The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance
Milazzo, Matteo J.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Milazzo, Matteo J.
The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68487
I

THE AXIS POWERS
AND THE DESTRUCTION
OF YUGOSLAVIA

The resistance and civil war in wartime Yugoslavia never would have assumed the dimensions they did had it not been for the Axis Powers' establishment of an occupation system which fostered rebellion and anarchy. Instead of creating political order, it produced rival "states" and zones of influence. Instead of being based on a common occupation policy, the "new order" was at best a temporary arrangement which no one thought would last. Playing on prewar political and national tensions, Berlin and Rome tried to solve the Yugoslav problem through a policy of divide and rule. Instead they encouraged a reign of terror in half the country which only fed the ranks of the rebellion and soon got totally out of hand.

Unlike countries like Poland and the Soviet Union, where a brutal occupation regime was the result of German expansionistic policies and long-range planning,¹ the Axis Powers almost stumbled into the war

¹For these themes, see Martin Broszat, Nationalsozialistische Polenpolik (1939–1945), Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 2 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1961); and Alexander Dallin, German Rule in Russia (1941–1945) (London: MacMillan, 1957).
against Yugoslavia and, with other priorities in mind, dismembered the country in haste and without adequate consideration of the likely consequences of their decisions. In the spring of 1941 Hitler was interested primarily in preparing for the invasion of the Soviet Union by securing his flank in southeastern Europe through an expansion of the Three-Power Pact to include Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. The short-term goals were to eliminate Soviet influence in the Balkans and to lay the groundwork for a quick campaign in Greece.\(^2\) In Belgrade, the Cvetković-Maček government had few alternatives; overcome by tremendous diplomatic pressure, the threat of German attack from Bulgaria, and the British refusal to offer concrete promises of military support, they signed the pact on 25 March 1941.

As it turned out, Prince Regent Paul and his ministers had next to no options at all. Had they refused to sign the agreement, they would have had to face Germany on impossible terms. Instead they decided to join the Three-Power Pact but could not bring the rest of the country with them. The Serb nationalists were motivated primarily by a desire to defy Hitler but perhaps also by opposition to the concessions made by the Cvetković-Maček government\(^3\) to the Croats' demands for increased administrative autonomy, and they resented Yugoslavia's ostensible entry into the Axis camp. On 27 March a military coup in Belgrade overthrew Prince Regent Paul, and the leader of the conspiracy, Air Force General Bora Mirković, declared the maturity of the seventeen-year-old Prince Peter and installed a fellow Air Force general, Dušan Simović, at the head of government.

The Simović government was in an even worse predicament than its predecessor. It needed time to consolidate its authority, to patch up relations with Maček's Croat Peasant party, and to appeal for guarantees from the Allies. Accordingly, it refused to ratify the Three-Power Pact but did not reject it openly. This strategy failed: Hitler flew into a fury at the news of the coup and the anti-German incidents at Belgrade\(^4\) and


\(^3\)Franjo Tudjman, "Drustveni Aspekti Narodnooslobodilačkog Pokreta u Jugoslaviji" [Social aspects of the Yugoslav national liberation movement], *Putovi Revolucion* 7 (1966): 14.

\(^4\)Von Heeren to Aus. Amt, "Telegramm N. 276 vom 27.3.1941." 27 March 1941, National Archives Microscopy No. T-120 (hereafter all German and Italian microfilmed materials are cited by microscopy number, for example, T-120), roll 1687, frame 3569H/E02321; von Heeren to Aus. Amt, "Zusammenfassende Darstellung der Vorgänge in Jugoslawien," 27 March 1941, T-120, roll 1687, frames 3569H/E023719, 3569H/E023720; von Herence to Aus. Amt, "Telegramm N. 274 vom 27.3.1941," 27 March 1941, T-120, roll 359, frame 3569H/E023715.
on the same evening ordered that Yugoslavia be crushed militarily “as quickly as possible.”

The action against Yugoslavia was, then, a “rushed” campaign which the Germans wanted to end quickly and with the smallest possible commitment of permanent occupation forces. At the end of March O.K.W. (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) was planning to station only six divisions in the German spheres of Yugoslavia and Greece and to carry out the invasion with the greatest possible participation of allied Italian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian units.

The Italians, too, despite their long-standing desire for a Balkan sphere, were totally unprepared for a war with Yugoslavia. Fresh from another unsuccessful offensive against the Greeks in Albania and therefore already overcommitted in the Balkans, they were stunned and horrified by the coup in Belgrade. Only about five divisions were stationed along the Alpine Italo-Yugoslav border, compared with thirty-seven in the fall of 1940, and the Italians were still pinned down by the Greeks. Mussolini even feared a Yugoslav attack against the Italian rear on the Albanian front. At the end of March, after Hitler had already decided on invasion, the Italian foreign minister, Ciano, even briefly attempted to act as an intermediary in improving relations between Germany and Yugoslavia.

