9.
The 1940s: Total War

If we are to understand why the partisans became so strong and the communists could later assume power, then it is imperative to view developments against the backdrop of the total war that Yugoslavia experienced. Inherent in this conflict were dimensions of an exploitative, racial, and civil war, a war that caused human tragedies and societal upheavals to an unimagined degree. Occupation, exploitation, terror against civilians, “ethnic cleansing,” persecution, and mass annihilation caused people to experience existential threat on a daily basis, which in turn rocked the foundations of institutions, social class, identity, roles, and hierarchies. All established values and moral categories were toppled. In this way the war became a laboratory for social utopias and an accelerator for a new revolutionary order. It bundled all those forces of social change that had been forging ahead since the turn of the century, if nothing else than by grinding away at the rotten fundament of the old political system.

Economic and Social Tremors
Back on 16 April 1941, Hitler ordered that the “economic prerogatives” and export quotas in Yugoslavia and Greece were to be secured for the Reich. He forced his allies to hand over resources that were vital to the German war effort. The Bulgarians had to relinquish ore and chrome mines, the Hungarians oilfields. Even Italy was bullied into delivering bauxite from Dalmatia, iron ore from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and lead and zinc from Kosovo. In order to exploit the occupied countries, German authorities resorted to every means imaginable. Reich Finance Minister Schwerin von Krosigk explained that the objective was to “extract the maximum of economic advantage from these countries.” Between June 1941 and July 1944, Croatia and Serbia were forced to deliver industrial goods to Germany valued at 328.4 million and 91.2 million reichsmarks, respectively.

The plenipotentiary for economic affairs in Serbia, Franz Neuhausen, organized the entire economy to coordinate with the German four-year plan. Infrastructure, mining, and plants relevant for armament were placed under
his supervision. Gold and securities from the vault of the Serbian national bank disappeared into the German treasury. In Croatia, Berlin used bilateral government committees and treaties to secure a monopoly on exploiting mineral deposits like antimony, copper, lead, zinc, bauxite, and iron ore. Labor was also exported: 200,000 workers from Croatia and 200,000 from Serbia were deported to the Reich, sometimes voluntarily, usually under force.

Tens of thousands were also forced to work in factories and mines in their home countries. At the end of 1941, the Nedić government introduced compulsory labor duty for every person between the ages of 17 and 45. The authorities resorted to drastic measures in order to compile the workforce needed for mining and other war-relevant activities. In 1943, this workforce numbered 40,000 and included compulsory laborers, refugees, political prisoners, and prisoners of war. In the mines and prison camps, “naked and barefoot people in rags” worked to the point of exhaustion, constantly undernourished and tormented by guards.

Parallel to this, agriculture was also being aligned to the needs of the Reich. Newly created economic offices issued “target quotas” and strict rules on levying feed and industrial crops, sunflowers and seed, vegetables and grain. To the frustration of the authorities, peasants were very creative in finding ways to use, hide, or sell their produce on the black market. They did so because anyone who indeed turned over the demanded quota soon found themselves starving. Should the quota be filled, this left only 57 kilograms of wheat per year to each Serb, while the normal bread consumption demanded four times as much on average. Only in the Banat, the region controlled by ethnic Germans, were the occupational authorities more successful in the “battle for production.” In the first three years of the war, this region sent 900,000 tons of wheat, corn, sunflower seeds, and other produce, as well as 305,000 pigs to the Reich.

To top it off, the occupied lands were also required to finance the Wehrmacht and the occupation administration. For this purpose, Serbia spent well over 1.5 billion reichsmarks and Croatia more than a billion. In both countries this resulted in a horrendous devaluation of their currency. In Croatia, prices climbed until 1944 from 2,500 to 3,000 percent over the prewar level. On the black market, the figure was more than 9,000 percent. In Serbia, the costs of living rose by more than 2,700 percent between mid-1941 and the end of 1943. At the same time, real wages sank by more than half. This explains why Yugoslavs had lost about four-fifths of their income by the end of the war.

The devastating impact of the war economy brought the social pyramid crashing to the ground. Galloping inflation caused a gigantic destruction of business values and leveled class and status differences. While peasants were freed of their debts overnight, the middle classes became poor because the
value of their wages, pensions, and savings melted away. The former advantage of urban life over rural life now turned into a disadvantage. To secure food, city dwellers had to swap or sell everything they owned. Gold and jewelry, furniture and clothing now changed hands for a song.

