



# WER IST WALTER?

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# The Partisan Movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina During World War II: A Comparison of the Towns and the Countryside

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The Partisan resistance movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) developed differently in towns and in the countryside. Connecting urban and rural areas was one of the Partisans' major challenges. In order to understand the role of the towns and of the countryside in BiH for the communist-led Partisan movement during World War II, it is essential to address the following questions: what was the influence of the communists in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian towns and villages before World War II? What was at the core of the disconnection between communists in the towns and Partisans or communists in the countryside when the uprising began in 1941? What were the differences in resistance patterns among communists in towns and the countryside? From when can we see a clear synergy of action among all communists, regardless of whether they were in the towns or on the periphery, in remote Bosnian mountains like Kozara or Igman or the canyons of Neretva and Sutjeska, or in urban centres like Banja Luka, Mostar, Sarajevo, or Tuzla? These questions will be answered using the example of Bosnian Krajina, a region in northwestern BiH that became the centre of the Partisans' Liberation Struggle (*Narodnooslobodilačka Borba* – NOB), and partially through examples in other regions of BiH.

## **Communists in the towns and countryside before 1941**

From 1929, when a dictatorship was established in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to 1937, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) in BiH did not have a unified provincial leadership.<sup>1</sup> Such circumstances led to a com-

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<sup>1</sup> The Kingdom was established in October 1918, under the name Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In 1920, the new government banned the KPJ, which went underground. In January

plete lack of organisation among the communists and the emergence of factionalism, which was addressed in several provincial conferences of the KPJ for BiH. From the Third Provincial Conference at the end of June 1940 and new leadership under Đuro Pucar Stari, the communists began more active engagement and revival of their work. This work began to be felt primarily in towns such as Prijedor, Jajce, Drvar and Bihać, mostly through labour unions, cultural and artistic societies, and rural associations.<sup>2</sup>

However, the influence of the communists on the rural population was much weaker than in towns for subjective and objective reasons. Subjective reasons stemmed from the importance the KPJ placed on the working class. Objective reasons were mainly linked to the social conditions in society. Openness to communist ideas was limited in many regions in BiH due to pronounced underdevelopment and economic backwardness among the predominantly rural population, which was under the strong influence of national parties, as well as strong patriarchal remnants from the past, which often resulted in religious and national intolerance between ethnic and national communities.<sup>3</sup> These tensions were heightened through the agrarian reform organised by the Kingdom after its proclamation in 1918. This reform provided many peasants with the opportunity to acquire land but also caused dissatisfaction, especially among Muslims, which often led to hostility between national communities, for example in Bosanska Krupa.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the communists' influence on the rural areas remained mostly limited to a small number of individuals who came to towns for education and then returned to their villages. A broader influence on the peasants was lacking. This does not mean there was no influence at all; some events in the Bosnian Krajina region, in places such as Bosanska Dubica, the surroundings of Prijedor and Jajce, indicate that communists

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1929, King Aleksandar I Karađorđević dissolved the National Assembly, banned the work of all political parties and changed the country's name to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Ivo Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51, 60-61.

2 Dušan Lukač, *Ustanak u Bosanskoj krajini* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1967), 19-22.

3 Zdravko Dizdar, *Radnički pokret u Pounju 1929-1941* (Sarajevo: IRO Veselin Masleša, 1980), 30.

4 For an example of interethnic conflicts in Bosanska Krupa, see ed. Rajko Jovčić, *Bosansko-krupaska opština u ratu i revoluciji* (Bosanska Krupa: Skupština opštine i Opštinski odbor SUBNOR-a Bosanska Krupa, 1969), 42-47. For the social conditions see Xavier Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana – Komunisti i seljaci u Bosanskoj krajini 1941-1945* (Sarajevo: Udruženje za modernu historiju, 2023), 20-21.

sometimes organised demonstrations or collected aid from peasants for families on strike, mainly through rural teachers.<sup>5</sup>

In some towns, such as Bihać, the spread of new communist ideas was very slow due to the insufficient number of members of the working class. For example, Oskar Davičo from Belgrade, a professor of French, came to Bihać in 1931. Davičo was supposed to encourage the spread of communist ideas among the students of the Bihać high school. However, his actions were only partially successful. Describing this period, one of Davičo's collaborators, Velimir Korać, describes Bihać as a

small Bosnian town, without any industry, with outdated craft shops, very primitive and backward Sunday markets that revealed all the poverty and destitution of the Krajina peasants. [...] The population in this town, where nothing significant happened, was divided into Serbs, Muslims, Catholics and Jews, reminiscent of other similar Bosnian towns of this type, as Ivo Andrić depicted in *The Days of the Consuls*.<sup>6</sup>

Until the beginning of World War II, the influence of the communists in Bihać was limited to a small group of individuals.

When World War II started in 1939, the conditions for the communists to enlarge their influence in BiH were not advantageous. This being said, the KPJ had been unified after Josip Broz Tito was appointed General Secretary in the second half of the 1930s, had adopted a new political line of the anti-fascist front advocated by the Comintern from 1935, and had developed a coherent stance on the national question by accepting the principles of the Yugoslav state and the equality of its various constituent nations.<sup>7</sup> When the war reached Yugoslavia in April 1941, the new situation required a more engaged approach. It was necessary to spread communist ideology, solve the tense national issue and connect rural and urban areas. In other words, the communists had to reconcile all the mentioned diversities under unfavourable circumstances. The overall situation was further complicated and exacerbated by the fascist occupation of the Kingdom and

5 Lukač, *Ustanak u Bosanskoj krajini*, 27-41.

6 Museum of Una-Sana Canton/Muzej Unsko-sanskog Kantona, Collection of Memoirs (MUSK-COM), box 1, no. 00007/1, "Velimir Korać—O radu partijske organizacije 1931/32. godine u Bihaću", 1.

