "detached", observing with some apprehension that "we […] exert what influence we can through the peace conference and observers, while recognising that these devices could well fail and that more blood may have to flow before any worthwhile discussion between the combatants can take place".[44]

There is some evidence that British diplomats initially expected the cession of Croatian territory as part of a general settlement of the Yugoslav conflict. On the opening day, Hurd asked Tuđman outright, "whether he could contemplate the change of frontiers by consent". Tuđman replied that "the concept of no change of

41 TNA. FCO 28/10856. C Hulse. Yugoslavia. 12 August 1991.

42 TNA. FCO 28/10856. R F Cooper. Yugoslavia. 14 August 1991.

43 See for example TNA. FCO 28/10856. R F Cooper. Yugoslavia. 14 August 1991; FCO 28/10870. M D Uden. Yugoslav Peace Conference 7 September 1991. 6 September 1991.

44 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Percy Cradock. Policy on Yugoslavia. 11 September 1991.

present frontiers should stick".[45] Yet the future of the Serbian enclaves in Croatia remained on the "back burner" throughout the conference, as stated in a Foreign Office telegram on 27 September. In this regard, British policy continued to take the position that "a final solution to it can be reached only through by [sic] negotiation between Croatia and Serbia" and "that acquisition of territory by force is unacceptable".[46] In his reply to the telegram, the British Ambassador in Belgrade, Peter Hall, pointed out the contradiction in this position: "Finally, I agree we must keep rigidly to the line that acquisition of territory by force is unacceptable […]. But I think that we ourselves need to recognise, privately, that the final deal (if there is one) […] may have to include cession of some Croatian territory."[47]

That being said, in the documents consulted for this article, there is no evidence that, after Hurd had raised the question with Tuđman once, British politicians actively went further in pressing Croatia to cede territory. On the contrary, when Hurd met with Genscher on 10 September, he spoke of the need to clearly tell Milošević that border changes by force were not acceptable and he considered border changes through an agreement unlikely.[48] Moreover, on 14 October, Hogg declared in the House of Commons: "However, the Serbians need to understand that the international community will not accept or tolerate any change in internal frontiers by force. I took the opportunity of a recent meeting with the deputy Prime Minister of Serbia to spell out that fact clearly."[49] In the meeting with Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Budimir Košutić, Hogg had indeed emphasised that "the international community would not recognise changes in borders achieved by force".[50]

In this regard, the political leadership of the UK took a different line to the French government. When President François Mitterrand met with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on 18 September, he spoke of the need for Croatia and Serbia to agree to a review of their borders.[51] The British government took no such steps to promote border changes, despite all the speculations about Croatian territorial concessions by the Foreign Office staff. For example, in a minute from 16 October, Hulse described a conversation with Hall where the latter had once again spoken of "an agreement on territorial exchange between Tudjman and Milosevic" as a

45 TNA. FCO 28/10870. The Hague to FCO. 7 September 1991.

46 TNA. FCO 28/10870. FCO to Belgrade. 27 September 1991.

47 TNA. FCO 28/10871. Belgrade to FCO. 2 October 1991.

48 "Gespräch des Bundesministers Genscher mit dem britischen Außenminister Hurd in Moskau, 10. September 1991." In Wirsching, Creuzberger, and Miard-Delacroix 2022, doc. 299, 1205–7.

49 House of Commons debate. 14 October 1991. https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1991-10-14/debates/7bc7b13a-3164-4e1f-9548-0a2f04e99693/Yugoslavia (accessed 27 May 2025).

50 TNA. FCO 28/10851. Hurd to Belgrade. 3 October 1991.

51 "Gespräch des Bundeskanzlers Kohl mit dem französischen Staatspräsidenten Mitterrand. 18. September 1991." In Wirsching, Creuzberger, and Miard-Delacroix 2022, doc. 315, 1256–62.

