

THE CHETNIKS IN OCCUPIED YUGOSLAVLIA: FRIENDS OR
FOES OF THE RESISTANCE?

by

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How does a resistance group twist the goals that they have to collaborate with a genocidal occupier? In the Second World War, occupied Yugoslavia had two primary resistance forces: the Serbian nationalist Chetniks, and the multi-ethnic communist Partisans. From their first contact with the outside world, the Chetniks enjoyed the backing of their government in exile, of the great Allied powers, and even the nominal support of the Soviet Union. Yet, the Chetniks were ultimately defeated by the Partisans, and Yugoslavia became a communist state following the war. The Chetnik program had two primary goals: the reinstatement of the Serbian monarchy on the throne of Yugoslavia, and the expansion of the Serbian unit within Yugoslavia, as well as the associated goal of protecting Serbian civilians from the horrors of war. In pursuing these goals, the Chetniks collaborated extensively with their occupiers, brought horrors onto the populations they controlled, and doomed themselves to the fate of the Axis.

This thesis finds that the Chetnik movement's goals were incompatible with that of a resistance force in a multi-ethnic country, and that their efforts to seize power after the war led them to collaborate extensively with the Axis and alienate themselves from the non-Serbian population of the country. It will also argue that their goal of exterminating the Partisans overtook their mission as a resistance force, and finally demonstrate that through their collaboration they eliminated themselves from contention of postwar power.

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Introduction

The military putsch in Yugoslavia has changed the political situation in the Balkans. Even if Yugoslavia initially makes declarations of loyalty, it must be regarded as an enemy and must therefore be smashed as quickly as possible.

-Adolf Hitler, 3/27/1941

At the beginning of 1941, Yugoslavia was surrounded by political pressures. To its East, Bulgaria and Romania had signed the Tripartite Pact, joining the Axis powers. To the south, Italy was invading Greece, and British reinforcements had turned what was supposed to be a brief expedition into a grinding war. To the north, Yugoslavia bordered Hungary, a signatory of the pact, and now Germany, who had annexed Austria in 1938. To the East, the Italians occupied Albania, Split, and were eyeing the Dalmatian coast to add to their growing empire. The country was surrounded by an alliance of hungry and historically hostile nations, who all had their eyes on the territories within Yugoslavia. Given this pressure, and a desire to secure Yugoslav support in his upcoming war with the Soviet Union, Adolf Hitler requested that the regent Prince Paul sign the Tripartite pact and join the Axis. Although Paul himself was in favor of the Allies, he recognized his impossible situation, and after negotiation signed the agreement. Almost immediately, there were riots across the country, and a coup led by opponents of the pact took place two days later, on March 27.

Following the coup, the military anticipated Germany's next move and made immediate preparations for an invasion. Führer Directive 25 ordered an attack to be organized by their allies surrounding Yugoslavia, and on the 6th of April 1941, a massive air raid on Belgrade

commenced, beginning the April War.¹ Six days later, the Yugoslav state had collapsed, and four years of brutal occupation had begun.

¹ Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*, 1st American ed. (New York: Viking, 2000), 476

The Mihailović Chetniks and the Ravna Gora Movement

Formation

Hasty preparations for Operation Barbarossa prevented the Wehrmacht from completing mopping up actions and forced the withdrawal of the crack German units from Yugoslavia as early as late April. Therefore, only 344,162 officers and troops, or about half the Yugoslav armed forces, were captured. After most of the Croats and Macedonians were released, about 200,000 prisoners, largely Serbs, remained in camps in Germany, and over 300,000 officers and troops, again Serbs for the most part, disobeyed the capitulation order and escaped capture.²

Almost immediately after the surrender, Dragoljub “Draža” Mihailović, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Yugoslav Second Army,³ fled with approximately eighty soldiers to organize a resistance effort in the interior of the country. By the time that they reached their destination, a mountain known as Ravna Gora, only thirty-one men remained under his command. The men in this group hoped to continue the fight that the Yugoslav Army could not, and ultimately reinstate the prewar government in Yugoslavia. The main goal of the Ravna Gora movement at this time was to build a network of support and recruit from among the thousands of Serbian soldiers that had evaded capture. To meet the first goal, the movement reached out to nearby villages to acquire donations of food and captured runaway convicts to turn over to the local authorities to establish friendly relations with the local police forces.⁴ Mihailović also reached out to wealthy contacts of his, who were able to provide enough money to sustain limited operations for the time being. At the same time, they began “surveying the potential manpower available to their organization, registering those who were willing to join immediately and preparing mobilization

² Matteo Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 5.

³ Milazzo *The Chetnik Movement*, 13.

⁴ Milazzo *The Chetnik Movement*, 14.

lists of men of military age who could be call upon when the time came.”⁵ Through these actions, they intended to build a base of power and create the ability to exert force where and when it was needed, with an eye toward the period after occupation.

These efforts were successful, and the Chetniks ranks swelled to at least a few thousand men by the summer.⁶ Communications were made to the collaborating authorities in this effort, to encourage a policy of live and let live. Chetnik officers met with the collaborationist Dimitrije Ljotić to ask for his assistance in finding donors for the movement, while also explaining that “Mihailović had no plans for attacking Germans.”⁷ At this time, Serbia was governed by an ineffective collaborationist government known as the “Commissar Government”, who would soon be dissolved after they failed to stop resistance groups from forming. The Germans themselves were unable to establish control over the countryside, as the invasion of the Soviet Union commenced less than three months after the April War and only a small occupying army could be spared. The Chetniks were of minimal concern to the occupying authorities, as their numbers were small and they had so far caused the Germans no trouble.

By establishing peaceable relations with both surrounding civilians and the occupation authorities, the Chetniks were able to grow their ranks unmolested. However, Mihailović knew that having a large resistance force concentrated on one area would inevitably draw too much attention. While he had not engaged in any resistance actions thus far, having an armed band of several thousand men would naturally be cause for alarm for the occupation forces and would force their hand to destroy the Chetniks. “Mihailović rightly feared that too large a collection of

⁵ Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: The Chetniks* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975), 125.

⁶ Simon Trew, *Britain, Mihailović, and the Chetniks, 1941-42* (Basingstoke: Macmillan in association with King’s College, London, 1998), 37.

⁷ Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 16.

recalcitrant troops in western Serbia would result in a reprisal raid which he was not prepared to resist. During the summer months, military considerations dictated a strategy of breaking the organization into small groups rather than trying to create large armed detachments.”⁸ To this end, Chetnik detachments were sent across the country to distribute their forces throughout the country, creating new units in Montenegro, Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina.

During the first months of occupation, the Ravna Gora Chetniks focused on organizing their forces from among the thousands of Serbian soldiers uncaptured after the capitulation of the Yugoslav armed forces. Special care was taken by the leaders of the movement to ensure warm relations with the occupying authorities, in order to allow for the unhindered growth of their forces. As their numbers grew, the need for a plan of action, coherent ideology, and postwar plan did as well.

The Goals and Ideology of the Chetniks

The Ravna Gora movement gave themselves a more official name after arriving at their new home: *The Chetnik Detachments of the Yugoslav Army*.⁹ The word “Chetnik” was not chosen to describe the Ravna Gora movement at random. In the Hapsburg-Ottoman war of 1788, a Serbian Free Corps was established to liberate the Serbian lands from Ottoman rule. Although the Ottomans won the war, a series of two Serbian uprisings saw many of these men organize into units called hajdučke čete¹⁰. These units were incredibly effective, using guerilla tactics to harass more formally organized occupying forces and began a tradition of guerilla resistance in Serbia. During the Balkan Wars, these units would reappear with the name Četnici, anglicized to Chetnik. These Četnici were no longer focused solely on traditionally Serbian lands; instead they

⁸ Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement* 15.

⁹ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 125.

¹⁰ Glenny *The Balkans*, 12.

were used to Serbianize non-Serbian lands, responsible for numerous atrocities in the process.¹¹ Četnici were also used during the First World War in minor uprisings, and to a greater extent to sabotage infrastructure used by the powers occupying Serbia. From over a century of resistance, the idea of guerilla fighting formations emerging against an occupying power was engrained in the Serbian consciousness. By entering this tradition, the Ravna Gora movement hoped to evoke support from the whole of Serbia.

Given this history, it is no surprise that the Ravna Gora Chetniks were primarily concerned with the interests of Serbia. Almost all of their recruiting was from Serbian members of the military, and their main goal was to ensure that Serbian dominance in Yugoslav government and society, which had been strongly established before the war, would return upon its conclusion. The entire Chetnik plan, throughout the war, was in service of this goal.