In the poorer regions, namely in Dalmatia, Lika, and Herzegovina, starvation occurred in the very first war winter of 1941. Likewise, in the Serbian province “the population [was] . . . especially preoccupied with the concern to secure food, which is almost all gone. What the occupier has failed to plunder and ship to Germany is hidden by unscrupulous retailers or sold only at astronomical prices.”

Despite it all, cultural life in Zagreb and Belgrade continued. Theater productions, exhibitions, literature readings, variety shows, concerts, and sport events were all subject to strict censure, as were radio broadcasts and printed press publications. Movie theaters primarily featured German films like Baron Münchhausen, and from the printing presses came Nazi propaganda publications and works by authors sympathetic to the cause, like the Swedish geographer Sven Hedin. All in all, the situation was desolate. “No one ever leaves the house. We don’t light the oven, and there is no electricity during the day. . . . Meals are bad, there is no meat. . . . No one knows from what direction they will be hit next. One lives from one day to the next.”

In the provincial areas, daily life was even grimmer. For example, in Užice “bleakness and tension prevailed: the shops were empty, the market deserted; only the tailor shops and bakeries that worked for the army were very busy. The streets and the small parks were neglected, the shop windows dirty. All that was to be seen was misery and decay. In the streets, only a few people . . . shabbily dressed.”

Those who had not been conscripted into the army or had not gone underground to fight in the resistance either sat at home or hung out at the village pub. But soon even that was no longer permitted. In early March 1942, the Serbian minister for domestic affairs prohibited youth from spending their time by taking the traditional stroll, sauntering down streets and through squares, even going to pubs.

Resignation and despair, apathy and fatalism spread particularly in places where there was constant fighting. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, people lived practically in a permanent state of psychological duress. When the partisans invaded eastern Bosnia in early 1942, they were met by eerie creatures: “Their faces expressed dull and inhuman indifference . . . all were dressed in rags and old stuff, their faces were yellow and haggard.”

In spite of harsh sanctions, the exploitative strategy was only successful to a degree. For one thing, the authorities no longer had access to an ever-increasing number of “liberated areas.” In 1943, they managed only to
secure barely a fourth of the harvest in Croatia. For another, industry did not produce the amount they expected. By dismembering Yugoslavia, the authorities also fragmented a functioning economic space and its division of labor, created small economic entities, and severed transregional chains of procurement and production. Given the starvation, shortages of manpower and fuel, and the constant attacks by the partisans, economic performance fell off sharply. In many sectors, Serbian production had already sunk by half by 1942; in Croatia, 80 percent of industrial capacity was out of service in 1944.

“Ethnic Cleansing”
As this first Yugoslavia perished, so too did the ideology of an integrated South Slavic state. In its place arose separate ethnic and sometimes even racist concepts of identity that resorted to the idea of the cultural nation—a community linked by origin, history, language, and religion. In all parts of the country, nationalists implemented ruthless policies of assimilation, resettlement, and in some cases annihilation in order to remove those population groups they deemed undesirable. Since the early nineteenth century and certainly after the two Balkan Wars in 1912/1913, ethnically heterogeneous regions were “cleansed” of minority populations when empires broke apart or institutions failed, as was now occurring in occupied Yugoslavia. Creating ethnically exclusive nation states also aimed at destroying potential opponents—a typical motive also in later “ethnic cleansing.” Millions of people now discovered that their fate was dependent solely on the purely accidental ascription of the “right” or the “wrong” nationality.

The Croat Ustasha government was driven by a complex mélange of anti-Serb sentiments and fascist ideology, old cravings for revenge and new enemy images, coupled with specific military, economic, and political interests. Their overriding obsession was to drive the Serbs out of the regions northwest of the Drina and Sava rivers, those regions that the Turks had conquered in the fifteenth century. Only as a result of missionary work and religious conversion as well as the colonization policy of the Habsburgs in the eighteenth century had Serb settlements of any importance emerged in Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. The objective of the Croat fascists was to restore the original ethnic state as they presumed it had existed in the period prior to the Ottoman conquest.

