CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have traced the development of an armed movement which was anti-Axis in its long-range goals and engaged in a marginal sort of resistance activity but which also carried out almost throughout the war a tactical or selective collaboration with the occupation order. This presents enormous problems for the historian, for there are perhaps no issues more charged emotionally than those of wartime collaboration and, its related topic, treason. Most of the literature, both popular and scholarly, prefers to examine resistance rather than collaboration; in the case of Yugoslavia during World War II, where a successful resistance group brought about a social and political revolution, this bias is especially marked. To place beside all the books and articles on Tito's Partisans there is only one serious study of the important and genuinely pro-Axis Croatian Ustaši.¹ But whereas Pavelić's treason and treachery were longstanding and immediately evident, General Nedić's collaboration with the Germans presents more complex problems, and Mihailović's behavior is even more difficult to characterize. Clearly, the Chetniks were in some sense both a resistance movement and collaborationists; there are also several degrees of collaboration, and each instance must be assessed on the basis of motives and surrounding circumstances. Writing

not long after the close of the war, Hugh Seton-Watson distinguished between at least five sorts of collaboration, and he probably did not exhaust all the possibilities.²

The officers' failure to undertake full-scale resistance obviously did not stem from pro-German or pro-Italian sympathies. It is probably more revealing to look at the Chetniks as a typical officer-led underground movement which for a whole variety of reasons proved abortive from the very beginning of the resistance. Their original plans were to build up an organization capable of seizing power immediately after a German withdrawal, to provide the Allies with information on the situation in the Balkans, to create diversions in the rear of the occupation troops in the event of a Balkan landing, and, in general, to act cautiously enough to avoid massive reprisals against the civilian population. Like officers in other defeated countries, their overriding loyalties were to the émigré government; as with several other non-Communist underground organizations, they felt uneasy about the immediate and postwar consequences of mass uprisings and tended to see their main function as providing information, carrying out acts of sabotage, and joining forces with conventional invasions by liberating troops.³ In countries like France, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, clandestine groups of anti-Axis officers avoided open confrontations with the Germans until there was a real prospect of effective Allied aid and, in doing so, were pursuing what was probably the only sensible course of action.

In Yugoslavia, however, the strategy of carrying on underground irregular warfare, postponing aggressive resistance, and confining anti-Axis actions to isolated acts of sabotage and terror was not feasible, given the realities of the occupation order. The decisive facts about wartime Yugoslavia had to do with the system, or lack of system, of the occupation regime. Generally speaking, the Axis Powers made the mistake of imposing an incredibly brutal occupation and political settlement on the country without providing the force to back it up. Overall territorial arrangements were hasty makeshifts and satisfied neither the Italians and the Germans nor the Croatian Ustaši. The policies of terror and mass reprisals were virtually unrestrained and unique in their execution.

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In the German sphere the army, rather than the Gestapo or S.S., was identified with the destruction of villages and mass deportations. In Independent Croatia, the terrorist Ustaši held sway over the regular army, the assaults on the Serb villages of Bosnia and Herzegovina were part of an open civil struggle, rather than concentration camp killings, and everyone knew about them. The result was spontaneous revolt in practically all the predominantly Serb parts of Yugoslavia.

In some areas, like Serbia and Montenegro, by the end of 1941 the occupation forces were able to suppress the armed revolt and expel, although not destroy, the resistance leadership. This, however, did not alter the basic fact that, during most of the war the villages and outlying hilly areas throughout Yugoslavia lacked any permanent and effective authority. Here normalization was the exception and chaos and intermittent civil war were the rule. In rural Serbia the contending elements were the Germans, Nedić’s Quisling armed forces, and a whole array of remote bands, all actual or potential supporters of Mihailović. In Montenegro the Italians gave up altogether and turned over large parts of the “protectorate” to separatist and pro-Mihailović officers. The most thoroughly anarchic situation was in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Italians, Germans, Ustaši, Serb nationalists, and Partisans competed for authority and spheres of influence. More than anywhere else, it was the ethnically mixed parts of Independent Croatia which gave the radical resistance a new life after the disasters of 1941 and sustained it throughout the war.

The unique facts about wartime Yugoslavia were, then, the weakness of the occupation system, the persistent failures of most attempts to impose a thoroughgoing pacification, and, consequently, a state of affairs characterized by anarchy and a largely unorganized and ongoing civil war. Stated more simply, there were actually three “wars” proceeding simultaneously: the resistance against the Axis occupation; the civil struggle between the Serbs on the one hand and the Croats and Muslims on the other; and a civil war within the anti-Axis camp which placed the Serb Chetniks against the Serb Partisans (large numbers of Croats joined Tito only in the latter part of 1943).

By choice and necessity, both Tito and Mihailović carried out civil wars in addition to anti-Axis resistance. The Partisans disputed with the officers, elected a strategy which invited continued reprisals, attacked Nedić’s gendarmes and Pavelić’s Ustaši troops, appealed for Muslim support against the extreme Serb nationalists, and in general led an anti-Chetnik struggle throughout the war. For Mihailović and the

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officers, the dilemma created by the realities of the occupation was far worse since, unlike the Partisans, they had followed from the beginning a "wait-and-see" strategy. After the disaster in Serbia in late 1941, though, the focus of the Chetnik movement shifted to the west, and the officers had to rely on an already existing Serb nationalist armed movement which was bent on revenge and dominated by a local leadership. From then on, Mihailović's movement, despite its anti-Axis schemes and long-haul orientation, fought a basically civil war against the Partisans and the Muslim and Croatian civilian population.

