



# WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on  
Resistance in Europe during  
World War II

Edited by

Elma Hašimbegović, Nicolas Moll and Ivo Pejaković

# Why Did They Resist? Motivations for Entering into Resistance in the Independent State of Croatia

*Hrvoje Klasić*

## **Introduction**

The answer to the question of why many people who lived on the territory of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH) decided to resist during World War II largely lies in understanding the situation that emerged after Germany, Italy, and their allies (Hungary and Bulgaria) attacked the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941. Just 11 days later, the kingdom capitulated and the king and government fled the country. Yugoslavia was occupied and dismembered and in this entirely new geopolitical situation, different occupation policies became a key factor in the emergence, development, and character of the resistance by the population.<sup>1</sup> This text will focus on the situation in the NDH because between 1941 and 1945, this area became the epicentre of the resistance movement and the site of the largest armed conflicts between resisters on one side and occupiers and their domestic collaborators on the other.

The NDH was a creation in the central part of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia, covering much of the present-day territories of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Srem province in Serbia. Parts of the Croatian coast and a broad hinterland were annexed by Italy, and smaller areas in the north were annexed by Hungary. The NDH was established through an agreement between Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini and, despite the term “independent”, effectively existed as an Italian-German protectorate. The demarcation line that divided the German and Italian occupation zones and areas of influence ran from west to east through the

---

1 Regarding the attack on Yugoslavia, the occupation and division of the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the nature of the occupation regimes, see: Jozo Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija u Jugoslaviji, 1941-1945. Okupacija i kolaboracija* (Zagreb: EPH Novi liber, 2010).

middle of the NDH.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 6,5 million people lived in an area slightly over 100.000 square kilometres: around 53 percent Croats, 31 percent Serbs, and 11 percent Muslims, while the remaining population included members of other ethnic groups such as Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Jews, Roma, and others. Power in the NDH was handed over to the Ustasha movement, a Croatian terrorist and nationalist organisation. Many Ustasha members, including its leader Ante Pavelić, had lived in exile for more than a decade, mainly in Italy, under the protection and control of the fascists. One of the most important features of the Ustasha movement was its anti-Serb sentiment, which, given the number of Serbs in the NDH, would prove to be one of the key factors in the emergence and development of the resistance movement.

This text's ambition is not to cover all the ways in which resistance to the occupation and fascism on the territory of NDH was carried out. Despite numerous examples of "urban guerrilla" actions such as armed clashes with the enemy in city streets, destruction of infrastructure, writing anti-regime slogans and individual and organised actions to rescue endangered populations, especially Jews, the focus will be on the reasons why people of different nationalities joined military formations known as the People's Liberation Army, or Partisans.<sup>3</sup>

A brief war, rapid capitulation, the ruling authorities' escape from the country, and the unhindered establishment of new geopolitical relationships were seen by the occupiers as a sign that the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had been successfully pacified. The resistance movement that would jeopardise the new reality, let alone lead to the opening of a new front on European soil, was not expected by anyone, as evidenced by the fact that the the Germans quickly withdrew and redeployed the bulk of their military force shortly after Yugoslavia's surrender to where they believed it would be more needed. However, it would only take a few months for circumstances on the ground to force them to change their strategy.

---

2 The demarcation line stretched across the entire territory of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia, from Slovenia in the northwest to the border of Serbia and Bulgaria in the southeast.

3 The armed formations that emerged in summer 1941 under the command of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije* – KPJ) were called the People's Liberation Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia (*Narodnooslobodilačkih partizanskih odreda Jugoslavije* – NOPOJ), and all members of these detachments were referred to as "Partisans". In early 1945, this army would change its name to the Yugoslav Army.

Considering that Yugoslavia was occupied by Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, their allies, and their domestic collaborators, who began to use various repressive methods when establishing their rule, it is logical to conclude that the resistance of the population was motivated by patriotic, antifascist and existential reasons. But not necessarily in that order. Contrary to expectations, patriotic reasons, such as the desire to liberate the country from foreign rule, would prove to be the least influential motive at the outset of the war. Just as the establishment of fascist regimes did not provide sufficient reason for the majority of the population to take up arms or resist the authorities in some other way. Therefore, most people decided to resist not because of political or ideological reasons but out of fear for their own lives and the lives of their families. This does not mean that other motives were absent from the beginning. On the contrary, the unexpected synergy of all these motives would result in the creation of the strongest and best-organised resistance movement in Europe.

