



# WER IST WALTER?

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# From Resistance to Collaboration: The Evolution of the Chetnik Movement in Serbia in 1941

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## **Introduction**

The first year of World War II in Yugoslavia was a turning point for the Chetnik movement. The entire wartime history of the movement, whose representative and commander was Dragoljub “Draža” Mihailović, was determined by the political, ideological, and subsequently military choices they made in the period between April and December 1941.

In April 1941, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as a stagnant, poor and largely illiterate society on the periphery of Europe, had been attacked and defeated by the Axis powers led by Nazi Germany. The Kingdom became easy prey for the external enemy; during its two decades of existence, it was torn by internal conflicts due to the failure to resolve the problems at the heart of the state’s structure, especially those arising from national issues of identity-deprivation for everyone (except Serbs) at varying levels. The government of the Kingdom, which had been established in 1918, was steeped in corruption and repression, especially after the introduction of the dictatorship by King Alexander in January 1929. Its damaged legitimacy was further undermined by the assassination of the authoritarian monarch in 1934, and completely devastated after Prince Regent Paul removed Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović from power. Although he was prone to fascist forces, Stojadinović was the last regime politician with any authority. After that, the government, in face of the internal crisis and frightened by the growing pressure from fascist states in Europe, signed an agreement in August 1939 with the opposition leader of the Croatian Peasant Party on the formation of the Croatian Banovina, a state within a state, which irreversibly defeated the centralist order in the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Fierce resistance by Ser-

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<sup>1</sup> Ljubo Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković – Maček* (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 1965).

bian nationalists (who were traditionally centralist and unitarian), as well by significant numbers in the military, led to dissatisfaction with the first man of the regime, Prince Regent Paul.<sup>2</sup> Under pressure from Nazi Germany, the government signed the Axis Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941, which led to mass demonstrations in Belgrade and other cities, mostly in Serbia. Two days later, Royal Army forces led by General Dušan Simović carried out a military coup, removing the ruler-regent Prince Paul from power and placing the still-minor King Petar II Karađorđević on the throne and at the head of Yugoslavia. The coup did not create any external or internal discontinuity; the Tripartite Pact remained in force, as did the decree on Banovina Croatia. But Adolf Hitler saw the events of 27 March 1941 in Belgrade as treason and deemed that those responsible for it needed to be punished. 10 days later, Nazi Germany and its allies began their attack and invasion of Yugoslavia. After only 11 days of resistance, the army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia capitulated on 17 April 1941. The government, with Prime Minister Dušan Simović and King Petar not formally accepting this act, escaped and after a period of wandering, settled in exile in London, until the liberation of the country.<sup>3</sup>

## The Chetnik movement and its relations towards the Partisans

After the Royal Army's capitulation and the state of Yugoslavia's de-facto dissolution, three positions crystallised in Serbia, which was occupied and placed under German military administration.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, a group of Royal Army officers refused to recognise the capitulation and gathered in mid-May 1941 on the Ravna Gora plateau in western Serbia, led by Colonel Dragoljub Mihailović. This marked the beginning of the Chetnik movement in World War II as an anti-occupation resistance movement. The Chetniks' ideological position cannot be qualified as antifascist, but their character as an anti-occupation and liberation movement in the very first

2 Miodrag Jovičić, *Jako srpstvo – jaka Jugoslavija. Izbor članaka iz Srpskog glasa, organa Srpskog kulturnog kluba* (Beograd: Naučna knjiga, 1991).

3 Branko Petranović and Nikola Žutić, *27. mart 1941. Tematska zbirka dokumenata* (Beograd: Nicom, 1990); Branko Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939-1945* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1992), 19-85.

4 For more information about these three positions see: Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939-1945*, 132-176.

months cannot be questioned. Anti-communism was also an important element of the Chetnik movement, but in the initial stage, this was not yet a dominant characteristic of the movement.

Another resistance movement gathered around the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije* – KPJ). The KPJ, banned and persecuted during the Kingdom, had formulated clear antifascist beliefs in the mid-1930s, when the party had started to develop a “National Front” strategy. On 4 July 1941, the KPJ called on the Yugoslav people to rise against the fascist occupiers. This marked the creation of the Partisan movement, and what was later called the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (*Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije* – NOVJ), the only anti-fascist movement on the territory of occupied Yugoslavia.

The third political grouping active in Serbia after the destruction of the Kingdom, were the fascist and quisling forces that officially collaborated with the occupiers. Their leaders were Milan Nedić and Dimitrije Ljotić. In August 1941, Nedić became the head of the civilian administration in Serbia established by the German military authorities, called the Government of National Salvation. Ljotić was the leader of the fascist party Zbor. This grouping’s armed formations were the Serbian State Guard (*Srpska državna straža*), the Serbian Border Guard (*Srpska granična straža*) and Ljotić’s Serbian Volunteer Corps (*Srpski dobrovoljački korpus*).