7 Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana*, 21.

the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH), led by the fascist Ustasha regime, as well as the development of the Serb-nationalist Chetnik movement which began as a rebel force turned increasingly to collaboration with the occupiers.<sup>8</sup>

### **The situation in BiH after the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the reaction of the communists**

The attack on the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by the Axis powers, often also called the April War, started with the bombing of Belgrade on 6 April 1941. It lasted two weeks, ending with the Yugoslav army's capitulation on 17 April. The war led to significant changes in the political and military organisation in that area. New political units were created, among them the Independent State of Croatia on 10 April, which included the entire territory of BiH. This process was organised under the control of Germany and Italy, which shared two military occupation zones in the NDH. The new circumstances led to the emergence of several genocidal policies in the Yugoslav and Bosnian-Herzegovinian regions. The Ustasha leader, Ante Pavelić, led a policy of extermination of the Serb, Jewish and Romani populations, while, on the other hand, Serb Chetniks carried out massacres of Muslim and Croatian populations.<sup>9</sup> This situation soon forced the local population in BiH to decide which of the present authorities and armies they should support.

In some parts of BiH, Croats and Muslims enthusiastically welcomed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's collapse, which led to their partial support for the Ustasha authorities, especially in parts of Herzegovina. In the Bosnian

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8 Chetniks was originally the name for members of Serbian paramilitary units that fought in Macedonia at the beginning of the 20th century and, more broadly, during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and World War I. During World War II, the Chetniks, led by Draža Mihailović, were a paramilitary and political movement that stood for the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in which they wanted to strengthen Serb supremacy. In 1941, the Chetniks fought alongside the Partisans in some places, before they started to collaborate with Italian and also German occupiers, partially also with the Ustasha, in order to fight against the Partisans. Their presence and influence was especially strong in Serbia, Montenegro and some parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. See Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana*, 25-26; Rasim Hurem, *Kriza NOP-a u Bosni i Hercegovini krajem 1941. i početkom 1942* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1972), 61-74.

9 Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana*, 21; Rasim Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu 1941-1945* (Zagreb: Plejada-University Press, 2016), 23-32.



Map 1: The Bosnian Krajina – cities, regions and rivers.  
(Map designed by Iris Buljević for this publication.)

Krajina, in the surrounding villages near Bihac, such as Zavalje, Međudražje, and Skočaj, a large part of the Croats welcomed and supported the new state's establishment. However, the majority of the local population in Bihac decided to remain neutral. Recalling the early wartime days, a local communist remembers that the streets of the town were eerily empty during those days.<sup>10</sup> A similar situation occurred in Banja Luka, where only a few Muslims and Croats joined the Ustasha ranks.<sup>11</sup>

10 MUSK-COM, box 1, no. 23/1, "Ale Terzić–Formiranje prvog Sreskog komiteta Komunističke partije za Bihac", 3.

11 Dušan Lukač, *Banja Luka i okolica u ratu i revoluciji* (Banja Luka: Savez udruženja boraca NOR-a opštine Banja Luka, 1968), 91.

In general, when the occupation forces arrived and the NDH was established, there was a lot of confusion regarding the new situation, not only among illiterate locals, but also for communists who had prior knowledge of fascism and its dangers. For example, it is recorded that when the German army entered Bihać, Huse Biščević, who was close to communists, raised his hand and greeted the German soldiers with a fascist salute. When Hilmija Lipovača, a local communist, asked him why he was saluting the occupiers, Biščević replied: “Well, it’s all the same [referring to National Socialism and socialism], that’s what we’ve been waiting for.”<sup>12</sup>

However, the unwillingness of a significant number of Muslims and some Croats to align themselves with the occupiers, as well as the support for the new Ustasha authorities until the revelation of their true principles and the crimes they committed against Serbs, Jews and Roma, did not necessarily mean that the local population was ready to immediately lean toward the communists and embrace the idea of the People’s Liberation Struggle. When Ustasha crimes became more evident, the part of the Serb population that had not perished in the towns fled to the surrounding forests and Serb villages, where it was much more challenging for the Ustasha to operate, although Ustasha raids had already destroyed many Serb villages and their inhabitants in the Cazinska Krajina. In the following years, the Ustasha managed to maintain control mainly in towns with a Muslim and Croat majority, while their influence in rural areas, except for regions with a Croat majority, was very weak.<sup>13</sup>

The mass killing of Serb Orthodox Christians confronted the survivors with a difficult choice: Fight or be killed.<sup>14</sup> However, when things were aligning for the communists to capitalise on such an opportunity and gain the support of the rural Serb population as well as of the urban escapees, they were confronted with a major problem. As Pero Morača, Yugoslav historian and former Partisan, points out, in a period when over 80 percent of Yugoslavia’s population lived in rural areas, the concept of the KPJ developing an armed struggle with liberatory and revolutionary goals could only be achieved if peasants were engaged in that struggle. The Partisan Supreme Headquarters, headed by Tito, seriously counted on the area of the Bosnian

12 Branko Bokan, “Organizovanje i aktivnost komunističke grupe u Ripču”, in *Bihać u novijoj istoriji I*, ed. Galib Šljivo (Banja Luka: Institut za istoriju u Banja Luci, 1987), 403.

13 Marko Attila Hoare, *Bosanski muslimani u Drugom svjetskom ratu* (Zenica: Vrijeme, 2019), 113.

14 Max Bergholz, *Nasilje kao generativna sila – identitet, nacionalizam i sjećanje u jednoj balkanskoj zajednici* (Sarajevo: Buybook, 2018), 156.