"possible outcome of the conflict". But the minute qualifies this observation by stating that there "is little that the EC can do to broker a trade-off of this kind".[52]

In fact, the actions of the EC went in the opposite direction. Originally, a ceasefire was considered to be a precondition for negotiations, and indeed, on 2 September, an agreement between the parties was reached – but did not hold. Thus, negotiations in The Hague had started while the fighting on the ground continued. When the violence further escalated in October, with the JNA shelling the historic port city of Dubrovnik, the EC blamed the JNA and Serbia for the continuation of the war (Gow 1997, 53–9). On 7 October, Hurd, too, favoured a "condemnation of the Serbian leadership in particular (mention of accountability for their actions, unacceptability of territory acquired by force […])".[53] Likewise, at the conference, the Dutch government abandoned its previous stance and insisted on a settlement without border changes.[54] As the holder of the EC presidency and host of the conference, the Netherlands played a crucial role during the negotiations. In a phone call with Hurd on 10 October, Dutch Foreign Minister van den Broek argued for the need to increase the pressure on the JNA and Serbia and "to say to them that the European Community wanted to end the peace conference at the end of the year at which point there would be a declaration of principles governing the future of Yugoslavia, and recognition by the Twelve of those republics that wanted independence". Hurd agreed "that this was a good idea".[55]

Hurd's support for the proposal is surprising, considering it contradicted the position the UK had taken before (and would take again afterwards) that any settlement of the conflict must be agreed on by all conflict parties. In a letter to the prime minister's office, he explained his support for van den Broek's step with his "conviction that Croatia and Slovenia will not rejoin a Yugoslav state and that the issue of recognition is one of timing rather than substance". However, he still did "not think that early recognition would be sensible".[56] Besides increasing British acceptance that Slovenian and Croatian independence was likely to come sooner or later, Hurd probably misjudged the significance of the Dutch step. After the outbreak of the Yugoslav conflict, the Netherlands had tended to be in the same camp as the UK, while its relations with the German government were tense. However, over time the Dutch had become increasingly impatient with Serbia's uncompromising attitude at the conference and consequently were moving closer to the German position. With the agreement of his EC colleagues, on 10 October, van den Broek announced a two-

52 TNA. FCO 28/10871. C Hulse. EC Conference on Yugoslavia, 16 October 1991.
53 TNA. FCO 28/10857. J Q Greenstock. Yugoslavia: Immediate FCO Action. 7 October 1991.
54 TNA. FCO 28/10871. Pres/Hag COREU. 11 October 1991.
55 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Gass to Turnbull. Yugoslavia. 10 October 1991.
56 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Gass to Turnbull. Yugoslavia. 10 October 1991.

month deadline for reaching a general settlement, otherwise a decision to recognise individual republics would follow (Both 2000, 121–6).

Subsequently, the Dutch made efforts to isolate Serbia at the conference. On 28 October, the EC issued a declaration calling on Serbia to accept Lord Carrington's draft settlement for the future of Yugoslavia by 5 November. Otherwise, the conference would continue only with the participation of cooperative republics. This draft settlement envisaged the transformation of Yugoslavia into a loose confederation of sovereign states, each of which would guarantee substantial rights to national minorities. The proposal was accepted by all republics but Serbia. The bone of contention was not whether Yugoslavia survived as a federation, a loose association, or at all, but rather how the borders between the republics would be drawn. Milošević was not satisfied with minority rights or even autonomy for the Serbs in Croatia, but demanded border changes (Both 2000, 126–8).

As a result, the negotiations failed on 5 November. However, instead of continuing without Serbia, Carrington suspended the conference, still hoping to reach a general settlement that included Serbia. The UK supported this stance. According to studies critical of London's Yugoslavia policy, this approach aimed at pressuring Croatia into territorial concessions. As evidence for this interpretation, they point to a statement by Hogg made in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons on 6 November: "If the parties wanted to make adjustments to frontiers, by your prior recognition you actually have an obstacle in the way of that" (Simms 2002, 19; Glaurdić 2011, 253). A memorandum from 27 November by Charles Crawford from the Soviet Department of the British Foreign Office more openly sympathised with the Serbian demands, arguing that the "existing internal borders were a Titoist/Stalinist fix" and "the Serbs would see international blessing of Croatia's present borders as, in effect, endorsing the horrendous massacres of Serbs which Croat fascists carried out during and after the Second World War".[57]

Siding with Serbia in this way was, however, the exception in the Foreign Office. In the diplomatic encounters that followed the collapse of the peace conference, the Foreign Office leadership took no steps to promote border changes and thus reach a settlement by appeasing Serbia. Certainly, decision-makers in London were more suspicious of Croatia than their colleagues in Bonn, and the Foreign Office attributed some of the blame for the escalation of the conflict to the government in Zagreb.[58] Prime Minister Major, too, wrote in his autobiography that "Milosevic was matched by the Croat leader Franjo Tudjman, whose nationalism enraged the minority of Serbs in Krajina and eastern Slavonia" (Major 1999, 532–3). But there is no evidence that sympathy for Serbia was a factor in the British position to continuously argue