Chetniks’ relation to the two other groups defined their attitude and evolution in the year 1941. However, the history of the Chetnik movement began not in this year, but decades before the start of World War II in Yugoslavia. Initially, they existed as paramilitary formations organised and financed by the authorities of the Principality and the Kingdom of Serbia at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, tasked with asserting, through their armed actions, the claim of the newly formed Serbian state to the territories of the Ottoman Empire predominantly inhabited by Christians. In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, between the two world wars, the Chetnik movement played the political role of a radical paramilitary organisation in defence of the monarchist order. From 1918 to 1941, Chetnik detachments operated in multi-ethnic areas in Macedonia, Sandžak, and Kosovo to terrorise and ethnically cleanse the Muslim and Albanian population (“nationalisation of southern areas”). Chetnik associations were notably active in provoking inter-ethnic conflicts in Croatia, where they found similar Croatian extreme-nationalist

organisations to enter into conflict with. Due to their militant activity and extreme right-wing orientation in the 1920s, Chetnik associations served as the Yugoslav regime's striking fist in dealing with the labour movement. After the change in the throne in 1934, the ruling Prince Paul Karađorđević, unlike his predecessor, was not in favour of the Chetnik organisations' violent methods, and efforts were made to limit their influence in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, primarily in Croatia.<sup>5</sup>

The war brought the movement again to the forefront. After the group of Royal Army officers who refused to recognise the capitulation gathered on the Ravna Gora plateau, they elected Colonel Dragoljub Mihailović as their commander in mid-May 1941. They originally called themselves the Chetnik detachments of the Yugoslav Army (*Četnički odredi Jugoslovenske vojske*) and then Military Chetnik detachments (*Vojno-četnički odredi*). After establishing a connection with the Yugoslav government in exile in London and the official recognition they received from it, they renamed themselves the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland (*Jugoslovenska vojska u otadžbini* – JVuO) in mid-November 1941.<sup>6</sup>

Operating as an anti-occupation movement, the Chetniks first cooperated with the Partisans in the summer of 1941 in the fight against German troops. From September 1941, the uprising flared up. The weakened Germans, whose key forces were focused on Operation Barbarossa and the attack on the Soviet Union, retreated from Serbian cities, which often fell as a result of the cooperation of Partisan and Chetnik units. They were successful in the battles around Gornji Milanovac, Šabac, Valjevo and Kraljevo. The liberated territory created in autumn 1941 in western Serbia was later called the Republic of Užice, because of its centre in the city of Užice. Its territory spread almost from the Danube in the north, to the Uvac in the south and represented one of the larger territories freed from the Germans in enslaved Europe. Within this territory, power was shared on a parity basis between Chetniks and Partisans, with for example two commands for each place. All together, the Republic of Užice was marked by duality of power and command, within which the Partisan forces were in a dominating position.<sup>7</sup>

5 For more about the Chetnik movement before 1941, see: Nusret Šehić, *Četništvo u Bosni i Hercegovini 1918–1941* (Sarajevo: Akademija nauka i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine, 1971).

6 Kosta Nikolić, *Istorija Ravnogorskog pokreta 1941–1945*, vol. 1 (Beograd: Srpska reč, 1999), 42–75.

7 Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939–1945*. (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1992), 228–244; Jovan Marjanović, *Ustanak i Narodnooslobodilački pokret u Srbiji 1941*. (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka – Odelenje za istorijske nauke, 1963).

Very soon, it became clear that there were fundamental disagreements and insurmountable differences between the Partisans and the Chetniks. This concerned their strategic choices: to directly and constantly fight against the occupiers, as advocated by the Partisans, or to adopt a strategy of waiting until the Germans were defeated on the main fronts, as advocated by the Chetnik movement. Their disagreements were also ideological and concerned the character of the state, its organisation and the orientation of society after the war. The Partisans, led by the communists, were a revolutionary organisation that intended to change the pre-war social order in the direction of social justice and national equality, while the Chetniks advocated the position of single-nation domination and uniting the Serbian ethnic space by creating a Greater Serbia within Yugoslavia and ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs from that area. Insurmountable differences also existed in all other social and political issues, from the place of religion to the position of women.

The first informal program issued by the Chetnik movement in June 1941 was called “Homogeneous Serbia” (*Homogena Srbija*) and its author was Stevan Moljević, a pre-war lawyer from Banja Luka and one of the leaders of the nationalist Serbian Cultural Club and member and president of the Central National Committee under Mihailović. As one of the key ideologues of the Chetnik movement, Mihailović appointed him as his special advisor for political issues, and during the war, he took over the leadership of the political wing of the Chetnik movement. In his well-known document, Moljević stated very openly that the “first and basic duty” of the Serbs is to “create and organise a homogeneous Serbia that has to encompass the entire ethnic area in which the Serbs live”. This meant the ethnic cleansing and eradication of all non-Serb peoples and identities that lived in the area that Moljević clearly defined, for the first time, as Serbian ethnic space.<sup>8</sup> Although Moljević speaks of “Serbia” in the document, the territories he lists as being Serb had nothing to do with the historical or legal framework of Serbia. The leading ideologue of the Chetnik movement believed that only the creation of a new, large and ethnically cleansed state would guarantee

8 It is indicative that already with Moljević, in June 1941, a pattern is visible that will persist to this day: crimes against Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia during World War II are a justification for the concept of ethnic cleansing and crimes against non-Serb peoples, especially against the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandžak. Cf: Dejan Ilić, “Ko tebe Srebrenicom, ti njega Jasenovcem”, 14 May 2024, <https://pescanik.net/ko-tebe-srebrenicom-ti-njega-jasenovcem/>. All internet sources last accessed on 14 May 2024.