Krajina to fill their ranks and start a guerrilla war. However, the problem was that the KPJ had not managed to improve its position in the villages around the outbreak of the war.

At the beginning of the war, some communists unsuccessfully attempted to develop military actions in urban areas, obsessed with involving workers and other town classes in the fight.<sup>15</sup> But in May 1941, after a KPJ conference in Zagreb, the communists emphasised the need for party organisations to become more actively involved in rural areas.<sup>16</sup> Following this, at the Regional Conference in Šehitluci, Banja Luka, the KPJ called for the preparation and commencement of the struggle against the occupiers.<sup>17</sup> Even though there was some communist activity among the peasants, as discussed earlier, it was not enough. Communists still considered the KPJ as a working class party that should also accept peasants into its ranks. However, the creation of this alliance between the KPJ and the peasants was only considered as preparation for the next stage of the struggle that was to follow after the end of the war. Class goals and the KPJ gave the uprising and the liberation revolution a socialist character, and the mass movement of the peasantry gave it a base.<sup>18</sup>

## **The uprising 1941 and the communists' attempts to take control in rural areas**

The history of the beginning of the armed resistance against the new Ustaša authorities in summer 1941 in BiH is very complex and turbulent. We

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15 Pero Morača, "Grad u Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu i revoluciji (s posebnim osvrtom na Banja Luku)", in *Banja Luka u novijoj istoriji 1878-1945*, ed. Muharem Beganović (Banja Luka: Institut za istoriju u Sarajevu, Arhiv Bosanske krajine, Muzej Bosanske krajine, 1976), 566-568; About influence of the KPJ in villages and towns in the Bosnian Krajina, see: Dušanka Kovačević, "Organizacija KPJ u Podgrmeču za vrijeme narodnooslobodilačke borbe", *Prilozi*, no. 17 (1980): 283-284.

16 The conference in Zagreb was organised on invitation of Josip Broz Tito, two weeks after the Kingdom's capitulation. Tito emphasised the need for the KPJ to "organizationally adapt to the new conditions" and "determine the tasks" in the new situation as the main reasons for holding these "May Consultations". Ivan Jelić, "Majsko savjetovanje rukovodstva Komunističke partije Jugoslavije u Zagrebu 1941. godine", *Časopis sa suvremenu povijest*, no. 3 (1984): 1-18.

17 Zdravko Antonić, "Šehitlučki dogovori u sklopu opštih priprema za ustanak u Bosni i Hercegovini i Jugoslaviji 1941. godine", in *Oblasna partijska savjetovanja na Šehitlucima jun-jul 1941. godine*, ed. Galib Šljivo (Banja Luka: Institut za istoriju u Banja Luci, 1981), 10-16.

18 Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana*, 112-113; Ivan Cifrić, "KPJ/SKJ i seljaštvo", *Sociologija i prostor*, no. 67-68 (1980): 7-9.



have on the one hand spontaneous armed revolts by Serb peasants, and on the other hand various attempts of the Communist Party to control or initiate such uprisings, with varied success. The first resistance to Ustasha terror – known as the June Uprising – in BiH took place in eastern Herzegovina. The uprising began spreading to other parts of BiH. The most significant uprising took place in the Bosnian Krajina, where it broke out in Drvar on Sunday, 27 July 1941.<sup>19</sup> It then spread to the regions of Podgrmeč, Kozara, Pljeva, and also to regions in central and eastern Bosnia, Ozren, Majevisa, Birač, Romanija, Jahorina, Bjelašnica where Serbs formed the majority of the population.

The uprising in Bosnian Krajina started with the conquest of the little town of Drvar, where an Ustasha garrison had been stationed. However, it was not realised from inside but by insurgents coming from the countryside. The uprising in summer 1941 developed mainly in rural areas and the main organisation centres were mountainous areas that provided opportunities for guerrilla warfare. Contrary to the KPJ's expectations, the centres of the uprising did not become towns. In these population centres, activities were initially limited to some actions of sabotage, information gathering and attempts to assist the insurgents in the countryside.

What was the Communist Party's role in organising these early uprisings? The KPJ sent its people to different areas to initiate or influence armed revolts, with mixed results. In some parts, their contribution was important, for example, in Prijedor, Bosanska Dubica, Bosanski Novi and in the area of Kozara, but in others it was not. In the Drvar region, for example, a small group of communists, such as Gojko Polovina, Đoko Jovanić, Stojan Matić and Stevan Pilipović Maćuka, had been making plans for armed resistance. However, their role and the KPJ's role in organising this uprising were minimal or, as Max Bergholz suggests, non-existent. In his post-war memoirs, the communist commander Kosta Nađ similarly claimed that "Apart from rare cases, our party organizations did not play any role in organizing the uprising."<sup>20</sup> In fact, at the beginning of the uprising in the summer of 1941, the group of insurgents, mainly composed of Serbs who rebelled against the Ustasha terror, represented a mix of individuals with different political and military stances.

