

# *Paul of Yugoslavia*



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## **Britain's Maligned Friend**

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NEIL BALFOUR AND SALLY MACKAY

## CHAPTER I

1893-1912

### *Background and Youth*

Paul Karageorgević was born on 15th April 1893 in St Petersburg, the only child of Prince Arsène Karageorgević of Serbia and Aurore Demidoff, Princess of San Donato. Why Arsène and Aurore ever married remains a mystery. His temperament and background made him a wholly unsuitable husband, while Aurore was clearly unequal to her responsibilities as mother. They were a profoundly unhappy couple and they did not remain together for long.

Arsène, who had attended the Lycée Louis le Grand in Paris as a boy and later trained as an officer at the Collège de Saint-Cyr, had from an early age developed a way with women and a longing for war. He was a gambler by nature and was to thirst throughout his life for danger and adventure. By the time he was twenty-eight his military citations and personal accounts show him to have been involved as a French cavalry officer on campaigns in places as far apart as North Africa and China, and during the course of his long and unsettled career he was to serve as an officer not only in French but also in Imperial Russian and Royal Serbian cavalry regiments.

Arsène's restless character owed much to his Karageorgević background. He was the grandson of the legendary Kara Djorje ('Black George'), a dark-faced herdsman who, in 1804, had risen up against the hated Turks and become 'Gospodar', or undisputed ruler, of Serbia. Kara Djorje's reign had lasted until 1813 when he, in turn, had been thrown out by the Turks and later murdered at the instigation of his rival, Miloš Obrenović. For the best part of the nineteenth century, the Karageorgević and Obrenović families had vied for the crown of Serbia and at the time of Arsène's birth, in 1859, his father King Alexander I was forced into exile and made to abdicate in favour of the ageing Miloš. Alexander had settled

with his family at Temesvar, a town near the Serbian border, well placed for the dynastic ambitions of the Karageorgević family but unsuitable for the education of children. Arsène and his two older brothers had accordingly been sent to school in France.

Aurore Demidoff, in contrast, came from an older family whose rise to fame and fortune, however, owed less to noble acts of heroism than to their perfect business sense. The story goes that one day in 1694 Nikita Demiditch, a poor blacksmith at Tula, was peacefully hammering on his anvil when a carriage emblazoned with the imperial arms suddenly pulled up outside. A steward ran up to Nikita and asked him to repair a pistol which had jammed on the journey. As he was going about his work Nikita heard a voice inside the carriage curse the fact that it was necessary to send abroad for beautiful and efficient firearms. At once Nikita answered back that such weapons were quite easy to make. The man who stepped out and slapped him across the face for his boastful insolence was no less than the Tsar, Peter the Great, himself. Nikita, reeling from the blow, staggered inside his workshop and produced a pair of pistols identical to the one he had been handed to repair. Peter the Great was flabbergasted and immediately invited Nikita to lunch. When the blacksmith left the palace he had been given his freedom and certain lands in the Urals. He turned this extraordinary stroke of luck to good effect for, discovering that his lands were rich in iron ore, he swiftly established a munitions factory. During the war with Sweden the factory in Tula worked round the clock, maintained a crucial level of production and earned for its proprietor the title of Count.

By the time the title was made hereditary in 1780 the Demidoffs were mining silver, platinum and gold but though their wealth was prodigious their position in society remained insecure. Thus it was that Nicholas Demidoff, Aurore's grandfather, was considered to have done well for himself, having married Elisabeth Alexandrovna Stroganoff.

To avoid the social uncertainty of St Petersburg, Nicholas and his bride moved to France. In Napoleonic Paris they flourished. With unfathomable wealth, a Russian title and a thirst for international society they set the stage for the later achieve-

ments of their eldest son, Anatole. For it was Anatole Demidoff, uncle of Aurore, who was to carry his father's and mother's social, literary and artistic ambitions to fulfilment.

Anatole was brought up in the magnificent villa of San Donato which his father had built above Florence. He was cultured, charming and handsome and before long made a spectacular marriage to Napoleon's formidable niece, Mathilde.\* On account of his wife's exalted name and imperial Russian connections Anatole was awarded the title of Prince of San Donato. But the marriage did not last. Mathilde returned to Paris and Anatole lived on alone at San Donato writing a series of travel books, which were to become famous, and collecting paintings and furniture with which to enhance the beauty of his home.

From Anatole, who had no heirs, the princely title passed down to Paul, his younger brother and father of Aurore. Aurore's mother, Princess Helen Troubetskoy was Paul Demidoff's second wife. Unlike the much travelled Anatole, Paul and Helen lived in Russia and it was in St Petersburg that Paul's son Elim (by a previous marriage) and Paul and Helen's daughters Aurore and Moina Demidoff were born. Whilst Elim became a Russian diplomat and eventually settled in Greece, Moina married another famous and cultured Russian traveller, Prince Simeon Abamalek Lazareff, with whom she lived in a palatial villa in Rome.