The Ustasha regime did not have a strong following, charismatic leadership, or any other form of legitimacy to govern. Against this background, their radical anti-Serb sentiment became their “raison d’être and ceterum censeo,” as one of their protagonists, Slavko Kvaternik, wrote. There were three reasons for this. First, the strong Serb presence contradicted their utopia of a homogeneous Greater Croatian nation state. Second, revenge needed to be
taken for the years of Serb hegemony, which was to be prevented from ever occurring again. Third, the elimination of the “eternal enemy” helped the Croat fascists justify their own rule and implement it locally. In a speech he gave on 2 May 1941, Minister Milovan Žanić declared: “This must be the land of the Croats, and no one else. No means exists that we, the Ustasha, will not use to make this land truly Croatian and to cleanse it of Serbs, who have long threatened us for centuries.”

In order to homogenize the Greater Croatian state, the authorities implemented ruthless policies of assimilation, displacement, and annihilation. They banned Serb organizations and the Cyrillic alphabet and “cleaned up” the Croatian language. Immediately after assuming power, they started mass expulsions. The first to be deported were the Serb colonists, who had received land in the course of the agrarian reform in 1919 that they now had to give up without any compensation. They were forced to leave for Serbia. The next ordered to leave were politically active individuals and clergy. Police woke up these people in the middle of the night, took away their house keys and valuables, and put them on a train headed for Serbia. Out of fear of reprisals, thousands of people then fled the country by foot and empty-handed, without cash or provisions. By the end of September 1941, nearly 120,000 Serbs had left the country, and a year later the number had risen to 200,000.

Besides discrimination and segregation, Serbs were the victim also of physical annihilation. The larger massacres of Serbs since April 1941 are documented as having taken place in Bosnian Krajina, in Bihać, Cazin, Bosanska Krupa, Prijedor, Sanski Most, and Ključ, then also in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example in Zvornik, Višegrad, Bijeljina, Sarajevo, Foča, and Goražde. It was quite obvious that the aim was to create homogeneous Croat areas in the regions bordering Serbia and Montenegro. From up to 330,000 Serbs killed in the four years of the war, 217,000 fell victim to the systematic persecution during killing sprees in villages, cities, and throughout the countryside, as well as in prisons and camps.

The events of 1941 in western and central Bosnia illustrate the way in which the spiral of violence and counterviolence began. Following the Ustasha movement’s seizure of power, measures to disenfranchise and persecute Serbs were implemented in rapid succession: on 17 April, a ban of the Cyrillic alphabet; 23 April, the expulsion of all those born in Serbia and Montenegro; 25 April, the annulment of mixed marriages; 4 May, hostage taking and the first killing sprees, plundering, and terror. The fear of further attacks prompted Serbs to organize local militias. On 7 May near Sanski Most, a group of about 1,000 peasants armed with hayforks and shovels drove off a troop of Croatian and German soldiers. In reprisal, the Wehrmacht advanced with heavy artillery, shelled the nest of resistance to smithereens, and shot numerous hostages.
On 27 May, Serbs and Jews were prohibited from using public transportation and baths. On 5 June came the order to gather all those fit for work in camps, and on 10 and 11 June the order to deport entire families on a massive scale to Serbia. The growing resistance at the local level, inspired by Tito’s beacon of hope regarding the people’s liberation, is what finally broke the dam: on 23 July, all remaining Serbs were required to be registered, and thousands were brutally murdered with axes, knives, clubs, and other archaic methods of killing.  

Under Ustasha rule, the extreme right—similar to what occurred in Spain—entered an unholy alliance with Catholicism. Serbs and Croats spoke the same dialects, so that religion was the only remaining objective marker of distinction and paramount ethnic identification. Therefore, the representatives of the Orthodox Church, meaning the bishops, metropolitans, monks, and priests, were subject to particular fury. The Ustasha forces had hundreds of churches deliberately destroyed, monasteries plundered and sacked to their foundations, and church property expropriated. The Serbian Orthodox religion was renamed “Greek Eastern.” Approximately 250,000 Orthodox were forced to convert to Catholicism. In order to cut the spiritual, emotional, and nationalist ties to Serbia, the Croatian government established a new, state-supervised Croatian Orthodox Church in April 1942; however, with little success.

Even today, the role of the Catholic Church and its leader, Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, is highly controversial. Nationalist-oriented clergy sympathized or even cooperated with the Ustasha regime, because they lauded the Croat nation and fought the communists. Stepinac was probably not a committed fascist, but he was certainly also not a decisive opponent of the new regime. In honor of the Independent State of Croatia, he had a Te Deum read in all churches in early May 1941 and had himself appointed to the post of head military vicar in Croatia. The state was the fulfilment of a “centuries-old and ardently desired dream”; it was “no longer the tongue . . . but the blood” that was speaking, he announced in a circular memorandum in April 1941. The Vatican, which was informed about what was happening in Croatia, withheld its criticism. The Catholic press praised the Ustasha, and far more than a few clerics welcomed and supported the policy of forced conversion to Catholicism. One of them was Frater Vlado Bilobrk from Metković, who said in a sermon: “Everyone must convert to the Catholic faith because no other religion has a justified existence and no one will remain alive who has not accepted the Catholic faith.”

