THE FAILED HANDSHAKE ON THE DANUBE: THE STORY OF ANGLO-AMERICAN PLANS FOR THE LIBERATION OF CENTRAL EUROPE AT THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

MIKLÓS LOJKÓ

Pembroke College, Cambridge,
UK

The exposition of the political and military aspects of this subject was fraught with difficulties during the years of the Cold War. It was likely to be frustrated by the mysticism in which it came to be shrouded on both sides of the political divide. In the West, the missed opportunities and possible errors of Allied strategy came to be regretted with hindsight. In the East, in countries where the degree of openness of the régime allowed it, the same sentiments were expressed with the added bitterness of those entombed behind the Iron Curtain. Both approaches were likely to misjudge the likelihood of success of plans which were thwarted at the end of the war.

The end of the Cold War has made a dispassionate approach more achievable. At the same time, no study has apparently been written with the aim of summing up the results of the related scholarship of the past decades, including those on strategic deception, and examining the options available for the West with the eyes of an Eastern inquirer. This short paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

I believe that, in the light of old debates and recently released material, two questions need to be addressed for an elucidation of the problem:

1. Was there genuine desire among British and American political and military leaders after 1942 to stage major campaigns in the Eastern Mediterranean, as a possible continuation of the Italian campaign, or were hints to this effect only part of a feint to divert German divisions from the vital battlegrounds of Normandy?

2. Was such a venture feasible considering the contemporary military and political situation?

These questions come naturally, and therefore, have to be formulated, at least initially, in this way. It will become apparent, however, that no clear-cut answer can be given to them, and a more thorough examination of the factors concerned will become necessary.

Hungarian Studies 13/1 (1998/99)
0236–6568/99/$ 5.00

Operations code named TORCH (the Allied invasion of French North Africa) and HUSKY (the subsequent landings in Sicily) were implemented in 1942–43 as the only alternative to engage the Axis in active fighting. At the same time, they also served as the rehearsal for the decisive invasion in Normandy in mid-1944. The operations, however, evolved from an earlier British plan, conceived before the Soviet and American entry into the war, which would have accorded a more positive role to these manoeuvres, and, significantly, as the various strands of the North African and Italian campaign developed, a new, clandestine, function came to be associated with them as well. The latter aspect only came to light recently as documents relating to strategic deception have been partially released for public scrutiny, or published in the *British Intelligence in the Second World War* series.

Until the Soviet and American entry into the war British strategic thinking concentrated on survival, rather than the means of actually winning. As far as there was a strategy, it consisted of a somewhat farfetched, but not inconceivable, theory that the German Reich would eventually be brought down by mass uprisings in occupied Europe, instigated and assisted by the British. Such a plan required a prolonged war of attrition, resulting in the depletion of the enemy's resources, and a build-up of British resources, and those of the resistance in Europe. Large-scale bombing operations, and the creation of an ever tightening ring around the continent were envisaged. The centre of gravity of any military activity would also, by necessity, have to be the peripheries, rather than the hub, of the Nazi Empire. It was also essential to construct an elaborate and sophisticated intelligence gathering network, and a web of agents who would "set Europe ablaze," to compensate for the disadvantage in matériel. As one of his last acts in public office on 19 July 1940, Neville Chamberlain signed a secret paper authorising that "a new organization shall be established forthwith to coordinate all action, by way of subversion and sabotage, against the enemy overseas... This organization will be known as the Special Operations Executive."[1]

A Mediterranean strategy, based on existing facilities in the Levant, and focusing on the Balkans, did not only emerge from the above stated principles by elimination. It made positive strategic sense as well. The loss of Romanian oil would have caused irreparable damage to the Germans; the Eastern Mediterranean, *en route* to the oil installations of the Persian Gulf, was a traditional British sphere of interest with many personal contacts, as well as equipment in the Middle East, already in place. The fact that the area was held down by Italy, the junior partner in the Axis, made operations seem all the more practicable. Finally, strong partisan activity, both in Greece and in Yugoslavia, no doubt due to the fact that these peoples had developed sophisticated guerrilla tactics during their long experience of submission under the Ottoman Empire, provided the British with some of their earliest continental allies. The fact, however, that

in May 1941, the British were ignominiously ejected from Crete by German intervention, was a portent of the considerable difficulties that lay ahead.

