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Calic, Marie-Janine

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PART III

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

(1941 TO 1945)
Yugoslavia ceased to exist on 17 April 1941, the day it surrendered. Hitler and Mussolini plucked the country apart, turning it into a mosaic of annexed, occupied, and quasi-independent territories. Germany annexed northern Slovenia and occupied Serbia and the Banat. Italy received southern Slovenia, Dalmatia, and Montenegro. In Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Independent State of Croatia was formed under the control of the two Axis powers. Kosovo and western Macedonia were given to Albania, which had been an Italian protectorate since 1939. While Bulgaria grabbed eastern Macedonia, Hungary pushed into the region between the Tisza, Danube, and Mur rivers. These developments prompted State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker to ask, in some consternation, about who was now going “to tend to this bag of fleas during the war.”

The new order in Southeast Europe worked as a system of graded dependencies in which there were annexed areas (Slovenia), occupied countries (Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece), puppet states (Croatia and Slovakia), and allies (Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary). However, the various legal statuses of these countries were of little practical relevance. Aims, strategies, and politics were all very similar within the National Socialist “Greater Space” (Großraum), regardless whether a country was “independent” or “occupied.” In all of these countries, partners could be found who were willing to collaborate with the Axis powers in order to launch their own plans for the creation of homogeneous nation states.

Germany and Italy had different motives for dividing up Yugoslavia. Hitler pursued political, military, and economic objectives in the Balkans. He sought to destroy the postwar order, secure transport lines and access to economic resources vital to the war effort, and thwart an Allied invasion. Shortly after occupying the Balkans, Himmler also incorporated them into his
megalomaniacal policies of resettlement and extermination. For its part, Italy considered Southeast Europe as its historically evolved sphere of influence and part of its natural living space (spazio vitale) stretching from the Adriatic to Africa and the Middle East. However, the equality between the two dictators was only a formal construct. Occupational practices later revealed permanent friction and serious conflicts of interest, in which Mussolini usually came out on the short end.\(^3\)

The Independent State of Croatia
The Independent State of Croatia (NDH) was created from the territory of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. After the attempt failed to get the popular peasant leader Vladko Maček to take over the reins of government under German protection, the SS-Standartenführer Edmund Veesenmayer put the fascist Ustasha movement in power. By this time he had already arranged the annexation of Austria and the independence of Slovakia.\(^4\) Ante Pavelić returned to Zagreb from his years-long exile to become Poglavnik (leader) with dictatorial authority. Croatia was organized as a leader state (Führerstaat) without any separation of powers, and the persecution of oppositional forces was legalized with the enactment of the Law for the Protection of the People and the State on 17 April 1941. The Ustasha government invoked the idea of a “people’s community” (Volksgemeinschaft), which it defined as “Aryan” like the German model. Also in April, Pavelić zealously enacted the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws. The pillars of support for his reign of violence were the militias, army, secret police, special courts, and more than twenty concentration camps.\(^5\)

Croatia’s long-sought sovereignty soon proved to be a chimera. Both Hitler and Mussolini treated the country as an occupied region and drew a demarcation line through its territory. Berlin used its immense diplomatic corps and the Plenipotentiary German General to exert great political influence on racial, economic, and military policy.\(^6\) In the Roman Protocols, Pavelić also had to surrender a wide strip of Dalmatian coastline and the Bay of Kotor to Italy on 18 May 1941, thus turning the decades-old collective nightmare of the Croats into reality.

In the wake of the German-Italian occupation, the Ustasha movement saw a historically unique opportunity to implement its original agenda, the creation of an ethnically homogeneous Greater Croatia. For decades, it had been preaching for the resurrection of medieval Croatia covering its “entire ethnic and historic territory.” The 6.3 million population of the Independent State of Croatia was extremely heterogeneous. Only a bare majority of 3.3 million were Croats. The rest of the populace was made up of about two million Serbs, 700,000 Muslims, and 150,000 ethnic Germans and other minorities.\(^7\) The Croat fascists now launched a systematic campaign against their
alleged archenemy, the Orthodox Christian population. Hundreds of thousands were disenfranchised, dispossessed, driven out, herded into internment camps, or murdered in vicious attacks. The centralist government of Greater Croatia also did not permit Muslims to hold any special status, even though a number of them sympathized with the Ustasha government. The government struck all references to “Bosnia-Herzegovina” from official language and declared the Muslims to be “Croats of Islamic Faith.” For this reason, the profascist Committee of National Rescue, based in Sarajevo, petitioned Hitler in November 1942 to bestow autonomy on Bosnia-Herzegovina under direct patronage of the Third Reich. Berlin turned down the request promptly.8