Just as the Ustasha regime propagated an ethnically “pure” Greater Croatia, the Serb Chetniks boasted about Greater Serbia. Draža Mihailović relied on Stevan Moljević’s memorandum of June 1941 titled “Homogeneous Serbia,” which he claimed included northern Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina,
Dalmatia, and large sections of Croatia. Had this absurd plan been implemented, more than four million people would have been resettled and expelled. With the political program they presented in September 1941, the Chetniks announced preparations in the “Serb countries” to ensure “that only the Serb population remains in them.” To do this it would be necessary “to have an eye particularly on the rapid and radical cleansing of the cities . . . [and] to develop a plan to cleanse and deport the rural population.” Moreover, it was also time “to solve the question of the Muslims as much as possible in this phase.”

Mihailović was even clearer about what he meant on 20 December 1941: he issued the directive “to cleanse [the national territory] of all national minorities and anational elements.” Muslims and Croats were also to be removed from Sandžak, Bosnia, and Croatia (up to the Karlovac-Knin-Šibenik line).

“Ethnic cleansing” was also undertaken by the Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Albanians, and Bulgarians for the purpose of better incorporating annexed territory. The most extensive plans were drawn up by Hitler, who intended to transform all of Europe along racial lines. In a speech given in the Reichstag on 6 October 1939, he had announced the “ethnic consolidation” (völkische Flurbereinigung) of East and Southeast Europe; as the Reich commissar responsible for “German Nationhood,” Heinrich Himmler had designed a comprehensive European “master settlement plan” (Gesamtsiedlungsplanung). The Balkan countries were also to provide several pieces to the overall mosaic of the “Greater Germanic Reich” that was to be created by systematically murdering Jews and gypsies, “Germanizing” annexed territory, and resettling millions of ethnic Germans.

Much like the Poles living under the General Government in the German zone of occupation, the Slovenes in the annexed regions of Lower Styria, southern Carinthia, and Upper Carniola were viewed “basically as enemies of the state.” The entire population was racially profiled and “Germanized.” More than 220,000 Slovenes, primarily representatives of the clergy, intelligentsia, and economic elite, were to be “deported” and their property confiscated. Slovene organizations, press, and schools were forbidden. As early as 1941, authorities deported about 40,000 men and women to Croatia and Serbia, and another 33,000 were taken to camps as part of the campaign to “re-Germanize” the area. Ethnic Germans were then “appointed” to their farms. Within the framework of the “master settlement plan” for all of Europe designed in May and June of 1942, the SS sent another 43,000 ethnic Germans from Bosnia, Syrmia, and Slavonia into the Reich, put them through the official “sluicing” procedure (Durchschleusung), and later resettled them in Poland and Galicia.

In Trieste, Gorizia, and Istria—those areas that Italy had acquired in 1920—a strict policy of assimilation had existed already before the war.
Mussolini considered the Slavic population to be an “inferior, barbaric race” that should be cast out of the region.\textsuperscript{33} Slovene and Croat personal names and city names were Italianized, while libraries, press publications, and societies were closed. It was forbidden to speak “Slavic” on the street. In the 1920s and 1930s, fascist authorities had already developed plans for the “ethnic cleansing” (\textit{bonifica nazionale}) of the border regions. They now put these plans into practice “with great rigor,” in part by organizing mass deportations. Authorities interned 30,000 men, women, and children under inhumane conditions in concentration camps, such as those in Gonars and on the island of Rab. Ownership of their homes and landholdings was then transferred to the families of Italian soldiers.\textsuperscript{34} In occupied Dalmatia and in Montenegro, the Italian army played a rather ambivalent role in that, on the one hand, it furthered the \textit{Italianità}, while on the other, it offered protection at the same time to thousands of Serbs escaping Ustasha units running amok and in some cases even took military steps to put the Croat militias in their place.\textsuperscript{35}