In the historiography of socialist Yugoslavia, as well as in society in general, the motives for people's decisions to resist during World War II were often approached in a very simplistic way, influenced by ideology. The official narrative focused on the "People's Liberation Struggle" in which the "people" under the Communist Party's leadership decided to rebel against the new situation. As one of the most prominent Yugoslav historians of that time wrote: "They [the communists] managed to unite the liberation and social aspirations of the people in the form of large-scale insurgent actions that evolved into a nationwide war..."<sup>4</sup> Since the Communist Party had largely legitimised its central role in socialism by emphasising the Yugoslav communists' central role in the resistance movement, any questioning of the Party's role in the war was seen as a threat to the position the Party believed it held during peacetime. Therefore, much less attention was devoted to examples of resistance in which the Party did not have a dominant role. Thus, Fighter's Day, a national holiday commemorating the official start of the People's Liberation Struggle, was celebrated on 4 July. This was done to mark the Communist Party leadership's session on 4 July 1941, in which the decision to initiate a nationwide armed uprising was made. In doing so, it deliberately overlooked the fact that many Yugoslavs, as will be discussed further in the text, had already been resisting with arms before that date.

---

4 Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije, 1918-1978* (Beograd: Nolit, 1981), 194.

## Existence/survival as a motive for resistance

The first individuals in the NDH who decided to actively resist were Serbs who primarily lived in rural areas where they constituted the majority of the population. The motives for their decision to take up arms were not of a patriotic nature. After the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's capitulation, most defeated soldiers from the newly-established NDH, including Serbs, returned to their homes and attempted to continue their lives as they did before the outbreak of the war. The fact that their homeland was occupied was not a sufficient motive for rebellion. The establishment of the new Croatian state was also not a motivation for them. Instead of fighting Serbs chose to adapt to the new circumstances as one participant in the Partisan movement, a Serb from Banija,<sup>5</sup> recalls in his memoirs: "...the older people reconciled themselves to the occupation because they hadn't seen any good in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia either. They were used to respecting every authority and quickly came to terms with the situation."<sup>6</sup> The fact that Serbs were ready to accept the Independent State of Croatia as their own country is also reflected in a letter from a Serb Partisan in Lika<sup>7</sup> sent to their Croatian neighbours at a time when the uprising had already gained momentum: "Brothers and neighbours, Croats! For years and years, our good neighbourly harmony and love have been a tradition in all our villages. This tradition should have continued in this Croatian state [NDH]. Unfortunately, it was not continued..."<sup>8</sup>

Some of the Serb population in the NDH did not see the occupation as a reason to rebel but rather as a prerequisite for survival. In fact, they sought and obtained protection under the Italian occupation forces, fearing the Ustasha's repressive policies. In order to protect as much of the Serb population as possible, Serb politicians from the region even asked the Italians to expand their occupation zone.<sup>9</sup> In return, local Serbian paramilitary

5 A region in Croatia, about fifty kilometres south of Zagreb toward the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

6 Nikola Mraković, "Grabovačka akcija i početak ustanka na Baniji", in *Sisak i Banija u revolucionarnom radničkom pokretu i ustanku 1941*, ed. Katarina Babić (Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1974), 717.

7 A region in Croatia between Central Croatia to the north, Dalmatia to the south, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the east.

8 The letter is dated 31 August 1941, see: Max Bergholz, *Nasilje kao generativna sila* (Sarajevo: Buybook, 2018), 168-169.

9 As Tomasevich writes, with the Italian expansion of the occupational zone one-third of the Serbs in the NDH came under the control of Italian armed forces and thus avoided the fate of their compatriots who remained under Ustasha control. Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija*, 285.

units became an integral part of the Italian paramilitary formation called the Voluntary Anti-Communist Militia (*Milizia Volontaria Anti Comunista* – MVAC) which, together with the Italians, fought against the Partisans.<sup>10</sup>

The motive for the resistance among Serbs in the NDH was also not antifascism, specifically the fact that the Ustasha regime in NDH established fascist rule. From the very establishment of the state, repression was legalised against anyone declared undesirable for national, racial or religious reasons. Serbs, alongside Jews and Roma, were the most numerous among the undesirable. The repression against the Serb population included dismissals from public service, confiscation of property, restrictions on human and civil rights, expulsion from NDH and more.<sup>11</sup> However, none of the above led to a mass uprising and a large number of Serbs chose to continue submitting to the new authorities. Over 250.000 Serbs decided to demonstrate their loyalty (of course, fearing for their lives) by, among other things, converting from the Orthodox to the Catholic faith, or as one participant in these events described it: “In some villages people fought for a place on overcrowded trucks hoping that, as ‘converts,’ they would have a place in the sun in this Ustasha state.”<sup>12</sup>

The main trigger for resistance against the new authorities was the mass murders of Serbs that the Ustasha began to carry out just a few days after the NDH’s establishment. These escalated throughout summer 1941.<sup>13</sup> Faced with the real threat of physical annihilation, Serbs organised armed village guards with the aim of preventing further people from being taken to their deaths. These guards were among the first to resist.<sup>14</sup> However, the resistance of the local population only resulted in increased pressure from

10 The MVAC would operate in all Yugoslav areas occupied by the Italians. In the NDH area, 20.000 Chetniks were a part of MVAC. Ibid, 153.

