

Partisans and Chetniks in occupied Yugoslavia by
Heather Williams – A Commentary by Gaj Trifković

Being a historian of the region, I naturally welcomed the publishing of *The Routledge Handbook of Balkan and Southeast European History* in October 2020 (for more information on this edited volume see <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Balkan-and-Southeast-European-History/Lampe-Brunnbauer/p/book/9781138613089>). Whereas the vast majority of the contributions contained in the volume fall outside my area of expertise, I feel there are a number of points in Heather Williams' piece „Partisans And Chetniks in occupied Yugoslavia“ that need to be addressed in some detail. Let's start:

- **p. 392: „The Independent State of Croatia (the NDH) had already adhered to the Tripartite Pact on April 10 and withdrawn from hostilities.“**

The NDH was proclaimed on 10 April 1941; it would officially join the Tripartite Pact only on 15 June 1941.

(*Bogdan Krizman, „Pavelić između Hitlera i Musolinija“, Zagreb, Globus, 1980, p. 76*).

- **p. 393: „In Serbia, the German invasion of the USSR on June 11, combined with feelings of outrage at the suffering of fellow Orthodox Christians arriving as refugees from the NDH, produced a spontaneous rising, encouraged by the withdrawal of many German frontline divisions to the east.“**

The invasion of the USSR began on 22 June 1941.

Unlike the sudden, violent, and largely spontaneous uprisings in Montenegro and the NDH, the uprising in Serbia was a much more gradual, snowball-effect affair, set in motion by the Communists.

(*Branko Petranović, „Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu“, Belgrade, VINC, 1992, pp. 177-78*).

- **p. 393: „In late August, the Germans appointed a Serbian puppet government headed by General Milan Nedić, former Minister of War, who was allowed to establish a Serbian State Guard to ensure internal order.“**

The first Serbian collaborationist allowed to form a gendarmerie in order to ensure internal order was Milan Aćimović already in May 1941; the gendarmerie would be renamed Serbian State Guard only in March 1942.

(*Milan Borković, „Kontrarevolucija u Srbiji“, Belgrade, Sloboda, 1979, Vol. I, pp. 42, 287.*)

- **p. 393: „Arrested for distributing illegal literature in 1928 and sentenced to five years, Tito used his time in prison to extend his political reading and later referred to it as his ‘university’.“**

In fact, Tito was arrested for organizing protests about the murder of the Croat politician Stjepan Radić, as well as a general strike.

(*Geoffrey Swain, Tito: A Biography, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2011, p. 12.*)

- **p. 394: „When Stalin made it clear that he wanted action against the Axis, not social revolution, the Partisans attacked the Germans in early August.“**

There were only ca. 30,000 German army personnel stationed in occupied Serbia and the NDH in the summer of 1941, which was barely enough to secure the major urban centers and industrial objects, let alone the vast, rugged countryside. This, combined with the fear that any, even the most minute defeat at the hands of the insurgents would constitute a major propaganda blow, made the Wehrmacht command actually forbid the army from taking part in anti-guerrilla actions at one point during the early weeks of war in Serbia. For their part, poorly armed and organized as they were at the moment, the Communists and other Serbian insurgents were still wary of tackling the Wehrmacht directly. Even so, the Partisans captured their first German soldiers in Serbia already on 12 July, followed by two more a couple of weeks later, not to mention the wounding of General Lontschar of the 704th Infantry Division on the 18th.

(*Gaj Trifković, „Parleying with the Devil: Prisoner Exchange in Yugoslavia 1941-1945“, Lexington, KY, UPK, 2020, pp. 21-22; NARA/T315/2236/99, 704th ID, War Diary, 18.7.41.*)

- **p. 394: „The Partisans established headquarters in the town of Užice, where Tito joined them from Belgrade, designating the area the ‘Užice Republic’.“**

Tito left Belgrade for Užička Požega on 16-17 September 1941; he would not establish his HQ in Užice before mid-October 1941. The name „Užice Republic“ was actually concocted by the collaborationist press, not the Partisans.

(*„Sabrana djela Josipa Broza Tita“, Vol. VII, Belgrade, „Komunist“, 1982, pp. 276-77; Trifković, „Parleying“, pp. 43-44.*)

- **p. 394: „He dispersed most of his forces, sending some home and some into the ranks of Nedić’s State Guard where they could obtain arms and gather information.“**

The majority of Mihailović’s „legalized“ men became a part of the so-called „Government Chetniks“ rather than the Serbian State Guard. The Government Chetniks, together with the Guard and Ljotić’s Serbian Volunteers, constituted the triad of the Serbian collaborationist formations until early 1943.