Support for the new regime remained sparse. Neither in domestic nor foreign policy did the government exercise full sovereignty. Approval came from the right wing of the Peasants’ Party, from parts of the Catholic Church, and from nationalist-thinking intellectuals and students, who celebrated the “resurrection” of Croatia and indulged in a missionary and chauvinist sense of purpose. Yet it only took a couple of months following the assumption of power before the already rather heterogeneous base of support for the Ustasha movement began to crack apart.9 Very few people identified unconditionally with the ideology and aims of the Croatian leadership, and whoever cooperated with it often acted out of pure opportunism. It “appears to prove little that houses in the villages hang flags and that a relatively large number of people participate” in Sunday rallies, warned a German informant in mid-1941. He sensed that the prevailing “indifference of broad segments of the population” could change “into active resistance.”10

In mid-February 1942, the plenipotentiary German general in Agram, Edmund von Glaise Horstenau, reported: “Hatred against it [Ustasha] is hard to beat anymore. Representatives of the movement make themselves unpopular time and again through their arrogance, despotism, greediness, and corruption. Furthermore, misdeeds, theft, and murder continue unabated. No week goes by in which some ‘cleansing action’ is not carried out in which entire villages including women and children bite the dust.”11 In early February 1943, German supreme commander of the southeast Alexander Löhr complained: “Government and bureaucracy have lost all support through mismanagement and the Ustasha course, not only among the Pravoslavs [the Serbs], but also among their own Croat population.”12

The German Occupation of Serbia
What little remained of Serbia fell under German occupation rule, a confusing jumble of various civilian and military offices that switched and altered their competencies time and again.13 Starting in June 1941, the highest authority in the occupied territories of Yugoslavia and Greece became the supreme army commander of Southeast Europe. Subordinate to him was the military
commander in Serbia (since September 1941, the plenipotentiary commanding general). This person, in turn, headed two staffs, one civilian and one military. As head of the civilian administration, SS-Group Leader Harald Turner supervised the Serbian collaboration government. The military command staff oversaw police, army, and security tasks. Operating independently of these were two task forces of the Security Police and the Security Service (SD) whose mission it was to combat “emigrants, saboteurs, and terrorists.” The general plenipotentiary for the economy, Hermann Göring’s direct representative, completed the institutional jumble. While he was, institutionally, not part of the Military Administration, he was to exploit Serbia’s resources for the German war machine. Foreign policy matters were handled, in turn, by the German Foreign Office through their own plenipotentiary. However, in August 1943, the powers of this office were transferred to the influential special plenipotentiary of the Foreign Office for the Southeast, Hermann Neubacher.14

In order to facilitate the administration of Serbia more easily, the SS officer Veesenmayer installed the ultraconservative and nationalist general Milan Nedić as prime minister of a puppet “Government of National Salvation” in August 1941. He was supported by parts of the officer corps, the Chetniks under Kosta Pećanac, and the fascist Zbor movement led by Dimitrije Ljotić. Nedić’s chief task was to smash resistance with indigenous troops and thereby relieve the German military from this work. Because Hitler viewed Serbs as characterless, disloyal, and dangerous, all government functions vital to power pertaining to the military, police, economy, and finances remained in German hands. Thus, the status of the Serbian collaboration government differed from that of Pétain’s regime in France, which was at least allowed to represent a sovereign state that the Germans did not classify a priori as inferior. Nedić proved to be a willing implementer of German occupation policy. He “cleansed” the education system, established strict censorship, and set up trade corporations and a National Labor Service. He also commanded the Serbian State Guard and the Serbian Volunteer Corps, two military organizations set up to assist German troops.

Nedić viewed himself as a trustee of Serb interests, as a mediator between the foreign occupiers and his people, and he tried to alleviate the suffering of the Serbs while at the same time brutally combating communists. His ideology was a mixture of ultraconservatism and the chauvinism of the fascist Zbor movement, a strange conglomerate of heterogeneous, ideological elements creating an ethnic-racist, blood-and-soil cult and religious Orthodox messianism, coupled with a fixation on an age-old Serb patriarchal family structure and village community.15 However, the Serb population did not prove very receptive to this train of thought. The nationalist-leaning middle class tended to remain loyal to the king and to favor the former and now exiled government, and the peasantry did not think much differently.
As was the case everywhere in Eastern Europe, the ethnic German minority played a key role in establishing the new order. For one, the approximately half a million Danube Swabians were expected to help further the “racial reordering” of the area. For another, they were to serve on the Eastern Front as “troops obligated to the Reich” and to fight in their own country against the partisans, no matter what the legal status of their home regions was. Even though Croatia was formally an independent state, the ethnic Germans there were given an autonomous legal status as “Volksgruppe” that ensured their total cooptation by the Reich.