11 Regarding the repression of the Ustasha authorities towards the Serbian population, see: Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija*, 431-456.

12 Slobodan Bjelajac, “Šamarički partizanski logor”, in *Sisak i Banija u revolucionarnom radničkom pokretu i ustanku 1941* (Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1974), 689.

13 About mass killings of Serbs, see: Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija*, 447-456 and Bergholz, *Nasilje*, 114-155.

14 This happened on 3 June 1941 in the village of Drežanj in the Nevesinje district in eastern Herzegovina. During the battles, which lasted the entire day, three Ustasha soldiers were killed and several were wounded. The uprising soon spread to neighbouring areas, and around 600 villagers participated in it. In addition to defending their own villages, the insurgents also began launching their first attacks on facilities and infrastructure. See: Slavko Stijacić-Slavo et. al. eds., *Hercegovina u NOB, knjiga 1* (Beograd: Vojno delo, 1961), 42-72. Similar conflicts with the Ustasha soon followed in other parts of the Independent State of Croatia where Serbs comprised the majority of the population.

the Ustasha authorities, who sent more numerous punitive expeditions that poorly armed peasants could no longer oppose. As a result, people sought safety in mass escapes. Entire villages moving to nearby forests and mountains. Armed groups of local men ensured the security of the fugitive population, often taking offensive actions against the enemy in addition to defensive measures.

The appearance of an increasing number of people willing to resist the terror and the new authorities prompted the Yugoslav communists to take advantage of the situation. Life-endangered Serb peasants gave the communists the one thing they lacked despite their uncompromising commitment to fighting against the occupiers and collaborators: large numbers. By introducing discipline and incorporating several hundred Yugoslav communists who had gained military experience in the Spanish Civil War into the ranks of the insurgents, the Party helped Serb peasants transform their spontaneous resistance into a well-organised resistance movement. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, in its early stages, the resistance initiated by the Serb population was not driven by any ideology but primarily by the desire for survival. As one German officer wrote: “Without Ustasha crimes no propaganda would be able to convince the Serbian peasants to fight to the death for communist goals.”<sup>15</sup>

## **Antifascism and patriotism**

Yugoslav communists, specifically members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička Partija Jugoslavije* – KPJ) and the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije* – SKOJ), were the most significant group that, for patriotic and antifascist reasons, chose armed resistance during World War II. Admittedly, some officers and soldiers of the Yugoslav Royal Army who refused to capitulate in April 1941 and would later become known as Chetniks also decided to continue resisting the occupiers for patriotic reasons, mainly on the territory of the NDH, Serbia and Montenegro. However, except for several brief

---

15 See: Bergholz, *Nasilje*, 165. One of the highest-ranking members of the Ustasha regime and a key figure in the repressive apparatus of the NDH wrote after the war that the Ustasha struggle against the communists would have been more successful if they had pursued a policy of understanding with the Serbs. Tomasevich, *Rat i revolucija*, 455.

periods of open hostility towards the occupation forces and their interests in certain parts of the country the Chetniks mostly collaborated openly with Italians, Ustasha and Germans during World War II.<sup>16</sup>

At the time of the attack on Yugoslavia, the KPJ had been operating strictly in secrecy for 20 years; its legal activities had been banned in 1920. Due to the repression against communist supporters, Party membership had been steadily decreasing over the years and had dropped to only 8.000 members by 1941.<sup>17</sup> Communists across Europe, including those in Yugoslavia, condemned fascism and Nazism from the moment these ideologies emerged, especially when fascists took power in Italy and Nazis in Germany. They were willing to go from words to action as demonstrated during the Spanish Civil War, when they voluntarily joined the International Brigades seeking to prevent Francisco Franco and his fascists from coming to power. About 2.000 Yugoslav communists participated in these brigades and they soon had the opportunity to apply their wartime experience in their own homeland.<sup>18</sup>

Communists had been warning for years before the German and Italian threat to Yugoslav independence that the country needed to prepare for resistance. In May 1939, the Central Committee of the KPJ's journal *Proleter* published a text that stated: "According to the plans of fascist conquerors, Yugoslavia should either be a vassal of the Rome-Berlin Axis or not exist at all. For a freedom-loving people, such an alternative is called either capitulation or resistance, defending its independence." The alternative for which the KPJ began preparing from that moment was summarised at the end of this text: "Fascist imperialists should know that the peoples of Yugoslavia will not give up an inch of their land and that the working class is ready to make any sacrifice in that struggle."<sup>19</sup> When Yugoslavia was attacked in April 1941, the KPJ was one of the few political parties that not only refused to accept the occupation and the disintegration of the country but actively

16 About Chetniks, see: Milan Radanović, *Kazna i zločin: snage kolaboracije u Srbiji* (Beograd: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2015) and Jozo Tomašević, *Četnici u Drugom svjetskom ratu: 1941-1945* (Zagreb: Liber, 1979).