19 Lukač, *Ustanak u Bosanskoj krajini*, 97; Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 129-130.

20 Quoted in Bergholz, *Nasilje kao generativna sila*, 157.

This situation lasted until almost the end of 1941, when the communists successfully imposed their ideas to a greater extent among the insurgents. But until then, historical sources suggest that there was a complete disarray in the insurgents' ranks. One such source is the recollection of Sajo Grbić, a communist activist, who described the beginning of the uprising as follows: "We called ourselves guerrillas. Some referred to us as Chetniks, but mostly guerrillas. I first heard the word 'partisan' in September, toward the end of September, from the late Voja Stanarević. [...]. Yes, we wore the five-pointed star, but there were also cockades, and there were red stars as well."<sup>21</sup> Although without a clearly defined goal, the insurgents in northwestern Bosnia managed to initiate and develop resistance against the Ustasha, mainly in villages where they destroyed telegraph and telephone lines and ambushed the Ustasha.<sup>22</sup>

In general, the communists coming from the towns to the insurgent, predominantly rural areas, in the woods and mountains, had significant problems with the uncontrolled insurgents. Many of these insurgents were inclined toward Chetnik ideologies or were eager for revenge against Muslims and Croats. Such insurgents blamed all Muslims and Croats for their sufferings at the hands of the Ustasha. Some communists, who attempted to organise anti-fascist resistance, like the Secretary of the District Committee for Bihać, Šefket Maglajlić, were forced to adopt a false Serb name, Mirko Novaković.<sup>23</sup> Other Muslim communists like Hajro Kapetanović and Avdo Ćuk managed to escape the revenge that the insurgents from Velika Rujiška planned for them.<sup>24</sup> Marko Orešković – nicknamed Krtinja – the political commissar of the Headquarters of the People's Liberation Movement (*Narodnooslobodilački pokret* – NOP) of Croatia, was not so fortunate. He was killed by Chetnik elements within the ranks of a Partisan unit at the end of October 1941.<sup>25</sup>

In the early months of the uprising, the insurgents rampaged and destroyed everything in their path. At the end of August 1941, for example,

21 MUSK-COM, box 2, no. 00014/1, "Sajo Grbić, Sava Popović, Slobodan Pilipović–O ustanku na području Bihaća 1941. godine", 11-12.

22 Bergholz, *Nasilje kao generativna sila*, 158.

23 Vera Kržišnik-Bukić, "Prilog pitanju odnosa KPJ i seljaštva na bihaćkom području u prvim ratnim godinama", in *Bihać u novijoj istoriji I*, 139.

24 MUSK-COM, box 1, no. 00004/1, "Stojan Makić – O krupskoj partizanskoj četi 1941/1942 godine", 35; Kovačević, "Organizacija KPJ u Podgrmeču", 287; Jovčić, *Bosansko-krupska opština*, 99.

25 Esad Bibanović, "Kulnavakufski komunisti u radničkom pokretu i ustanku", in *Bihać u novijoj istoriji I*, 454.

they set fire to abandoned Muslim villages in the Podgrmeč region, including Muslimanska Jasenica.<sup>26</sup> The resistance that the communists envisioned and their wish to establish themselves in the villages faced significant challenges in Podgrmeč. As Osman Karabegović, one of the leaders of the communists in the uprising wrote, a large number of capable party cadres was killed in a short time, and they fell at the hands of Chetniks or, in the words of Karabegović, of “unenlightened people from rural areas.”<sup>27</sup> The District Committee in the Podgrmeč region operated precisely in the rural environment where the influence of communists was underdeveloped. This eventually necessitated the arrival of a large number of experienced cadres from surrounding towns and Banja Luka.<sup>28</sup> They had some success, as indicated by the establishment of the first partisan hospital and later a pharmacy in Podgrmeč in August 1941, where the villagers played a significant role and, in this way, formed a united resistance front.<sup>29</sup>

The events of late summer 1941 in the area of Bosanski Petrovac and Kulen Vakuf also indicate the complex and turbulent situation in the region. A group of insurgents, including some communists, entered the villages of Vrtoče and Krnjeuša at the beginning of August and massacred a significant number of local Catholic Croats. Lieutenant Colonel Božidar Zorn, the commander of the Croatian army of the NDH, the Home Guard,<sup>30</sup> managed to retake the mentioned villages shortly thereafter. The report he sent to Zagreb drew a dramatic picture of the situation.<sup>31</sup> The peak of insurgent violence occurred on 6 September 1941, when insurgents captured Kulen Vakuf and killed around two thousand Muslims. Communists Esad and Ibrahim Bibanović, along with their friend Džafer Demirović, all Muslims, had been expecting an attack from the insurgents that day, believing them to be fellow communists. After the insurgents entered Kulen Vakuf,

26 Dušan Lukač, *Partizanska Jasenica* (Beograd: Skupština opštine Bosanska Krupa i Izdavačka radna organizacija Rad, 1979), 25.

27 Osman Karabegović, *Bosanska krajina nepresušivi izvor revolucionarnih snaga* (Beograd: Vojno izdavački i novinski centar, 1988), 220.

28 Ibid., 221-223.

29 Dino Dupanović, *Partizanske bolnice u Drugom svjetskom ratu u Bihačkoj krajini* (Bihać: Muzej Unsko-sanskog kantona, 2023), 4-18.

30 The Home Guard was established in mid-April 1941 and stood under German supreme command. Nikica Barić, *Ustroj kopnene vojske domobranstva Nezavisne Države Hrvatske, 1941.-1945* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest), 43-55.

31 Serbian Military Archive/Vojni Arhiv (Belgrade) (Collection: Independent State of Croatia) – VA-NDH, box 1, f. 2, doc. no. 14, “Izvjješće potpukovnika Zorna od 14. augusta 1941. godine”, 1.