The southern regions of the former Yugoslavia also witnessed “ethnic cleansing.” In Italian-controlled Kosovo and in western Macedonia, Albanians drove out the indigenous Serbs and Montenegrins, burned down their houses, and destroyed historically important churches and monasteries. After King Vittorio Emmanuele decreed the annexation of these areas to Albania, of which he had also been king since 1939, a policy of Albaniazation and colonization was methodically carried out.\textsuperscript{36} For its part, eastern Macedonia was subject to a radical policy of Bulgarianization. More than 110,000 Serbs were forced to leave the country, and their property was confiscated. Bulgarian authorities closed schools and libraries, and destroyed cultural facilities, archives, cemeteries, and churches. Everything Serbian and Macedonian had to disappear, be it names, language, or national symbols; repression and despotism prevailed.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Mass Atrocities and the Dynamics of Violence}

Hostage shootings and reprisals, “ethnic cleansing,” and mass killings threatened a large segment of society. Everyone could feel the omnipresent violence, and the longer the war continued, the more brutal, deadening, and barbaric everything became. Against this background, traditional religious cohabitation, cosmopolitan culture, and civic consciousness were deeply challenged. This was evident in multiethnic Sarajevo and many other places.\textsuperscript{38} Fear, insecurity, onslaught, and killings created feelings of revenge and paranoia that prompted ordinary people to participate in collective violence. Sometimes economic and interpersonal conflicts or simple greed drove some neighbors to attack each other along ethnic lines. Contingent events and
specific instances of violence could thus crystalize and transform senses of collective identity that would result in ethnic conflict.39

Most people experienced the war as a rolling barrage that descended upon them unexpectedly and with great force. In many regions, nationalist sentiments may well have existed before the war, and in several others, like eastern Herzegovina, even open conflict. However, a fundamentally anti-Serb, anti-Croat, or anti-Muslim consensus did not exist. Neither regionally specific cultural traditions nor the nebulous category of self-perpetuating mass violence can explain the atrocities. As in every society, South Slavic popular culture did include traditions glorifying war and violence as expressed in gory folk epics, the cult of knives, or patriarchal imprinting. Yet, it is no more than popular legend that Serbs, Croats, and Muslims always hated each other and that the “Balkan ghosts” were only waiting for a signal to perpetrate genocide.40

“Ethnic cleansing” and mass atrocities did not occur spontaneously; they were ordered. In Serb-inhabited communities, the Croatian government installed loyal authorities who could be counted on to implement the homogenization program. For example, in May 1941, the Franciscan priest Velimir Šimić appeared in Knin to inform the appalled commander of the Italian troops of the new political line: “Kill all the Serbs in the shortest possible time.”41 As the new prefect, Ante Nikolić arrived in the company of Ustasha commander Juraj (Juco) Rukavina, one of the leaders of the failed uprising in Lika in 1932. Their mission was to form an ideologically indoctrinated, terror-trained militia and to carry out “acts of revenge.”42 Among other things, Ustasha troops were infamous for loading their victims in trucks and transporting them into the mountains, beating them with axes and wooden hammers, stabbing them with knives and daggers, or throwing them down canyons alive.43

Later, once the civil war was raging in full, special forces, militias, and paramilitary units also played a key role in atrocities. When a village was to be taken, troops schooled in terror were first sent in. Massacres helped intimidate the unwanted and potentially resistant population groups and sent them fleeing elsewhere. This is what happened not only when the new Ustasha ruler “cleansed” Herzegovina in the spring of 1941, but also when the Serb Chetniks overran eastern Bosnia in early 1942.44 There were always people who joined the rampages, be it out of opportunism, social pressure, jealousy, or greed. Witnesses reported time and again seeing peasants from the neighborhood stuffing their pockets during the plundering. A similar scenario occurred yet again in the 1990s. Targeted pogroms are the most effective means to throw a multiethnic society, regardless of how well it may function, out of kilter.

By the summer of 1941 at the latest, revenge was also playing a role. In eastern Bosnia, where Croat and Muslim Ustasha militias had murdered
hundreds of Serb families and burned down their homes that summer, Serb Chetniks launched a counterattack in the following winter. The reaction to the Greater Croatian racial craze took an open “anti-Turkish” turn. Thousands of Muslims in Foča, Goražde, Vlasenica, Srebrenica, and many other places became the victims of massacres. Men, women, and children fled to the cities in an attempt to save themselves from the terror. By the end of 1943, more than 230,000 people had abandoned their homes. “The tragedies taking place among these masses are not something any person can immediately describe,” reported a member of the SS.45 Refugees were vegetating away by the hundreds in warehouses, sheds, stalls, and basements, without food or light.