Serbs “free economic, political and cultural life and development for all time”. Moljević’s great Serbian state was supposed to include, apart from Serbia and Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Vojvodina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, significant parts of Croatia, but also the western parts of Bulgaria and northern Albania.<sup>9</sup>

Moljević sharply criticised the “unlimited liberalism” of the time of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and advocated the introduction of state corporatism, a key characteristic of fascist regimes in southern Europe. In this way, apart from the national program that had strong elements of fascism, Moljević also advocated for the socioeconomic arrangement implemented in Italy, Spain and Portugal. Capital “must be the means by which the Serbian people will realise their historic mission in the field of national defence, national economy and national culture, and ensure their national survival, but the bearer of capital and capitalism must first and foremost be the state”.<sup>10</sup>

The positions articulated in Moljević’s document, which were repeated in later programmatic documents of the movement, clearly show that the Chetniks also stood for a radical restructuring of the former Yugoslav state and socio-economic system. This means that not only the Partisans, but also the Chetniks advocated a radical change of the pre-war monarchist order. The difference was that the Partisans wanted to implement left-revolutionary ideas, and the Chetniks, far-right and ultra-conservative ideologies. These differences increased the two groups’ distance from each other, and influenced the Chetniks’ approach to the occupation regimes. Hence, the claim often reproduced in historiography, that the Partisans were in favour of revolutionary changes and the Chetniks were in favour of maintaining the previous order, is incorrect. The stated attitudes towards national politics, but also towards liberal capitalism and generally anti-liberal rhetoric in a large number of programmatic documents of the Chetnik movement, render historiography’s efforts to ascribe post-factum a liberal or even anti-fascist connotation to them pointless.

Precisely because of these ideological differences, but also because of the strengthening of the Partisan movement, who rejected the wait-and-see strategy, the Chetniks increasingly began to see the Partisans as their key

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9 Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije (ZNOR), XIV-1 (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1981), 1-6.

10 Ibid.

enemies, and their anti-communist stance strongly intensified. Between July and November 1941, we can witness the step-by-step transformation of the Chetnik movement from an anti-occupation force to a collaboration force. October and November were key moments, in which Chetniks began to directly attack Partisan forces and when Mihailović, promising that he would “cleanse” Serbia of communists, expressed his desire to fight against the Partisans alongside the Germans and Nedić. As a consequence, an attack by German and quisling forces at the end of November 1941 led to the destruction of the Užice Republic and the uprising in Serbia was crushed. The surviving Partisan troops and their commanding staff retreated through the Sandžak towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, which became the centrepiece of their military operations. Thus, concluding with the first year of the war, Serbia was left to the occupiers and quislings, apart from its southern part, which retained a sizable Partisan presence throughout the war, until the year of liberation in 1944. The main Chetnik forces remained in Serbia and applied a completely different strategy than did the Partisans.<sup>11</sup>

### **First steps towards collaboration (July-September 1941)**

What were the concrete steps in the Chetniks’ transformation from a liberation movement to a collaborationist movement in the second half of 1941? The first signs can already be seen in summer 1941 and are linked to Mihailović’s well-known position on the need to “unify national [Serbian] forces”. This was already his position in the first weeks after the occupation of Yugoslavia, and this relativised the basic division between anti-occupation and collaboration forces. For the purpose of “national unification”, Mihailović, soon after arriving at Ravna Gora, established contact with the head of the quisling administration in Serbia, at this time Milan Aćimović, who would become one of the most trusted people through whom Mihailović would connect with the Germans.

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11 For different opinions about the Chetnik movement and its evolution, see: Marjanović, *Ustanak i Narodnooslobodilački pokret u Srbiji 1941*; Jozo Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom svjetskom ratu 1941-1945* (Zagreb: Liber, 1979); Nikolić, *Istorija Ravnogorskog pokreta 1941-1945*; Bojan Dimitrijević and Kosta Nikolić, *Đeneral Mihailović. Biografija* (Beograd: Srpska reč, 2000).



Aćimović's position was that "discreet coordination" with Mihailović's Chetniks was needed, not confrontation. The only real enemy and thus rallying point for the Chetniks, quislings and occupiers was the "fight against the communists." Aćimović, president of the Council of Commissioners and the Commissioner of Internal Affairs of occupied Serbia, stressed that "Draža's goal must be our goal as well". The argument he used in front of the Germans was that while the occupation lasted, a number of people would always go "into the forest", and that it was better to be led there by a "national and sober man" such as Mihailović than by communists.<sup>12</sup> Believing that "national unity" could be an instrument in preserving the "biological substance" of the Serbian people, Mihailović was in a situation where, at the beginning of the war, he still did not have a clear connection with the British or the support of the Allies. Witnessing the Partisan movement's daily strengthening, he decided to establish a relationship with the local quislings and then enjoyed their support throughout the war. Also, already in the summer of 1941, it was clear to Mihailović and to the Serbian quisling politicians, but also to the Germans, that they were connected by two strategic goals: the necessity of destroying the Partisan movement and the necessity of pacifying Serbia. In order for the Chetnik non-combat strategy of waiting to prevail, and given that this kind of passivity was also in the interests of the occupation, the existence of a competitive, combative and liberation movement like the Partisans could not be tolerated.

There is no agreement in historiography at which moment Mihailović, as the Chetnik movement's commander, came into contact with the German occupiers. On 17 July 1941, the Chief of the Administrative Staff of the Military Commander of Serbia, Harald Turner, informed Aćimović, in a confidential document, that he had entered into contact with an "official representative" of Mihailović's movement, without providing details about that representative's identity. The document states that Mihailović's unnamed representative condemned "terrorist and communist actions". And in his monthly report from December 1941, Turner mentions July as the month when Aćimović and Mihailović negotiated, with German approval, during which Mihailović avoided signing the agreement previously reached with Kosta Pećanac, a rival Chetnik commander. This first contact took place before the uprising spread in Serbia, and also before Mihailović

12 Jovan Marjanović, *Draža Mihailović između Britanaca i Nemaca*, Vol. 1: *Britanski štitećenik* (Zagreb: Globus, 1979), 121-122.

established a connection with British intelligence, which first happened in September 1941.<sup>13</sup> In July 1941 and in the following months, Mihailović avoided a written commitment to an agreement with the Germans and refused to directly and publicly put himself at the service of the occupiers, but persistently sought to cooperate with them with the common goal of destroying the Partisan movement. The German response remained constantly the same: pressuring Mihailović to enter into open collaboration, showing distrust towards him, and trying to use the Chetnik movement to destroy the opposing Partisan movement. At the same time, Mihailović also did not trust the Germans and tried to reach an agreement that would be kept secret, yet would guarantee cooperation and the delivery and use of German weapons to destroy the Partisans.