Mihailović treated his units as an extension of the army, shown through his classification of his units as the Chetnik Detachments of the Yugoslav Army. He was supported in this effort by the Yugoslav government-in-exile, who appointed him as the Minister of the Army, Navy, and Air Force in January 1942.¹² Minimal attempts at political education of the rank and file were made –the majority of Chetniks “were united in fighting ‘For the King and Fatherland’... but they were just soldiers.”¹³ In a manual detailing Chetnik goals and strategies, it was stated that one of the most important tasks during the war was the “Organization of the national struggle through the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland on purely military foundations without any (party) political influences and tendencies.”¹⁴ From this, it should be understood that the

¹¹ Glenny, *The Balkans*, 234.

¹² Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 178.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

Chetniks did not present themselves as ideological crusaders, rather an extension of the legitimate government-in-exile that was above the political fray.

In a memorandum given to the first commanders appointed by Mihailović to lead Chetnik forces in Montenegro and the Sandžak, it was ordered to “[struggle] for the liberty of our whole nation under the scepter of His Majesty King Peter II.”¹⁵ The instructions also explicitly forbade any actions to be taken alongside the Partisans, as “they are fighting against the dynasty and for social evolution... we are only and exclusively soldiers and fighters for the King, Fatherland, and the freedom of the people.”¹⁶ This was an order issued from the leader of the Chetnik movement to two of his highest ranking subordinates – it is clear that the Chetnik program was not primarily concerned with an effective resistance, but with the maintenance of the prewar order.

Most importantly, the Chetniks firmly believed in an inevitable Allied victory. It was said of Mihailović that he “‘knows that he is not in a position to significantly influence the development of events on the main front’ and ‘knows that the victory will be won by the allies’”¹⁷. The Chetniks were opposed to any premature uprisings, as it would only draw unwanted attention from the occupying authorities and waste their limited resources for minimal gains. As the Chetniks were an extension of the government-in-exile, a similar policy was advocated by them. The prime minister, General Simović, proclaimed over the BBC during the first uprising in Serbia that “‘a handful of unscrupulous men inflict great sufferings upon the people by their premature action.’”¹⁸ Their goals were never to resist or to hamper the German war machine, as it would have an extremely minimal impact on the overall war effort, invite

¹⁵ *Dokumenti o izdajstvu Draže Mihailovića* (Beograd, 1945), 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Jovan Marjanović and Mihailo Stanišić, *The Collaboration of D. Mihailović's Chetniks with the Enemy Forces of Occupation: 1941-1944*, (Beograd: Arhivski pregled, 1976), 186.

¹⁸ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 142.

reprisals from the Germans, and require forces that could otherwise be used to fight the Partisans for control of the country after the war.

Operating under these assumptions, the main Chetnik aim was purely to be in the best possible position to seize power after the war ended. In the case of an Allied victory, there would be two remaining factions in Yugoslavia: the Chetniks and the Partisans. Therefore, the Chetniks determined that their primary enemy was not the occupiers, but instead the Partisans, and began acting accordingly. In the Chetnik view, collaboration with the occupying forces was both an acceptable and desirable strategy. The experiences of initial uprisings in the war demonstrated the Axis military supremacy was unquestionable, and that any open revolts were doomed to be crushed by reinforcements of the occupier. Instead, by collaborating with the Germans and Italians, the Chetniks could avoid the destruction of their units, and even be supplied and paid by the occupiers in some circumstances. From this advantageous position, they could work with the Axis military apparatus to crush the Partisans, eliminating their primary opponent. Finally, when the Allies inevitably landed in the Balkans (as was assumed to happen by their leadership),¹⁹ the Chetniks could act as a well-equipped and trained insurgent force, turning the tools of their occupiers against them.

¹⁹ Ibid., 162.

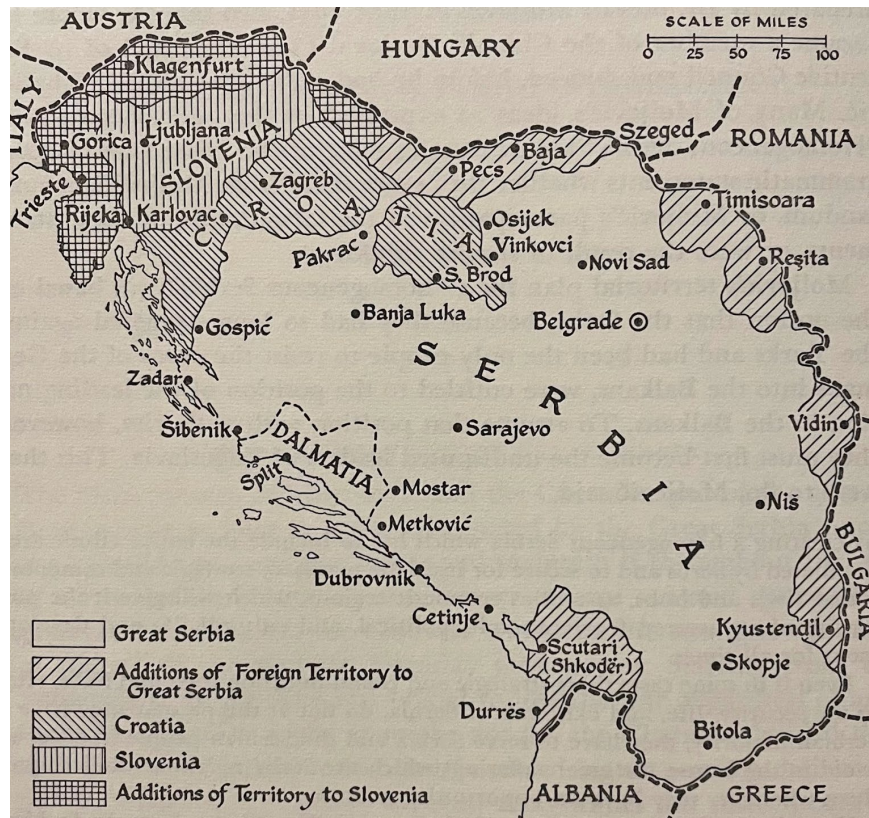


Figure 1: Greater Serbia

A map of the proposed “Greater Serbia”, as outlined in a Chetnik pamphlet titled “Our Way”²⁰

The Chetniks also had an ideology that went beyond restoration of the old government. In June 1941, Dr. Stevan Moljević, who would join the Chetnik National Committee two months later, prepared a memorandum entitled *Homogenous Serbia*, which advocated for the creation of a postwar Greater Serbia as a dominant federal unit within Yugoslavia. This new Serbia would include “the entire ethnic area populated by Serbs... as well as economic regions, which will give it the possibility of an assured free economic, political, and cultural life and development for all times.”²¹ This memorandum also advocated for the “transfer and exchanges of population”, largely between Serbia and Croatia to ensure an ethnically homogenous state. This

²⁰ Ibid., 168.

²¹ Ibid., 167.

proposal also included Macedonia, Montenegro, and territory from all of its neighbors to be included in Great Serbia, as the presence of Serbs in these lands meant that they were viewed as rightfully Serbian lands. *Homogenous Serbia* would serve as the underlying ideology of the Chetnik leadership throughout the war, and was endorsed by both Mihailović and the Chetnik National Committee. In a 1942 directive to his commanders, Mihailović laid out as the goal of their efforts “the creation of a Great Yugoslavia and within it of a Great Serbia which is to be ethnically pure.”²² To achieve this goal, the Chetniks would build their strength, and when the time came, seize power and mold Yugoslavia as they wished.

The Chetnik ideology was inherently opposed to that of the Partisans. The Partisans were staunchly opposed to any form of monarchy, and the Chetniks were recognized as the army of the Yugoslav government-in-exile, serving the king. The Partisans hoped to upend the preexisting social order – the Chetniks wanted to keep and expand it. The Chetniks pursued a Serb-first policy, which ignored the needs of any other nationalities in service of an empowered and expanded Serbia. This meant that Chetnik support outside of the territory of the Serbian federal unit was generally limited only to the Serbian minority in that area.²³ In contrast, the Partisans recruited from all nationalities, and advocated for a more equal sharing of power within Yugoslavia. Given the assumption that the Allies would inevitably be victorious, the Chetniks determined the Partisans to be their main opponents, and were willing to work with the Axis to crush their rivals.

²² Ibid., 170.

²³ Ibid., 162.

Armed Resistance Begins

On June 22, 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union in what would become the largest military struggle in human history. The struggle would come to be a fight between fascism and communism, and one that invigorated the communist resistance in Yugoslavia to fight in solidarity with their Russian comrades. The communist resistance had coalesced around a group known as the Partisans, who had developed a highly organized and ideologically motivated fighting force. They were lead throughout the war by a shadowy figure named Tito, who had extensive connections with the Soviet Union and was committed to the communist party line.²⁴ As communists the Partisan's ultimate goals were to spread the revolution to Yugoslavia, meaning the abolishment of the monarchy and capitalist system previously in place.