The Chetniks were certainly no less barbaric than the Ustasha regime. People were treated ruthlessly. Men had their throats cut or were stabbed or impaled. Derviš Bačević was a man from Foča who, against all odds, escaped massacre. In early February 1942, he reported how a group of Chetniks, whom he knew by name, tied him up in his home and then led him and other men to a railroad bridge. “One of the Chetnik thieves got down on his knees and held a large knife in his left hand. Every victim had to place himself under the knife. . . . Every slaughtered victim was searched, robbed . . . and then kicked into the Drina.”46 Hundreds of bodies, some of them chained together, floated down the rivers as testimony to the terror. The permanent threat of violence became an effective resource of power because it acted as both deterrent and intimidation. Whoever stabbed people with a knife, dagger, or stiletto handled their victims no better than animals, which magnified the humiliation and horror felt by the civilian population. The scenes these hangmen staged resembled human sacrifice and invoked sacral symbolic acts.47

In ethnically homogeneous Serbia and Montenegro, the wrath of the fanatic Chetniks focused on the political enemy. They drew up death lists so that their trained killers from the “Black Troika” could wipe out entire families. The commander of the Majevica Corps, for example, ordered the ruthless elimination of all those who sympathized with the communists. “Everything that has to be killed—kill it, that has to be set afire—set afire, that has to be plundered to the benefit of the Chetniks—plunder.”48 Nor were they any less cruel toward dissenters or traitors from their own ranks. Any person who broke the rules was liquidated immediately. Even Mihailović’s rival, Kosta Pećanac, became the victim of a clandestine murder.49

A report from eastern Bosnia, written by the commander in charge on 13 February 1943, for Draža Mihailović proved the systematic implementation of the “cleansing.” “All Muslim villages . . . were completely burned down, so that not a single house remained intact. All property was destroyed. . . . During the operation, we proceeded to completely annihilate the Muslim population regardless of sex and age. Victims . . . among the Muslims were about 1,200
fighters and up to 8,000 other victims: women, elderly, and children.” Entire stretches of the countryside were depopulated in this manner. The picturesque valley of Sutjeska was also eerily empty when the partisans arrived: “Charred chimneys towered over grass-covered ruins. Nowhere a living soul. Here and there lay a broken barrel, a battered pot, or an old cup . . . not a living soul, not a single person, with whom one could talk.”

As in many other situations of persecution, it is surprising the degree to which potential victims repressed and denied what was going on and sat quietly in their houses awaiting their fate. Those who survived reported that they had placed their faith in law and order, that later they had hoped—in fact, firmly believed—that aggression toward them could be diverted through conformism, even religious conversion and name changes. This was a dangerous mistake. Suddenly all certainty of an orderly coexistence vanished. Countless people were left defenseless against the unpredictability of terror and tyranny.

The insecurity grew because power changed hands time and again, leaving no one safe from revenge. In June 1942, the military maps of the Bosnian Krajina region, to cite one example, showed a confusing mosaic of competing rule. Half of the territory was occupied by the partisans, interspersed with German-, Italian-, and Croat-held areas. Another four regions were controlled by rival Chetnik leaders. During the four and a half years of war, the small Montenegrin town of Kolašin experienced nineteen changes of power, the east Bosnian town of Foča, twenty-seven. It was here that the partisans discovered in 1942 the owner of a small shop who “kept several flags under his counter: a German flag, an Italian flag, and a Yugoslav flag with a star. Whenever he heard fighting going on around the town at night, he would listen intently and then pull out the appropriate flag.” The poor man was eventually shot by the Italians for being a communist.

As in every civil war, some who participated in the nationalistic murder sprees and revenge orgies were fanatic nationalists and sadists who acted out of a pure passion for torment and killing. Others seized the opportunity to take personal revenge on a neighbor or settle a long-standing communal conflict. However, moderate Croats and Muslims rejected the Ustasha atrocities, if for no other reason than the very justified fear of revenge. In a protest petition dated 2 December 1941, seventy Muslim notables from Bijeljina presented their view that the violence against Orthodox believers contradicted the prevailing concepts of morality, well-tested rules on coexistence, and the healthy tradition of religious tolerance. Authorities also received complaints from Prijedor, Banja Luka, and Sarajevo. Many sources tell how Croats, Serbs, and Muslims helped each other to safety when terror threatened. The fact that hundreds of thousands joined Tito’s supranational people’s liberation movement during the course of the war is indeed the best proof that within the population neither blind hate nor the desire for systematic annihilation dominated.
Tradition and Transformation