Fig. 1: Central pharmacy in Bosanski Petrovac in 1942. (Courtesy of the Public Institution Museum of the Una-Sana Canton)

the three welcomed them but the insurgents considered them as enemies and threatened to kill them. They only survived thanks to insurgent commander Gojko Polovina's intervention.<sup>32</sup>

What was the relationship between the communists in the towns and the communists in the countryside? Communists in the towns faced several obstacles when it came to assisting the communists among the insurgents in the periphery. One of them was the Ustasha secret police, which, after taking control of the government, obtained the complete archives of the previous police force and monitored most communist illegal activists in the towns. Some of them were arrested by the Ustasha, like Ivica Mažar, a prominent activist from Banja Luka, when he was sent by the Provincial Committee of the KP of BiH to convey directives for launching Partisan guerrilla actions to party organisations in Jajce, Janja and Pljeva. Mažar's arrest, followed by his execution by the Ustasha, left the communists in Jajce and the surrounding areas completely isolated and unconnected to the insurgents. Such Ustasha raids, which often led to executions, also significantly reduced the possibilities for communist propaganda.<sup>33</sup>

32 Bergholz, *Nasilje kao generativna sila*, 223-230.

33 VA-NDH, box 61, f. 18, doc. 8., "Bosansko divizijsko područje-Očevidni izvještaj za prvu deseteticu od 1-10/X-1941. godine", 3.

Another problem that hindered the connection between illegal communist activists in the towns and the communists among the insurgents in rural areas stemmed from the already mentioned very sensitive ethnic tensions. Chetnik-oriented individuals who largely controlled the insurgents in some parts of Bosnian Krajina were often tempted to kill Muslim and Croat communists. Immediately after the establishment of the Ustasha government in Bihać in 1941, the communists were broken after two waves of arrests. For those who escaped, one important reason for not going to the periphery was the fear of possible revenge by Serb insurgents and Chetnik-minded individuals. Out of the mainly Croat and Muslim members of the Local Committee of the KPJ in Bihać, Stipe Butorac, who was their organisational secretary, Ante Rukavina, Robert Šolc, Hasko Ibrahimpašić, and Matko Vuković only established contact with the headquarters of guerrilla units in the neighbouring Croatian province of Lika in early November 1941. After this, they also established contact with local Serb communists from the villages around Bihać and left the town to join them in the First Bihać Company, a newly formed Partisan unit.

This connection was very important because in 1941, interethnic distrust affected communists from different ethnic communities, even if all were party members. Also at the end of 1941, the former secretary of the Local Committee in Bihać, Salih Mušanović, established contact with the KP District Committee in Majkića Japra in Podgrmeč and joined the insurgents.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of the uprising, Mušanović had decided to join the Croatian army, the Home Guard, probably because he believed that it was not safe to join the insurgents at that moment due to the aforementioned revenge concerns. Several other examples suggest that others who later became prominent revolutionaries had similar behavioural patterns. In Croatia, Mika Špiljak, who became an important politician after the war, had a similar wartime trajectory as Mušanović; he first joined the Home Guard, although he was a member of the KPJ since 1938.<sup>35</sup> Also, Banja Luka illegal activist Željko Lastrić became a soldier in the Home Guard in summer 1941, having previously declined the invitation from other comrades to join them in the forest in preparation for the uprising, citing that he

34 Savo Popović, "Partijska organizacija Bihaća i razvoj oružanog ustanka, organizacija i organa NOP-a u bihaćkom srezu (1941-1942)", in *Bihać u novijoj istoriji I*, 314; Husref Redžić, "Mladi crveni grad", in *Podgrmeč u NOB-u: Podgrmeč do ustanka i u ustanku 1941: zbornik sjećanja I*, ed. Dušan Pejanović (Beograd: Vojno izdavački zavod, 1972), 121.

35 Hrvoje Klasić, *Mika Špiljak: Revolucionar i državnik* (Zagreb: Ljevak, 2019), 54.

wouldn't be able to endure the hardships that come with insurgent life.<sup>36</sup>

In Banja Luka, in contrast to Bihać, the process of connecting the insurgents in the town and its surroundings was somewhat more successful from the outset. When the April war broke out, some communists from Banja Luka had already gone to the Kozara mountain area to join the resistance against the occupiers. By the end of July and the beginning of August 1941, large parts of the organisation from the town had gone to nearby villages and the forests of Starčevica, where they worked on preparing for the uprising.<sup>37</sup> The Banja Luka case of connecting urban communists and insurgents/peasants outside the town who opposed Ustasha crimes, was a rare example of success at this stage of the war and was primarily due to the communists' strong position in this region before 1941. Thanks to the development of the partisan movement around the town, in connection with underground activities of the communists in the town, the partisans controlled the outskirts of Banja Luka by the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942.<sup>38</sup> These Partisan successes created a strong belief among the population in the town that the Partisans would soon attack and liberate the town, which caused great fear among the Ustasha. A volunteer company of illegals was even formed in Banja Luka, which was supposed to help from the inside in the event of a Partisan attack on the town.<sup>39</sup>



Fig. 2: Salih Mušanović from Bihać, a shoemaker and member of the Local Committee of the KPJ for Bihać from 1932. From 1938, he was the secretary of the Local Committee of the KPJ. He died in June 1942 in Kozara at the hands of Chetnik forces. (Courtesy of the Public Institution Museum of the Una-Sana Canton)

36 Vladan Vukliš and Marijana Todorović Bilić, eds., *Banjalučki ilegalac – sjećanja Žarka Lastrića* (Banja Luka: Udruženje arhivskih radnika Republike Srpske i Arhiv Republike Srpske, 2020), 107.