It was to the inspiration of Anatole Demidoff's achievements at San Donato, and to the example and encouragement of his uncles Abamalek Lazareff in Rome and Elim Demidoff in Greece, that the young Prince Paul of Serbia was to owe much of his early interest in classical art; and it was to the Demidoff fortunes in Italy that the later Prince Paul of Yugoslavia was to owe his financial independence and thus the means whereby to indulge his lifelong passion for art.

Paul left Russia with his mother and a Russian nurse at the age of one. Aurore appears from the beginning to have harboured no illusions about her own or Arsène's ability to bring up their little boy. First she begged her half-brother Elim to adopt him, but Elim was in a difficult position as a career diplomat and

\* Mathilde was also a cousin of the Romanovs and a great granddaughter of George III of England.

he had to refuse. Young, bewildered and deserted, the gentle Aurore continued to seek for a home for her son. At last, in 1896, when Paul was just three, the opportunity presented itself. Arsène's eldest brother Peter, the head of the exiled Karageorgević dynasty, was then living in Geneva. Since his wife had died, he had determined to send his three children, George, Helen and Alexander — the last and youngest of whom was eight years old — to school in St Petersburg. The boys were to attend the Ecole des Pages; the girl the Smolny Institute. He consequently agreed to take in his nephew and nurse to live with him in his house by the side of Lake Geneva. From the day that Paul left Nice with his nurse and his few belongings, he was to see his mother again only twice. As an old man he would tell how he could remember his mother from only two brief but emotionally powerful encounters. Once, aged about six, he was taken out to a large cruise ship on Lake Geneva where a lady clasped him to her bosom for what seemed an eternity, and in his tiny heart an eternity of bliss, and then introduced him to her friends as her son. Then again, aged perhaps eight, he was taken late one evening in the middle of winter to a station where he was told to wait. Presently a train pulled up and the same lady stepped off, hugged her son tightly for some minutes, then climbed, tears streaming down her cheeks, on to the train again and sped away. Aurore remarried not long after sending Paul to Geneva, to a certain Nicholas Count Noguera from Turin. She died in 1904 leaving twin sons, neither of whom ever knew their half-brother Paul.

Arsène for his part never remarried. He continued his peripatetic life alone and, by the time the Karageorgević dynasty was back on the throne in Serbia in 1903 he had run through a succession of mistresses and most of his inheritance. During the Balkan Wars of 1907 and 1912, he distinguished himself as a cavalry officer and captured the town of Veles. Later, when the Great War began, he was passed over. Furious, he returned to Russia where he was given the rank of General and fought with the Horse Guards until the Revolution obliged him to return to Paris.

Arsène never acknowledged his responsibilities towards his son and Paul grew up as a complete stranger to his father. By

nature the two were quite different. Paul was highly sensitive, thoughtful and withdrawn. His father was brash, unthinking and extrovert. They were always to maintain a cordial, almost formal relationship, but in early life Paul scarcely came across his father, whom he saw at infrequent and irregular intervals.

Paul's first two years with his uncle in Geneva went passably well. He became devoted to his Russian nurse who had by then taken over the role both of father and mother. His strict and taciturn uncle was not much in evidence and with his cousins away in Russia and the run of the house to himself, Paul was not unhappy.

Then it was that the little boy's life took a dramatic turn for the worse. At the age of seven he was packed off as a boarder to a school in Lausanne and his nurse was dismissed. The school was cold, bleak and infested with rats. For the rest of his life, the thought of a rat filled Paul with horror. Lonely, miserable and confused, Paul prayed for his nurse. Her love and tenderness was the only real affection he had known and he never forgot her. The sense of rejection was complete. For the next four years he moved between Geneva and Lausanne, between a household composed only of men and a school which he hated and feared. By nature both affectionate and timid, his loneliness and longing for female protection during these years were absolute.

Then, in June 1903, news arrived from Serbia that King Alexander Obrenović and his wife had been murdered and that Paul's uncle Peter had been named to succeed him as King. Paul was removed from school and arrangements were made for him to follow his uncle to Belgrade.

At the time Paul was hardly aware of the feud that had existed between the two families, and he was profoundly shocked by the gruesome murders. Alexander Obrenović and his wife had been hacked to pieces in a closet while attempting to hide from their assassins, and their mutilated bodies had been hurled into the palace courtyard below. Paul was present when the messenger came in to announce the murders and the memory was to haunt him for the rest of his life.