Since the beginning of the war, the communists worked determinedly to bring about a system change. The popular liberation struggle was the vehicle and the basis for legitimizing a socialist revolution that would transform Yugoslavia into an egalitarian, free workers’ and peasants’ state and would guarantee the CPY absolute rule. The heart of the new order was the so-called People’s Committees, which temporarily assumed the role of state bodies in place of the earlier bureaucracy. In the “liberated areas” they issued regulations, organized supplies, and expropriated landholdings and possessions to distribute among the local peasantry. The communists thus resorted to a simple means by which to gain the support of the land-hungry peasantry and at the same time create irreversible facts with regard to the later social and political systems.57

The People’s Committees also took control of all other facets of public life. People’s courts made short shrift of alleged traitors, spies, and saboteurs. Dissenters, deserters, and collaborators were ruthlessly liquidated after they had been sentenced in mass trials.58 However, at the same time the partisans opened theaters and ballet companies, printed newspapers, and started up postal delivery and telephone connections. In Foča they even helped put on partisan Olympic Games.59

In February 1942, Edvard Kardelj drew up a complex set of rules, known as the “Regulations of Foča,” for these temporary administrative bodies. That summer it was eventually decided to establish the Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia as an overarching political body, a quasi-government, to coordinate the work of the local committees. In November 1942, the first meeting of this council took place, and a year later the AVNOJ was established in Jajce as the highest executive body. It was also decided that Yugoslavia would be reestablished as a socialist federal state.

The communists filled all important positions with their supporters, usually peasants, which is why the takeover of power marked not only a new start politically, but also initiated an immense social mobilization. By the end of 1943, approximately 12,000 people’s committees existed at the local level with over 120,000 elected members. The new bodies used very simple means to do their work, because very few of the new functionaries could read and write. These provisional institutions were therefore the genesis of a loyal, Yugoslav-oriented political class that would become an important pillar of support for the new system in the immediate postwar decades.60

Yet even then, opinions differed throughout the country on what was the correct policy. For example, the “Liberation Front of the Slovene Nation” installed a Central Economic Commission, regulated the bank lending system in 1943/1944, reformed taxes and pricing practices, and issued a new currency. The economic and financial system established there became the model for all of the other partisan areas and later for Yugoslavia as a whole.
However, it later became apparent that the modern Slovenian model was very difficult to implement in the poorer regions. The area around the eastern Bosnian city of Foča was plagued by starvation, refugee plight, and a shortage of land, which prompted those in charge to resort to a rigid steering policy. In other words, the seed of what would later become a perpetual conflict over the direction of economic policy between the developed north and the underdeveloped south began to take root during the war.61

Contrary to all other parties, the communists explicitly campaigned for women’s issues and granted women active and passive electoral suffrage for the first time in the fall of 1942. Although the party leadership had initially seen the role of women primarily in the procurement and maintenance of weapons and medication, sabotage, propaganda, and messenger duties, by 1942 women were allowed to be combat medics, doctors, and soldiers in the army. Military service gave about 100,000 women fighters social recognition and more rights.62

The body most important for the creation of a new order was the People’s Liberation Army, the “revolutionary educator for the masses,” as Tito’s fellow collaborator Moša Pijade expressed it.63 No institution of socialist Yugoslavia epitomized the ideal of “brotherhood and unity” in such a pure form as did this multinational volunteer army. During the entire course of the People’s Liberation Struggle, the force was made up of 53 percent Serbs, 18.6 percent Croats, 9.2 percent Slovenes, 5.5 percent Montenegrins, 3.5 percent Bosnian Muslims, 2.7 percent Macedonians, and the remaining compilation of Albanians, Hungarians, “Yugoslavs,” and other ethnic groups.64 After Belgrade was taken in the fall of 1944, the partisans began to mobilize all men between the ages of 17 and 50 for the People’s Liberation Army, adding another 250,000 soldiers by the end of the war. All enemy soldiers were encouraged to desert to the partisan side and were granted amnesty as long as they had not committed any war crimes. By May 1945, the army had 800,000 men and women in arms.65