A Partisan uprising began on July 7, and fighting soon spread across the whole country. The purpose of this uprising, from the Partisan perspective, was to divert the attention of German divisions away from the Eastern front to deal with the threat.²⁵ The Chetniks initially played no part in this rebellion, partially because Mihailović deemed it too early to have any hope of succeeding “because as a professional soldier he knew that the ‘liberated territory could not be held.’”²⁶ The Chetniks were organized as a conventional army, and therefore saw their purpose as the seizure of power, not hopeless resistance. More importantly, the Chetnik leadership was more than happy to let the Partisans expend their strength against a more powerful adversary, only to be destroyed. Few Chetnik units were therefore involved in the uprising in its initial months, although some commanders broke rank to commit their forces to the effort.²⁷

²⁴ Jože Pirjevec and Emily Greble, *Tito and His Comrades*, Translated by Emily Greble (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 72

²⁵ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁷ Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement* 21.

The uprising also directly conflicted with the vision of the Chetnik leadership towards the war, as it would bring unnecessary attention and conflict to their burgeoning movement. Their leadership had not counted on an uprising beginning, and were no longer able to remain in the planning stages of resistance – they were now forced to take action, lest they lose their position as Chetniks, as guerillas fighting the occupier. “All evidence indicates that [Mihailović] remained convinced that extravagant actions would only compound the suffering of civilians, force the Germans to strengthen their occupation contingent, and reduce his chances of ultimate success.”²⁸ However, to the surprise of the Chetniks, the uprising was initially quite successful. The Partisans established control of the area surrounding the town of Užice, proclaiming the Užice Republic and waging war against the occupying authorities. The Chetniks realized that if they did not join in the fight, that they would soon lose all claim to legitimacy as a resistance group. In a meeting with the Germans in November 1941, Mihailović admitted that “Armed struggle against the occupier was a necessary evil in order to prevent the broad masses of the people from going over to the communists.”²⁹ The Germans also recognized this independently as the reason for the Chetniks joining the uprising, as the Command Staff of the Military Commander in Serbia reported that “stimulated by partly successful fighting on the part of the Communists, the nationalist Serbs have also organized detachments against the Germans.”³⁰ Although the Chetniks did partake in resistance during the Užice uprising, it is clear that it was only in response to Partisan successes, and designed to take credit for their efforts.

²⁸ Ibid., 24.

²⁹ Marjanović *Collaboration* 25

³⁰ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 135.

Immediate rifts between the two movements were evidenced by accounts of Chetnik actions at the town of Užice and Požega, where Chetnik units engaged in fighting alongside the Partisans, only to take the towns and refuse the Partisans entry.

The day before the Germans were to leave Požega, the Chetniks of Draža Mihailović came to the city, met with the Germans and guaranteed them a free departure from Užice and Požega. The Germans handed over power in Užice to the gendarmes and the Chetnik vojvoda [commander] Đekić and Major Manojlo. The headquarters of the [Partisan] Užice NOP detachment, informed of this, sent its delegation to Užice to reach an agreement on the entry of the partisans into the city. However, the Chetnik leaders refused any negotiations, declaring that they are the legitimate representatives of the Yugoslav army and the king in the country. On September 23, the First Užice, Montenegro, Račan and Zlatibor companies of the Užice NOP detachment took up positions around Užice. Seeing this, Chetniks and gendarmes fled the city and on September 24, the Užice detachment entered Užice.³¹

This incident occurred on September 23 – barely a week after the Chetniks began fighting alongside the Partisans – and immediately the rift between the two groups dominated their actions. The Chetniks badly needed to demonstrate some military achievements, and attempted to take the town as a show of their own strength. In doing so, they could also deny the Partisans the large and strategically significant town of Užice. The Chetniks also had to contend with the fact that cooperation with the Partisans would strengthen their position, and give the Partisan efforts nationalist legitimacy. This was a concern shared by the Germans in the early stages of the uprising, as “From the German point of view it was very important to establish whether the uprising in Serbia was supported by the nationalist circles... because they thought that only with nationalist backing could it acquire a mass character.”³² Cooperation could prove that the Chetniks were actively resisting, something that they needed to do to remain a competitor for support with the Partisans, but in doing so brought legitimacy to the Partisan uprising, as well as

³¹ Marjanović *Contributions* 243-244

³² Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 134.

German attention to themselves. Their position as an extension of the Yugoslav army masquerading as a resistance force put them in an impossible position – any action or inaction would ultimately have a negative outcome.

The End of Friendly Relations

On October 31, Draža Mihailović ordered attacks to begin against Partisans in the area of Požega and Užice.³³ The month leading up to this event had seen some joint operations by the two groups, but discord between them had been growing. Although there had been obvious ideological and strategic differences between them, with events like the incident at Požega showing their unwillingness to work together, they had never engaged in an all-out conflict before. What caused such a rapid shift, from cooperation, albeit in bad faith, to the beginning of a civil war? There were two main causes of the split: a growing sense of Chetnik superiority due to international recognition, and a German offensive that provided an opportunity to crush the Partisans once and for all.

Just a few weeks earlier, Captain Bill Hudson of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) had arrived on the coast of Yugoslavia with the goal of meeting Mihailović and establishing communication between him and the British government. He arrived in the Mihailović camp on October 25, at which point Mihailović knew that he was the only legitimate commander of resistance forces in Yugoslavia in the eyes of the British.³⁴ “The British military mission that was sent to their headquarters imparted a great deal of prestige to the Chetniks; it was a visible expression of their officially having become a part of the Grand Alliance engaged in the struggle against the Axis.”³⁵ This served to embolden Mihailović, and convinced him that

³³ Ibid., 149.

³⁴ Ibid., 144.

³⁵ Ibid.

he did not need to cooperate to survive any more – the Chetniks were now the considered by the Allies to be the official resistance movement in Yugoslavia, regardless of what the situation on the ground was, or of their actual focus on the postwar power balance.

Captain Hudson was the first direct source of intelligence that the British had on the situation in Yugoslavia. The limited information that they had received came from Yugoslav government channels, which naturally backed Mihailović as the restorationist resistance leader. The Yugoslav Minister of War had instructed Mihailović on October 2nd to treat the Partisans like a “dangerous and treacherous enemy”³⁶, demonstrating a lack of will to orchestrate an effective resistance. Reports from the Yugoslav Istanbul embassy described the Partisans as “made up of vagabonds who often reduce themselves to pillage”,³⁷ even claiming that Mihailović “was offered the leadership by the communists.”³⁸ At the same time, the British had been facing pressure to open up a second front by the Soviet government, in order to draw pressure off of the rapidly collapsing Eastern Front. The British saw the uprising in Yugoslavia, which they attributed to Mihailović and his Chetniks, as the most cost-effective way to demonstrate their commitment to aiding the Soviets.³⁹ Further, the German attention to the East presented a prime opportunity to strike at their weakest point, and Mihailović claimed that a “large and powerful army could be formed in a few days.”⁴⁰ While it is now clear that Mihailović was bluffing, the British decided to support him, further solidifying Mihailović’s view of his Chetniks as rightful in their conflict against the Partisans.

³⁶ Ibid., 68.

³⁷ Ibid., 67.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 74.

The German counteroffensive at this time also had a significant impact on the plans of the Chetniks as well. Two fresh German divisions and a reinforced regiment were brought in to crush the uprising and began to push into the liberated territory. This forced the Chetniks into a much more difficult position than they had initially been in. While the Partisans were ideologically motivated to continue, the Chetnik strategy did not involve fighting the Germans in open battle, and they were therefore eager to end their cooperation with the Partisans. If the Partisans continued to fight the Germans they would be crushed, and if they retreated they would lose their territory, ammunition factory, and the civilian population under their control, their biggest achievement to date. Therefore, continued resistance could only serve to hurt the goals of the Chetniks, and this provided an opportunity to switch sides

Another major contributing factor to the split was the German's brutal policy of reprisals. Although Nazi occupation was brutal and inhumane in almost all of their conquered territory, Serbia had the most stringent policy of civilian reprisals of any occupied state. Führer Directive 31a prescribed a policy of retribution that mandated the execution of 100 Serbian civilians for every German soldier killed in Serbia, and 50 executions for every German soldier wounded. This policy was designed to make any continued resistance in Serbia too costly to continue, and on 16 and 21 October 1941, almost 1800 civilians from Kraljevo and 2800 civilians from the town of Kragujevac were rounded up and shot in response to raids on German positions in the village of Gornji Milanovac.⁴¹ This had the desired effect as "For the officers on Ravna Gora, they represented their worst fears come true... the reduction of the Serbs to a minority in Yugoslavia and possibly their biological extermination."⁴² Since the Chetnik plan was predicated on assuming the greatest possible power for Serbs after the war under the Greater Serbian

⁴¹ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 146.