It is reliably known that on 10 August 1941, Mihailović met with the commander of the gendarmerie in occupied Serbia, Jovan Trišić, with the aim of coordinating the actions of the quisling structures and the Chetniks. According to testimonies, Mihailović also advocated a strategy of waiting towards the occupiers at that meeting, but asked the commander of the quisling gendarmerie to better arm his units, in which he would include as many members of the Chetnik movement as possible. The connection with the quisling apparatus was intensified by the arrival of General Milan Nedić, acting as the so-called president of the government of national salvation, under German auspices. Immediately after taking office at the end of August 1941, Nedić sent a letter to Mihailović through an intermediary (Živojin Đurić) inviting him to come to Belgrade for negotiations. Mihailović did not go, but sent a three-member delegation (Colonel Dragoslav Pavlović, Major Aleksandar Mišić and Major Radoslav Đurić) who held several meetings with Nedić at the beginning of September. Mihailović's conditions for cooperation were: the end of the uprising and establishment of "order and peace" in Serbia; a common fight against the Partisans; that Nedić's government enables the Chetnik movement to communicate with the Germans and to de facto legitimise them towards the occupiers; that Nedić's government provides financial resources to Chetnik officers. Milan Nedić accepted all the preconditions, provided financial resources for the Chetnik officers, and the German occupiers approved this agreement.<sup>14</sup> This was the de facto start of Chetnik collaboration. At the same time,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 125-26.

Mihailović was negotiating with the Partisans and also established contacts with the British.

On 19 September 1941, Mihailović met with the Partisan commander Josip Broz Tito in the village of Struganik. The two concluded a verbal agreement on non-aggression in this meeting. Mihailović also tried to convince Tito that the uprising against the occupiers was premature, while at the same time refusing the Partisan offer to stand at the head of the uprising forces. It should be noted that at that time, two of Mihailović's men, Colonel Branislav Pantić and Captain Nenad Mitrović, as liaison officers with the Germans and General Nedić, were already regularly travelling from Ravna Gora to Belgrade, preparing the ground for closer cooperation with the occupiers. In simultaneously negotiating with the quisling authorities and the Germans in Belgrade, trying to get the support of the British and the Yugoslav government in exile, and cooperating on the ground with the Partisans, Mihailović and the leadership of the Chetnik movement in September 1941 put themselves in a position in which they wanted to remain throughout the war, yet one that was unsustainable.<sup>15</sup>

### **The decisive steps towards collaboration (October-November 1941)**

October 1941 was the peak of the liberation uprising in Serbia, and a crucial month when it came to the future orientation of the Chetniks. The situation was becoming complicated and sitting on so many chairs was no longer sustainable for Mihailović and his movement. Despite the fact that Hitler ordered the suppression of the uprising in Serbia, and the arrival of additional troops, the German forces still suffered defeats. The free territory, centred in Užice, which was liberated at the end of September, was growing. At the beginning of October, the Republic of Užice had around one million inhabitants and included industrial facilities and other material assets.<sup>16</sup> More and more people were mobilised into the liberation army, and there was no shortage of weapons either, as production was renewed at the weapons factory in Užice. Health and sanitary services were organised, as well

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15 Ivo Goldstein and Slavko Goldstein, *Tito* (Profil: Zagreb, 2015), 212-215; Dimitrijević and Nikolić, *General Mihailović*, 153-162.

16 Venceslav Glišić, *Užička republika* (Beograd: Nolit, 1986), 46.

as a whole network of new local authorities. At that time, the British sent the first military mission to the free territory where, although with Partisan supremacy, the two movements still cooperated in their fight against the occupiers. Nevertheless, during September and more intensively in October, Mihailović sent messages through emissaries to the Germans, assuring them that he did not want to fight against them and asked for an agreement with the Partisans as a common opponent. However, all these efforts were not enough because the German military command had no confidence in the Chetniks, until the appearance of the Austrian professor of Slavic studies and Abwehr intelligence officer, Josef Matl.

Matl was most responsible for establishing trust between the German authorities and the Chetnik movement's leadership. Secret talks were held between 28 and 30 October in occupied Belgrade with Matl and Mihailović's authorised representatives, Colonel Branislav Pantić and Captain Nenad Mitrović. Matl's reports on the talks, sent to his superiors, were titled: "Making available the group of General Staff Colonel Draža Mihailović for the fight against communists in cooperation with the German Wehrmacht". In these talks, it was agreed that Mihailović would meet with the authorised officers of the German command in Serbia. The occupation apparatus issued a written security guarantee for Mihailović. Pantić and Mitrović's mission in Belgrade was successfully completed and they returned to Ravna Gora on 30 October with German consent to talks and a written guarantee for the commander of the Chetnik movement. Following this, on the last day of October, Mihailović issued an order to attack Partisan positions in the free territory of western Serbia, Užice, Ivanjica, Čačak, and Gornji Milanovac. By doing so, Mihailović wanted to strengthen his negotiating positions towards the occupiers and his argument that the "communists" were his only enemy and that he was ready to actively fight against them, which he also used as an argument for why he needed weapons.

