

**Valentine Low**

"The Times", January 24 2012

## **Prince Paul of Yugoslavia exonerated of war crimes**

A one-time suitor of the Queen Mother, a member of Oxford's Bullingdon Club and a noted art collector, Prince Paul of Yugoslavia was the sort of European royal who was destined for a life of privilege, not political controversy.

When fate unexpectedly intervened, however, he became first a ruler then an exile, forced to live under house arrest and vilified by those he once regarded as friends. At the end of the Second World War he was branded a war criminal by Yugoslavia's communist regime for doing a deal with Hitler, and never again returned to the country of his birth.

Now, more than 70 years after his downfall, Prince Paul, who died in 1976, has finally been rehabilitated. The Serbian Supreme Court has ruled that he was not a war criminal after all, and his daughter Princess Elizabeth is pressing for his body to be returned home from its burial place in Switzerland and given a state funeral in Belgrade.

Princess Elizabeth, 75, who lives in Belgrade and drove the campaign to clear her father's name, told *The Times*: "This is something I have been working on for the last 20 years. It is amazing, I cannot believe it. My father would have been over the moon. I am just sorry I cannot tell him myself."

In the years after the First World War Prince Paul cut a glamorous figure in European society. He was part of the "Chips" Channon set — the American-born politician and diarist, with whom he once shared a house, describing him as "the person I have loved most" — and a close friend of the Queen Mother.

"Many thought he was keen to marry her," William Shawcross wrote in his official biography of the Queen Mother.

Instead, he married Princess Olga, sister of Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent. George VI, then Duke of York, was his best man.

In 1934 his cousin King Alexander was assassinated in Marseilles and Paul installed as Regent until Alexander's son Peter came of age.

When the Second World War broke out, Yugoslavia declared its neutrality. It was not a position it could hold for long. Paul tried asking Britain and France for military assistance but none was forthcoming.

By 1941 Churchill, who wanted to create a "side show" in the Balkans, decided neutrality was not enough. Hitler, meanwhile, wanted Paul to sign the Tripartite Pact: Paul, thinking it would buy him time, insisted on a clause that the Germans would not march through Yugoslavia.

When he protested at Britain's insistence that he declare war on Germany, Churchill said: "Prince Paul's attitude looks like that of an unfortunate man in a cage with a tiger, hoping not to provoke him, while steadily dinner time approaches."

It all proved irrelevant anyway. Two days after the pact was signed Paul was ousted in a British-inspired coup, civil war ensued and Hitler invaded anyway.

Crown Prince Alexander of Yugoslavia, who lives in the Royal Palace in Belgrade, said: "He tried to defend the unity of Yugoslavia at a very difficult time. He was a very good man, a gentleman. But he was in an impossible situation."

The historian Andrew Roberts said: "He cannot be thought of as a great strategist, but he certainly was not a war criminal."

Paul and his family ended up in Kenya, where they spent three years under British house arrest. To most people he was a traitor who had betrayed his country to the Nazis.

Back in England, his old friend Elizabeth, by then Britain's Queen and later the Queen Mother, wrote: "He had made such a mess of his job in the eyes of the world... Of course, one knows that he is very timorous & sensitive & subtle minded, but things have got too serious in the world, for any country to be able to sign a pact with Germany, & yet be pro-English or neutral."

Later Paul moved to South Africa. His daughter recalled: "He was accused of being pro-German when he was a staunch Anglophile. That was what hurt the most.

"It affected all of us. I remember having a fist fight with a girl at school in South Africa when I was about nine years old, trying to defend him."

The Supreme Court ruling says that Paul's property, seized by the communists 66 years ago, should be restored to the prince's heirs, although some of that property then in Yugoslavia is now in Slovenia.

To Princess Elizabeth, however, property is less important than her father's name. She said: "I have to get the Government to agree for him to have an official funeral, because he was head of state. It is nice to restore the dignity of his name. People should be proud that they had him as ruler."