⁴² Trew, *Britain, Mihailović, and the Chetniks*, 63.

ideology, and that they did not see their actions as possible to significantly influence the outcome of the war, hesitancy to combat the German occupation can be understood within their framework.

For his part, Mihailović saw the reprisal killings as a tool to be used by the communists to ensure their eventual victory. In a later meeting with German officers, he said that “I have never concluded any serious agreements with the Communists because they have no concern for the people... They want the greatest possible number of Serbs to be killed in order to assure their success later on.”⁴³ While Mihailović may have been wrong about the purpose of provoking reprisals, he was correct that it benefitted the Partisans. As the Partisans were the most active resistance group taking action against the occupiers, “These [reprisals] created more recruits for the most extreme elements within the resistance, usually the Partisans.”⁴⁴ Therefore, Mihailović had little to gain by attacking German formations, as his actions only strengthened the ranks of the Partisans, and killed the people that he had set out to protect.

This view was echoed by the government-in-exile, who had instructed Mihailović via the BBC on October 28 “to abstain from too hasty action, in order to avoid losses... do not provoke the enemy except in greatest need.”⁴⁵ Further instructions were given on November 15, when he was instructed that “the acts of sabotage, and of individual attacks, which only give an excuse to the enemy for the most brutal and criminal attacks against the peaceful population, should immediately cease, in order to reduce the number of unnecessary victims and unnecessary loss of blood of our people.”⁴⁶ By committing the massacre of so many civilians, the Germans had not only stopped the Chetniks from fighting their occupation – they had created a moral imperative,

⁴³ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 24.

⁴⁴ Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 31.

⁴⁵ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 163.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

from the Chetnik and Yugoslav government's point of view, to stop *any* action that would provoke reprisals. As the Partisans were continuing to fight the Germans, combatting them would prevent German deaths and the massacre of Serbs.

Attempts to Mend Relations

Tito had simultaneously reached out to Mihailović for a meeting to flesh out a system under which a unified front could be formed. At the meeting, which took place on October 26, Tito advocated for increased cooperation between the two groups, and proposed ten points on which to base their cooperation, of which points 1, 2, 5, and 7 were rejected by Mihailović.

(1) joint operations against Nedić and the Germans; (2) common provisioning of Chetniks and Partisans; (3) the equal division of captured equipment; (4) joint commands in liberated areas; (5) organization of provisional administrations in the liberated areas, popularly elected by all who supported the national liberation struggle; (6) creation of Chetnik-Partisan commissions to settle all disputes; (7) renunciation of forced mobilization; (8) an all-out struggle against traitors and spies with the aid of joint military tribunals; (9) common action against "collaborationist" Chetnik groups; and (10) a mutual commitment not to give identification papers to potential enemies.⁴⁷

Clearly, Tito hoped that a unified front could be achieved despite the previous actions of the Chetniks. Mihailović, however, did not enter the meeting with good faith. Immediately after the meeting, he said to his British liaison Bill Hudson that "This attack which I am going to launch on the Partisans, and my relations with them, is entirely a Yugoslav affair and I am the legitimate representative of my government."⁴⁸ Even though Mihailović agreed to 6 of the points, preparations for the attack on the Partisans began on October 27.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 32.

⁴⁸ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 148.

⁴⁹ Jovan Marjanović, *Ustanak i narodno-oslobodilački Pokret U Srbiji, 1941* (Beograd: Institut Društvenih Nauka, 1963), 336.

Additional evidence of the Chetnik plans are demonstrated by two Chetnik emissaries, Colonel Pantić and Captain Mitrović, who arrived in Belgrade the next day and made contact with a German intelligence officer. They had been instructed to “establish contact with [the collaborationist] Prime Minister Nedić and the appropriate Wehrmacht command posts”⁵⁰ and inform them that he “assumes responsibility and provides full guarantee for the definite elimination of communist armed bands from Serbian territory to the east and west of the Morava River.”⁵¹ The representatives also requested weaponry from the Germans for this effort: “5000 rifles, 350 light machine guns, and 20 heavy machine guns.”⁵² To this point, Mihailović had not received any supplies from the British, and desperately needed both guns and ammunition.

At this meeting, the Chetnik representatives were informed that the Germans wanted to negotiate with Mihailović in person, and a meeting was requested. Seemingly upon receiving that request, Mihailović launched his campaign against the Partisans in the area of Požega. The attack on Požega demonstrated the untenable double game that the Chetniks were trying to play. First, the airfield at Požega was necessary to receive British supplies by air, with which he would fight the Partisans. Second, it would demonstrate to the Germans that the Chetniks were engaged in the fight against the Partisans – as willing allies of the Germans, who acted out of a desire to crush the communist rebellion. In his response to the invitation on November 4th, Mihailović wrote that he would meet with the Germans, as soon as the communist threat had been cleared:

In view of the actual situation in the country which is characterized during the past few days by armed struggle waged on a fairly large scale by my detachments against the communist elements, and as these operations are apparently assuming the proportions of a general armed conflict it is imperative that I remain here until the situation is cleared up.⁵³

⁵⁰ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 148.

⁵¹ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 14.

⁵² Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 148.

⁵³ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 19.

Given the timing of these events, it is clear that Mihailović's offensive against the Partisans was designed to coincide with negotiations with the Germans, and that his message was designed to inform them of his independent actions. The action makes strategic sense as well, as he desperately needed ammunition in order to win the battle. This sentiment was expressed in a November 1 letter that he wrote to the commander of the German 342nd division, requesting supplies and for German offensives to be halted for the duration of his operation. "The number of nationalists is so large that the communists account for a mere 5 per cent. Thanks to their numerical superiority the nationalist elements under Chetnik leadership are capable of resolving the communist problem without mutual armed combat. The condition therefore is that they be supplied with adequate armaments which are lacking."⁵⁴ In his attacks on the Partisans, Mihailović was attempting to display his Chetniks as a valuable ally to the Germans, who only needed weapons to crush the Partisan uprising.

The rift between the Chetniks and Partisans was caused by three main factors: international recognition of the Chetniks as the legitimate resistance force in Yugoslavia, which emboldened them to attack the Partisans as illegitimate, and German reprisal killings as well as a counteroffensive changed the prospect of resisting from a relatively costly strategy to one with high costs and little gains to be had. The Chetniks at this point saw the Germans as the lesser of two evils, as continued Partisan provocations lead to the slaughter of Serbian civilians, and the Germans would naturally not take power after the war. By collaborating with the Germans against the Partisans, they played dually in to their strategy of crushing their postwar rivals, and protecting their own ethnicity from genocide imposed by the occupiers. However, this strategy

⁵⁴ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 18.

exposed the Chetniks to massive risks, as they secretly allied themselves to their occupiers while needing to maintain a veneer of resistance.

The Chetniks Commit to Collaboration

The Chetnik attacks on the Partisans failed miserably. As described by Captain Hudson, “His [Mihailović’s] Serbs were unwilling to fight, his own officers unwilling to fight... they found the Partisans were prepared and started shooting back, and there were very few casualties.”⁵⁵ The Chetnik attacks on the Partisans were more symbolic than practical, and even then they were woefully unprepared to handle their better trained and supplied adversaries. The first British supplies, and the first support of any kind from the outside world, were parachuted in to the Chetniks on November 9, although the quantity was insignificant relative to what was needed.⁵⁶ Captain Hudson played a role in the lack of supplies airdropped to the Chetniks, as he was trying encourage the British to withhold their supplies to force a truce with the Partisans. In a November 13 message, Hudson advised: “I suggest that you tell Mihailović that full British help will not be forthcoming unless an attempt is made to incorporate all anti-fascist elements under his command.”⁵⁷ However, Hudson and the British did not realize that Mihailović had already met with the Germans to request aid from them to crush the Partisans.

On November 11, Mihailović met with the Germans in the town of Divci. Unfortunately for him, the Germans did not believe in him or his motivations. The minutes of this meeting show a deep distrust of the Chetniks, as they had just weeks before been fighting against the Germans alongside the Partisans. The German Lt. Colonel Kogard opened the meeting with accusations of treachery against the Chetniks, adding “In view of the foregoing, when you

⁵⁵ Trew, *Britain, Mihailović, and the Chetniks*, 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

suddenly proclaim yourself an ally of the German Wehrmacht, one cannot believe that you are motivated by genuine conviction... Had your offer been prompted by sincere conviction, Colonel, this would have inevitably been reflected in the conduct of operations of late.”⁵⁸ The German view of the situation displays the bind that the Chetniks had put themselves in – resistance was necessary to maintain the veneer of legitimacy, but their attempt to take a middle route and crush the Partisans left them weaker, and forced them to seek out the help of the occupiers that they appeared to fight.