57 TNA. FCO 28/10904. Charles Crawford. Possible Recognition of Croatia. 27 November 1991.
58 TNA. FCO 28/10856. J C R Gray. Yugoslavia. 30 August 1991.

against "premature" recognition at the end of 1991. Rather, the Foreign Office expected that recognition would only fuel the violence in the conflict region. On the one hand, it was feared that such a step would provoke Serbia, causing it to pursue an even more aggressive course in Croatia and thus endangering the negotiations about a ceasefire and the deployment of peacekeeping forces that were still ongoing even after the suspension of the peace conference. On the other hand, a spread of the violence and the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina seemed to be a real risk once the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia placed the independence of all the Yugoslav republics on the international agenda.[59]

And even though the case for delaying the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia for as long as possible de facto benefited the Serbian position, London by no means intentionally pursued a policy of strengthening Serbia. On the contrary, in the assessments of the Foreign Office, sanctions against Serbia were perceived as the only strategy that in the mid and long term could influence the government in Belgrade to agree to a negotiated settlement of the conflict.[60] In this regard, the British government advocated taking a tough line and was often much closer to Germany than to France, its "ally" on the recognition front. Already in the deliberations that led to the EC's warning against Serbia on 28 October, London would have liked to include "explicit reference to a UN oil embargo" but was "supported only by the Belgians and Germany". And French responses to the British attempts to strengthen sanctions against Yugoslavia in the United Nations Security Council were perceived as unhelpful.[61]

While the UK was keen to postpone the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia, Germany was doubling down in its efforts to support the independence of the two republics. Genscher disagreed with Carrington's decision to suspend the conference and wanted to continue negotiations with the cooperative republics. Furthermore, Bonn took the ultimatum the EC had issued on 10 October seriously and advocated recognising Slovenia and Croatia after 10 December.[62] In the end, on 16 December, London acquiesced and supported the French–German compromise to recognise the republics seeking independence based on them fulfilling certain conditions. This decision cannot be explained by German pressure alone. Dutch insistence on setting deadlines for a negotiated settlement – and initial British support for this step – were

59 TNA. FCO 28/10857. J C R Gray. Yugoslavia. 26 November 1991; TNA. PREM 19/3990. Eastern European Department. Foreign Affairs Council: Brussels, 16–17 December 1991. 12 December 1991.

60 TNA, FCO 28/10867. S L Gass. Yugoslavia: The Next Steps. 7 October 1991.

61 TNA. PREM 19/3989. S L Gass. Yugoslavia. 30 October 1991.

62 "Vorlage des Vortragenden Legationsrats I. Klasse Libal für Bundesminister Genscher. 9. November 1991." In Wirsching, Creuzberger, and Miard-Delacroix 2022, doc. 377, 1521–7; Vermerk des Ministerialdirektors Chrobog. 26. November 1991." In Wirsching, Creuzberger, and Miard-Delacroix 2022, doc. 405, 1630–9, here 1636.

equally important in setting a process in motion that made it easy for Germany to self-confidently advance the cause of Croatian and Slovenian independence. Furthermore, Hurd himself had increasingly warmed to the idea of recognising both republics, repeatedly arguing that this was not a question of "substance", but rather of "timing".

In the British press too, support for Croatia and Slovenia was increasing as a result of the Serbian aggression. Especially the bombardment and siege of Dubrovnik was a turning point in the British media coverage, and from early October on, many comments singled out Serbia as the aggressor (Symvoulidis 2005, 57–61). That said, on 21 October, an opinion poll analysis by Edward Bickham, the special adviser of the foreign secretary, still concluded that the "Government's practical, if inglorious, approach to the Yugoslav crisis appears to command public support". In fact, this conclusion is a rather benevolent interpretation of the data, as according to the polls, a relative majority felt that the EC and the UK had not done enough to stop the fighting. However, one poll finding came as a surprise to Bickham: 65 % agreed with the statement that "as Yugoslavia is part of Europe, the other countries of the European Community, including Britain, have a duty to try and help". For Bickham, the "idea of a special responsibility to Yugoslavia as a fellow European country is stronger than I would have predicted".[63] This comment is telling of the British perception of the Yugoslav crisis in general. In retrospect, it is clear that the Yugoslav wars had a "European dimension" and "confronted European societies with difficult questions" (Bougarel, Grandits, and Stefanov 2013, 471; see also Wirsching 2012, 121–52). But as the crisis escalated in the summer of 1991, the British government seriously misjudged the significance that events in Yugoslavia would have for the struggles over the meaning of Europe's post-Cold War order.