Berlin treated the Banat Swabians in a similar fashion. This German minority in Serbia was given its own administrative region, where society was organized according to the Nazi model and the district received directives directly from the Reich. Berlin expected the Banat Swabians to do their part in the agricultural “production battle” and to engage in “total war.” Starting in the spring of 1942, practically all men fit for military service were conscripted into the Waffen-SS on the basis of “the iron law of their folkdom (Volkstum).” In 1943/1944, about 50,000 ethnic Germans from Croatia, Serbia, and the Banat were serving, and another 18,500 came from the territories occupied by Hungary.

In all other parts of the former territory of Yugoslavia, the New Order was built on sand. In the summer of 1941, the Italians in Montenegro failed in their attempt to declare a pseudoindependent satellite state. Instead, they set up a military government. Slovenia, which Hitler and Mussolini had divided up between themselves, was subjected to a systematically implemented policy of Germanization and Italianization, respectively. The Provincia di Lubiana was headed by an Italian high commissioner, who was assisted by a local consultative council that, however, lacked any form of authority in its own country. After Italy surrendered in 1943, the region fell to the German occupiers. With the help of General Leon Rupnik, who wanted to secure the Slovenes a place in “New Europe,” and with the blessing of Bishop Gregorij Rožman, a home guard (domobranci) was formed, an auxiliary of the Wehrmacht under German command. At the height of its power, this force was about 17,500 men strong.

Reprisal Actions
The plan to rule the country with little military deployment and with the help of local collaborators soon proved illusionary. All state institutions of government and authority had been destroyed, creating a power vacuum that was hard to control. While bourgeois groups, royalists, peasant-party supporters, social democrats, and communists were distraught and disillusioned, they were not without fight in them. In various parts of the country, oppositionists carried out attacks and acts of sabotage. The Germans decided to nip
this resistance in the bud by having SS-strike forces and Wehrmacht soldiers carry out hostage executions. On 28 April, Colonel-General von Weichs, the commander-in-chief of the Second Army, ordered that, in retribution for every German soldier harmed in an attack, one hundred civilians from all segments of society were to be shot “ruthlessly” and the corpses hung in public display. General Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel instructed the High Command on 28 September 1941 to shoot one hundred people, “including known leaders of the community or their relatives,” for every German soldier killed and fifty people for every German soldier wounded. The Wehrmacht took prisoners referred to as “Sühnegefangene” [retribution prisoners], usually communists, Jews, gypsies, criminals, and “hostages . . . who play a role in public life.” They had to pay with their lives for attacks against members of the Wehrmacht, ethnic Germans, and—as of November 1942—Serb collaborators. For example, on a single November night in Belgrade, 149 professors, academy members, artists, doctors, and lawyers were arrested, including the intellectuals Aleksandar Belić, Tihomir Djordjević, Viktor Novak, and Vaša Ćubrilović. In particularly brutal acts of retribution, the German army shot 4,000 to 5,000 civilians in Kraljevo and more than 2,300 in Kragujevac in mid-October 1941. German soldiers captured school pupils and teachers, workers and peasants, clerics and sextons, and any man they happened to come across. Later these people were executed in groups of thirty to fifty and dumped in mass graves. General Böhme’s “punitive actions” took the lives of more than 25,000 men and women just between October and December 1941.

Like elsewhere in the Eastern European realm, the measures undertaken by the occupiers to smash the resistance were combined with those to annihilate the Jewish population. As early as 2 April 1941, the forces deployed by both the security police and the SD for “enemy combat” received the mission to crack down not only on “emigrants, saboteurs, terrorists, etc.” but explicitly on “communists and Jews.” Thus, the Balkan campaign exhibited the characteristics of a war of ideology from the very beginning and not only after Germany invaded the Soviet Union.
Second World Wars are so very similar. Many a brutal “cleansing action” was carried out in regions where, according to Böhme, “in 1914, streams of German blood flowed from those beguiled by Serbs, men and women.”26 The terror perpetrated against the Serbian civilian population in the First World War was significantly radicalized yet again by the National Socialists, who used it as means to the ends of their racial policy.

In their sphere of influence the Italians also resorted to brute force as a means to create an ordine nuovo in the Mediterranean region. Anti-Slavic sentiments and the colonial experience in Africa shaped the attitudes of the Italian officer corps toward the Balkan “subhumans.”27 In the circular memo 3C from March 1942, General Mario Roatta instructed his army not to play the part of the “good Italian,” but to use the harshest reprisals to smash partisan resistance. Villages were bombed and burned to the ground, masses of hostages were interned and shot, tens of thousands of civilians were taken to the concentration camps of Gonars, Ponza, Colfiorito, and Renicci.28 This reality thoroughly contradicted the decades-old, uncontested self-image of the “good Italian.”29

The Annihilation of Jews and Roma

Military operations to combat the resistance were inseparable from the measures taken by the National Socialists to implement their monstrous plans for displacement, resettlement, and extermination beginning all over Europe in mid-July 1941.30 Jews in Southeast Europe also lost their civil rights, jobs, and property. They were registered, badged, declared an “enemy within,” and targeted in police raids, hostage shootings, mass executions and—starting in October 1941 at the latest—systematic and complete annihilation.