Thus, on 1 November 1941, the internal war in Serbia, which was fought within the liberation war, began.<sup>17</sup> The Chetnik movement opened a front against the Partisans, and Mihailović believed that he had thereby legitimised himself as a negotiator with the German command in Serbia. However, the events did not develop according to his plans. On the one hand,

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17 About the character of the war in Yugoslavia and the dilemma of whether it was a liberation or civil war, see Boro Krivokapić's explanation: "Nema građanskog rata u prisustvu – okupatora (1941–45)", Boro Krivokapić, *Bes/konačni Tito* (Beograd: Novosti, 2006), 298.

the Chetnik movement soon started to suffer defeats from superior and more motivated Partisan forces. On the other hand, representatives of the German military command in Serbia soon disputed Abwehr and Matl's assertion about the necessity of negotiations with the Chetnik leadership. Representatives of the German military command, above all General Turner, continued to believe that Mihailović could not be trusted, that he was facing destruction and that he was trying to gain time and use German forces through negotiations without any real intention to help the efforts of the occupiers. However, since the talks were already scheduled, the rank of the German delegation was lowered, the seat was moved from Belgrade to the province, and the German position in the talks was significantly different from the tone in which the negotiations between Mihailović's envoys and Matl had taken place.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the meeting took place on 11 November 1941 in the village of Divci in western Serbia. Although the German delegation came without the intention of actually negotiating with Mihailović, his appearance was undoubtedly a turning point in the Chetniks' transition from a liberation movement to a collaborationist movement. The Chetnik delegation was led by Colonel Dragoljub Mihailović and the German one was led by Lieutenant Colonel Rudolf Kogard. The delegations also included: Military Administrative Advisor Georg Kissel, Captain Jozef Matl and two other officers from Germany and Major Aleksandar Mišić, Colonel Branislav Pantić and Captain Nenad Mitrović from the Chetnik side.

At the beginning of the meeting, Kogard said that he was authorised by the German Military Command in Serbia to read the official German statement on Mihailović's request for cooperation. The statement first said: "Two weeks ago, you told us through your confidants in Belgrade that your intention is 'that you will no longer allow Serbian blood to be shed uselessly and Serbian property to be further destroyed'. At the same time, you offered to fight communism together with the German Wehrmacht and the organs of the Nedić government." Mihailović's offer was rejected by the German Command because, as it was said, the Wehrmacht would suppress the Partisan uprising on its own, while the Chetniks could not be fully trusted "as allies". In order to win the trust of the German occupation authorities, the Chetniks were to look up to the quisling administration ("government") of

18 Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 180-182; Dimitrijević and Nikolić, *Đeneral Mihailović*, 163-166; Marjanović, *Draža Mihailović između Britanaca i Nemaca*, 133-152.

Milan Nedić, because it “put itself in the fight against communism from the beginning”. Unlike Nedić, the Chetniks, as formulated in the statement, sided with those who wanted to “drive the Germans out of the country and who already at the end of September made a solid fighting alliance with the Communists”. The Chetniks were especially criticised for using ruses in attacking “peaceful German troops”, some of whom were captured near Krupanj, Loznica and Gornji Milanovac. With this, the Chetniks had caused damage to the German Wehrmacht, from whom they now sought an alliance in the fight against the Partisans. It was incomprehensible to the Germans that “after all mentioned above”, Mihailović was trying to portray the Chetniks as “allies of the German Wehrmacht”, and they considered his declarations insincere and unconvincing.

Considering that they were doing well on the ground, the Germans told Mihailović that “the German Wehrmacht cannot burden itself with such allies” who join it out of pure opportunism and without enough real faith in what the German Reich represented. The Germans also objected to Mihailović because he was negotiating with them and Tito at the same time, in other words: that he participated in attacks on German positions and at the same time sent an “offer to the German Wehrmacht”. As a condition for starting strategic cooperation, the Germans issued an ultimatum to the Chetniks, demanding cessation of fighting and unconditional surrender, including the surrender of their weapons and military equipment, as well as the release of all German prisoners. Kogard even used the term “capitulation”. An additional reason for distrust towards the Chetniks which was put forward was that Mihailović’s superiors, “who pull the strings”, were the government in exile, now based in London.<sup>19</sup>

In his response to the German note, Colonel Mihailović replied that he was not a “representative of London”, but that he could not act openly like Milan Nedić.

Nedić’s government came out completely openly and sided with the occupiers, and that was its mistake. It is not my intention to wage war against the occupiers, because as a general staff officer I know the strengths of both forces. I am not a communist, nor do I work for them. But I tried to mitigate and prevent their terror. The Germans

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19 ZNOR, XIV-1, 871-873.

themselves handed over Užice, and with that the race between me and the communists began. After the Germans withdrew their weak garrison, the communists attacked Gornji Milanovac, and therefore I had to do the same. They went to Čačak, so I had to too. They went to Kraljevo, I had to too. The attack on Krupanj is not my work, but the work of the renegade Lieutenant Martinović. But my men went to Loznica so that the communists would not occupy it. The attack on Šabac was the work of disobedient elements. There I ordered a retreat, because it is pointless to attack Šabac, if the left bank cannot be captured. I never made serious agreements with the communists, because they don't care about the people. They are led by foreigners, those who are not Serbs...<sup>20</sup>

Mihailović strongly denied that he sided with those who wanted to expel the German occupiers from Serbia, claiming that the only reason for his struggle was the desire that the Serbian people, "who love freedom", do not go over to the Partisans as liberation fighters.

Denying that he had ever used tricks, he said decisively:

I demand that I be allowed to continue the fight against communism that began on 31 October.<sup>21</sup> We know how to fight in the forest, especially against the elements that want to hide. Ammunition is a must! Counting on that, I came here. Communism in the country represents a danger for the Serbian people and for the German Wehrmacht, which has a different task than suppressing it here. I was hoping to get a limited amount of ammunition this night and I thought this matter would be addressed first! I am not aware that my Chetniks used illegal means. The fight against the occupiers was a necessary evil so that the masses would not go over to the side of the communists.