This sentiment was expressed by Mihailović in his answer to Lt. Col. Kogard, as he said that “Armed struggle against the occupier was a necessary evil in order to prevent the broad masses of the people from going over to the communists... My secret idea was to protect the Serbian people, which is imbued with nationalism, from communism.”⁵⁹ He also added commentary on Serbians who had openly collaborated, namely the prime minister of the quisling Serbian Government, Milan Nedić, and Kosta Pećanac, who led a band of approximately 3000 men also calling themselves Chetniks, although they were fully integrated into the armed forces of the Nedić government. “The Serbian people are freedom loving... The Nedić government openly sided with the occupying powers and this was an error... I could not agree with Kosta Pećanac, because an overt agreement had been concluded which the people would not have been able to accept. Kosta Pećanac has lost all esteem among the people.”⁶⁰ While his ultimate goal was to eliminate the Partisans, at this point in the war he was unable to do so without the support of the Germans. However, in order to have a semblance of legitimacy, resistance against the Germans was necessary as well.

⁵⁸ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

The ultimate outcome of the meeting was not what was needed for the Chetniks. Mihailović went into the meeting with the goal of securing ammunition from the Germans, saying “I ask to be enabled to continue the struggle against communism which began on October 31... Ammunition is indispensable. I counted on it when I came here.” The Germans did not intend to negotiate. Kogard answered the request of Mihailović firmly: “I have no other orders from the Commander in Chief than to ask Colonel Mihailović whether he intends to surrender unconditionally or not.”⁶¹ The meeting ended with Mihailović denying the request, and no material support would be provided. On the night of November 13th, a Chetnik commander would, on the orders of Mihailović, turn over 365 captured Partisans to the Germans. This was undoubtedly an effort to prove their allegiance to the Germans; all but a few dozen of the men were executed or sent to concentration camps.

The End of the Užice Republic

The failed Chetnik attack on the Partisans was followed up with a counterattack that surrounded the Chetnik headquarters at Ravna Gora. According to Tomasevich, the Partisans could have overtaken the position and killed Mihailović, but at the last second a broadcast from Radio Moscow came through that called Mihailović the leader of the Yugoslav resistance. This happened at the perfect moment for the Chetniks, as “Tito realized that the fight against the Chetniks and the possible killing of Mihailović might cause the Russians some trouble with the British”,⁶² and emissaries were dispatched to organize a truce between the two. A ceasefire was negotiated, “In order to stop the fratricidal struggle and stop the shedding of fraternal blood, and to unite all the patriotic forces of the Serbian people and turn against the occupiers and national

⁶¹ Ibid., 26.

⁶² Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 151.

traitors.”⁶³ While the agreement was successful in ending the conflict between the two, their agreement to “deploy all their forces in the fight against the occupiers and people's traitors”, as stipulated in the agreement, did not materialize. In the last days of November, the Germans pushed for the liquidation of the last free Partisan territory of the Užice republic. Tito urged the Chetniks to come to his aid – but Mihailović refused, telling him that “he could not accept frontal attacks and furthermore had to return his detachments to their home areas.”⁶⁴ Thus, the Užice Republic ended as it started – with little involvement from the Chetniks, and the blood of Partisan soldiers paying the price.

The Chetniks in Serbia at the beginning of occupation established two primary goals for their movement: to restore the prewar order, including the Serbian monarchy, and to create a Great Serbia from which the Serbian people could prosper. Both of these goals put them at odds with the Partisans and the Germans, and left them hesitant to participate in the Užice uprising. Partisan successes forced the Chetniks to engage in resistance actions to maintain a veneer of legitimacy, although they did so with the aim of taking strategic victories away from the Partisans for their own gain. The Chetniks saw them as the primary threat to their program, and they began attacking Partisan formations when the opportunity presented itself. In doing so, the Chetniks put themselves in an impossible dilemma. To collaborate openly with the Germans against the Partisans would cede the legitimacy that they had as a resistance organization, and would inevitably lose them the backing of the Allies. However, to cooperate with the Partisans lent their uprising legitimacy by providing them with the backing of nationalist forces, and left the Chetniks exposed to German attacks. Quelling the Partisan movement while appearing to resist the occupiers could not work in tandem. Their attempt to play both sides left the Chetniks

⁶³ Marjanović, *Ustanak*, 371.

⁶⁴ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 153.

as the lesser of two resistance forces, while also not being trusted by the Germans as an ally in their fight against communism. In the meantime, the distrusting Germans tried to wipe out Mihailović, forcing him to flee to Montenegro in May 1942 to continue building his skeletal organization into an effective fighting force.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Stevan Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder: the Second World War in Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 93.

The Chetniks in the Italian Occupied Zone



Figure 2: The Territorial Division of Yugoslavia⁶⁶

While Germany occupied much of Serbia and Slovenia, after the April War the Italians took control of parts of the Dalmatian coast, the southern portion of Slovenia, Montenegro, and expanded their Albania protectorate with portions of Kosovo and Macedonia. The Italians and the Chetniks found willing allies in each other, and had more extensive collaboration than any other two factions in Yugoslavia during the war. The Chetniks were viewed as a necessary

⁶⁶ File:Axis Occupation of Yugoslavia, 1943-44.Png - Wikimedia Commons.

counterbalance to the Partisans by the Italians, and were equipped, paid, and in some cases directed by the Italian military.

The Italians found the Chetniks to be a useful partner against the Partisans and ignored the organization's future aims. As explained by the Commander of the Italian Second Army, "their program for the future did not interest this commander, and these things he 'ignored'. He only established and exploited the existing fact, that in the territory under his command, the 'Chetniks' acted in our favor."⁶⁷ The Chetnik commander Ilija Trifunović-Birčanin stated that "The Chetniks are aware of the fact that after the victory of the Axis powers Italy will not be an enemy of a Serbia which will at least comprise a large number of Serbs."⁶⁸ In response, the same Italian general said "the Italian Command does not assume any obligations whatsoever in this respect. It is negotiating with the Chetniks only in terms of the struggle against the communists."⁶⁹ Although the Italians favored Serbian autonomy over the existence of a Croatian state, they too were using the Chetniks as a tool to crush insurgents on their territory. Ultimately, the Chetniks found Italian collaboration to be their best method of establishing their power in the Italian zone, and became heavily integrated within the Italian military. However, the risk of this plan was that from when the Chetniks legalized themselves on, their fate would be inextricably linked with that of the Axis.

Chetnik collaboration in the Italian zone was in line with the general Chetnik strategy, as the assumption was that once the Allies landed in the Balkans, their now well-equipped army would turn and fight against the Axis forces. However, their collaboration again put their postwar plans in jeopardy, as they worked with the unpopular Italian administration and their

⁶⁷ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 216.

⁶⁸ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 59.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

collaborators, and oppressed Croats and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These actions ostracized the Chetniks from the rest of the country, and their pursuit of a Serb-first policy in a multiethnic country doomed their efforts from the start.

Italian-Chetnik Collaboration in Montenegro

Almost immediately after the Italians established a puppet state in Montenegro, an uprising broke out. The uprising was rooted in a general sense of contentment with Yugoslav rule, and although the Italians had counted on a separatist Montenegrin movement (a party known as the “Greens” who had opposed the unification of Serbia and Montenegro to form the Serbian unit in Yugoslavia) to staff their planned puppet regime, they soon found that there was little popular support for the party.⁷⁰ Lacking a better alternative, the Italians orchestrated a sparsely attended ceremony on July 12, 1941, in which a “Declaration on the Restoration of Montenegro” was read, a constitutional monarchy was declared, and the King of Italy was asked to name a regent.⁷¹ This event triggered the first major uprising in Montenegro, in which the officers of the Yugoslav army, who had not been disarmed thus far in a relatively lax occupation strategy, members of the Communist party and thousands of peasants rallied to overthrow their new state. The Italians had garrisoned the country with only one division, and were quickly overwhelmed by the revolt. Only after calling in over 60,000 reinforcements was order restored in November and the revolt crushed.⁷²

At this point, those who had revolted split along strategic and ideological lines, mirroring the Chetnik-Partisan divide in Serbia. Naturally, the officers and communists had only had an alliance of convenience during the uprising, and clashed frequently over the communists’

⁷⁰ Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 72.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 75.

attempts to subvert the movement with commissars in peasant units. Ultimately, a lack of organization and the achievement of the goal of stopping an independent Montenegro being established had been met, and the revolt dissolved. According to Pavlowitch, “The Italians wanted peace. They realized that the best they could have was control of the towns, the coast, and communications... The remaining rebels were tolerated as long as they desisted from active hostility.”⁷³ The Italian strategy worked, and the resistance movement grew into two distinct parts. The communists fled to the hills, and declared themselves Partisans, while the largely Serb officer corps favored collaboration, as Italian rule was relatively tolerable when compared to the Germans and Ustasha. The only remaining nationalist groups with active operations in the fall of 1941 were concerned primarily with protecting their villages from communists and the armed Muslim bands roaming the countryside.⁷⁴

⁷³Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 77.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 78.