In 1940, an estimated 72,000 Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews lived in Yugoslavia, primarily in the cities. Unlike the situation in most other Eastern European countries, the Jewish population here was highly assimilated, well integrated, and not stigmatized by social envy to the same degree as in Hungary and Romania. Although anti-Semitism did exist in Croatia and to a lesser extent in Serbia, it tended to be a peripheral social phenomenon. Mixed marriages were common. In the 1930s, propaganda financed by Nazi Germany had been seeping into the country well before the Yugoslav government finally succumbed to pressure from Berlin and passed anti-Jewish laws in 1940. First and foremost, these laws set quotas for Jews at higher schools and banned them from serving in the army. Thanks to what was still a comparatively liberal policy, thousands of German and Austrian Jews chose to flee to Yugoslavia in the 1930s.

The Jewish policy of the Ustasha government was also highly influenced by Nazi Germany. Like several of his colleagues, Ante Pavelić was married
to a woman with Jewish family roots. Not until the late 1930s was an explicit anti-Semitism documented in the party’s program. Berlin often doubted the assiduity of its Croat vassals, such as when they proposed to grant particularly well-deserved Jewish citizens the status of “honorary Aryans” despite the strict race laws. Nonetheless, Pavelić followed the Nazi example and had Jews registered, badged, and dispossessed. On 26 June 1941, the Poglavnik came out in favor of the principle of collective guilt: “Since the Jews spread bogus news to unsettle the populace and disrupt and aggravate the provision of the population with their known speculative practices, they will therefore be considered collectively responsible and . . . deported to outdoor detention camps.” The Ustasha murdered more than 25,000 Jews in these camps, most of them in the notorious Department III B of the Jasenovac concentration camp. German agencies deported another 5,000 Jews to Auschwitz. Tens of thousands were shipped to German extermination camps from regions occupied by Bulgaria and Hungary. The only place where Jews were a bit safer was in the Italian zone. Authorities there treated German pressure to deport in a dilatory manner, so that thousands could escape to Italy or save themselves in partisan-held territory. Whereas the royalist and conservative Italian army conducted an arrogant and aggressive civilizing mission in the lands it occupied, it did not carry out a race-based, ethnic extermination project.

German involvement was more direct in occupied Serbia. As early as mid-April 1941, all Jews had to register with the police. The German High Command (OKW, Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) collectively branded them as enemies of the state within the context of “combating banditry” and made it a priority to shoot them in “reprisal actions” (Sühneaktionen). By early December nearly all Jews and gypsies were detained in the Sajmište concentration camp near Belgrade, where the SS deployed a gas van starting in the spring of 1942 to murder the remaining survivors, of which 7,000 were women and children. Harald Turner, an SS-Gruppenführer and head of the German military administration in Serbia, proudly reported in August 1942: “Serbia is the only country in which the Jewish question and the Gypsy question have been solved.”

Of the approximately 72,000 Jews who originally lived in the entire Yugoslav region, about 55,000 to 60,000 fell victim to the genocide between 1941 and 1945, about 28,000 of whom died in German concentration camps. Thousands emigrated to Israel after the war. As a result, the Jewish population in Yugoslavia in the early 1950s had been decimated to about 6,500. Likewise, the roughly 80,000 Yugoslav Roma were also stigmatized, disenfranchised, and systematically murdered. In Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina they were almost completely wiped out and managed to survive in larger numbers only in Serbia and Montenegro.
The Serb Chetniks

In the spring and summer of 1941, the nationalist Chetniks presented themselves as the chief protagonists of Serb resistance. The Chetniks formed armed guerrilla units in parts of Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia under the command of Colonel Dragoljub “Draža” Mihailović. As assistant to the chief of staff in the Yugoslav army and an expert on guerrilla warfare, Mihailović had refused to surrender when the German Wehrmacht invaded and instead marched to western Serbia with fifty to sixty men, where he set up his headquarters in Ravna Gora in mid-May.

It was Mihailović’s aim to ride the wave of Serb patriotism to the top of a restored monarchical postwar order. He therefore avoided open confrontation with the occupiers, which he considered to be militarily superior, and planned to wait for the anticipated Allied landing before starting an uprising. He invented military successes to report to London, while at the same time getting financial backing from the Serbian collaboration government and offering his services to the Germans and Italians. Fearing the communists above all else, the Yugoslav government in exile turned a deaf ear to rumors about any possible betrayal by their resistance hero. In January 1942, it named Mihailović to the post of war minister and commander-in-chief of the “Yugoslav Army in the Homeland.” As a recognized representative of the old system, he received military support from the British until mid-1943.