17 To this number we need to add between 30.000 and 50.000 members of SKOJ. Petranović, *Istorija*, 219-220.

18 About the participation of Yugoslavs in the Spanish Civil War, see: Vladan Vukliš, *Sjećanje na Španiju: Španski građanski rat u jugoslovenskoj istoriografiji i memoaristici 1945-1991* (Banja Luka: Arhiv Republike Srpske, 2013) and Vjeran Pavlaković, *The Battle for Spain is Ours* (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2014).

19 "Nezavisnost Jugoslavije u opasnosti", *Proleter*, no. 1, 1939.



resisted the new situation. On 10 April 1941, the day when the Independent State of Croatia was proclaimed in Zagreb, a meeting of the communist leadership was held in the same city, where the Military Committee was established, with Josip Broz Tito at its helm, and an order was sent to the party membership to start collecting weapons.<sup>20</sup>

Recognizing that they could not achieve significant success on their own, communists invited the entire population to join the fight against the enemy. In the spirit of a popular front, this included other civil political parties. However, even as conditions in the country became increasingly conducive to a general uprising, the KPJ could not make this decision independently. The green light was awaited from the Soviet Union which was still in a non-aggression treaty with the Third Reich at that time. Given the clear hierarchy within the communist world – the subordination of all communist parties to the one in Moscow – any armed provocation against the German army (and its allies) would have been considered a violation of that agreement. Therefore, the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, which terminated that treaty, also served as a call for all communists, including the Yugoslav ones, to engage. On 27 June, the Military Committee was renamed the Main Headquarters of the People's Liberation Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia, and on 4 July, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the KPJ decided to establish the first Partisan detachments. It was decided to shift from sabotage and diversions, which the communists had already carried out in cities, to a general uprising in the form of a partisan war starting from mid-July 1941.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, military formations organised and led by the KPJ began to emerge throughout NDH and all of Yugoslavia.<sup>22</sup>

---

20 The weapons were largely gathered from deserters from the Yugoslav Royal Army and from the army's warehouses after its surrender. For example, through a raid on a military depot near the town of Sisak, local communists acquired around 30 rifles and two machine guns, which were hidden in nearby barns, and even in the attic of a rural church. This weaponry would be used by members of the first Partisan unit formed in the NDH and in Yugoslavia more broadly on 22 June 1941, in a forest near Sisak. See: Hrvoje Klasić, *Mika Špiljak. Revolucionar i državnik* (Zagreb: Ljevak, 2019), 53-54.

21 Vladimir Dedijer, *Novi prilozii za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita* (Rijeka: Liburnija, 1981), 389.

22 The first military formation was established by Sisak Communists on the day of the German invasion of the USSR but it was done independently, before the KPJ leadership's official decision. As a result, that day (22 June 1941) was not commemorated as one of the most important events related to the war in socialist Yugoslavia.

As mentioned earlier, many people had already taken up arms before official communist involvement began. Realising the potential of this dissatisfied and combat-ready population, the KPJ sought to establish itself as the organiser and political leader of the ongoing national uprising. For this reason, prominent KPJ members were first sent to Serb villages and then to rural communities across the Independent State of Croatia to resist the enemy alongside the local population. After the official decision to launch a nationwide uprising, the dispatch of communists to the field intensified and existing armed groups of Serb peasants became the core of the first Partisan detachments. Although this relationship has been portrayed as a natural symbiosis in post-war historiography, the local population, especially Serbs, initially showed considerable distrust toward the communists, especially when they were Croats.<sup>23</sup> The atmosphere improved with the daily arrival of an increasing number of communists in the field and their determination to sacrifice their lives to assist those in need. Armed groups of Serbian peasants soon realised that their joint struggle with the communists brought other advantages. Besides better resistance organisation, the contributions of communists who had fought as volunteers in the Spanish Civil War was particularly significant. The KPJ sent them to already established insurgent units where they became military strategists and commanders as well as instructors for inexperienced civilians in handling weapons and various explosive devices.<sup>24</sup>