The invasion began on 6 April and, although the Germans prepared it at the last minute, the Yugoslav army was in a hopeless position and was routed in a matter of days (see the map). It was outflanked by German forces in former Austria and Bulgaria, and, in view of recent events, the military commanders could not count on the allegiance of their Croat troops. On the eve of the attack about 400,000 of their 700,000 soldiers were recent inductees, and the large bulk of the units were strung out along the 1,860-mile frontier according to a “cordon” defensive strategy. Furthermore, the final operational plan, which Yugoslav army leaders worked out immediately after the Germans en-

---


tered Bulgaria, did not reach the army commands until 31 March. After only a week of fighting, German units had already marched on Zagreb and Sarajevo and were rather well received by the Croatian and Muslim civilian populations. General Simović therefore decided on an armistice.

Less than two weeks after the war had begun, on 17 April 1941, the rout was complete and the Yugoslav High Command was compelled to sign an unconditional surrender. The striking fact about the events of April, however, is that the Germans failed to follow up their military victory. Hasty preparations for Operation Barbarossa prevented the Wehrmacht from completing mopping up actions and forced the withdrawal of the crack German units from Yugoslavia as early as late April. Therefore, only 344,162 officers and troops, or about half the Yugoslav armed forces, were captured. After most of the Croats and Macedonians were released, about 200,000 prisoners, largely Serbs, remained in camps in Germany, and over 300,000 officers and troops, again Serbs for the most part, disobeyed the capitulation order and escaped capture.

Even more important, the Germans, largely because they lacked clearly defined plans for Yugoslavia's postwar disposition and were unable to make a large permanent military commitment there, had to turn over the administration of the country, or a large part of it, to their allies and to native collaborators. Rump Serbia was the only important area of exclusive German influence. Part of Macedonia would probably go to Bulgaria, and the Adriatic littoral would fall in the Italian zone, but the overriding question of predominant political influence in the central parts of the country was still undecided. Hitler was rather disinclined to see Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina become an Italian satellite and even thought briefly of turning over the area to the more pliable Hungarians. As for native political elements in Croatia, the Germans attempted to influence Maček but got nowhere.


15 Szotay to Bardossy, 6 April 1941, in Lajos Kerekes et al., eds., Allianz Hitler-Horthy-Mussolini (Budapest: Akademijai Kiado, 1966), no. 102.

16 Woermann to von Grote, 29 March 1941, T-120, roll 1369, frame 2548H/D523310;
The Italians, far more than the Germans, had major territorial ambitions in the western half of former Yugoslavia. Recognizing that no Croat political figure would be happy about them, they looked for someone in their debt. The choice fell on the Croatian-Ustaši terrorist and separatist Ante Pavelić, a veteran of over a decade of political exile in Italy and one of the chief conspirators behind the assassination of King Alexander in Marseilles, France, in 1934. Mussolini offered to sponsor a Ustaši regime in Croatia in exchange for Pavelić’s support of the Italian annexation of the Dalmation coast. Pavelić agreed, and even proposed an Italo-Croat union under the House of Savoy, arguing that there would “no longer exist any political and administrative differences with the Italians . . . and that the Dalmatian problem will no longer have any meaning.”

By early April the Germans, having failed with Maček, were also talking to Pavelić through his principal agent in Zagreb, Colonel Slavko Kvaternik, and less than a week after the invasion Hitler approved the Pavelić movement’s assumption of power. Thus the Ustaši leader, who only days before had an armed following of about 230 Croat separatist émigrés, based in Pistoia, Italy, and outfitted with uniforms from the Ethiopian campaign, marched on Zagreb and was proclaimed poglavnik (“chief”) of the Independent State of Croatia.

Italy’s diplomatic triumph, though, proved more apparent than real. Hitler gave in, accepted Pavelić, and professed relative lack of interest in Croatian affairs, probably because he recognized that a falling out between the Italians and the Ustaši was inevitable. Pavelić was even more open: he told the German minister in Zagreb that he was relying on the “later disintegration” of the Italian army to reassert Croatia’s rights on the Adriatic. In the meantime, German agents in Zagreb worked assiduously to encourage the Ustaši regime’s growing anti-Italian orientation.