Mihailović’s Chetniks borrowed the famous name, emblems, and bearing of the historical partisan fighters from the First World War. They wore high fur caps on heads bearing long hair and unkempt beards and hung ammunition belts across their chests. Traditional symbols and codes evoked a sense of continuity that did not actually exist but triggered widespread recognition and favor among the rural population. Mihailović is thought to have recruited 3,000 to 4,000 men, if not more, by September 1941. Many were former officers, noncommissioned officers, gendarmes, and policemen. By 1943, his following is said to have grown to a number ranging from 30,000 (the German estimate) to 180,000 (Mihailović’s claim). However, from the start, the slightly chaotic force suffered from internal rivalries, discipline problems, and a lack of clear organizational structure and central command.  

The Chetniks differed from region to region, and their supporters were driven by various motives: patriotism, self-protection, nationalism, or chauvinism. In Croatia and western Bosnia, they formed primarily as resistance to the Ustasha atrocities. Otherwise, their social base consisted of the populations found in Serb villages and the Montenegrin mountains, where customs, popular religion, and patriarchal values were dominant. Any search for a cohesive ideological program is fruitless. This explains why some collaborated with the occupiers, while others conducted guerrilla warfare, and still others later
defected to the partisans. A notable segment of the Serb bourgeoisie, the nationalist-oriented intelligentsia, and the Orthodox clergy also sympathized with the Chetniks, especially since those with more moderate political views found few alternatives to the communists.

The popularity enjoyed by the Chetniks in Serbia and Montenegro in the rural areas can be attributed in no small measure to the protection they provided to the peasant population against Germans and Italians. For example, in consultation with the Italian occupation authorities in Montenegro, Herzegovina, and Sandžak, they were able to establish local self-administrative bodies. With tacit approval and sometimes open support on the part of Nedić’s authorities, many communities in Serbia led a life of their own. The village Miokovce in the Šumadija region completely evaded the clutches of the state: “Now all state power has skipped over us,” the head of the village told a journalist in early 1944. “Here we also have military, police, and court. . . . Now we make all our own laws. . . . Whoever does not listen, gets beaten. . . . Blows or a bullet to the head. . . . The village is . . . like a small state.” The inhabitants paid no taxes and ignored military conscription orders. Instead, they provided food to the Chetnik fighters in the surrounding mountains, who in exchange protected the villagers from unwanted visits by the Wehrmacht.

_Tito and the People’s Liberation War_

In the meantime, the communists working underground were making military preparations for armed resistance. On 4 July 1941, shortly after Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Tito declared the launching of armed insurgency and created partisan units. Preparations had been underway already for months. Yugoslavia was to be liberated and some pressure taken off the Red Army by creating a new front for the Germans. In August 1941, he proclaimed the “liberation of the peoples of Yugoslavia from the occupiers and a fight against indigenous agents . . . who support the subjugation and terrorization of our people.” Although a change of political system was part of the plan from the very start, it sounded less adverse to refer to the struggle as a “people’s war of liberation” instead of a “socialist revolution.” Still, the iconography spoke volumes. As an emblem the partisans chose the five-pointed red star, and on Stalin’s birthday, 21 December 1941, they formed the First Proletarian Brigade in the eastern Bosnian town of Rudo. With 1,200 soldiers, it was the first larger all-Yugoslav combat unit operating offensively and transregionally that understood itself as the military arm of the Communist Party.

The emergence of Tito’s armed resistance presented the occupation forces with a serious challenger and the Chetniks with a dangerous rival. Although the partisans and the Chetniks had sometimes fought together against Ustasha and the Wehrmacht, a rift occurred in September 1941. The first military clash
in November 1941 escalated into civil war, an ideological battle to the death. Mihailović saw himself as the legitimate representative of the king and his government and strove to reinstate the old order under Serb leadership. In June 1941 a memorandum titled “Homogeneous Serbia” by political advisor Stevan Moljević outlined the large-scale, ethnic-based, forced displacement of Croats and Muslims on roughly 70 percent of Yugoslavia’s territory. His ideas about a Greater Serbia inspired a proposal by the Chetnik Central Committee that was presented to the government in exile in September 1941. For his part, Tito preached “brotherhood and unity” among all peoples and sought to bring about a socialist revolution and certainly his own rise to power.

Unlike the defensive military operations of the Chetniks, the partisans sought open offensive combat with the occupation forces. Next to their contrasting ideological and political objectives, this was another reason for the tension between them. The militarily trained party cadre, veterans from the Spanish Civil War, and former officers of the Yugoslav army assumed the command of the partisan fighters. Within a few months, they had built a tightly run armed force that quickly developed into a regular, centrally commanded people’s liberation army.