Figure 2: Chetnik commander Pavle Đurišić making a speech, accompanied by Pirzio Biroli, the Italian Governor of Montenegro.⁷⁵

As a result of the fracturing of the resistance movement, the Serb nationalist forces in Montenegro⁷⁶ were unorganized and ineffective for most of 1941. The communists had co-opted most of the active resistance movement, a fact noted by Captain Hudson on his way through Montenegro on his way to meet with Mihailović.⁷⁷ It was not until December, when Mihailović dispatched Lašić and Đurišić to command nationalist forces in Montenegro and the Sandžak

⁷⁵ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 49.

⁷⁶ One important thing to understand when discussing the Chetniks in Montenegro is that although they are now two separate countries, there existed a large proportion of the population that considered themselves to be Montenegrin Serbs. Serbian nationalists considered all Montenegrins to be Serbs, therefore making Montenegro the rightful territory of Serbia.

⁷⁷ Trew, *Britain, Mihailović, and the Chetniks*, 54.

respectively, that any centralized authority was present in the region.⁷⁸ A trend of peaceable coexistence existed between the Italians and the nationalist resistance forces in Montenegro, who were more concerned with the threat posed by communists than each other.

The biggest threat to Italian rule in Montenegro was the Partisans. Following the initial revolt, the communists had established footholds in some towns, and engaged in a series of terror campaigns against those who they perceived to be enemies of their resistance effort.⁷⁹ Around the same time, Chetniks leaders Đurišić and Lašić began recruiting for the Chetniks in Montenegro. These two events caused the majority of the Montenegrin population to turn against the Partisans in favor of the Chetniks, and the Italians began organizing with the Chetniks in order to push back the Partisans. An agreement made between the Italians and Chetniks in March 1942 formalized this, with the goals:

- 1) To conduct an uncompromising struggle in conjunction with the Montenegrin nationalists [Chetniks] against communism. The leader of Montenegrin nationalists... shall maintain permanent contact with the Supreme Command of the Italian troops in Montenegro with a view to conducting joint operations;
- 2) To extend assistance in armaments, ammunition, provisions, shoes and clothing in quantities to be determined jointly by both parties;
- 3) To take part with its troops and resources in joint military operations with the nationalist detachments...
- 4) The Italian troops shall maintain law and order in towns, while this task will be carried out by the Montenegrin nationalist forces in rural areas. They shall be jointly responsible for the security of communication arteries.⁸⁰

This agreement spelled out the precise role of Chetnik forces as an apparatus of the Italian military in Montenegro – to secure the countryside and fight against the Partisans. Further evidence of this role can be found in an agreement between the commander of the Italian Taro division (stationed in Montenegro) and the Chetnik leader Bajo Stanišić, in which freedom of

⁷⁸ Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 79.

⁷⁹ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 210.

⁸⁰ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 42-43.

mobility and food supplies were promised to Chetnik forces, in exchange for securing river crossings against the communists.⁸¹

Although there were distinctions between central Chetnik leadership and Montenegrin leadership, Mihailović and his associates were aware of and endorsed this collaboration. In his trial after the war, Mihailović was questioned on his knowledge of collaboration, and was asked “Did you know that the [Chetniks] were collaborating with the Italians?” In response, Mihailović said “When I was in Montenegro I witnessed this... I saw that they had a certain policy. I let them go on.”⁸² In fact Mihailović exercised a level of authority in Montenegro, displayed by the election of General Đukanović as the commander of all Chetnik forces in Montenegro, who he had nominated for the position.⁸³ What is more, he lived and operated in Montenegro for a period of time in 1942, authorizing the “[placing] all Chetnik detachments... not under Italian control at the disposal of the [Italian] Sixth Army Corps with the aim of suppressing communism.”⁸⁴

The Chetnik forces in Montenegro became progressively more legalized within the Italian military apparatus throughout the first half of 1942, culminating in a declaration of fealty by General Đukanović to the Italian governor of the province on July 24, 1942. In one of the most clear cut examples of collaboration of the Chetniks throughout the entire war, it organized explicit formations to be enlisted in the struggle against communism, entirely under the command of the Italian governor and military commander.

- 1) His Excellency the Governor of Montenegro accepts the obligation assumed in relation to the Italian Authorities by the Montenegrin nationalists

⁸¹ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 41.

⁸² Draža Mihailović, *The Trial of Dragoljub-Draža Mihailović, Stenographic Record and Documents from the Trial of Dragoljub-Draža Mihailović* (Belgrade: Union of the Journalists' Association of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, 1946), 146.

⁸³ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 210.

⁸⁴ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 52.

represented by the signatories of this document who, prompted by their honourable pledges and sense of loyalty to the Italians solemnly declare the following:

- a. That they will continue and bring to an end the uncompromising struggle against communism and the communists in Montenegro;
- b. Cooperate on the restoration of peace comma law and order and public safety in the country

...

- 5) In order to assure a successful outcome of the action effectively begun against the communists and in order to preclude their return in any form whatsoever, volunteer units under the name of “flying detachments” and consisting of handpicked and reliable Montenegrin nationalists shall be formed in Montenegro.

Three such formations shall be formed and will operate on the territory of the following districts...

Each detachment shall consist of 1500 men. Depending on the future situation the numerical strength of these detachments may be increased or reduced as deemed expedient by His Excellency the Governor...

- 6) General Đukanović and the commanders of the aforementioned units may put forward proposals for military action to H. E. the Governor or Military Commander or the divisional commanders stationed on the territories on which the formations are operating. No action may be varied out, however, without previous approval by the Italian military commanders who also retain the right to issue directives concerning the conduct of these operations.

General Đukanović and the commanders of the aforementioned formations pledge themselves to extend their wholehearted cooperation whenever requested to do so by H. E. the Governor, the Military commander or by the divisional commanders, always within the context of struggle against the communists who are active in Montenegro.

...

- 12) The Montenegrin National Committee [the Chetnik organization in Montenegro] pledges itself to engage all its forces and authority for the maintenance of order and discipline and prevent any action which might be directed against the Italian authorities.⁸⁵

As demonstrated by this agreement, the Chetniks were integrated into the Italian military apparatus. The Italians also paid Chetnik units, in the order of 15 lire per day for each soldier.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid., 46-49.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 65.

These actions and agreements were directly in line with the Chetnik program, as it provided the Chetniks with the necessary forces to win the eventual struggle against the Partisans. As observed by the historian Jozo Tomasevich, “Mihailović wanted to have a ready-made army which at the opportune moment would turn against the enemy and unite with other Mihailović forces, and with the help of the Western Allies carry Mihailović to power.”⁸⁷ The Chetniks were remarkably successful in this effort, and effectively controlled a large portion of Montenegro until the surrender of the Italians.⁸⁸

Unlike in Serbia, the Italian collaboration was generally a success for the Chetniks. Because they as an organization had not fought against the Italians, there was nothing more than a working relationship between the two. Additionally, the Partisans had little popular support in the province following their initial terror campaigns, and so prosecuting them was generally a popular action among the populace. Italian policy also played a role in Chetnik success – a lax attitude towards the population was successful in preventing an uprising, and when compared to the German and Ustasha regimes, Italian rule was favored among the population. The Chetniks in Montenegro did not pretend to be a resistance group, and were avowedly anti-communist.

The Chetniks in Montenegro collaborated extensively with the Axis, and signed a number of agreements to maintain order under the banner of the Italian occupation government. However, because the Partisans were not active in Montenegro, the Chetniks did not make many accomplishments to support their long-term goals. Chetnik collaboration in Montenegro only resulted in a well-equipped, but constrained fighting force, and their increasing reliance on the Italian military meant their fate was tied to that of the Axis.

⁸⁷ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 212.