Practically all the German diplomatic efforts had the effect of undermining Italy’s territorial designs. First the Germans delayed approval

---


19 Broszat and Hory, Kroatische Ustascha Staat, p. 50.


of Pavelić's public statement announcing the transfer of Dalmatia to Italian sovereignty; \(^{22}\) then, on April 21, Ribbentrop opened talks with Ciano by supporting Croatia's absorption of Bosnia and Herzegovina and "considerable portions" of the Dalmatian coast.\(^{23}\) On the following day the German foreign minister announced that Berlin had decided to maintain an occupation force in "a strip of Croatia running from northwest to southeast in order to safeguard the railroad communications with Serbia" and to preserve certain economic privileges in the Italian zone, particularly with regard to bauxite mining operations.\(^{24}\)

These tactics forced the Italians to reduce their territorial demands from all to most of the Dalmatian coast and gave Pavelić the courage to defy Rome at almost every turn.\(^{25}\) By 25 April he had gone so far as to insist on all of Dalmatia, as defined by the Treaty of London, Split (Spalato), Dubrovnik (Ragusa), and several islands in the Adriatic. As a result of prolonged negotiations, during which Zagreb continuously appealed to Berlin for support,\(^{26}\) the Italians finally got most of Dalmatia (with the exception of Dubrovnik), an area inhabited by about 280,000 Croats, 90,000 Serbs, and 5,000 Italians.\(^{27}\)

The territorial arrangements finally agreed upon on 18 May solved the problem in a formal diplomatic sense but only marked one phase in the progressive estrangement between the Italians and the Ustaši government. Although they had acquired the southern half of Slovenia, a large share of the Adriatic coast, and a protectorate over Montenegro, the Italians' "puppet," Pavelić, defied them openly, and they grew increasingly suspicious of German intrigue in Zagreb.\(^{28}\) Rome had dramatically underestimated the strength of Croatian nationalist aspirations along the Adriatic and the poglavnik's capacity for independent action.

During and after the negotiation of the territorial settlement a virtual administrative war went on between the Italians and the Zagreb government. Rome tried to reinforce its foothold along the Adriatic by

\(^{22}\) Anfuso, *Palazzo Venezia*, p. 102.


\(^{24}\) RAM, "Record of the Conversation between the Reich Foreign Minister and Count Ciano at the Hotel Imperial," *DGFP*, ser. D, vol. 12, no. 385.


\(^{27}\) Mackensen to the foreign minister, 1 May 1941, *ibid.*, no. 428; Broszat and Hory, *Kroatische Ustascha Staat*, p. 67.

\(^{28}\) Anfuso, *Palazzo Venezia*, p. 142.

\(^{29}\) King Victor Emmanuel was a major exception. In late April he told Ciano that "the less of Dalmatia we take, the fewer problems we'll have." Ciano, *Diario II (1941–1943)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1946), entry for 30 April 1941.

...Frontiers of Yugoslavia before April 1941

---

[Diagram of Yugoslavia with borders marked]

---

demanding that Croatia enter a monetary and customs union with Italy, but Pavelić remained firm and refused. Zagreb countered by erecting a high customs barrier around Split to obstruct the flow of agricultural products into the port and urged civilians everywhere to boycott Italian goods. Increasing numbers of Croat civilians refused to exchange Yugoslav dinars for lire. Economic rivalry spilled over into the political sphere. Pavelić at once

---


sent Ustaši agents into Dalmatia to oversee the “discipline and behavior” of the heavily Croat population and to establish contacts with local nationalists. In Zagreb a Dalmatian Ustaši set up an office for the occupied coastal territories, where they attempted to direct the relations between the Croats and the Italian authorities. 

The growing mutual intransigence on the Dalmatian question had the far greater effect of undermining Italo-German cooperation on all matters regarding policy in former Yugoslavia. Certain knowledge that the Germans at least tolerated Zagreb’s policies and reports that German officers were promising the war minister, Slavko Kvaternik, arms supplies from the Reich only exacerbated the situation. Hitler hardly helped matters by appointing the former Austrian officer and outspoken Italophile Edmond Glaise von Horstenau as plenipotentiary general in Croatia. In a more general sense, Croatia, although falling in a vaguely defined Italian sphere, looked more and more like a German satellite in fact if not in name. Pavelić gave this relationship concrete expression when he permitted the Germans to recruit freely among Croatia’s 150,000 Volksdeutsche for the S.S. “Prinz Eugen division.” Consequently, by June, Mussolini was railing against the German invasion of Zagreb, and Ciano and Giuseppe Bastianini, governor of Dalmatia, saw a concerted German effort aimed at undermining Italian influence in Croatia.