Before the war, the Communist Party had only been strong and well organized in several of the larger cities. In occupied Slovenia, they had already joined forces with Christian socialists, intellectuals, and segments of the Sokol organization to create a “Liberation Front” (*Osvobodilna fronta*) in April 1941. They became so powerful in Italian-occupied Ljubljana that they could establish a parallel state with illegal military hospitals, print shops, and so on, and practically governed the province from underground through a tightly meshed network that reached the highest levels of authority. In the rural regions, however, the CPY was considerably weaker and had not cared too much about the peasants. For example, when the war started, they only had 830 members in all of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Four years later, 140,000 Bosnian partisans were fighting under Tito’s command.

In addition to CPY members, youth organizations, trade unions, and an increasing number of noncommunists soon began to back the partisans. Besides a general sense of patriotism, the brutal persecution by the Ustasha and the rampant retribution measures by the Wehrmacht also drove more and more fighters underground. The unpredictability and omnipresence of the terror, the precarious supply situation, and the state of unending exhaustion and humiliation mobilized resistance, at first hesitantly and then at a rapidly accelerating pace. For the masses of simple rural dwellers, even the unpoltical ones, no conceivable way had been found to come to terms with the foreign rulers. Harald Turner, German military head of the administration in Serbia, noted as early as the fall of 1941: “These people, who in countless
cases witnessed themselves the bestial massacre of their relatives, had no more to lose . . . and thus consorted with the Communists in the forests and mountains.46

The motives and modes of insurgency varied; rarely were they ideological. There were organized forms of communist resistance in the cities, but also activities by irregular bands, militias, and village guards conducted strictly for self-protection. Often organized opposition developed out of social rebelliousness, proletarian protest, and small-town obstinacy. The uprising of Serb peasants in western Bosnia tended to resemble premodern agrarian revolts, in which the aim was to restore the old order, not to create a new one. In other places, insurgency flared up in urban working-class milieus, such as in the summer of 1941 when the workforce of the timber and cellulose factories in Drvar rebelled against layoffs and then declared the founding of the republic.47

The Communist Party was successful because it managed to bundle these very different forms of protest and resistance under the motto of “people’s liberation” and to forge the heterogeneous milieus into a unified command structure. In the firmly established social structure of a village community, a single part-time worker might have been all it took to draw first his large family clan and then all of his neighbors into the resistance. Tito’s comrade and chronicler Vladimir Dedijer was surprised how many simple, politically unexperienced, and unskilled men joined them, especially from quite poverty-stricken regions. In the fall of 1941, the partisans had taken control of several areas located in Montenegro, in Croatian Lika,Banija, and Kordun, in Bosnian Krajina, in Herzegovina, and in western, southern, and eastern Serbia. In the first liberated territory the communists declared the establishment of the Republic of Užice in September. The short-lived mini-state in Western Serbia served as Tito’s headquarters.48

In light of the partisans’ military successes, Mihailović discovered that his strategy to wait out the war was causing him to fall more and more to the wayside. Not only was Tito challenging his title as the top resistance hero, but also his claim to be the future head of state. In November 1941, Mihailović ordered an attack on the partisan headquarters in Užice, an assault that ended in military disaster for the Chetniks.49 Mihailović, who still refused to surrender to the Germans, now offered to be a partner to the Wehrmacht. This was the beginning of an ever intensifying involvement in various forms of cooperation and collaboration with the declared enemy. However, the commanding general, Franz Böhme, rejected Mihailović’s offer, telling him that “the German Wehrmacht will deal with the communists by itself quite soon and . . . cannot trust you as an ally.”50

The seed for the rift between Tito and Stalin was planted during these early years. In the fall of 1941, the Soviet dictator was desperately dependent on a second Allied front that would force the Germans to redirect more
divisions from the east. In order to calm Western suspicions that he was attempting to Sovietize Southeast Europe, he needed to dissuade the Yugoslav communists from their plans to establish a socialist political system. Instead of the arms Tito urgently requested, Stalin sent him a long telegram lecturing the Yugoslavs to stop preaching revolution and instead to forge a popular front alliance with the man backed by the British, Draža Mihailović. To Tito’s extreme frustration, the radio station Free Yugoslavia from Moscow continually broadcast Chetnik propaganda from London.

At the end of November, the Wehrmacht undertook a major offensive against all the areas controlled by the resistance in Serbia, during which the Republic of Užice also fell. More than 1,400 partisans died; hundreds were taken prisoner and then murdered. Not long after that, the Germans stormed the Chetnik headquarters in Ravna Gora. They also leveled further draconian measures against civilians. Whoever gave partisans food or shelter or refused to betray partisan whereabouts was “considered an insurgent himself and shot.”

Tito and his stalwart followers managed to head south and eventually reach Sandžak. In the borderlands between Montenegro, eastern Bosnia, and southern Serbia, they could at first control some territory but were soon also driven away from there.