Italo-Chetnik Collaboration in the Independent State of Croatia

The Italians also controlled the entire Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia, part of which was administered under the Independent State of Croatia. The Chetniks had extensive operations in both directly Italian and Croatian controlled territory, and collaborated with the Italians to support their operations here. The Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* or NDH) was in no sense independent. It was established by Italy and Germany to administer the lands of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and was for its entire existence subservient to its creators militarily, economically, and governmentally. It was divided into two zones of influence between Germany and Italy. Although Italy had de jure control of Croatia's affairs, having even sheltered its dictator Ante Pavelić during the interwar period, the NDH increasingly became beholden to Germany.⁸⁹ The NDH also began participating in the Holocaust, opening concentration camps targeting the nation's Jewish, Roma, and Serbian population, the latter which comprised almost a third of the nation's 6 million residents. It is estimated that by the end of the war, approximately 400,000 Serbians living in the territory of the NDH had been killed in an effort to 'purify' their lands.⁹⁰

In June 1941, a revolt broke out in Southern Bosnia in response to the impending genocide orchestrated by the Ustasha. The revolt is generally understood as apolitical and decentralized, and was not associated with either the Chetniks or the Partisans.⁹¹ Croatian despotic rule and hate campaigns, rather than a legitimate desire for regime change, was the cause of this revolt. In contrast, the Italians were seen as a benevolent occupier: "The shock of

⁸⁹ A pact was signed between the NDH and Germany that "allowed the Reich unrestricted exploitation of industrial raw material, and Croatian cover for all costs connected with the presence of German troops... the Germans also dismantled and took away a number of plants... they also took away workers... rising to over 200,000 by January 1944." – Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹¹ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 133.

the arrival of Italian troops were followed by a feeling of relief when comparisons were made with Ustasha rule.”⁹² This encouraged rebels, particularly Serbians, to make accommodations with the Italians in their fight against the Ustasha, as the Italians did not engage in genocide. In fact, Serbian rebels contacted Italy in late July and asked them to move further inland and occupy the areas within their zone of influence. Italy used this opportunity to both control the rebellion, as it was presented to the Italians that “they would stop fighting, if Italy helped them or annexed the area”,⁹³ and to expand their influence over Croatia. Although the NDH and Italy were in theory allied, Italy was willing to occupy the western half of the state in order to maintain order and secure their own interests in the region, in the process enlisting the support of Serbian nationalist elements.

The first documented instance of Italo-Chetnik collaboration in the NDH comes on November 30, 1941, as the Italians were preparing to occupy a town that the NDH had abandoned. The agreement was simple: the Chetniks would allow the Italians to operate unmolested, and vice versa, and the two units would operate on either side of the river Drina to occupy the town.⁹⁴ Following this action, “full freedom of action” would be resumed, implying that resistance and suppression actions could be undertaken, but a precedent of collaboration had been set that further agreements would be based on. The Chetnik goals in this action were clear, and in line with their general ideology, as it saw the loss of a town from the Ustasha regime in favor of the more pro-Serb Italians.

A consistent pillar of the Chetnik program was the protection of Orthodox Serbians in Croatia, as the Ustasha had implemented a plan to Croatianize their country by force. Because of

⁹² Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 41.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹⁴ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 28.

this, the Chetniks were less concerned about the Partisan threat, and more interested in orchestrating the takeover of NDH territory by the Italians, in order to protect the Serbian populations therein. Over the first half of 1942, the Italians gradually pushed the Ustasha out of the Italian zone of influence, a move that was welcomed by the local Serbian population.⁹⁵ Trifunović himself proclaimed the Chetniks to “consider themselves Serbs and hence friends of Italy... The Italian troops saved 100,000 Orthodox [Serbian] inhabitants in Croatia from certain death.”⁹⁶ The Italians also made agreements to install Serbian leaders in power in areas of Croatia occupied by the Italians, as is demonstrated by an agreement between the Italian VI army corps and the delegate of the Chetnik leader Boško Todorović. In this agreement, it was stipulated that in areas where Serbs were the majority population group, that Serbian civil administrations would be established:

The establishment of a Serbian civilian administration parallel with the Italian military one in all Serbian regions in Eastern Bosnia whose occupation is pending and where the Catholics [Croats] are in the minority. There can be no garrisons of the Croatian army in those areas. This is also valid for the districts of Gacko, Ulog, Kalinovik and Nevesinje.⁹⁷

This virtually assured that the genocide against the Serbs being undertaken in Croatia would cease in Serbian majority areas under Italian control. In return, the Chetniks swore that their forces “will never resort to arms against the Italians”⁹⁸, and a presumably friendly Serbian civil administration would keep the peace in the newly occupied territory. Important to note is the stipulation that no Croatian army units could be present in these areas – a prerequisite to the oppression of Croat and Muslim civilians that the Chetniks would bring.

⁹⁵ Srdja Trifković, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia, 1942-1943.” (The Historical Journal 36, no. 4, 1993), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2640036>, 881.

⁹⁶ Marjanović, *Collaboration*, 59.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

This accord reflects more concern about the NDH than the Partisans, only mentioning them by name once. Instead, the Chetnik forces concern themselves with the Ustasha presence in the newly 'liberated' areas: "All armed Ustashi [sic]... should be disarmed in all areas which are scheduled for occupation by the Italian armed forces."⁹⁹ As this agreement would see Chetnik and Italian soldiers working in tandem, it was recognized that this would be a propaganda victory for the communists. Therefore, the Chetniks demanded a propaganda victory to be provided themselves.

In view of the fact that this collaboration with the Italian military authorities, particularly the absence of armed resistance enabling the unhampered entry of Italian troops in the towns and villages liberated by the Chetniks affords ample opportunities to the communists for anti-Chetnik propaganda, we demand that the crucial problem of the Serbian population in these areas be settled in order to provide the necessary moral counter-balance to this propaganda. This of course refers to the problem of Serbian prisoners who are perishing by the score in the Croatian camps. These prisoners must be allowed to return to their homes, as this will provide the most effective weapon against the propaganda campaign mounted against us because of our collaboration.¹⁰⁰

Similarly to in Montenegro, the Chetniks were generally disinterested in disguising their actions as anything other than collaboration. Rather, they were concerned with the direct outcomes of Serbs, and hoped to liberate their people. With regards to the Italians, they could collaborate and obtain tangible benefits, while maintaining a positive image among the Serbian population. This demonstrates how collaboration in Croatia was again in line with the Chetnik program, as the transfer of territory between two Axis powers would have a minimal impact on the outcome of the war, and protect Serbians from the genocidal NDH regime.

By taking over swathes of land from the NDH in league with the Italians, the Chetniks were able to establish themselves in the area as the necessary precursors to the Greater Serbian

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 31.

state. This involved installing Serbian dominated systems of power, as well as the ethnic cleansing of a-national elements from these regions, as will be discussed in the next section. In the face of a genocide perpetrated against their own people, the Chetniks were more concerned with eliminating Ustasha forces than the Partisans. “Todorović had gone some way towards getting the disunited chetnik groups, many of whom had already made accommodations with Italian units, to concentrate on fighting the Ustashas, to let the Italians deal with the communists, and to be chary of links with the occupation power.”¹⁰¹ While this did not contribute directly to the Chetnik goal of eliminating the Partisans from contention of postwar power, it was effective in laying the groundwork for an eventual Great Serbia, and in protecting Serbs in the immediate time frame.

The Italians built up the Chetniks into a large and relatively effective fighting force. Approximately 20,000 Chetniks were active under Italian command as Voluntary Anti-Communist Militia (MVAC) in 1942. According to the Chief of Staff of the Italian Second Army, these units were supplied with: “30,000 rifles, 500 machine guns, 100 mortars, fifteen pieces of artillery, 250,000 hand grenades, 7,000,000 rounds of ammunition, 7,000-8,000 pairs of shoes.”¹⁰² Clearly, the Italians saw value in the Chetniks as an anti-Partisan formation, and as a peacekeeping force in the countryside. At this stage, the Chetniks functioned essentially as an auxiliary gendarmerie for Italy, who could not hope to control the rural areas of Bosnia without them, and supplied them accordingly.

Through the first half of 1942, the Chetniks in occupied Croatia filled the role of gendarmerie for the Italian army. Although the Partisans were present in the NDH (specifically

¹⁰¹ Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 115.

¹⁰² Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 216.

in Bosnia),¹⁰³ the MVAC units were not involved in any major operations against them. This worked within the Chetnik plan to build up their strength with the support of the Axis powers, with the eventual goal of turning that power against both them and the Partisans. The historian Matteo Milazzo writes that the Chetnik leadership always planned to turn on the Axis, saying “The Chetnik officers felt compelled to collaborate, but only selectively and on their own terms, and they were just as determined to prepare to turn against the Axis at the right moment.”¹⁰⁴

Certainly, this fits in the Chetnik framework of opportunistic collaboration, and the Chetniks were able to secure a significant military force through their collaboration. Unlike in Serbia, collaboration with the Italians caused minimal harms to the Chetniks. They were able to collaborate and receive their necessary supplies from a willing ally, and were generally able to avoid conflict with the Partisans, protecting their image as a resistance group. Additionally, they were able to secure the livelihood of Serbs in the areas that they conquered, in line with their nationalist leanings. However, their reliance on the Axis had grown from simply a request for ammunition in Serbia in 1941, to salaries, equipment, food, and clothing being supplied by the Italian military by 1942. The Chetniks had essentially tied any military success that they would have to their occupiers, and had not taken any major actions against the Partisans in the NDH in that time. The major Chetnik victory came in their security of the Serbian people in the Italian occupied areas of the NDH – undoubtedly, many thousands of Serbs were saved from Ustasha genocide by Italo-Chetnik collaboration. But one genocide would soon be replaced with another, as the Chetniks exacted their revenge on the territory they conquered.