Although the KPJ was the main catalyst for resistance against occupation and fascism, communists were not the only ones who joined the resistance movement for patriotic and antifascist reasons. The practice of recruiting individuals who were not KPJ members into Partisan units became

---

23 One of the organisers of the uprising in Croatia, a communist and a Croat by nationality, Savo Zlatić, wrote the following in his wartime diary: "We find ourselves in an area where we still have no influence. The residents of the nearest village are afraid of us, so it's only on the second day that we receive food. When thinking in rigid schemes, as often happens, things seem quite simple and clear. This logic also underlies the belief that the Serbian people, under the pressure of Ustasha persecution, essentially joined the Partisans under their flags. However, the reality was quite different. The political orientation of the majority of the Serbian population toward the People's Liberation Struggle was the result of the intense and difficult political struggle of the Party... Where this work was not done there were no results despite persecutions and all other 'favourable' conditions." Savo Zlatić, *Poslali su me na Kordun* (Zagreb: Razlog, 2005), 27.

24 Approximately 250 former Spanish volunteers participated in Partisan units. The majority of them held important command positions, including about 15 members in the main headquarters of the Yugoslav republics. The liberation of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1945 was carried out by four Yugoslav armies, each of which was led by a former "Spaniard". See: Vuklić, *Sjećanje*, 26-27.

common in all regions of NDH, and in the rest of Yugoslavia. Over time, more and more Croats joined the Partisan movement in the NDH, while at the beginning of the war, this had only been the case for Croatian communists and communist sympathisers. Growing repression against all dissenters, especially critics of the Ustasha regime, coupled with increasingly difficult living conditions, were among the motives. A particularly important role in reinforcing the Partisan movement was played by Croats from Dalmatia and Istria, regions that remained outside the Independent State of Croatia and were annexed by Italy. The fact that Rome became their capital, through the agreement between the Independent State of Croatia and Italy, provoked antifascist and patriotic feelings. Non-communist Croats were also disturbed by the collaboration of fascist authorities with the Chetniks and the Italian tolerance of Chetnik crimes against Croatian civilians.<sup>25</sup>

Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims also increasingly chose to take up arms, even though many of them were not communists, for patriotic as well as existential reasons. It should be noted that the Ustasha movement considered Muslims as members of the Croatian nation, so unlike the Serbs, they were not as such the target of repression by the NDH. Some Muslim political elites actively joined the Ustasha movement and numerous Muslims became members of the NDH's armed forces. Problems arose when Chetniks, whose ideology was fundamentally anti-Muslim and who were seeking revenge for Ustasha crimes against Serbs, began to carry out massacres against the Muslim civilian population. Since NDH as a state proved incapable of protecting them, some Muslims joined the Partisans, while others formed special paramilitary formations.<sup>26</sup> The enlistment in Partisan units grew after the end of the initial cooperation between Partisans and Chetniks, and when Ustasha authorities signed a series of cooperation agreements with Chetnik units throughout the NDH during 1942. The trend of joining the Partisans became especially important when it became clear, from 1943 on, that the communist leadership was advocating equal rights for Muslims with Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina and recognition of the latter as a republic in its own right within the future Yugoslav state.

---

25 Zdravko Dizdar and Mihael Sobolovski, *Prešućivani četnički zločini u Hrvatskoj i u Bosni i Hercegovini 1941-1945* (Zagreb, Hrvatski institut za povijest – Dom i svijet, 1999).

26 These Muslim militias were neither antifascist nor anti-occupation. In addition to protecting civilians' lives, some of them aimed to achieve autonomy for Bosnia and Herzegovina within or outside the NDH. For more information, refer to: Marko Atilla Hoare, *The Bosnian Muslims in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

## Other motives of resistance

In addition to liberating the country and resisting Nazi fascism, there was another significant motive that led Yugoslav communists to take up arms in 1941. It was the belief that the newly emerged situation should be used to seize power in Yugoslavia. Consequently, the People's Liberation Struggle was understood from the very beginning as a socialist revolution. As Tito asserted during the war: "Our People's Liberation Struggle would not have been so determined and successful if the people of Yugoslavia did not see in it, in addition to victory over fascism, a victory over those who oppressed and aimed to further oppress the Yugoslav people."<sup>27</sup> However, this very motive also caused the first disagreements in the relationship between the KPJ, the Comintern and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Namely, Tito was more inclined toward the doctrine of the Chinese communists during the civil war in China, advocating the simultaneous struggle for liberation and the establishment of socialism, in contrast to the Bolshevik doctrine of two stages of revolution – first liberation of the country, then a change in the political system. This divergent approach was evident from the very beginning of the uprising.