Besides this bloodthirsty story Paul knew little about his native land. On the rare occasions when his uncle had chosen to speak to him it had been to correct his bearing and manner or to

discuss schooling and other arrangements. His first tongue had been Russian and at school he had spoken and worked in French. When, therefore, at the age of ten Paul arrived in Belgrade and was shown to his small room at the top of the north-east wing of the royal palace he felt, and could not help but be made to feel, a total stranger. Court life was male, and discipline and protocol severe. It was therefore from foreign visitors, ambassadors and other diplomatic staff that this acutely intelligent, painfully shy and inquisitive little boy began to draw his intellectual inspiration. His knowledge of Serbian and other Balkan history he picked up partly at school and partly at meal-times at the palace when, in full military gear, the all-male court paraded at table with the sombre, meticulous and untalkative King Peter. Apart from his efforts to listen, Paul's main concern at meal-times was to get something to eat. The King had a habit of marching in, sitting down, being served first and finishing his meal before anyone else had been properly served. As soon as he had finished he would stand up, declare the meal at an end, and leave.

Between 1903 and 1912, Paul attended school in Belgrade. Of his cousins the eldest, Helen (Jelena), was nine years older and primarily based in Russia. On 3rd September 1911, she married Prince John (Ioann) Constantinovitch of Russia, son of Grand Duke Constantin and grandson of Tsar Nicholas I. The elder of King Peter's two sons, Crown Prince George, was mentally unbalanced and a sadist. At one point in Belgrade he managed to kill his own bodyguard and manservant; at another, he was caught spreading broken glass over a school playground (where the children were accustomed to run about barefoot) in order to watch the fun. Paul, who already in Geneva had nearly been drowned by his older cousin, and in Belgrade had live bullets fired at his feet to make him jump, was not surprisingly terrified of George and dreaded — even in middle age — being left alone with him.

Alexander, or 'Sandro' as he was referred to by the family, was different. He was quick-witted, distinguished looking and a determined and dedicated soldier. He was popular with both his seniors and his contemporaries, and although he was five years older than Paul and had nothing in common with the boy, he was always friendly and approachable.

Paul found life in Belgrade relatively easy, though in the completely male-dominated, military atmosphere of the royal household he found little inspiration and neither tenderness nor love. He was from the age of ten to eighteen, through necessity rather than by choice, a solitary child. He was good at his work and scored high marks in all his lessons. He kept as much as possible out of the way and out of trouble. He was not tall for his age but fascinatingly good looking. His dark, sad eyes and pale complexion gave him the unmistakable Demidoff look. His mind, too, having been left unusually unregimented and unindoctrinated, found a natural affinity with beautiful objects rather than with horses, uniforms or firearms. His first and most deeply cherished possession was a small blue Sevres cup and saucer. He had admired its beauty many times in the house of a foreign diplomat, and when the latter was finally recalled Paul went round to purchase the cup and saucer. In Lausanne he had whiled away his lonely and idle hours learning, reciting and, in child-like fashion, writing poetry. In Belgrade he filled in his days in the royal palace admiring and inquiring about pictures, bits of furniture, sculpture, jewellery, staircases, cornices, china and anything else that took his fancy. Eventually, he found that he was able to pilfer lamps, saucers, small pictures, cups and other objets d'art and assemble them in his room for public display. He would then, after having done some basic homework on his precious borrowed possessions, make a show of inviting palace guests to visit his tiny gallery. He was eventually caught and punished. Palace administration concluded that the young prince was at best some kind of eccentric and at worst, an uncontrollable kleptomaniac. Yet he had found, in his deep and almost sensual love of art, a substitute for parental love and affection.

As Paul grew older he began to arrange small plays and poetry readings in the houses of acquaintances and, very occasionally, in his uncle's palace. He began to be invited out too, invariably by foreigners, and away from his immediate family he found he could enjoy the company of others. Amongst the Serbs whom he knew, there seemed to be a total absence of social life outside the court circle and Paul felt himself increasingly standing apart from his fellow countrymen.

Each summer, for health reasons and in the company of his



tutor or a doctor, Paul was sent to one of the spas of Europe. More often than not, these journeys took him through Florence where he visited his aunt, Moina, at her villa called Pratolino. Moina had taken some interest in Paul, particularly since her sister's death, and Paul's short visits were always pleasant. Pratolino was a magic place for a child. It was light, airy and delicate, unlike the palace in Belgrade, and at the end of the garden there was a monumental statue by Gian Bologna which was a never-ending source of fascination. Representing the River Po, it took the form of a huge bearded man crouching over a small lake. Its size was such that a grown man could stand on its toe, or walk upright through the passage between its underarm and stooping torso.