37 Lukač, *Banja Luka i okolica u ratu i revoluciji*, 109, 121.

38 Hoare, *Bosanski muslimani*, 123.

39 Lukač, *Banja Luka i okolica u ratu i revoluciji*, 196-205.

## Connecting the town and countryside: The Bihać Republic in 1942

At the end of 1941, various parts of the rural areas of the Bosnian Krajina had become liberated territories, while the bigger cities and urban centres like Bihać, Prijedor and Banja Luka continued to be under Ustasha control. In many of these liberated territories, the Partisans successfully gained control, while Chetnik influence was still strong in eastern parts of Bosnian Krajina. While both movements had initially and partially cooperated, they increasingly competed with each other. This was especially true for the aforementioned Podgrmeč area, where the transformation of insurgents into Partisan units became more pronounced following the arrival of Mladen Stojanović in November 1941, the commander of the Second Krajina Partisan Detachment, to this region.<sup>40</sup> From the end of 1941, the relation between Partisans and Chetniks turned more and more into open confrontation. Chetniks cooperated increasingly openly with Italian occupation forces and some Chetnik leaders even concluded agreements with local Ustasha authorities.<sup>41</sup> This collaboration with the Ustasha significantly weakened the Chetniks' position in the Mount Manjača region, the surroundings of Jajce, Mrkonjić Grad, Glamoč, and Bosansko Grahovo. Simultaneously, it strengthened the Partisans. A large number of Chetniks either returned home or switched to the Partisans.<sup>42</sup>

The development of the NOP in Bosnian Krajina was further strengthened in summer 1942 by the arrival and stay of proletarian brigades, the new mobile elite units of the Partisan army, and the army's Supreme Headquarters. The Partisan troops conquered more territory, including the towns of Livno, Mrkonjić-Grad and Jajce. In the territories under their control, Partisan units and NOP activists exhaustively explained the goals of the communist struggle to the local population through political conferences, gatherings, artistic programs and leaflet distribution. Thus, in 1942, the Bosnian Krajina was on its way to become the main stronghold of the Partisan movement during World War II, and where the network

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40 Rasim Hurem, "Diferencijacija ustaničkih snaga u Bosni i Hercegovini zadnjih mjeseci 1941. i u prvoj polovini 1942. godine", *Prilozi*, no. 21 (1985): 189-190.

41 *Ibid.*, 186-190.

42 Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 185-187.

of People's Liberation Committees (*Narodnooslobodilački odbori* – NOO) would be the most developed and stable.<sup>43</sup>

The Partisan movement's success in the Bosnian Krajina in early 1942 also attracted the attention of the Supreme Headquarters of the Partisans, led by Tito. In the second half of 1941, the headquarters were based in previously liberated territory in western Serbia, known as the Republic of Užice. The need for a new location emerged after the beginning of open conflict with the Chetniks in November 1941. In their search for a safe territory and increasingly reliant on Serbs of the NDH for support, they moved first to eastern Bosnia, near Foča and then in mid-1942 to the Bosnian Krajina.

However, the Supreme Headquarters and the Partisans, mainly staying in the rural areas, needed a larger liberated territory, just as the Užice Republic had been earlier. This required taking a larger town. Partisan commander Kosta Nađ, who stayed with Tito in an abandoned railroad wagon on Mount Oštrej near Bosanski Petrovac in autumn 1942, later wrote that Tito, after numerous uncertainties, uttered, “[...] We need a larger town. We need a town we can hold for a longer time.”<sup>44</sup> The decision was made that the town to be liberated would be Bihać, which was only a few kilometres away from the wagon where Tito and Nađ had their conversation. There were two reasons why Tito decided on this move. First, he desperately needed to mobilise and replenish Partisan units with new fighters, preferably from other national communities living in the town, meaning Muslims and Croats, as the existing Partisan units mostly consisted of Serbs. The second reason was that partisans from the surrounding villages and mountains had good connections with the illegal operatives in the town, and the population was on their side, already fed up with Ustasha's atrocities and misdeeds.<sup>45</sup> Nađ later described in detail the contact with the Bihać communist organisation in town while preparing for the attack. Based on this contact, he recalled a message that came from the town: “Bihać is with us!”<sup>46</sup>

In November 1942, the Partisans attacked and conquered Bihać, which became the first major town in BiH to be liberated. This significantly

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43 Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana*, 30-31; Hoare, *Bosanski muslimani*, 79; Đorđe Mikić, “O privrednim i socijalnim prilikama u Bosanskoj krajini u prvim godinama austrougarske okupacije”, *Prilozi*, no. 2 (1982): 76-77. The People's Liberation Committees were the governmental bodies established in the Partisan-held territories during the war.

44 Kosta Nađ, *Bihačka republika: ratne uspomene Koste Nada* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1982), 207-213.

45 Karabegović, *Bosanska krajina nepresušivi izvor*, 203.

46 Nađ, *Bihačka republika: Ratne uspomene*, 443.





Fig. 3: Bihać, 4 November 1942. The photo shows the Kloster building, which was one of the last lines of Ustasha defence during the Partisan attack on the town. In the same building, the First Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) was held on 26 November 1942. (Courtesy of the Public Institution Museum of the Una-Sana Canton)

influenced the change in the national composition of partisan units. In less than three months during which the Partisans stayed in the town, a large portion of the urban population, mostly Muslims and Croats, joined the ranks of the First Bosnian Partisan Corps.<sup>47</sup> By the end of December 1942, the Eighth Krajina People's Liberation Assault Brigade was formed in Cazin, primarily composed of Muslims from Bihać, Bosanska Krupa, Velika Kladuša and Bosanski Novi.<sup>48</sup>

With the formation of a large free territory – the Bihać Republic – Partisans in towns and villages established authority over all social segments.<sup>49</sup> Thus, they connected rural and urban populations and used the opportunity to conduct more propaganda work among the rural population, who did not fully understand the communist struggle's goals. They were aided by local

47 MUSK-Collection of archival material (CAM), K-A6, no. 1241, "Dopis Komande područja Bihać-Cazin-Štabu I Bosanskog korpusa od decembra 1942. godine, o slanju 127 dobrovoljaca u NOVJ iz Bihaća i okoline", 1.

