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YUGOSLAV SOCIETY

The following is the text of a speech to the Yugoslav Society this afternoon by the Right Hon. L.S. Amery, M.P., Secretary of State for India:-

We are met this afternoon to hear - and, indeed, also to see - what Professor Lavrin, in his lecture, has to tell and show us about Yugoslav culture. We in this country have been so accustomed to associate the idea of the Yugoslav people with their heroic struggles for freedom and unity, ever since the days, Sir, of your ancestor, the first Karageorge, that we may have paid too little attention to their characteristic culture, to the part which it has played in the life of Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, and to the contribution which it is yet destined to make to the European culture of the future.

It is therefore altogether fitting that the Yugoslav Society of Great Britain should take this opportunity of emphasising an aspect of Yugoslavia's life which is not only of fascinating interest in itself, but may also, in the happier days of peace to which we look forward, be one to which we may increasingly look both for example and for inspiration.

At the same time, before we turn to the actual subject matter of Dr. Lavrin's lecture, you will, I trust, pardon me if I say a word or two about the date of this our meeting. It was on this day, a year ago, that the Yugoslav people, by a sudden irresistible impulse, declared their unconquerable will to freedom regardless of the sacrifice that declaration involved. I said the Yugoslav people, for while the actual decisive step was taken in the small hours of the morning by a mere handful of officers, it was the expression of a whole nation's spiritual uprising. It was a whole people - peasants, students and clergy, quite as much as officers and soldiers - who rose in passionate resentment against a government which was prepared to deliver their country, bound hand and foot, to Nazi overlordship. They knew that, in one sense, their uprising was in vain. They knew that it was too late to organise any effective resistance against the invading German armies. But they also knew that it was not too late to save Yugoslavia's soul and to save her future.

In great emergencies nations, like men, act, not on calculation but on deep-seated instinct. For Yugoslavia that historic instinct of hers, which kept alive the flame of her national spirit through centuries of alien oppression, has been embodied in the beautiful legend of King Lazar, who, on the eve of the battle of Kossovo, was offered in a vision the choice between earthly victory or a heavenly kingdom for himself and for his people. He chose the heavenly kingdom, and through all the dark ages which followed his people held their heads high, in inward pride and unquenchable hope, because of that decision.

It was the same issue which confronted Yugoslavia on March 27 of last year. On the eve of that fateful decision I ventured, Sir, as an old friend and admirer of your people, to recall in a broadcast the memory of that earlier choice. Perhaps I may be pardoned if I repeat what I said then, not suggesting that it could have influenced the decision, but as showing that there were some of us here who could at least divine the strength of the latent forces which might, even against all the odds, challenge fate and shape a nation's destiny.

(Cont'd)

After addressing myself to my old comrades in arms of the Serbian Army I turned to the students and clergy:

"Ja se obracam i varga, svestenici i studenti, koji ste kroz vekove ropstva drzali plamen nacionalnog duha..... Hocete li vi dozvoliti da vas narod postane ponovo rajetin? Na Kosovom polju Knez Lazar vise je voleo nebeskog od zeraljskog carstva. Srbija je bila pobedena, ali njen duh nije nikada umro. Ako se vi sada predate, dali ce taj duh ikada ponovo ziveti?.... Sada ili ikad od Jugoslovenski vlade ocekuje se da Izraza pravim pogledima jos slobodnog naroda. Vasa sudnina visi o koncu.

The fateful decision was taken. Its immediate consequences have been terrible. Before the Yugoslav army could even be mobilised it was overwhelmed by superior forces converging from every quarter upon its weak frontier screen. There has followed a reign of brutal terrorism, of massacre and torture, of the fiendish fostering of fratricidal strife, of sheer wholesale starvation, which might have broken the spirit of any nation. It has left Yugoslavia still defiant, still confident of the eventual outcome of the struggle, to which she made - and is indeed making - no small contribution.

For Yugoslavia's resistance, if it could not save her own soil from the conqueror, still gained precious weeks which may well have proved the turning point of the war. For it was those weeks that saved Moscow and so made possible the splendid recovery of the Russian armies during this last winter. And even through these later stages of the Russian war the unrelenting resistance in Yugoslavia itself of General Drazha Mihailovitch and his guerrilla forces has compelled the enemy to keep large bodies of troops engaged in a territory so speedily overrun but still so precariously held.

We cannot say when the end will come. Our enemies can still boast of the long succession of their victories, of the vast regions they are holding down, of the formidable array of their forces in the field. But behind their front of brass, west and east, there are elements of inner weakness, moral as well as material, which sooner or later will bring them crashing down before our ever increasingly sustained and intensified attack.

Then will come the hour of Yugoslavia's deliverance. Then her young King and those who have stood by him during the long hours of darkness and exile will return to their own dear home, to build up, in the coming years of peace, a country strong and united in face of the outside world, developing to the full its great natural resources, and giving free play, at long last, to the unspoilt native genius of a great people.

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