It is arguable that a strategy based on the Eastern Mediterranean alone could never have won the war against Germany, and that the German attack on Russia was inevitable, and consequently any Russian counter-offensive would have clashed with British activity also aimed at establishing, or maintaining, a sphere of influence there. However, these considerations did not arise in this manner at this stage of the conflict. With *Festung Europa* an accomplished fact, the future seemed inscrutable. For a considerable period following the German attack on the Soviet Union, the Russians did not appear to be able resist to the onslaught. At this time "[a victorious counter-attack] was not the rôle for which the Russian Army was cast in the calculations of the British Chiefs of Staff."[2]

The distribution of power in the conflict changed significantly with the American entry into the war. A Joint Chiefs of Staff was established, and American strategic planning, commensurate with their input into the war effort in matériel, gradually began to carry more weight than that of the British. US agreement to the "Germany First" principle was achieved with the natural concomitant proviso that the war had to be brought to a conclusion in Europe as quickly as possible. From as early as December 1941, the time of the first Washington Conference, the plan of a North-Western assault on the heart of Europe enjoyed primacy among Allied strategies. BOLERO and ROUNDUP, as the build-up of troops and equipment in the UK and the planned landing operations were code named initially, had to take precedence over all other commitments, or had to benefit from them. If the Far East became temporarily a subsidiary theatre, the Balkans, with its frightening connotations for the Americans of a Byzantine quagmire, did all the more so. The principle was not an "un-European" one. Engaging the enemy at the decisive point with decisive force had been an old Clausewitzian approach to war. Gradually the British Chiefs of Staff and Churchill himself came round to accepting the idea, not least because it seemed to serve as a guarantee of US adherence to the "Germany First" principle. By the time of the Teheran Conference in December 1943 no-one openly dissented from this main thrust of the strategy. In addition, the fact that President Roosevelt, and George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the US Army, argued fervently for providing effective relief for the Russians in their fight against appalling odds on the Eastern Front as early as possible by opening a second front in Western Europe, and that they, among other American leaders, shared a propensity to suspect the British Mediterranean strategy of not being entirely disinterested, of being part of some kind of an imperial design, lay heavily in favour of an exclusively North-West European strategy. Resentment to the scheme was likewise flamed by the impression that, by clinging to it, Churchill hoped to put right, as it were, his failed policy at the Dardanelles during the First World War. In both cases he invoked the metaphor of attacking the "soft

underbelly" of a crocodile to propagate the plan. The early attachment of the British to action in the Eastern Mediterranean, however, died hard.

An Allied amphibious attack on North-West Europe turned out to be logistically impossible in 1942. Ironically, it was American eagerness to engage the Axis in 1942 which gave the impetus to reviving the old British plans for landing in French North Africa, Operation GYMNAST, or TORCH as it was subsequently renamed. In December 1942 at Casablanca Churchill and Roosevelt worked out the logical continuation of the North African Allied advance, i.e. plans for landing on the island of Sicily. Beyond that, however, they did not attempt to formulate policy. Only after spectacular success in Sicily was it decided that the Allies should press on to knock Italy out of the Axis. It was in the course of the execution of this opportunistic strategy in late 1942 and in 1943 that the appetite of Churchill, Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Henry Maitland Wilson, Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East in 1943, Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean in 1944, and of General Sir Harold Alexander, Commander-in-Chief of the 8th Army, Supreme Allied Commander in Italy, came, in Sir Michael Howard's words, *"en mangeant"*, to shift the emphasis onto the Mediterranean theatre more than it had been agreed by the combined chiefs. Though very hard fought, the campaign in Italy bore fruit. Mussolini was dismissed by the King of Italy a fortnight after the landings in Sicily. Buoyed by the events, Churchill argued:

> The flank attack may become the main attack, and the main attack a holding operation in the early stages. Our second front will, in fact, comprise both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of Europe, and we can push either right-handed, left-handed, or both handed as our resources and circumstances permit.[3]

On 26 October, one month before the Teheran Conference, he wrote to President Roosevelt:

> We must not let this great Italian battle degenerate into a deadlock. At all costs we must win Rome and the airfields to the north of it. ... I feel that Eisenhower and Alexander must have what they need to win the battle in Italy, no matter what effect is produced on subsequent operations.[4]

Churchill's confidant, Field Marshal Smuts, and King George VI also joined in the enthusiasm for this strategy. Smuts hoped "to go on fighting" in the Mediterranean "and not switch over to a new front like 'Overlord.'" The King wrote to Churchill in October 1943:

> [...] I have always thought that your original idea of last year of attacking the "underbelly" of the Axis was the right one [...] The present

> situation as we know has turned out even better than we could have ever hoped [...] we command the Mediterranean Sea [...] Italy is at war with our enemy Germany; Roumania & Hungary are trying to get in touch with us. [...] may be we shall see the 3 great powers, Great Britain, USA & USSR fighting together on the same front.[5]

As I have discussed earlier, keeping the Eastern Mediterranean operations as the single line of attack was not a realistic or expedient strategy. However, it later became clear that the resources for pursuing Churchill's vision of two second fronts would never be sufficient either, even though, through the activities of the secret deception unit, "A" Force (*see* below), the Germans were led to believe and fear the opposite. The two separate aspects of the strategy in the Mediterranean, ambitious plans for real strategy, and notional threats, may have become somewhat mixed up among the ambitions of those who wished for a greater emphasis on the Eastern Mediterranean.

At the third Washington Conference, held in May 1943, the British delegation proposed to press ahead to exploit the achievements of the Italian campaign by landings eastward on the Balkans, rather than transferring these troops to the UK. It was argued that from the newly occupied bases the Allies could reach previously inaccessible parts of Central and South-Eastern Europe. If the Germans reacted strongly, so much the better, as this would also keep large numbers of their forces pinned down, away from both North-Western Europe and the Russian front. In July 1943 Churchill spoke to the Chiefs of Staff Committee about a "post-HUSKY" strategy, which had the River Po, or Vienna, among its possible aims, even to the detriment of OVERLORD. The Americans were not impressed. Correctly they argued that the British proposals contradicted previous agreements. At Teheran, still wishing to retain the Balkans option, Churchill supported the primacy of the build-up for a North-Western attack, and accepted a definite plan for an invasion of Southern France in the wake of the advance in Italy, believing that landing craft would also become available for a move into the Balkans. The debate, however, never had the chance to become significantly more than theoretical as the operations bogged down on the Pisa-Rimini Line, and did not move much further north until the spring of 1945, by which time the Soviet forces came to dominate the Balkans and Central Europe, with the exception of Greece, in adherence to the terms of the Churchill–Stalin "percentage agreement" of October 1944.

From the summer of 1944, Churchill began to see the Soviet advance as a threat, rather than as a relief. Backed by General Alexander, he renewed his plea for a diversion to the east, especially as an alternative to ANVIL, landings in the south of France, originally planned to coincide with, and provide dynamic diversionary assistance to, the D-Day operations. Plans for an Adriatic alternative were put forward on 7 June 1944 by General Alexander. Describing his

plans to a meeting of the British War Cabinet on 7 July, he said they represented a chance for "the historical entry into Europe."[6] In his memoirs he wrote: "Once through the so-called Ljubljana Gap the way led to Vienna, an object of great political and psychological value."[7] This time, however, even the British chiefs were opposed to the idea. Even though ANVIL was not carried out, the operations through the Rhône Valley, renamed as DRAGOON, started in August 1944, and therefore late to assist in the initial days of OVERLORD, the Americans were adamant that their landing craft, essential for any amphibious operation across the Adriatic, could only be used in DRAGOON, and not in an, in their view, strategically and politically dubious diversion to the east. At the same time, the lateness of DRAGOON was partially compensated by the spreading of false rumours of an attack in the region to coincide with OVERLORD, known to its creator in "A" Force as Operation VENDETTA.

Churchill's support for a move to the east stemmed from political considerations, which were no longer consistent with his pledges made in the percentage agreement. The Prime Minister and his general had to yield to the majority opinion, both American and British, arrayed against them.