48 Izudin Čaušević, *Osma krajiška NOU brigada* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1981), 9; Dušan Lukač, "KPJ u borbi za učvršćivanje NOP-a i političko jedinstvo", *Istorijski zbornik*, no. 5 (1984): 121-124.

49 Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 188-192.

notables like Nurija Pozderac, who held great respect among all segments of the population.<sup>50</sup> The army mainly supplied itself with food that came from the villages. During their stay in the area of the Bihać Republic, the Partisans established People's Liberation Committees on a large scale. By the end of 1942, there were hundreds of them in the Bosnian Krajina: 414 village committees, 66 municipal committees, including three town committees.<sup>51</sup>

The Bihać Republic lasted only three months, until the end of January 1943, when the town was recaptured by German and Ustasha forces. But its existence during the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943 was a very important period for the development of the Partisan movement. On a political level, the first session of the Anti-Fascist Council for the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) was organised on 26 November 1942 in Bihać, which would become the legislative body establishing the future Yugoslav state's fundamentals. These three months also had a substantial impact on the NOP's growth. When the Partisans left Bihać at the end of January 1943, their base had significantly increased in terms of personnel. While in 1941, support for the Partisans was much greater among the rural than the urban population, it had now also grown considerably among the latter. One Ustasha report, for example, stated that when the Partisans left Bihać, over 80 prominent citizens joined them.<sup>52</sup> The mainly Muslim and Croat urban population's fear that moving to the countryside, where predominantly Serb Partisans resided, could lead to revenge, was overcome. And while the city was reoccupied by the Germans and the Ustasha in February 1943, the majority of the rural areas around Bihać and in the Krajina region remained under Partisan control until the end of the war.

## **The development of the Partisan movement in towns and rural areas in BiH during World War II**

While the Partisan movement succeeded in imposing its influence rather quickly in the Bosnian Krajina, the situation was different in eastern Bosnia.

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50 MUSK-CAM, K-A6, no. 1651, "Neautorizovano sjećanje Pavla Savića na Nuriju Pozderca iz 1985. godine", 1; Karabegović, "Bosanska krajina nepresušivi izvor", 203.

51 Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 187-188.

52 Historical museum of BiH/*Historijski muzej Bosne i Hercegovine* – Fund UNS-a, doc. no. 13423, "Napad partizana na Bihać, prilike za vrijeme partizana u Bihaću, povraćaj Bihaća i sadašnje prilike", 10-11.

At the beginning of the uprising, the KPJ could not establish itself in the areas around Srebrenica, Bratunac, Drinjača, Kalinovnik, Trebava and villages on the left side of the Bosna River due to a lack of personnel.<sup>53</sup> Chetniks were very strong in eastern Bosnia, and after the joint struggle of Partisans and Chetniks against the occupiers, the Chetniks managed to recruit a large number of members from Partisan units into their ranks. Additionally, the communists neglected political work with the population and were more active in trying to conduct sabotage actions, especially in the towns. From May 1942, Partisan units virtually ceased to exist in eastern Bosnia, except for the Biričan Partisan detachment, which was the only one that persisted. The Ustasha held power in the towns, while in the villages, in a very uncertain situation, power was shared by the Ustashas and the Chetniks.<sup>54</sup> Failed Partisan attacks such as the one on Vlasenica in June 1942 demonstrated that Partisan units were not yet able to reverse the situation. However, the Provincial Committee of the KPJ decided that it should stay in eastern Bosnia and revive armed activities there. No encouraging news came from the towns, where groups of illegals were often arrested. But from the end of the summer to the winter of 1942, the Partisans in eastern Bosnia recorded several significant successes against the Chetniks, mostly in mountainous areas. After the Battle of Maleševac in November 1942, where the Partisans inflicted a heavy defeat on the Chetniks, their influence also began to strengthen in the Tuzla region, in the northern part of eastern Bosnia.<sup>55</sup>

Tuzla was the biggest town in eastern Bosnia and an industrial centre. In early October 1943, the Partisans defeated the NDH's military forces and conquered the city and its surroundings. The liberation of Tuzla became an important moment in making the Partisan movement more attractive to the urban population.<sup>56</sup> Before the liberation of the city itself, after the Partisans invaded Puračić near Tuzla, a larger group from the Muslim Legion led by Lieutenant Omer Gluhić had already joined the Partisan units.<sup>57</sup>

53 Zdravko Antonić, *Ustanak u istočnoj i centralnoj Bosni* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1973), 239.

54 Nisim Albahari, "Prevazilaženje krize ustanka 1942. godine i novi polet narodnooslobodilačke borbe u istočnoj Bosni", in *Istočna Bosna u NOB-u 1941-1945. Sjećanje učesnika, volume 2*, ed. Esad Tihčić (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1971), 7-9.

55 Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 193-195.

56 Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 224-231; Zdravko Antonić, "O razvoju NOB-e u istočnoj Bosni 1943-1944, s posebnim osvrtom na oslobođenje Tuzle", *Prilozi*, no. 21 (1985).