The emblem of the Yugoslav Partisan movement became the red five-pointed star, a symbol of communism. The term "partisan" was borrowed from the USSR and it literally meant a member of the party, specifically the Communist Party.<sup>28</sup> Each Partisan unit was required to have a political commissar alongside the military commander, someone who would oversee morale and discipline and implement the KPJ's political line. In areas liberated from occupiers or collaborators, Partisans established national liberation committees as bodies of the new revolutionary people's government. Dedication to revolutionary change as well as loyalty to the leader of all communists, Stalin, was most clearly demonstrated by the establishment of elite Partisan formations called proletarian brigades. The First Proletarian Brigade was founded on 21 December 1941, Stalin's birthday.<sup>29</sup>

---

27 "Nacionalno pitanje u Jugoslaviji u svetlosti narodno-oslobodilačke borbe", *Proleter*, no. 16, 1942.

28 In the beginning terms like "guerrilla" and "guerrilla units" were also used.

29 In contrast to most of the existing Partisan units, whose members were from specific territories and operated within those territories, the proletarian brigades were composed of the best fighters from various regions of Yugoslavia and were deployed on missions wherever the need for their involvement arose.

Contrary to expectations, Moscow did not react enthusiastically to the Yugoslav communist comrades' decisions. The Comintern immediately warned the KPJ leadership that they should adhere to the doctrine of two stages of revolution, insisting that "the current stage was about liberation from fascist subjugation, not a socialist revolution".<sup>30</sup> This is why all the decisions of the Yugoslav Partisan leadership mentioned earlier were criticised.

Why did the Soviet Union (and the Comintern) disagree with the KPJ's military-political strategy? The reason was actually quite selfish. The precarious situation in which the USSR found itself after the Third Reich's attack suggested the need to maintain good relations with Western allies. In this regard, any support for a communist revolution in the Balkans would likely mean a rupture of the alliance with Great Britain and the USA, further worsening the already difficult situation for the Soviets. For this reason, not only did Moscow criticise the Yugoslav Partisans' political "deviation", but the USSR also re-established diplomatic relations with the Yugoslav royal government in London during the war and invited the KPJ to cooperate with Draža Mihailović, the leader of the royalist resistance movement in Yugoslavia.<sup>31</sup>

Such news from Moscow triggered bitterness and even anger but it did not lead to a shift in Tito's and the Partisan leadership's military-political strategy.<sup>32</sup> Although there were many disagreements and misunderstandings in the relationship between the KPJ and Moscow during the entirety of World War II, it should be mentioned that pro-Russian sentiments were important motivating factors for joining the resistance movement. Yugoslav communists entered the war, among other reasons, to assist their

---

30 Dedijer, *Novi prilozi*, 387.

31 Marie-Janine Calic, *Tito – Vječni partizan* (Zagreb: Fraktura, 2022), 127. The USSR signed a Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on the night of 5-6 April 1941, only to, under pressure from Berlin, sever diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia in May of the same year. However, Moscow re-established relations with the royal government, which had already relocated to London, in July 1941 following Germany's invasion of the USSR.

32 On 25 November 1941, prompted by broadcasts on Radio Moscow praising the Chetniks and Draža Mihailović, Tito sent a telegram to the Executive Committee of the Comintern in which he strongly condemned the broadcasts' content, stating that it was "appalling nonsense". Tito demanded: "Tell them up there to stop spreading the nonsense that the London radio is promoting" and continued "We have all the evidence that Draža is openly collaborating with the Germans in the fight against us. Draža's men do not fire a single shot against the Germans. The entire struggle is carried out only by the Partisans". Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela*, tom 7 (Beograd: NIRO Komunist, 1983), 198.

Russian (communist) brethren in some parts of Yugoslavia, the tradition of Russophilia transcended ideological boundaries. This was most evident among the Orthodox Serb (and Montenegrin) population. Thus, after the Third Reich's attack on the USSR, the belief in the Russian army's invincibility encouraged many Serbs to take up arms. It was believed that once the Russians defeated the Germans, they would come to liberate their South Slavic brethren. Naivety and lack of information sometimes resulted in almost surreal situations. According to eyewitness accounts, upon hearing the news of the fighting in the Soviet Union, Serb peasants in NDH began to mow wheat and grass en masse in preparation for Russian paratroopers to land on soft ground.<sup>33</sup>