The more involved the Serb nationalist movement became in the civil struggle, the more the officers had to place a priority on short-term goals. Although this certainly meant putting off anti-Axis resistance, it also meant that in order to fight Tito's Partisans, compete with the Ustaši, and wage border raids against the Sandžak Muslims, they could no longer remain an essentially underground organization. In order to carry out the policy of "parallel wars" against their domestic foes, the Serb nationalist leaders needed an armed movement, and this led to ongoing collaboration with the Italians.

The accommodations with the Italians made possible a temporary revival of the Chetniks in 1942, but it was precisely this sort of short-term success which ultimately proved fatal to the officers. Although the non-Communist Serb armed movement succeeded in many instances in adjusting itself to different occupation orders and local circumstances, it did so at the cost of becoming hopelessly dispersed and permanently dominated by civilian notables. Mihailović and his delegate-officers tried in vain in 1942 and 1943 to pull together the Chetnik formations under a firm military leadership and failed miserably. There was an almost permanent tension between the officers who were loyal to Mihailović and the formations' spokesmen, often civilians, who tended to be more responsive to the mood of their followers, took a more active part in negotiating with the occupation authorities, and therefore were more inclined toward collaboration.

Even where the officers played a predominant role, for example, in Montenegro, their reliance on external support undermined the usefulness of the armed formations. The Montenegrins divided influence with the Italians in their native province but could not operate freely anywhere else. In Serbia the officers survived by establishing a truce with and attaching themselves to the Nedić administration but in the process became militarily impotent. Virtually everywhere in the Serb parts of Yugoslavia, the nationalist movement came to depend on some form of support or toleration from the occupation powers, and the longer this state of affairs lasted the more they had to yield to pressures to conduct
themselves as volunteer police detachments with exclusively anti-Partisan responsibilities and strictly defined spheres of action.

As the war went on, the nationalist units had less and less freedom of maneuver, and Mihailović's staff had less influence with the formation leaders. Even at the end of 1942, during the high point of the Serb nationalist recovery, however, Mihailović could act decisively as the "leader" of the Chetniks only at the risk of arousing countermeasures from the Germans and Italians and sacrificing the gains and material aid which collaboration brought to the Serb spokesmen. By the middle of 1943, the Chetnik movement as a centrally directed and officer-led resistance organization capable of carrying on guerrilla warfare was a myth. In a more general sense, Mihailović's authority over the non-Communist armed movement and the military potential of the Chetniks were products of Allied wartime propaganda in 1941 and 1942 and of the Germans' persistent fear and mistrust of the Serb officers. The Chetniks in fact were local self-defense units, marauding bands of Serb villagers, anti-Partisan auxiliaries, forcibly mobilized peasants, and armed refugees, which a small groups of uncaptured Yugoslav officers was attempting without success to mold into an organized fighting force.

That the officers and civilian spokesmen failed in this effort does not alter the fact that the Serb nationalist movement, for all its shortcomings of leadership and strategy, did represent a very widespread response by Yugoslavia's largest national group to the experience of war, occupation, and civil anarchy. In a country as poorly organized and as politically divided as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a large part of the civilian population, including the Serbs, must have perceived the war in essentially local and ethnic-religious terms rather than in terms of postwar politics. The brutalities of the Axis occupation and Ustaši terror ignited national divisions but clearly did not create them, and what emerges from this study is a picture of a country which was politically, administratively, and culturally fragmented before the war and certainly even more so during it. Even the Partisans, so often credited, and with considerable justification, for pulling the country together, were an overwhelmingly Serb movement until well into 1943, and there is considerable evidence that they often expanded their ranks by appealing to national sentiments which had little to do with allegiance to the Yugoslav idea.

Also, it should be kept in mind that until the middle of the war the Partisans were in control of relatively large liberated areas only in parts of Bosnia and that their fighting effectives were probably no more numerous than the total of armed followers who made up the Serb nationalist movement. The overwhelming bulk of the Serb civilian population,
mostly villagers and small independent peasants, wanted security and armed protection and, in moments of overwhelming crisis, were willing to join an armed band, Partisan or Chetnik, for purposes of defense, plunder, or national revenge. Thus Herzegovinian and Montenegrin Partisans of 1941 appeared in the ranks of the Chetnik volunteer militia in 1942 and passed over to the Partisans again in 1943. Serb nationalist groups in Bosnia fought the Germans, Ustaši, and the Croat and Muslim civilians almost simultaneously and then were pacified or dispersed when the situation changed. Likewise, the Muslims of the Sandžak, hard pressed by both Serb and Montenegrin Chetniks, proved willing recruits for both the Germans and the Partisans.

Seen in this context, the failure of the officers and the Serb non-Communist armed movement was just one reflection of the thorough disintegration which Yugoslavia suffered during World War II. Toward the end of the war and after it, the Partisans made a heroic and remarkably successful effort to revive “Yugoslavia” on a new political basis, but their achievements in overcoming national hostilities almost certainly were not widely supported, due in large part to the fact that Serb, Croat, and Muslim particularist nationalism had no political outlet. World War II was of enormous significance to Yugoslavia not only because of the group it brought to power but also because of those it eliminated. Had Mihailović’s officers and the Serb civilian nationalist leaders triumphed, with some sort of decisive Allied intervention on the Greek model, the restoration of the monarchy would surely have been accompanied by violent political purges and a reign of Serb vengeance.

According to the 1931 census, Yugoslavia’s population was over 76 percent rural and only 8.6 percent “industrial”; over 90 percent of the peasants were smallholders, owning ten hectares or less of land.