The army served not only as the armed force of the party, but also as the earliest and most important instrument in socializing the populace of the future socialist state. During their military service, soldiers learned how to read and write. They were instructed in Marxist political economy and socialist-patriotic values. In addition to the ideological indoctrination, shared events, experiences, and emotions shaped new identities. Military rituals such as flag presentations and brigade baptisms created a unique popular and revolutionary partisan culture. Elements of folklore were incorporated, such as the peasant circle dance kolo, popular throughout the South Slavic region. Partisans read the poems written by great national writers, sang battle songs, and printed calendars that listed the new holidays created during the war. After
the war, the song “Comrade Tito, we swear to you, from your path we will never depart!” referred to the time of the partisan struggle.66

Yugoslavia was the second country in Europe, after the Soviet Union, in which communism came to power of its own accord. In both countries, it would never have been possible without the war. However, this was not due to strategic mistakes made by the German high command of the militarily far superior Wehrmacht, to the partisans’ better knowledge of the lay of the land, to the Croats’ incompetence and loss of reputation, or to the failure of the allied Italians.67 It was the illegitimacy of the occupation itself that mobilized a major part of the population. Economic plight, the rule of terror, and the omnifarious and omnipresent experience with violence destroyed in a very short period of time nearly everything that had once constituted traditional society, leaving the political, social, economic, and psychological foundations of the old order in irrevocable ruins. The war accelerated basic social changes and created approaches with which to bridge the old rifts between the urban and rural populations. Unlike the old parties, the communists were well organized politically and militarily and, most importantly, they were not compromised by their absence, as were the king and his government in exile. In this situation, the partisans promised the battered nation a magical vision of the future in that they combined in their ideology the three existential questions that had plagued the South Slavic countries for so long: resolution of the social problems of the peasants and workers, triumph over exploitation and foreign rule, and last but not least, reconciliation through “brotherhood and unity.” By the end of the war, this had led to the emergence of a truly revolutionary situation, one made possible by the total collapse of the old system and its irretrievable loss of repute, shaped by the radical upheaval of social relations, and facilitated by an international constellation pushing for change.

Burdensome Legacy
The attritional power of the war as an important prerequisite for the communist takeover is illustrated in the compilation of the damage it caused. According to official statistics provided by the Yugoslav reparations commission, more than 1.7 million people died between 1941 and 1945, which equals 11 percent of the Yugoslav population at the time. This figure is certainly greatly exaggerated. Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian scientists later calculated independently that there were about a million war dead, of whom 500,000 were Serbs, 200,000 Croats, and up to 100,000 Muslims. Today it is no longer possible for anyone to reliably estimate how many of the dead were killed in fighting, in camps, in mass executions, or by starvation, disease, and the lack of medical provisions. The experts also agree that Yugoslavia indirectly lost another million people through the lack of births, emigration,
abduction, resettlement, and dislocation. All in all, Yugoslavia lost around two million inhabitants because of the Second World War. In addition to the dead, statistics documented about 400,000 prisoners, interned persons, and forced laborers; 530,000 people deported and displaced; and 320,000 forced recruitments. According to the figures, every fourth Yugoslav must have personally experienced the inhuman consequences of the war.

The victory of the People’s Liberation Army came at an extremely high toll. About 305,000 fighters lost their lives and 425,000 were wounded. The Communist Party also paid a high price: of its original 12,000 members, about 9,000 were lost. Nor were the communists the only ones to suffer heavy losses. Their political opponents and many simple soldiers from the government’s forces also died. About 350,000 fought on that side, and many members of the Croat Ustasha, the Serb Chetniks, and the Slovenian Home Guard did not survive the war.

Those who did survive had a heavy burden to shoulder. The deaths of relatives, comrades, and neighbors and their own experiences with hunger and suffering deeply scarred their biographies and memories. The roots of many of Yugoslavia’s later problems lie in this period, because the experience of violence further reified and significantly radicalized competing ideological alternatives. Although the war came to an end, the ideological passions and feelings of revenge did not. The number of murdered, tortured, and expelled became a political issue. In the concentration camp at Jasenovac, the epitome of the fascist rule of terror, 700,000 people are said to have been killed according to official depictions. However, within Croat exile circles, people spoke of 30,000 killed; within Serb circles, up to 1.1 million. Since the communists did not later permit any impartial research into the matter, events became framed in rival cultures of memory. For one side, Jasenovac became a site for collective repression and forgetting; for the other, a ghostly location to commemorate an inflated national myth of sacrifice. Probably a total of about 200,000 people died in all of the Croatian concentration camps.