By early December 1941, the insurgency in Serbia and Montenegro had been put down for all practical purposes. Granted, by then the partisans had about 80,000 men and women in arms, but the superior might of half a million German, Italian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian occupation troops plus 120,000 soldiers from the Ustasha and Nedić regimes was crushing. Having been driven out of Serbia, where the peasant population tended to favor the Chetniks over the partisans, and under constant fire from the militarily far superior Germans and Italians, the partisans were faced with despair and demise. There was no help to be found far and wide. Eight painfully long and demoralizing months had passed since the Germans had stormed Užice when Tito decided in late June 1942 to move his high command westward to the heartland of the Independent State of Croatia. Only here were the partisans able to control larger areas with the support of Serbs threatened by persecution. The crusade by the Ustasha drove more and more men and women to join the resistance, so that the uprising in the Bosnian region of Krajina, in Lika, and in Slavonia promised to spread further.

Four brigades set out in June 1942 on a seemingly never-ending and very risky march full of deprivation through the summits and valleys of the Bosnian mountains. For months, the ragged figures lived in the forests and slept on the hard ground with only a tornister pack shoved under their heads. Food and medicine were notoriously scarce and ammunition was in acute shortage, just as it was everywhere. “The worst was that there was no salt. We also suffered from scurvy, for there was no fruit or green vegetables in the mountains. We
could only eat young beech leaves, or press the juice out of the beech bark and drink it.”

Usually the partisans traveled with entire herds of sheep and goats that were slaughtered along the way. The herds were replenished by requisitions from peasants.

During the march through the ethnically heterogeneous areas in which the Ustasha, Chetniks, and occupational forces had raged and rampaged one after the other, more and more desperate people joined the people’s liberation army, first and foremost the persecuted Serbs. With the slogan “Brotherhood and Unity” (bratstvo i jedinstvo), Tito overcame the initial reservations of some of those Croats and Muslims who had originally felt drawn to the nationalist parties and had distrusted the communists. The latter, however, now promised to solve the national question at the expense of Serbian hegemony so that the emphasis of national and religious feelings became decisive for the mobilization of the rural population. The communists explained that they did not just want to liberate Yugoslavia as a state, but also each of its peoples. At the end of 1942, Tito published an article on the “National Question” in which he promised: “The struggle for the peoples’ liberation and the national question in Yugoslavia are inseparably linked to one another. . . . The term peoples’ liberation struggle would only be an empty phrase, even deceit, if it would not . . . also have its own national meaning for every people, if it would not only mean the liberation of Yugoslavia but at the same time also the liberation of the Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Macedonians, Albanians, Muslims, etc.”

The peoples’ liberation struggle presented itself as a national emancipatory movement for everyone and every nation and nationality. Eventually a large segment of the non-Serb peasantry became convinced of this.

In early November 1942, the partisans captured the western Bosnian town of Bihać, formerly a Ustasha bastion, after a hard fight. From this victory emerged a large contiguous territory in the heart of Independent State of Croatia in western Bosnia, Dalmatia, and Lika. Roughly two million people inhabited this territory, now known as the Bihać Republic. In this new republic, the first all-Yugoslav assembly was held on 26–27 November 1942, attended by delegates from the various parts of the country, specifically the Antifascist Council of the Peoples’ Liberation Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) with its national committees from Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tito still did not dare to declare the founding of a new government, but the cornerstone for a socialist Yugoslavia had been laid.

**1943: The Turning Point**

In the fall of 1942, the military tide turned against Germany worldwide. In Africa, British and American troops were victorious, and the Western powers were preparing for the invasion of Sicily. All at once, the partisans in the Balkans played a key role as a potential partner for the Allies. In early 1943,
there was more and more evidence that the British would drop Mihailović. He had publicly declared that his main enemies were the partisans, Ustasha, and Muslims and that only the Italians were his pillar of support. A British military mission sent evidence back to London proving that the Chetniks were collaborating with the Axis and that partisan fighting power was “the most formidable.” Moreover, to switch sides would also help to establish a common line with the Soviets.  

Hitler undertook one more futile attempt to ward off his military defeat in the Balkans. He transferred the command of all Serbian and Croatian units to the supreme commander of the southeast and expanded the competencies of the SS in their campaign to “combat banditry.” Part of this project was to create national volunteer divisions in the occupied and allied lands to fight alongside the Waffen SS. In addition to the notorious “Prinz Eugen” Division of ethnic Germans, they formed the Muslim division Handžar (saber) in March 1943 and the Kosovo-Albanian Skanderbeg in March 1944.  

Hitler ordered his generals to be “brutal” in their operations and to discard all “European inhibitions.” German troops liquidated insurgents and anyone considered suspicious, plundered and torched villages, and depopulated entire tracts of the countryside in order “to drain the swamp.” Ahead of events, the Wehrmacht High Command had ensured its soldiers immunity for any criminal action “also against women and children.” With time, the German military leadership was reluctantly forced to admit that the arbitrary terror perpetrated against the civilian population tended to spark more resistance than to smother it.  