The greatest drawback of the plan was that Alexander never really explored its logistic feasibility. It envisaged the crossing, in a short space of time, of very difficult and hostile terrain, much of which had proved to be killing fields in the First World War. The vistas opened up by the plan were enticing indeed. With the British and the Americans in Vienna, the Danube, rather than the Elbe, could have been the line on which the Western and Eastern Allies finally met. The Ljubljana Gap, the valley of the Save, and the Klagenfurt Valley, *en route* to Vienna, however, would have held unpleasant surprises in store for a war-weary British 8th Army. The "underbelly" may not have been so soft after all. Although the plans were never put to the test, it is highly doubtful that they could have been executed within the time frame available, given the fact that both the Yugoslav partisans and the Russian armies were progressing speedily in a similar direction. In any case, the opportunity was lost after DRAGOON had been staged and Soviet forces had advanced through Romania, Hungary, and parts of Yugoslavia from August 1944 to April 1945. At the same time, it is important to point out, especially in the context of the ensuing Cold War, that the original British pressure for a Mediterranean strategy was meant to counter American opinion opposed to the "Europe First" principle, and that its continued exploitation served to give immediate succour to the Soviet war effort, rather than to forestall it. Its last minute transformation to serve the latter purpose was not a viable alternative either strategically or politically at the time.

In the foregoing I have discussed the points raised in my original questions, except for the aspect of secret intelligence, which, I believe, needs to be discussed separately.

The hidden side of the Mediterranean strategy was strategic deception. In March 1941 "Advanced HQ 'A' Force" was established under a British officer, Lieut Col Dudley Clarke. As part of the "Double-Cross System" the British intelligence network of agents, double agents and their controllers, "A" Force was originally a "notional" Brigade of the Special Air Service, itself also initially a notional body. Having become the centre for strategic deception in the Middle East, and then in the whole Mediterranean area, its task was to create and keep in service notional, i.e. imaginary, agents, military formations, sometimes whole divisions, threats, intended to mislead and disadvantage the enemy in that theatre, especially in preparation for particular planned real operations. Though largely independent in choosing its methods, this "rumour factory," as Sir Michael Howard has called it, worked under the loose supervision of an organisation called the London Controlling Section. The main headquarters of "A" Force was in Cairo and served, for most of the story covered above, to provide camouflage for factual operations under the command of General Alexander.

The notional operation code named BARCLAY helped to secure the success of HUSKY by pinning down large numbers of German troops through implanting the idea of an impending Allied attack on the Balkans via Greece in the early summer of 1943. The most successful of all bogus operation, code named MINCEMEAT, designed to confuse the Germans about future Allied operations, resulted in the German penetration of the Balkans in March–July 1943. ZEPPELIN, among other objectives, carried a notional plan to attack Istria and the Dalmatian coast by a US contingent in early 1944. "The strategic task laid down for 'A' Force under the overall plan, *Zeppelin,* was to keep German reserves away from the Normandy battlefields until D+25; that is until the beginning of July."[8] TURPITUDE comprised notional attacks on Salonica and Varna with Russian participation in June 1944. Another very successful bogus operation, FERDINAND, promoted in August 1944, at the time of real operation DRAGOON, practically concurred with the unrealistic strategy campaigned for by Churchill and Alexander at the time to concentrate on Italy and achieve an eastward diversion later. All these imaginary plans implied action in the Eastern Mediterranean, and were ultimately designed to assist OVERLORD. The Germans proved to be remarkably susceptible to them. By the spring of 1944 the impression was created in some German intelligence analysts that plans for an Allied North-Western attack were abandoned altogether for a Dalmatian or Southern French assault. Accurate reports of the unfeasibility of a Balkan strategy were drowned out by the "intelligence noise." By the time the credibility of any Eastern Mediterranean strategy to be pursued by the Western Allies diminished, the Soviets appeared on the horizon after a successful drive across the Ukraine, drawing ever more German formations away from the west. On 19 March 1944, in order to protect their lines of communication, the Germans occupied Hungary, their ally, and on 15 October, by staging a fascist coup, de-

stroyed the remnants of constitutional government there. By this time, with its aims accomplished, "A" Force began to close down. The illusions of an "Anglo-Saxon" landing also vanished, both amongst the retreating Germans, and the amongst the liberal opposition in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