57 VA-NDH, box 28, f. 1, doc. no. 4/35, "Partizani prebačeni na Ozren upali u Puračić-Legionari muslimanske legije priključili se partizanima", 1-2. The Muslim Legion was created in late 1941 as

According to some sources, the Partisans were strongly supported by the town population, which fired from their windows on the defenders from their windows, thus helping the attacking Partisans during the liberation.<sup>58</sup> Local elites saluted the liberation of Tuzla. Partisan units were replenished with over five thousand new fighters, both workers and peasants, among them a majority of Muslims. This happened after Sulejman Filipović, a Home Guard colonel and commander of the Tuzla Brigade, declared that he would join the Partisan army.<sup>59</sup>

Before the war, the city in BiH with the largest number of KPJ members was Sarajevo. During the occupation, the party's Local Committee organised cells in different neighbourhoods in the city. There was also a bigger number of Party sympathisers, some of whom were in the Home Guard. Others held important social functions such as doctors, pharmacists, printers and artisans, and made a significant contribution to the hiding of Jews as well as recruiting individuals to join the Partisans and transferring them to the insurgent-controlled territory.<sup>60</sup> However, starting in 1941, the KPJ in Sarajevo was significantly weakened by police raids; frequent arrests required frequent changes in leadership and finding individuals willing to engage in these dangerous activities. The arrests also significantly slowed the spread of propaganda activities. The situation in Sarajevo improved slowly after Vladimir Perić took over the leadership of the town's organisation in 1943. Perić restored the KPJ Local Committee which, until the final liberation of the town in April 1945, organised a series of actions in which citizens collected money, food and clothes, which were then sent to Partisans around the town. Inhabitants of Sarajevo were also very helpful in organising the transfer of communist activists from the town to Partisan territory.<sup>61</sup>

The only party organisation that demonstrated stability and continuity in its work, according to Ustasha reports from the spring and summer of 1942, was the one in Mostar. The NOP's influence there was very effective, especially through numerous acts of sabotage.<sup>62</sup> Since summer 1942,

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a self-defence militia and unit of the Croatian Home Guard in northeastern Bosnia to fight against Chetniks and against Partisans.

58 VA-NDH, box 153, f. 3, doc. no. 14, "Pad Tuzle u partizanske ruke-18. studenog 1943. godine", 1-2.

59 Antonić, "O razvoju NOB-e u istočnoj Bosni 1943-1944", 218-219.

60 Hoare, *Bosanski muslimani*, 113-121.

61 Emily Greble, *Sarajevo 1941-1945 – Muslimani, kršćani i Jevreji u Hitlerovoj Evropi* (Sarajevo: University Press – izdanja Magistrat, 2020), 224.

62 Hurem, *Bosna i Hercegovina u Drugom svjetskom ratu*, 192-201.

the communists in Mostar received increasingly strong support from local Muslims. This was particularly pronounced after the defection of the Home Guard officers Fazlija Alikaflić and Fahrudin Orman to the Partisans. The situation was similar in some other towns in Herzegovina, such as Konjic and Glamoč, where, according to an Ustasha report, increasing numbers of intellectuals and peasants went to the Partisans.<sup>63</sup> While in spring 1942, the KPJ was strongly implemented in some towns, this was not the case in other Herzegovinian towns, for example in Ljubuški, where support for the Ustasha was very strong.<sup>64</sup> However the Muslim notables' increasingly open protest against the Ustasha arrests and deportation of Muslims and Serbs – and even some Catholics – from Mostar, Konjic or Čapljina to camps, during 1944, brought the Muslim community closer to the Partisan movement.<sup>65</sup>

In Banja Luka, the tight relations between the illegal movement in the town and the Partisans in the surrounding areas that existed in 1941 were soon broken because of strong Ustasha pressure. It was only in the second half of 1943 that the Partisans reestablished such a connection. This relationship could be maintained in very difficult conditions, especially the constant arrest of Partisan couriers. In late autumn 1944, the Partisans managed to completely cut off and isolate Banja Luka from the surrounding villages and supply roads and caused a great shortage of food in the town. The Ustasha were not even able to repair some industrial enterprises on the outskirts of the town, due to constant Partisan incursions.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, what did the situation look like in Bihać after the Partisans left the town at the end of January 1943? Several members of the KPJ Local Committee had gone with them, including Salih Mušanović, who died shortly after. A few communists remained in the town, led by Hasan Salihodžić, who eventually also had to leave the town after a Ustasha raid at the beginning of 1944 led to the arrest of almost all Committee members. The link between the Partisans in the villages and the town was maintained only through a few unreliable Partisan sympathisers in the town.<sup>67</sup>

63 VA-NDH, box 69, f. 10, doc. no. 10, "Izbjegavanje domobranske vježbe domobrana muslimanske vjere", 1-3.

64 VA-NDH, box 153c, f. 1, doc. no. 17, "Raspoloženje pripadnika na području kotara Ljubuški prema ustaškom pokretu", 1.

65 VA-NDH, box 86, f. 23, doc. no. 2, "Pismo 15 muslimanskih predstavnika iz Sarajeva o zločinima vlasti NDH, posebno u Hercegovini i dr.", 1-5.

66 Lukač, *Banja Luka i okolica u ratu i revoluciji*, 360.

67 Zdravko Dizdar, "Bihaćka partijska organizacija 1941-1945", in *Bihać u novijoj istoriji I*, 74-77.

During the final months of the war, the Partisans took complete control of the villages and the surrounding areas of the largest towns in BiH, which were still occupied by the Ustasha and German forces. Generally speaking, the crisis that the Partisans went through in previous years in the villages to prove their “identity” had been overcome and now, the liberation of the remaining towns was to follow. In the first half of 1945, the Partisans liberated Mostar in February, Bihać in March, Sarajevo and Banja Luka in April. The large number of citizens who attended the gatherings held by the communists in liberated cities and supporters who joined the movement strengthened the Partisans in their fight for the further liberation of other parts of Yugoslavia, especially Croatia.

The liberation of the towns in BiH from the German occupiers and the Ustasha in 1945 followed a similar scenario. Partisan units moved towards the city from outside and advanced step by step into them, while the communists within the cities supported the attacks through sabotage activities and by taking control of strategic places. It was the closing of a paradoxical circle: While the KPJ had initially thought that the liberation would start in the cities, it was the countryside that liberated them.

# 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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