

Lament for England

by Aleksa Djilas

After English pilots started dropping bombs on me I began to reconsider my Anglophilia

Aleksa Djilas is a writer living in Belgrade

Jorge Luis Borges noticed how English friendships begin with avoiding intimacies and are soon transformed into occasional exchanges of books and journals. I was an Anglophile long before I first arrived in England in the early 1970s—to discover with delight that the cliffs of Dover really were white and the police unarmed.

As the son of the Yugoslav writer and political prisoner Milovan Djilas, I grew up believing in western democracy. Civilised parliamentary England seemed its mother and father. And what about France, where the rights of man and citizen were proclaimed in 1789? For us dissidents in communist Yugoslavia, the word revolution did not rhyme with liberty. Piecemeal English-style reforms were what we wanted. Tito's regime referred to all pro-western intellectuals as "bourgeois liberals" and this was not entirely wrong. We were the successors of those 19th-century Balkan leaders who wanted to limit the power of kings and often cried: "Anglia docet." (Vladimir Jovanovic, the father of liberalism in Serbia and a friend of Gladstone, even invented for his son a new name: "Slobodan" means "a free man." It is, of course, carried by the Serb leader Milosevic—in his case a misnomer.)

Britain does not have a written constitution, as every child knows ("used to know," my very English friend Edward Pearce would say), but the British parliamentary reforms of the 1830s were actually incorporated into many 19th-century European constitutions, including Balkan ones. The constitution of Serbia from 1903 was a rather English compromise between the monarchy and a parliament based on popular representation. This was one reason why it actually worked.

I lived in London for almost ten years, mostly in the 1980s, as a graduate student and writer (the Home Office granted me asylum after an unnerving six-month silence following my letter of application—and several attempts by the Yugoslav embassy to prevent it.) In the small group of emigr

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