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20 When talking about the Partisan leadership, Mihailović sometimes gave the wrong names or information, which indicates that even though he was an intelligence officer before the war, he did not have basic information about the until recently Partisan allies, or that he deliberately misled the Germans.

21 He is referring to the Chetnik attack on Partisan positions throughout the liberated territory of the Republic of Užice.

Mihailović emphasised that “I would never have engaged in raids if there had not been communist raids” and if the Germans had not retreated. Underlining that the Partisans had a weapons and ammunition factory in Užice, he begged the representatives of the German command “to deliver ammunition to him tonight, if possible, in the interest of the Serbian people, as well as in the interest of Germany.” He guaranteed that those weapons would never be turned against the Germans, even if that struggle were imposed on him. Mihailović also denied that he ordered the attack on Kraljevo on 1 November 1941, because that was not possible, since “I just ordered my troops to withdraw and gather for the fight against communism”, referring to the order he issued the day before to attack Partisan positions.

Since the Germans, in addition to Nedić, also cited Kosta Pećanac as a positive example of cooperation with the occupiers, Mihailović emphasised that he did not agree with Pećanac, because he concluded “an open agreement that the people could not accept”. Mihailović believed that Pećanac had lost his legitimacy among the people. He stated as a key argument: “If I had followed his example, I would also have lost my reputation and influence.” In the situation of an occupied country, Mihailović asked the representatives of the German command, “can a person openly take the side of the occupier, and want to openly fight against those who took the tempting name of ‘freedom fighters?’” In order to avoid the stigma of betrayal, Mihailović stated that one must “act secretly”, meaning that any cooperation with the German Nazis in the joint fight against the Partisans had to remain secret, so that the Chetniks would not compromise themselves and bear the mark of treason like the quislings who came forward openly. Mihailović ended his address to the German occupation command with the words:

I suppose that after this statement, more trust can be placed in me when it comes to my correctness and my intentions, as that I can be provided with support. I ask my position to be understood as it is beneficial for both parties. I am asking once again that a certain amount of ammunition be delivered to me tonight! It goes without saying that all this should be kept in the utmost secrecy on both sides. I would like, if possible, to receive an answer tonight regarding the aid with ammunition. All my forces are gathered to fight communism.<sup>22</sup>

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22 ZNOR, XIV-1, 873-875.



Despite Mihailović's insistence, Kogard's answer was clear: the Chetnik struggle was illegal, opportunities for cooperation had been missed, and the only question that interested the German commander-in-chief in Serbia was whether Mihailović was ready to capitulate unconditionally and indulge in open cooperation with the Nazis. The leader of the Chetnik movement was clearly depressed by the German intransigence and asked for more time for a final answer, in order to consult with the commanders in the field. Kogard emphasised that the fight against the Chetniks would continue if Mihailović's response to the German conditions was negative. To this, the commander of the Chetnik forces replied: "We will not fight against the Germans, not even if this fight is imposed on us."<sup>23</sup>

Major Aleksandar Mišić, one of Mihailović's closest collaborators, invoked the German origins of his mother Lujza and the military honour of his father Živojin Mišić, the most decorated commander of the Serbian army from World War I; he asked the German officers to "trust" and give weapons to the Chetnik commander, stressing: "We will not be unfaithful to you." In order to support his claims with arguments, Mišić asked if the Wehrmacht representatives were aware of the fight "that we are currently waging against the communists?" After Kogard's negative answer, Mišić proposed that the German occupation command send liaison officers to the Chetnik headquarters, in order to ascertain the scale of the Chetnik fight against the Partisans. This was the only proposal of the Chetnik delegation that was not negatively received by the Germans. However, the Germans were interested in why the Chetnik attack on the Partisan positions had come "so late". When Mihailović and his associates tried to explain their tactics of simultaneous negotiation, cooperation and armed struggle against both the occupiers and the Partisans, Kogard stated that further explanations were "superfluous", and a little less than an hour and a half later, the meeting ended with polite greetings but without a concrete result.<sup>24</sup> Although this meeting did not produce the desired results, it was the de facto beginning of Chetnik-German cooperation and Mihailović's clear and direct collaboration. What followed after that was the establishment of the trust that had been missing in the meeting in Divci. From the beginning of 1942, the Chetniks moved into increasingly open collaboration, which was first reflected in their so-called legalisation within Nedić's quisling apparatus, when a part of their units became auxiliaries of the Serbian State Guard.

23 Ibid., 876

24 Ibid, 876-878.

Another important document on this path was the Instruction of 20 December 1941, which Mihailović addressed to the field commanders Pavle Đurišić and Đorđe Lašić, and wherein the then-commander of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland explained the movement's objectives. The instruction started with the statement that Yugoslavia was at war with "our age-old enemies, the Germans and Italians", while the members of the anti-Hitler coalition were labelled as "our allies". The Chetnik movement's key goals were: the fight for the freedom of "our entire people under the sceptre of His Majesty King Peter II"; the creation of a great Yugoslavia and, within it, demarcating the borders of a great Serbia, which would be "ethnically pure within the borders of Serbia – Montenegro – Bosnia and Herzegovina – Srem – Banat and Bačka". The instruction also went on to describe the movement's further goals as being: the struggle for the annexation of "unliberated, Slovenian territories under the Italians and Germans (Trieste – Gorica – Istria and Carinthia) as well as Bulgaria, northern Albania with Shkodra"; the "cleansing the state territory of all national minorities and non-national elements"; the creation of an "immediate common border between Serbia and Montenegro, as well as Serbia and Slovenia by cleaning Sandžak from Muslim population and Bosnia from Muslim and Croatian population"; and finally, to "punish all Ustaše and Muslims who mercilessly destroyed our people in the tragic days".<sup>25</sup> The instruction stipulates that Montenegrins will settle in the territories where the inhabitants will have been removed, but only "nationally correct and honest families". The document stated that "there can be no cooperation with communists-partisans", which was an already-known position. In the special part of the instruction that referred to Montenegro, the key task was to "clean Pešter of Muslim and Arnaut [term used for Albanians] population", as well as the "cleansing" of Metohija from the Albanian population. Specific emphasis was placed on the "procedure with the Arnauts, Muslims and Ustashas", who should be handed over to the "people's court" due to their "heinous crimes".<sup>26</sup>