The significance of all these rivalries and disputes over territory and spheres of influence is that they generated a mood which militated against the effective coordination of policy. The Italians, the Germans, and the Zagreb government were not satisfied with existing political arrangements, nor were they very enthusiastic about upholding them. The Italian military authorities were increasingly anti-Ustaši and anxious

---

37 Glaise von Horstenau served with the Austro-Hungarian liaison staff with the Germans during World War I; in 1925 he became director of the Austrian War Archives and served in Schussnigg’s cabinet from 1936 to 1938 as minister without portfolio. From the Anschluss to March 1941 he was vice-chancellor, then interior minister under Seyss-Inquart, and from April 1941 to August 1944 he was German plenipotentiary general in Croatia. He committed suicide in 1946.
38 Broszat and Hory, Kroatische Ustascha Staat, pp. 70–71.
40 This was granted even by the Italian Fascist party delegation at Zagreb. “Delegazione del PNF presso il Partito Ustascia a Segretario del PNF,” 21 August 1941, T-821, roll 295, frame 80.
to extend their occupation zone further into Croatia; the Ustaši were openly revisionist on the Dalmatian issue, and Berlin tried to feign an impartial attitude while in practice using the Ustaši state as a buffer against Italy’s Balkan pretensions.

The occupation system was weakened from the very beginning by differences between the occupying powers. Mussolini’s and Hitler’s decision, made for very different reasons, to support Pavelić only compounded the problem. The émigré Ustaši group had very little domestic support and was utterly unfit to rule a Greater Croatia. Even according to members of the Ustaši organization, the movement had at most about 40,000 “followers,” or barely 6 percent of the population. The largely rural Croatian population was traditionally loyal to the Peasant party; several efforts of the Ustaši leaders to win Maček over to some sort of collaborationist posture failed. When they annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina and absorbed almost two million Serbs it was almost certain that the Ustaši would have to govern by strong-arm methods, but Zagreb immediately went far beyond that and decided to solve the “Serb problem” with a policy of unrestricted terror. By the end of the summer at least a third of Independent Croatia’s population, practically all the nearby Italian occupation authorities, and even several Germans were irreversibly opposed to the Ustaši regime.

The cession of the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a Greater Croatia does, however, illustrate one of the overriding motives of the Axis Powers, especially the Germans, as far as the Yugoslav territorial settlement was concerned. Hitler, in particular, singled out the Serb military leaders and nationalists as responsible for the events of 27 March and thought in terms of a Yugoslav “new order” which would dismember the Serbs even more than the Yugoslav state. As Ribbentrop explained it to Ciano, the Reich’s aim was “to reduce Serbia to the smallest limits to prevent . . . conspiracies and intrigues.” Accordingly, the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina were sacrificed to the Ustaši, those in parts of the Vojvodina to Hungary, and the Montenegrins to the Italians. Probably less than four million Serbs remained in rump Serbia, which for all practical purposes lacked the very rudiments of a political existence.

The Germans maintained the large part of their weak occupation forces in Serbia and at the end of April set up a fictitious multiparty Commissar Administration in Belgrade, headed by Milan Acimović. Originally, Berlin was neither willing nor able to work with well-known

---

42 Broszat and Hory, Kroatische Ustascha Staat, p. 88.
43 Ciano, L’Europa verso la catastrofe, p. 654.
conservative collaborators. During the April war, the Serb political elite had almost vanished. The young King Peter and the Simović cabinet had left the country, and practically all the political leaders of a rightist stripe, with whom the Germans conceivably could have made a deal, were also in exile. Stojadinović, for example, spent the war under British guard in Mauritius.

It is possible that the military administration in Serbia could have made this arrangement work if O.K.W. had been able to commit more than a weak army corps there and if the disastrous course of events in Independent Croatia had not taken place. What Germany was attempting, however, was the imposition of a Carthaginian peace on Yugoslavia's Serb population which it lacked the strength to enforce.

During the summer of 1941, a revolt in Montenegro temporarily wrested a large part of the province from Italian control. In Serbia, the Germans recognized that the authority of their military occupation barely extended beyond the few large cities, and in Independent Croatia Ustaši policies quickly threw whole areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina into a state of almost continual anarchy and national war. These simultaneous upheavals were interrelated: Serb rebels from Herzegovina fled south and played a major role in the Montenegrin uprising; Ustaši terror caused a growing influx of desperate and embittered refugees into rump Serbia. By August probably about 100,000 Serbs had fled east from the Ustaši state, and at the end of September the number of refugees in Serbia was estimated by the Germans at over 200,000. With half the Yugoslav army at large and many of them remaining in the hills, the Ustaši government and Axis occupation authorities faced a nearly impossible situation.

*Benzler to Aus. Amt, 23 July 1941, T-120, roll 200, frame 230/152287.*