As the years passed by, little changed in Paul's life. His father was bivouacked abroad, his mother was dead and his uncle immersed in diplomatic affairs. No one particularly cared to face the question of what should be done with him. Whereas Arsène had been considered unreliable he had, at least, been officer material. Paul was altogether something different. He was weak rather than strong, feeble rather than tough and had a horror of physical disability and violence which was to remain with him all his life. His robust cousins considered him over-sensitive while his tutors continually praised his excellence and his diligence. By 1911 Paul spoke Russian, French, Serbian, a little German and a remarkable amount of English. His interests were definitely artistic, and his bent intellectual. To the surprise and relief of all who had a responsibility for his further education and development, Paul announced in the summer of 1911 that he wanted to study abroad and preferably at Oxford. Nobody could quite work out why or how the boy had developed this fixation. It was almost certainly the doing of one or other of his diplomatic acquaintances and the result of a recently developed interest in English literature and history.

The Karageorgevićs had been educated, by tradition, proximity and convenience in Russia, Switzerland or France. Oxford was a new departure. However, Paul was not in immediate line of succession. He was to all intents and purposes an orphan and in no way suited to the military career which he would otherwise have been expected to pursue.

Immediately the foreign ministry set to work. Through the

Serbian legation in London, a place was found for Paul at Christ Church and all the details fixed for his admission in April 1913.

His father was notified and it was suggested that Paul's expenses should be shared between Arsène and the State. Paul's allowance was enough to entitle him to a flat in London and digs at Oxford. It was assumed that, in addition to his 'college battels' and other fees, he would need sufficient funds to keep and house a manservant, to acquire and to maintain a suitable wardrobe, to travel and to entertain. In all these things Paul was to depend initially at least on the advice of his uncle's Minister in London, Mr Gruić, and his charming and eccentric American wife, Mabel.

At Moina's request, Paul passed through Rome in the early summer of 1912, en route to England. Prince Simeon Abamalek Lazareff, whose palace in Rome was almost as richly decorated and adorned as the Demidoff villa at San Donato, was delighted when his young and impressionable Serbian nephew arrived. Immediately, it was plain to both that each had found in the other a kindred spirit. For Simeon it was a real joy to find in Paul an attentive, intelligent and, more surprisingly, a relatively well-informed audience. For Paul, his stay in Rome was a sheer delight. At long last he began to see how his thirst for knowledge and his artistic passions might be satisfied. His stay, however, was all too short for soon he was on a train to Florence and thence, via Paris, to London.

Paul had purchased or borrowed several books for his trip to London. De Tocqueville, Gibbon, Flaubert, Rilke and Macaulay were among them. So too were books on the great houses and galleries of England. His excitement at the prospect of all the treasures that awaited him was overpowering. For him, his trip to England marked the end of an orphan-like dependency. He had chosen a path for himself and the nearer he drew to Dover the more convinced he became of the wisdom of his choice.

In Florence he had become intoxicated with the beauty of San Donato. In Paris he was to lie awake all night unable to sleep at the thought of his impending visit to the Louvre. In spite of all that he had read and heard about these museums and priceless works of art, in spite of his anticipation, the reality of his experience when he actually saw them was a complete delight. He felt

an immediate physical relationship with everything he saw.

When at length, aged nineteen, Paul alighted at Victoria Station with four leather suitcases and two wooden and brass trunks, unusually and inappropriately attired on a stiflingly hot summer's day, his excitement was intense. He engaged the services of an ancient looking porter and barrow and joined the queue for hansom cabs.

It was his first experience of the British art of peaceful queueing — indeed, it was his first experience of British life — and he was greatly impressed. When at length his turn came he climbed into the cab and instructed his driver to take him to the Ritz.

Paul had come armed with letters of introduction from Belgrade and they were for the most part addressed to members of the older generation. He spent some months, before going up to Oxford, getting together an appropriate wardrobe in London and making new contacts. Sensitive, emotional and, to the English taste, a little highly-strung, he was immediately taken up by those whom he met. He was exactly the kind of young man whom the more enterprising hostesses of the day were glad to have to dinner. By the time Paul went up to Oxford he had met a small and interesting cross-section of the English ruling class, and was beginning to feel comfortable in their midst.

He was beginning to understand their ways and some of their inter-relationships. Coming from a country where there was virtually no aristocracy and certainly no ruling class outside the cavalry officers' mess, the position, wealth and power of the British nobility filled Paul with sheer astonishment. The treasures in their houses, their estates, their varied interests, and above all their unshakable self-confidence was a complete wonder to him. He was fascinated by their eccentricities and immediately drawn to what he would describe with admiration, throughout the rest of his life, as their essentially 'civilized' way of life. Not surprisingly, within a short period of time he had begun to fashion himself on their style.