The USSR's entry into the war against Germany in June 1941 caused euphoria among Yugoslav communists, further strengthening their determination to initiate armed resistance. At the time, there was no doubt about whether the Red Army would win but rather how long it would take for victory. The belief in the Soviet Union's superiority had a positive impact on the combat morale of Yugoslav communists. However, unrealistic assessments of the situation on the Eastern Front had some negative consequences on the insurgents' combat effectiveness. For example, the Comintern in late June 1941 appealed to the communists to destroy bridges, factories and other infrastructure that served the needs of the German army throughout Yugoslavia. However, some, like the communist official Vlado Popović in Zagreb, refused to do so, arguing that the Red Army would arrive quickly and it was unnecessary to destroy something that would serve the people in the future.<sup>34</sup>

The building of a socialist society after the war was a significant motive for Yugoslav communists to join the resistance and persevere in opposing a much stronger enemy. However, the way in which they attempted to organise life in the liberated territories motivated many non-communists to become participants or sympathisers of the Partisan movement. This was a significant success because resistance and the liberation of the country, despite the unquestionable dedication and courage of the communists, would have been almost impossible without the involvement of the "broad masses of the people". Therefore, those who had no prior connection to communism needed to be convinced that life organised according to

---

33 Dedijer, *Novi prilozi*, 388.

34 Ibid.

communist principles would be better and fairer than what they had before and during the war. Great attention was given to the so-called “moral economy” or the “economy of survival” based on the redistribution of economic resources in favour of the most vulnerable population groups. Assistance was provided for refugees and the families of fallen fighters, food, clothing and shoes were collected for the poor. Solidarity and mutual aid were encouraged, while looting was punished. Literacy programs and cultural centres were established. Efforts were made to improve health and living conditions. For the first time in the history of the Yugoslav region, women and young people were included in social and political life. Contrary to fascist propaganda that portrayed Partisans as enemies of religion, freedom of religion was emphasised and assistance was provided in the restoration of damaged places of worship. Some priests and imams became members of national liberation committees and even Partisan units.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, one of the motives for supporting the Partisan movement was the attitude towards the national question. In the atmosphere of a civil war in which nationalists from one ethnic group committed mass crimes against members of another ethnic group, insisting on national equality and a joint struggle against the occupiers sounded utopian if the Partisans did not implement it in practice. For example, on NDH territory, Croat Partisans saved Serbs from the Ustasha, while Serb Partisans protected Muslims from the Chetniks. The national equality established in the struggle was meant to lay the foundation for the equality of all citizens and all ethnic and religious groups in the new state after the war. Thanks to the leadership of the Partisan movement, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina would, for the first time in their history, have their own statehood in the form of an equal republic within the Yugoslav socialist federation.<sup>36</sup>

All the aforementioned factors – the building of a better and more just world, the emancipation of socially marginalised groups, and the promotion of national and religious equality – motivated many on the NDH territory, regardless of their previous ideological preferences, to join the KPJ-led resistance movement. Of course, the communists’ revolutionary methods such as the confiscation of property from those arbitrarily labelled

---

35 For more on the successes and challenges of building life in liberated territories and the relationship between communists and non-communists, see: Xavier Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana. Komunisti i seljaci u Bosanskoj krajini 1941-1945* (Sarajevo: Udruženje za modernu historiju, 2023).

36 See *ibid.*, 35-67 for the Partisans’ attitudes towards the national question.

as “enemies of the people” and brutal confrontations with dissenters, deterred many from any form of cooperation with the Partisans and turned some of them into active opponents.<sup>37</sup>

It has already been mentioned that Ustasha crimes against the Serb population were a key motive for joining insurgent and later Partisan units. Often, the insurgents’ reaction to these crimes was revenge, carrying horrific consequences with it. However, revenge was not only a consequence but often an important motive for joining the insurgent ranks.<sup>38</sup> Bergholz supports this thesis with numerous examples of insurgent violence not only against members of the NDH army and police but also against innocent (non-Serb) civilians. In his opinion, this was a process of “antagonistic collective categorization” primarily based on ethnic principles. For Serb insurgents, Croatian (and Muslim) villages became Ustasha and therefore deserved punishment. Ethnic-motivated antagonism that escalated into revenge and violence often was not triggered by recent crimes but by settling old pre-war scores.<sup>39</sup>

Along with revenge, one of the motives for joining the resistance movement, associated with violence, was looting. This motive should be observed on two levels. On the first, it involved individuals whose *modus operandi* was best described by an old saying from Yugoslav territories that every conflict is “someone’s war and someone’s brother” (“*nekome rat a nekome brat*”). On the second, one must consider the context of widespread poverty, especially in rural areas. Both the “looters in the dark” (“*lovci u mutnom*”) and some impoverished peasants joined the insurgents, seeking to exploit the situation for their own benefit. Both groups were aided by the fact that looting “enemy” property in a wartime atmosphere and lawlessness was accepted as justifiable and necessary. However, contrary to the previously mentioned revenge killings, the victims of the looters were not exclusively members of antagonised ethnic groups. By citing numerous examples in which Serbian insurgents looted property and stole livestock from Serbian families, Bergholz attempts to prove that looting was often

---

37 One of the most well-known examples of Partisan violence came in so-called left-wing shifts in Montenegro and southeastern parts of NDH at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942. Mass liquidations were carried out on all those who did not want to support the Partisan movement. Violence subsided during 1942, and then intensified at the very end of the war and immediately after its conclusion.