Although revisionist historians repeatedly declared this Instruction to be a forgery, latest research has refuted this claim.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, the actions

25 Ibid., 93-94.

26 Ibid., 97.

27 The instruction was first published in *ZNOR*, III-1 (Beograd, 1953), with the explanation that it is a copy of an authentic document and that the copy was certified by Pavle Đurušić. It was also published in Dragoljub M. Mihailović, *Rat i mir đenerala: izabrani ratni spisi*, eds. Milan Vesović, Kosta Nikolić and Bojan Dimitrijević, vol. 2 (Beograd, 1998), 359-363, with the claim that the

of the commanders in the field, to whom the document was addressed, were in complete agreement with the instruction's stated goals. The commander of the Chetnik movement manifested identical intentions, undoubtedly of a genocidal character, in the program he sent to the government in exile September 1941. Although this document is less well-known and influential than the above-mentioned Instruction, it also underlines that one should not engage in "direct combat" with the occupier, and the creation of an ethnically pure state is mentioned as the key goal. The main political task during the war was to punish those who, while serving the enemy, "consciously worked for the extermination of the Serbian people". The second most important war objective that Mihailović communicated to the Yugoslav government in London was: "To delimit the 'de facto' Serbian lands and to make sure that only the Serbian population remains in them", and he especially underlined the need for "radical cleaning of the cities and their filling with fresh Serbian elements". In particular, a plan had to be made for "clearing or moving the rural population with the aim of homogeneity of the Serbian state union". And finally, Mihailović cited the existence of the Muslim population in this imagined greater Serbia as a "particularly difficult problem" that had to be resolved "at this stage".<sup>28</sup> It is clear that these goals and objectives were by no means compatible with the ideas of anti-fascism and could not be achieved in an alliance with the Partisans, and in the fight against the occupier. These goals were rather compatible with the occupier and the fight against the Partisans. The Partisan antifascist movement, based on the leadership of the Yugoslav communists and its ideology with national equality and social justice as its fundamental principles, have to be legally and politically on a different level than the Chetniks, who were the bearers of opposing ideas, values and goals.

The choices Mihailović made during the last three months of 1941 traced the path and destiny not only for him personally, but for the entire Chetnik movement, and also much more broadly, for the mass casualties

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document was a forgery fabricated with the intention of portraying Mihailović as "a man who plans genocide against Muslims, Croats, Albanians and national minorities in general". However, the forgery narrative has convincingly been repelled by Milan Terzić, see: Milan Terzić, "Falsifikat ili ne? Instrukcija Draže Mihailovića od 20. decembra 1941. Đorđu Lašiću i Pavlu Đurišiću", *Vojno-istorijski glasnik*, no. 1-2 (Beograd, 2004), 209-214.

28 "Program četničkog pokreta od septembra 1941. za vreme i posle završetka Drugog svetskog rata upućen izbegličkoj Vladi Kraljevine Jugoslavije." ZNOR, XIV-1, 26-29; See: Arhiv Jugoslavije, *Fond Državne komisije za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača*.

that would follow, primarily among civilians.<sup>29</sup> Collaboration, as the Chetnik movement's strategy, was intensified from the beginning of 1942. The German offensive on the free territory in western Serbia at the end of 1941 did not hamper this strategy but on the contrary strengthened it. The advice and instructions from the government in exile in London to expect active resistance to the German offensive and to preserve a single front of resistance between Chetniks and Partisans were worthless. In contrast, in one of the last significant documents of 1941, Mihailović emphasised to his commanders in the field that there could be "no cooperation" with the Partisans. It was a rhetorical mirror image of the order of 31 October 1941, that had been a declaration of war on the Partisan movement.

In mid-January 1942, the Chetnik High Command sent a dispatch to its units in the field, which also stated that the "communist danger is one of the greatest" and that the Partisans as "criminals and executioners" (*zlotvore i krvnike*) must be "destroyed without mercy".<sup>30</sup> This confirmed that the antifascist forces of the Partisan movement were the only real enemy of the Chetniks and that all means were allowed in the fight against them, including, even primarily, cooperation with all occupying and quisling forces that fought in a coordinated manner against the Partisans. Bearing in mind that the vast majority of the Partisan army in Yugoslavia in 1941 was made up of Serbs, and almost exclusively in the territories of occupied Serbia, the rhetorical and practical "destruction without mercy" practised by the Chetniks destroyed the only, to some extent, rational argument for their strategy of hesitation and "wait and see", but not collaboration. That argument was "preserving the biological substance" of the Serbian people. Also, at the beginning of 1942, the mass legalisation of Mihailović's Chetniks in Serbia began, as well as the cooperation of Chetnik commander Jezdimir Dangić with the German command in eastern Bosnia and Serbia. Synchronously, all other Chetnik commanders in the field, in Herzegovina, Montenegro, Dalmatia and Lika, as if by order, started open cooperation and more and more direct synchronisation with the different occupying formations on the ground. It was a path of no return and confirmation of collaboration-as-a-strategy in the actions of Mihailović. The strategic

29 Vladimir Dedijer, Antun Miletić, *Genocid nad Muslimanima 1941-1945* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1990); Milan Radanović, *Kazna i zločin. Snage kolaboracije u Srbiji* (Beograd: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2016).