Strategic deception is a cool and effective device. As the details of its role in the Mediterranean in 1942–44 began to emerge in the 1980s, at least one Central European historian, the Hungarian Gyula Juhász, expressed his bitterness about its cold logic. Hungary's precarious participation in the Hitler alliance was a disaster from the start. Soon after the very heavy losses sustained by the Hungarian 2nd Army at the southern Russian front in 1942, the Prime Minister, Miklós Kállay, supported by the more liberal elements of the political spectrum, introduced policies what were meant to steer the country out of the German clasp. Prominent among such policies were circumventing demands for the deportation of Hungary's Jews by assigning them to work units assisting the Hungarian army, and sending peace feelers to neutral capitals to negotiate terms for a possible surrender. The negotiators, and through them the government, were lulled into believing in an active Allied policy in South-Eastern Europe, and the misconception that they only needed to bide their time, and change sides when the Western Allies came near to Hungary's borders. For historical and political reasons, until the very last moment, the Hungarians, like the Polish but unlike the Czechoslovak governments-in-exile, were very reluctant to negotiate with the Russians. Therefore it is not an exaggeration to say that from early 1943 till October 1944, the whole of Hungarian policy hinged on the expectation that Western troops will appear near Hungary's borders, and the country may safely leave the war, or change sides. What happened instead was that Hungary was occupied by the Nazis, its "autocratic-liberal" leadership was removed, and 600,000 of its citizens were deported to face death or untold suffering. The validity of the policy to provide all possible buttress to OVERLORD cannot be questioned. It is evident that the victims of 1944–45 in Hungary were the victims of the Nazis, and not of the Allies. At the same time, acquaintance with local perspectives, such as the above, can only enrich the view on the workings of the global strategy and of deception as a part of it.

Having demonstrated that,

a) although there was a short-lived desire at the highest level among British leaders for military involvement in liberating parts of Central Europe and the Balkans, no agreement could be reached for its execution; and

b) that the above was partly the result of American reluctance to be associated with such a project, and the fact that the plans were most probably logistically unfeasible in the available time frame.

I would finally like to clarify a point concerning deception. When discussing this subject, many authors, in my view, fail to draw a firm line between deliberate deception by notional threats, and the fact that certain actors were deceived

as a result of receiving information on factual plans subsequently not carried out, or as a result of factual operations, some of which may in fact have been intended as ruses. The overall strategy benefited from all three. As I pointed out earlier, in this war of both nerves *and* matériel, these phenomena may have temporarily come very close, in the field, or in the minds of the authors of strategy. However, I believe that in resolving the questions I put at the beginning, it is important to keep them apart. By realising that the decisive majority of plans relating to the Eastern Mediterranean only existed in the realm of fantasy, i.e. as part of deception, one can understand how little chance they ever had of becoming an alternative to the strategy which was actually pursued by the Western Allies.

Notes

1. M.R.D. Foot, *SOE in France* (London, 1968), 8–9, as quoted in M.R.D. Foot, "Was SOE Any Good?", *Journal of Contemporary History,* Vol. 16 (1981), 167–81.
2. Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* (London, 1968), 15–16.
3. J.M. Gwyer and J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy* (London, 1964), 637–8, quoted in M. Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy*, 34.
4. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. V. 220, quoted in M. Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy,* 56.
5. Martin Gilbert, *Road to Victory, Winston Churchill 1941–45,* Vol. VII of *The Churchill Biography* (London, 1986), quoting Churchill Papers 20/92.
6. David Hunt, "British Military Planning and Aims in 1944", in William Deakin, Elisabeth Barker, Jonathan Chadwick, eds, *British Political and Military Strategy in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe in 1944* (London, 1988), 14, quoting from PRO CAB 65/47.
7. Field Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis, *The Alexander Memoirs 1940–45* (London, 1962), 138, quoted in M. Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy,* 62.
8. Michael Howard, *British Intelligence in the Second World War,* Vol. V, *Strategic Deception* (London, 1990), 148.