On 20 January 1943, the Wehrmacht launched “Operation White” to eradicate resistance once and for all. Unceasing air, tank, and artillery attacks were supposed to drive the partisans into the murderous clutches of the Italians and Chetniks and then thoroughly annihilate them. The German offensive, in which the Prinz Eugen Division took part, put Tito’s troops in an utterly hopeless situation. Thousands of wounded needed to be rescued from the enemy’s revenge. Despite ice and snow, more than 100,000 refugees set out on a march in which they found burned-down villages but no shelter. Tito sent a telegram to Moscow: “Am obliged once again to ask you if it is really quite impossible to send us some sort of assistance? Hundreds of thousands of refugees are menaced by death from starvation.” But even twenty months into the war, not even a token of support was in sight.  

Josip Broz, whom his fellow partisans endearingly called stari (in effect, “old man” or “father”), engendered even in his toughest political opponents a bit of awestruck admiration. Over fifty years old, Tito possessed legendary leadership qualities and radiated self-confidence, determination, and natural authority. “He gave an impression of great strength held in reserve, the impression of a tiger ready to spring,” reported the British liaison officer Fitzroy.
Maclean in 1943 from Tito’s headquarters. “He was unusually ready to discuss any question on its merits and to take a decision there and then, without reference to a higher authority. He seemed perfectly sure of himself; he was a principal, not a subordinate.”

Maybe Tito lacked the talent to be a great field marshal, but he was able to inspire his troops time and again and to lead them into the offensive by way of dubious military maneuvers. Despite enormous losses during the German offensive of early 1943, the Proletarian Brigades broke through the enemy circumvallation, finally defeated the Chetniks allied with the Italians in the Battle of the Neretva, and saved thousands of wounded and masses of peasants seeking protection before advancing subsequently to Montenegro. In the following German-Italian offensive “Operation Black” in May, the partisans also suffered massive losses. As many as 7,500 fighters, nearly a third of their troops, and over 1,300 wounded and sick, were wiped out in the Battle of the Sutjeska. Yet once again the partisans succeeded in escaping the enemy’s clutches and the ranks filled with new volunteers. Even local alliances between Germans, Italians, Ustasha, and Chetniks were no longer in a position to turn the tide.

With each military victory, Tito’s stature grew. All power became concentrated in him. He was the head of the CPY, commander-in-chief of the army, and chairman of the government-like AVNOJ. Many people projected their hopes on him, and partisans were finding more and more backing in Croatia. “Hardly a village, hardly a wooded area, hardly a train trip that they [the Wehrmacht] do not become the victim of some larger or smaller measure of treacherous attack,” noted General Glaise von Horstenau in his diary. The German general Rudolf Lüters had to admit in July 1943: “The view that the German Wehrmacht serves in a friendly country [Croatia] is long obsolete. The majority of the population support the insurgents.”

Italy’s surrender in September 1943 brought the final military breakthrough. Large arsenals of weapons and munition fell into partisan hands. The insurgency had now engulfed Dalmatia and Montenegro, and victory was in sight. In 1943, the People’s Liberation Army numbered over 300,000 men and women, and the ranks kept swelling. At the start of the war Germany had only had 30,000 soldiers in the Balkans; by 1943/1944 the force had grown to include 18 divisions with 250,000 men in place to control the growing resistance.

From 29 to 30 November 1943, Tito convened the second meeting of the AVNOJ in the central Bosnian town of Jajce. The 142 delegates from all parts of the country declared the body to be the country’s highest legislative and executive authority. The only delegates who could not make it were those from Macedonia; combat activity had blocked their trip to Bosnia. The council
decided to restructure Yugoslavia as a socialist federal state of constituent peoples and republics with equal rights. The parts of Slovenia and Croatia that had been lost in 1918 were to be handed back to the new Yugoslavia. The council forbade King Peter II to return and announced that war crimes would be prosecuted. Tito was awarded the honorary title of marshal. The Allies had signaled beforehand that they would officially recognize the partisans as allies. At the time, on 30 November to be exact, they too were meeting at a summit in Tehran. They were also of the opinion that Yugoslavia should be revived as a state, although the question of the eventual political order and the western border to Italy were left open for a while.

In May 1944, as the Allies prepared for the landing in Normandy, the Wehrmacht started its seventh and last offensive, known as “Rösselsprung” (a chess term for a knight’s move), this time with the objective being to capture Tito himself, dead or alive. At the very last minute, the partisan leader was able to escape the paratrooper attack on his hideout in a Bosnian cave. The British brought him and his staff to safety on the Adriatic island of Vis. From here he laid the tracks for his later takeover of power.