30 ZNOR, XIV-1, 500, 558.

decision from October 1941 was thus implemented in depth and on the ground and irreversibly directed the former anti-occupation and liberation movement towards a collaboration in which they would see the end of the war in Yugoslavia.

## Conclusion

As previously mentioned, in the first months of the war in 1941 in Yugoslavia, there were three major and clearly defined groups in Serbia: the anti-occupation movement (the Chetniks), the antifascist movement (the Partisans) and the quislings, i.e. fascist forces (as personified by Nedić and Ljotić). But while the positions of the Partisan movement and the quisling forces were clear and consistent until the end of the war, this was not the case for the Chetnik movement, whose attitude was the most ambivalent and caused the most controversies, both during the war and later as part of revisionist historiography and memory politics.<sup>31</sup> In comparison to the openly quisling movements in Yugoslavia who believed in the victory of the German Reich, until 1944, the Chetnik movement tied their aspirations for the new Yugoslavia and the place of the Serbian people in it to the victory of the Anglo-American allies. Rhetorically calling representatives of the anti-Hitler coalition allies, and simultaneously directly cooperating with the Axis powers was not the only irreconcilable contradiction when looking at the ideology and practice of Mihailović's Chetniks. Their ambivalence tried to reconcile rhetorical patriotism and collaboration, i.e. betrayal of their country; they proclaimed their desire to avoid German retaliations and "save the people" and yet the slaughtered en masse that same people; they established draconian punishments for military discipline but which was completely absent in the field; they nominally accepted the Yugoslav program, while at the same time rejecting the existence of Yugoslavia through open hatred and striving for the planned destruction or "punishment" of other Yugoslav nations. Further contradictions concern their principled defence of the pre-war order, yet their fierce criticism of the state and social organisation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, along with their plans for its radical restructuring. Chetniks consistently pronounced the harshest condemnations of

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31 Marko Škorić and Milivoj Bešlin, "Politics of Memory, Historical Revisionism, and Negationism in Postsocialist Serbia", *Filozofija i društvo* 28, no. 3, (2017): 631-649.

Nedić and Ljotić, yet cooperated with them in the fight against the Partisans. Then there were the 1941 autumn negotiations with the Partisans on joint actions against the Germans, whilst the same time requesting weapons from the Germans to fight against the Partisans; they insisted on the military character of the movement with the simultaneous aspiration to play a primarily political role; a hard-right-wing ideological conception during most of the war with an attempt at pseudo-leftist reorientation during the congress organised in January 1944 in the village of Ba.<sup>32</sup>

By using, manipulating and subjectively interpreting historical facts, these aforementioned contradictions and inconsistencies have become the birthplace of revisionist narratives that attempt to reinterpret the history of World War II in Yugoslavia in order to rehabilitate the Chetnik movement, their commander and the ideological postulates on which it was based, and attempting to define him and his movement as antifascist.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of whether the Chetnik cooperation with the German, Italian, Bulgarian occupiers, as well as with Nedić's apparatus, was part of a strategy or just a tactic, the historical facts and sources testifying to the time of World War II in Yugoslavia are unequivocal, as are historiographical results of numerous Yugoslav and of foreign historians, all based on very meticulously researched archival materials. Historian Branko Petranović summarised these results in detail:

Regardless of motivations and tactical moves and strategic ideas – Mihailović is the head of the Chetnik counter-revolution, the bearer of collaboration in the conditions of the occupied country, a sworn anti-communist, interpreter of a different national policy, one of the protagonists of national betrayal in a heterogeneous front of collaborationist forces conditioned by attempts to save the social system of

32 Marjanović, *Draža Mihailović između Britanaca i Nemaca*, vol.1: *Britanski štíćenik*, 11; Milivoj Bešlin, "Četnički pokret Draže Mihailovića – najfrekventniji objekat istorijskog revizionizma u Srbiji", in *Politička upotreba prošlosti. O istorijskom revizionizmu na postjugoslovenskom prostoru*, ed. Momir Samardžić, Milivoj Bešlin and Srđan Milošević (Novi Sad: AKO, 2013), 88. The congress in Ba in January 1944 gathered 300 representatives from Mihailović's Chetnik movement and was mainly organised to counter the post-war plans of the Partisan movement and to convince the Allies to reverse their decision to switch their support to the Partisans from the Chetniks, a decision they had taken after they had become aware of the Chetnik collaboration with Germany.

33 For more information on this rehabilitation, see: Škorić and Bešlin, "Politics of Memory", esp. 636-644, and Jelena Đureinović, *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia: Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution* (London: Routledge, 2020), esp. 129-164.

their class, restore the monarchy and strengthen the primacy of the Serbian citizenry in Yugoslavia.<sup>34</sup>

After the victory of the Partisans and the establishment of Socialist Yugoslavia, Mihailović was arrested in March 1946, put on trial in Belgrade and sentenced to death in July 1946. The death sentence on the commander of the Chetnik movement for war crimes and collaboration was a moral and political verdict not only on the movement, but also on the ideology of Serbian nationalism and monarchism in the broadest sense. And it is precisely this fact that would condition several decades later the post-communist, revisionist rehabilitation of the Chetniks and Mihailović in Serbia.

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34 Branko Petranović, "Fetišizam izvora i stvarnost", in *Metodologija savremene istorije*, ed. Petar Kačavenda (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1987), 74.

# WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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