The blanket of secrecy that covered MI6’s activities during the Second World War has been partially removed with the publication of Keith Jeffrey’s (2010) admirable history of the organization, yet in respect of Romania little has entered the public domain in Britain about the work of the MI6 network. It was active throughout the war in gathering and passing on information to the British authorities about Axis military operations in the area between the Rivers Dniester and Bug in southern Ukraine that was administered by Romania between 1941 and the early part of 1944. The restoration to history, therefore, of Alexander Eck and his network is overdue.\(^1\)

Eck had had a truly international career, in keeping with his background. He was born on 16 December 1876 in the province of Polock in Poland, then under Russian rule, of a Swedish father and a Russian mother. His father was a baker and his mother took in washing. After attending junior school in Warsaw he attended the Pavel Galagan College in Kiev where he completed his secondary schooling in 1894. He returned to Warsaw and studied history and Slavonic philology at the university from which he graduated in 1898. His first post was as a teacher of Russian in a gymnasium in Warsaw, after which he moved to St Petersburg where he taught for a brief period in 1903 in a girls’ high school.

While in Warsaw, although – according to an obituary – not a Jew, he became a member of the Jewish Social Democratic Association and in 1903, under the name of Muchin, he joined the Bolshevik (Leninist) wing of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party. In December 1905, under the name of Artem, he acted on the strike committee in Ekaterinoslav. At the beginning of 1906, he was arrested (for the third time) in Rostov-on-Don and in May sentenced to be deported to Tobolsk but managed to escape before the journey. From then onwards, until his exile in France in 1909, he was a member of the underground movement in Kiev and Lodz. In 1907 he went to London under the name of Budownicz, as a delegate to the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party congress. Two years later he left Russia and settled in France, living successively in Nancy, Nice and Paris.
On the outbreak of the First World War, Eck volunteered along with another eighty Russian political émigrés to join the French army. He served in 1915 as an intelligence officer at the headquarters of General Sarrail in Salonica, and after the armistice of 11 November 1918 was sent as part of the Allied Military Mission to Slovakia. He was demobilized in January 1920, in Paris.² Between 1921 and 1934 he lectured in Russian at the University of Ghent, from where he moved to the University of Brussels to become Professor of Byzantine and Slavonic Studies.³ In 1939, after the outbreak of war, he re-joined the intelligence bureau of the French Army with the rank of captain and in February 1940 proposed to his superiors that he take advantage of an invitation from the eminent historian Nicolae Iorga to give a series of lectures at Institutul de Istorie Universală and at the University of Bucharest in order to gather intelligence about Romanian defences in Bessarabia, German spies posing as journalists, and German troop movements in the country. They agreed and on 28 February 1940 he arrived in Bucharest.⁴

After the fall of France in June 1940, Eck’s offer to work for MI6 was accepted, it is claimed, by Winston Churchill himself, whom Eck knew personally.⁵ His profession as a scholar of Byzantium afforded him cover for lecturing at Institutul de Istorie Universală and at the French Institute of Byzantine Studies⁶ where its director, Professor Laurent gave him an office.⁷ Eck’s young female companion, Margareta Haller,⁸ assisted Eck in his espionage activity by handling the reports that came in from the members of the network.⁹

Eck first met Haller in 1937 at the Belgian stand whilst attending the Paris International Exhibition and kept up a regular correspondence with her until he arrived in Bucharest in February 1940. Driven by a deep affection for Haller, he confided in her to reveal his anti-Axis sentiments and after the fall of France she agreed to help him gather information about German officers and civilians who visited the German factory ‘Scherg’ where she was employed. When she was dismissed in November 1941, as a result of the application of the law on Romanianization of enterprises,¹⁰ Eck stepped in to secure her a temporary position as secretary to the commercial attaché at the French legation, after which she was made secretary of the French Red Cross in Romania. In addition to collecting information about German military units, Haller was tasked by Eck with delivering messages encoded by him and placed visiting-card envelopes to three Polish radio operators, Gałaczyński, Wieraszko and Czupryk, recommended by Captain Stopoński, a Polish intelligence officer, to Eck when the British legation withdrew from Romania in February 1941.¹¹

The MI6 network coordinated by Eck included French nationals resident in Romania who, after the fall of France in June 1940, committed themselves to the Allied cause. Among these were Jean Mouton, Charles Singevin, Michel Dard and Yves Augier, members of the former French legation; Pierre Guiraud, a teacher at the French Institute in Chișinău who had withdrawn