Initially, as the crisis unfolded in the summer of 1991, many in the Foreign Office believed that the UK could pursue a "detached" policy, condemning the use of force while waiting for the parties in the conflict region to fight it out until they were ready to reach a settlement based on the new realities on the ground. This policy, however, was difficult to maintain given the growing expectations among the British public and in the European Community that something needed to be done about the Serbian aggression. And sanctions, the one tool London was willing to use to pressure Milošević into making concessions, were unlikely to yield quick results. In a letter to the prime minister from 25 November, Hurd commented on recent news on the course of the war that "public and Parliamentary pressure, already great, will increase if the siege of Osijek continues. This pressure is ill-focussed but we are likely to be urged still more strongly to recognise Croatia (and other Yugoslav Republics who want independence)." Besides, as Hurd noted, the "Germans and Italians are both

63 TNA. PREM 19/3989. Edward Bickham. Opinion Research: Yugoslavia. 21 October 1991.

strongly in favour". Describing the British position on this question, he stated: "Our public line has been that recognition is a matter of when, not if. We may not be far off."[64] A brief in preparation for the crucial EC meeting on 16 December still described one objective as being "to resist pressure, particularly from the Germans, to push us into rapid recognition of Croatia and Slovenia". But the document also contained a fallback position in case "recognition of Croatia is inevitable".[65]

The meeting on 16 December was a tense one. While the Netherlands had pursued an anti-Serbian course during the negotiations in The Hague, the Dutch were now worried about the consequences an early recognition could have for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Spain, Ireland, and Greece also raised concerns. Germany, Denmark, Belgium, and Italy, on the other hand, insisted that the time was ripe for recognition, and eventually the EC agreed on the French–German compromise formula to recognise those republics that fulfilled certain criteria (rule of law, democracy, human rights, minority rights, etc.). There is some evidence that German support for British demands at the EC summit in Maastricht on 9 and 10 December played a role for the UK's willingness to accommodate German demands (Both 2000, 133–6). In his memoirs, Hurd describes how Genscher, during the 16 December meeting, reminded him of Kohl's previous support for Major at the Maastricht summit. "Now, so ran his argument, it was the Germans who were in political difficulty and it was our turn to help them by agreeing to the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia. This argument carried weight with the Prime Minister and myself." In a phone call with Hurd, Major agreed to settle the question (Hurd 2004, 497–8). In the words of the memorandum from Cooper quoted at the beginning of this article: "Germany helped Britain and others at Maastricht. When they called in the debt we had no choice: Germany is more important to us than Yugoslavia."[66]

Conclusion

A re-evaluation of British policy towards the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia based on recently declassified archival documents in parts corroborates interpretations from older studies, in parts provides a basis for questioning older assumptions about British motives, and in parts offers new insights into hitherto unknown debates and activities of the Foreign Office. Thus, the newly declassified documents on British policy during the Yugoslav Wars clearly demonstrate that

64 TNA. PREM 19/3990. Douglas Hurd. Yugoslavia. 26 November 1991.

65 TNA. PREM 19/3990. Eastern European Department. Foreign Affairs Council: Brussels, 16–17 December 1991. 12 December 1991.

66 TNA. FCO 175/408. R F Cooper. How did We get into this Mess? 24 January 1992.

London's policy formulation was not influenced by a long Serbophilic tradition that allegedly dominated British thinking on the eve of the Yugoslav Wars. On the contrary, there was no sympathy for the Serbian government under Milošević from the early stages of the crisis on and a strong Serbia was by no means perceived as being in the interests of the UK by the Foreign Office. Instead, all assessments that refer to the motives of the Serbian government describe the rise of a "Greater Serbia" as a worrisome development that should best be contained. Similarly, opposition to (premature) recognition was not motivated by fear of a reunified Germany aiming to expand its sphere of influence in Southeastern Europe. Rather, in the British assessment, German policy was driven by public pressure and not geopolitical designs. Bonn's demands were opposed because there were perceived as a misguided policy with potentially dangerous consequences for the conflict region and not because it was expected that Germany could profit from them.