¹⁰³ Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 93.

Chetnik Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia

One cannot discuss Chetnik actions in the NDH without examining the genocidal actions carried out by their commanders and soldiers against both Croats and Muslims. A large number of Muslims joined in the Ustasha terrors against Serbian populations in 1941,¹⁰⁵ adding fuel to a flame of hatred that had brewed after centuries of Turkish rule of the area. The Chetnik Greater Serbian program necessitated the ethnic cleansing of the areas to be incorporated into the new Serbian unit. According to the architect of the Greater Serbian plan, Dr. Stevan Moljević, it was necessary to create a “homogenous Serbia” advocating that “Transfers and exchanges of population, especially of Croats from the Serbian and of Serbs from the Croatian areas, is the only way to arrive at their separation and to create better relations between them.”¹⁰⁶ Although Moljević’s ideas are peaceful in a literal reading, the work of the Belgrade Chetnik Committee argues for massive population shifts, arguing that “not less than 2,675,000 people would have to be expelled, including 1,000,000 Croats and 500,000 Germans... ‘In the Serbian unit the Moslems present a grave problem and if possible it should be solved in this phase [referring to the late war/early postwar period].’”¹⁰⁷ Clearly, the expulsion of over 2.5 million people could not be accomplished by policy alone, and the Chetniks were willing to resort to any means necessary to accomplish their goal.

In his December 20, 1941 instructions to his commanders in Montenegro and the Sandžak, Mihailović ordered for the ethnic cleansing of the areas deemed to be in Great Serbia.

The objectives are, the directive says... The creation of a Great Yugoslavia and within it a Great Serbia which is to be ethnically pure... the cleansing of the state territory of all national minorities and a-national elements... the creation of contiguous frontiers between Serbia and Montenegro, as well as between Serbia

¹⁰⁵ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 257, Pavlowitch, *Hitler’s New Disorder*, 115.

¹⁰⁶ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 167.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

and Slovenia by cleansing the Moslem population from Sanjak and the Moslem and Croat populations from Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁰⁸

The official Chetnik ideology undoubtedly prescribed ethnic cleansing, and the repercussions of that were felt in the occupied territory of the Independent State of Croatia. The Chetniks generally did not attempt the ethnic cleansing of any minorities other than the Croats and Muslims of Yugoslavia. Terror acts against the families and villages of Partisans also occurred,¹⁰⁹ but were not based on a specific ethnicity and therefore would not fall under the description of ethnic cleansing.

A number of atrocities committed by the Chetniks in Croatia were enumerated during the postwar trial of Draža Mihailović, of which a few are documented here:

In December 1941, and during January 1942, the Cetniks [sic] massacred over 2.000 Moslems — men, women and children, from the Foca, Gorazde and Cajnice regions... In August 1942 on the terrain round Ustikolina and Jahorina (Eastern Bosnia) Mihailovic's Cetniks, under the command of Major Zaharija Ostojii and Petar Bacovic, massacred about 2.500 Moslems and burned down their villages; In September 1942, at Makarska, Petar Bacovic's Cetniks killed about 900 Croats, skinned alive a number of Catholic priests, and burned 17 villages; In October 1942, near Prozor, Petar Bacovic's Cetniks killed, in collaboration with the Italians and under the command of the Italian lieutenant Vidjak, about 2.500 Moslems and Croats, among whom were women, children and old men, and burned a large number of villages.¹¹⁰

Further, in his own reports, the Chetnik commander Đurišić reported that as of January 1943, “thirty-three Moslem villages had been burned down... about 1,000 women and children had been killed.”, and as of February 13, “the Chetniks killed about 1,200 Moslem fighters and about 8,000 old people, women, and children; Chetnik losses in the action were 22 killed and 32 wounded.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 257.

¹¹⁰ Mihailović, *Trial of Draža Mihailović*, 520-521.

¹¹¹ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 258.

The Chetniks also centered their genocidal acts around revenge. In a Chetnik manual on their goals and strategies to achieve them, a section was entitled “The Problem of Revenge”, which justified revenge as “the sacred duty of the Serbian people against those who had wronged them during the war and occupation.”¹¹² Particularly against the Ustasha, revenge was advocated to ensure that the crimes committed would not go unanswered. Milazzo writes that this sentiment was encouraged by the officer corps: “The officer leadership, as Serb nationalists, not only encouraged the recurrent outrages committed by the armed formations against the Croats and Muslims as a part of general policy and in a spirit of revenge for everything the Serb civilians had suffered.”¹¹³ To attribute the whole of these actions to revenge, however, would be misguided. Although similar atrocities had been carried out against ethnic Serbs by Muslims and Croats in the initial Ustasha terrors of 1941,¹¹⁴ the fact that these actions had been prescribed by multiple Chetnik directives and by Mihailović himself proves that the ethnic cleansing was premeditated and not purely reactionary.

A spirit of sanctioned revenge killings was present in the Chetnik formations, particularly in Bosnia and the Sandžak, which ultimately worked in favor of the Chetnik program. In order to create the Greater Serbia that they desired, the work of cleansing the territory of all non-Serbs could be started at will. This presents another advantage to the Chetniks of collaboration: military support of the Italians, who as previously mentioned armed and paid the Chetniks to act as countryside gendarmerie, allowed them to operate generally unhindered in this task and to greater effect.

¹¹² Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, 261.

¹¹³ Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 95.

¹¹⁴ Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, 114.

The genocide carried out by the Chetniks against Muslims and Croats, although limited in scale when compared to the horrors of the Holocaust, was a defining feature of the Chetnik program. Their Serbian nationalist ideology was predicated on clearing the Great Serbian state of national minorities, and Mihailović, as well as many of his commanders, gave orders to exterminate entire non-Serbian populations. Not only are these actions crimes against humanity, but from a practical standpoint, they alienated the Chetniks from the country they ostensibly hoped to liberate. Their Serb-first ideology was incompatible with multiethnic Yugoslavia, and only served to drive more people into the anti-Chetnik – or Partisan – camp.

Conclusion

During the Second World War, the Chetniks lost their ability to claim power in postwar Yugoslavia. The central question to answer is, what actions taken by the Chetniks lead to their downfall? By classifying the Partisans, and not the Axis, as their main enemy, the Chetniks justified a system of collaboration that both alienated themselves from the population and the Allied powers, but increasingly tied their fate to that of Italy and Germany. By integrating into the Italian military apparatus in the NDH and Montenegro, the Chetniks were unable and unwilling to carry out any resistance actions, and surrendered the movement to the Partisans. The major act of Chetnik resistance undertaken in the early stages of the war was to briefly fight alongside the Partisans during the Užice uprising, before negotiating with the Germans and turning on the Partisans to end the revolt. The Chetnik program was not primarily focused on carrying out effective resistance, only to build their own strength through which they could assume power postwar. This led them to collaborate, and surrender the any legitimacy as either a resistance movement, or to their namesake of Chetniks, hailing back to the Serbian guerillas of old.

The Chetnik program was also incompatible with a multiethnic country like Yugoslavia. Their ideology was based on upholding Serbian dominance in society and government, and securing ethnically homogenous territory for the Serbian people. The Germans recognized their unwillingness to sacrifice Serbian life for their cause, and used this in their policy of reprisal killings to encourage the Chetniks to fight the Partisans in order to stop any bloodshed from happening. The Chetniks also engaged in the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia, taking revenge on tens of thousands of innocent Muslim and Croat civilians for the killing of Serbs by the Ustasha. A sincere lack of regard for the majority of Yugoslavia that was non-Serbian forced the Chetniks to

seek the support of only a segment of the population, and encouraged other ethnicities to fight against them. The plan to establish a Great Serbia that was comprised of ethnically homogenous territory was not something that a group concerned with resisting their occupiers could attempt.

The Chetniks demonstrate the flaws of pursuing an ethnically and ideologically homogenous strategy in an effort that requires buy-in from all interested parties. By refusing to work with the Partisans, they not only isolated themselves from the heart of the resistance movement, but actively harmed what would eventually be the most successful resistance in all of occupied Europe. Chetnik collaboration caused untold suffering from the people who they occupied, tied them to the fate of the Axis powers, and ultimately ceded control of their nation to the powers that they most feared.

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