38 Bergholz, *Nasilje*, 191.

39 *Ibid.*, 191-221.



not just a consequence but also an important motive for action, specifically, joining the insurgent ranks.<sup>40</sup>

It should also be noted that another reason for joining the Partisan resistance movement was the attraction generated by its growing strength and success. This applies in particular to the period from 1943 to 1945. Italy's capitulation in September 1943 gave the Partisans a considerable boost; moreover, toward the end of the war, it became increasingly clear that whoever would emerge victorious would likely take power over the country. Some members of the Croatian Home Guard and the Chetniks became part of the Partisan movement for this reason, especially after Tito offered, in the summer and autumn of 1944, a general amnesty to those who joined the Partisans (except for those who had committed serious crimes). Also, unlike those who voluntarily joined the Partisans for various reasons, towards the end of the war when the Partisans transformed from guerrilla forces into a well-organised and massive army, a certain number became members of the resistance movement due to the (forced) mobilisation carried out by the leadership of the movement in liberated territories.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Just a few months after Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and their allies attacked the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a resistance movement emerged in the occupied territory. Day by day, and for various reasons, it attracted an increasing number of participants. The epicentre of resistance was the territory of the Independent State of Croatia. Except for the very beginning, when there was spontaneity driven by Serb peasants' ad hoc decision to rebel in order to save their lives, the resistance quickly began to take on a clear organisational and hierarchical structure. The results of this process would be incredible in every aspect. The resistance grew from a few thousand insurgents in summer 1941, mainly on the territory of the Independent State of Croatia and Serbia, to 150.000 fighters in the Partisan units all around Yugoslavia by the end of 1942. There were 320.000 at the beginning of 1944, and around 800.000 fighters in May 1945. These numbers forced the Germans, Italians and their allies to keep between 30 and 35 divisions – over

---

40 Ibid., 160-161.

41 Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana*, 125-128.

600.000 soldiers – on Yugoslav territory during World War II instead of sending them to another European front.<sup>42</sup> After the initial activities, mainly focused on the defence of the threatened population, Partisan units went on to liberate more than one-third of Yugoslav territory by the end of 1941 – around 100.000 square kilometres – thus justifying the name “People’s Liberation Army”.<sup>43</sup> With the exception of Serbia, which was liberated in 1944 by the joint forces of the Red Army, Bulgarians and Yugoslav Partisans, the liberation of the rest of the country, including the territory of NDH, was an independent achievement of the domestic fighters.

The main credit for the transformation of unconnected, small guerrilla units into a massive and powerful army should go to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and its leadership, with Josip Broz Tito at the helm. This does not mean that all Partisans were communists. On the contrary, members of the KPJ and the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia were a minority among the fighters, although it should be noted that membership in these organisations increased significantly by the end of the war. Often, especially in the historiographies of the states formed after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, there is an insistence that Yugoslav antifascist and liberation resistance movement resulted from the Third Reich’s attack on the USSR. However, the facts indicate that Yugoslav communists started preparations for the struggle against occupation and fascism well before 22 June 1941, and they were ready when German troops entered the Soviet Union. What is perhaps most important is that subordination within the global communist movement certainly influenced the start date of the organised armed resistance movement in Yugoslavia. However, it is worth noting that the appeal to initiate armed resistance against the Nazis and fascists from Moscow was addressed to all European communist parties. Unlike the others, the Yugoslav Communist Party responded to it by creating the most organised and efficient antifascist and liberation resistance movement in Europe.

---

42 Svetozar Oro, “Titov antifašistički ustanak – novi front u okupiranoj Evropi”, in *O ustanku 1941 – danas* (Beograd: Društvo za istinu o antifašističkoj narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi u Jugoslaviji 1941-1945, 2002), 77.

43 Dušan Bilandžić, *Historija Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1978), 53. The liberated territory fluctuated in size during the following war years.

# 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.



HISTORIJSKI MUZEJ  
BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE

crossborder  
factory



cife

SPOMEN PODRUČJE **jasenovac** MEMORIAL SITE

Funded by:



Federal Ministry  
of Finance



Foundation  
**evz** Remembrance  
Responsibility  
Future

on the basis of a decision  
of the Bundestag



9 789958 956980