There is also no evidence in the archival material consulted for this study that neocolonial motives and worries over the spread of secessionism to "satellites" in Africa played a role in British policy formulation. Nor was London's stance on the Yugoslav crisis shaped by the anti-secessionist consensus that had emerged in the wake of the decolonisation process. When the British government referred to international law, it mainly drew on criteria for state recognition in the tradition of the 1933 Montevideo Convention. In the end, however, political considerations played a decisive role in the decisions made in London.

Overall, interpretations that emphasize the *realpolitik* approach of the Foreign Office best explain British policy formulation on Yugoslavia in 1991. Yet Foreign Office policy papers outlining a *realpolitik* position based on British interests often offered no guidelines for realistic decision-making once developments unfolded rapidly in the crisis region and international politics. Ultimately, British decisions also reflected public opinion in the UK and the search for a consensus within the EC, especially in cases where Foreign Secretary Hurd became personally involved in the decision-making process. Foreign Policy Adviser Cradock later wrote that "the belief in the European Community at the time that the crisis offered an admirable opportunity for the Community to display its ability to sort out European problems" and the "media too, with their harrowing television pictures and their implicit refrain, 'Something must be done', made inactivity politically impossible" (Cradock 1997, 188). The documents from the Foreign Office confirm this view.

At the onset of the crisis, London endorsed Yugoslav unity, as the preservation of the Yugoslav federation seemed to serve British interests and regional stability best, even though such an outcome was perceived as unlikely and London was hesitant to make financial commitments to support the federal government (Glaurdić 2013). Still, British politicians made ambiguous public statements that could be interpreted as consenting to military action against the secessionist republics (Glaurdić 2011, 162,

176). Moreover, the archival material this article draws on demonstrates that the Foreign Office explicitly gave the green light to the use of force in a meeting with the Yugoslav ambassador a day before the JNA intervened in Slovenia.

Yet the Foreign Office documents also show that once the JNA's action was met with harsh criticism by the British press and governments around Europe, Hurd strongly condemned the use of force in a conversation with the Yugoslav ambassador and in a warning to the Yugoslav defence minister. Furthermore, he made an ambiguous statement in the House of Commons that gave rise to speculations about London's willingness to consider the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia. But once the fighting in Slovenia ended, the UK continued to oppose Croatian and Slovenian independence, instead hoping to preserve Yugoslavia in the looser structure of a confederation. During the negotiations that followed, the Foreign Office began by arguing that the EC should only act as a neutral mediator. Yet, in response to the course of the Serbian–Croatian War and press criticism of the actions of the JNA and the Serbian forces, Hurd supported several EC initiatives to increase the pressure on Serbia, thus contributing to a development that eventually culminated in the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia. From October on, Hurd himself repeatedly contended that recognition was only a question of timing and should be part of an overall settlement of the Yugoslav crisis.

British insistence on an overall settlement has been interpreted as an attempt to pressure Croatia into making territorial concessions. Indeed, many observers in the Foreign Office assumed that the final political settlement would reflect the new realities created by the Serbian advances on the ground and thus expected border changes to be the likely outcome of the crisis. However, despite all these speculations among the Foreign Office staff, calling for Croatia to agree to territorial concessions did not become British policy. Hurd never approved policy guidelines that envisioned border changes as part of a diplomatic settlement. In his diplomatic encounters, he once raised the question of border changes in a conversation with Tuđman. But thereafter, when meeting representatives of other EC member states or the conflict parties, Hurd, as well as other Foreign Office members, stuck to the line that the international community would not recognise border changes resulting from the use of force.

On the whole, from the autumn of 1991 on, the UK argued in favour of combining negotiations with sanctions against Serbia to force Milošević to accept a settlement that was agreeable to the other republics and the EC. However, the question was never perceived as being of vital importance to the United Kingdom. Due to mounting pressure from other EC members as well as growing criticism of Serbia among the British public, London eventually relented and agreed to the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia.

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