(*Jozo Tomasevich, „War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration“, Stanford, CA: SUP, 2001, pp. 194-95).*

- **p. 395: „Tito’s goal remained a return to Serbia but in March 1942, he had to accept that for the time being he must develop his movement in Bosnia.“**

Tito moved his operations to Bosnia already in January 1942 and remained there for as long as he could, hoping the circumstances would allow the return to Serbia. However, the increasing enemy pressure, as well as the sobering realization that the USSR will not be able to defeat Germany in the foreseeable future (caused, it seems, by the Soviet defeat in the 2nd Battle of Kharkov in May 1942), made Tito look west, instead of east.

(*Trifković, „Parleying“, pp. 89-90).*

- **pp. 395-96: „Local Chetniks were joined by forces from Serbia to challenge the Partisans...“**

Apart from a few individuals, the Chetniks from Serbia never intervened in Eastern Herzegovina in 1941-42 (they did so on occasion in Eastern Bosnia).

- **p. 396: „The so-called Long March, 200 miles along the watershed between the Italian and German demarcation line, was also a watershed for the Partisan movement and would result in a transformation into a disciplined and organized force. Their route took them through areas that had seen ethnic strife but the Communist leadership was careful to distinguish between Ustaša and ordinary Croats or Muslims.“**

„The National Liberation Army (NLA) had a wider appeal than the overtly Communist Proletarian Brigades and by the end of 1942 was three times larger and growing.“

„The military leaders, many of them Spanish civil war veterans, now molded the NLA into a much more useful body than the irregular one that had left Serbia in 1941.“

The process of „regularization“ did not happen over night as suggested here, but lasted from the beginning until the end of the war. Officially, it began with the Conference at Stolice on 26-27 September 1941. The conference

established a clear chain of command (Supreme HQ -> regional, or „Main“ HQ s -> Detachment -> Battalion -> Company -> Platoon -> Squad), and regulated the questions of insignia, salute, and military oath, among other things. The second step in the process came in December 1941 with the forming of the first semi-regular unit, the 1st Proletarian Brigade; other brigades and smaller mobile units (Proletarian and Assault Battalions) followed in the period March-June 1942. By the time these mobile outfits were formally merged into divisions and corps of the People's Liberation Army, they were already fairly militarized, comparatively well-led, and decently armed light infantry units. The presence of the Spanish civil war veterans was mostly felt in the early days of the war, when the Partisan units consisted of untrained youths and Party members. Professional officers (from either the old Yugoslav or one of the Axis armies), as well as gifted amateurs who advanced through the ranks, played at least as an important role.

(Gaj Trišković, „Od 'bandita' do Jugoslovenske armije: partizanski rat 1941–1945. http://www.yuhistorija.com/serbian/drugi_sr_txt01c1.html)

- **p. 396: „In this remote area of the NDH, of no strategic value and with no Axis troops, the Partisans ousted the Ustaša administration in the town of Bihać and established the Republic of Bihać.“**

The area of Zelengora from where the Partisans started their Great March, was far more remote and desolate than their designated objective. Unlike Zelengora, Western and Central Bosnia contained several strategically important industrial objects (a chemical plant at Jajce, iron ore mines at Prijedor) and were incomparably better-off in terms of agricultural wealth. To say no Axis troops were present in the region is a gross understatement. In order to counter the expansion of the liberated territory—which ultimately covered ca. 25,000 square km – the Germans had to use two of their own divisions (out of altogether five they had in Yugoslavia minus Slovenia at the end of 1942), plus whatever NDH and Chetnik forces were available. For instance, the area of Bihać, stormed during the first half of November 1942 by eight Partisan brigades, was garrisoned by about 4,300 men, including the entire 4th Active Ustasha Brigade.

(Mladenko Colić, „Pregled operacija na jugoslovenskom ratištu 1941-1945“, *Belgrade, VII, 1988, pp. 60-66, 72-78; NARA/T314/554/289, Commander of German Troops in Croatia, Situation report 17-26.12.1942.*)

- **p. 396: „The new Croat and Muslim recruits enabled the Partisans to infiltrate the NDH administration and military in order to gain useful support and intelligence.“**

The Partisans had sympathizers in the NDH administration and military long before the capture of Bihać. The topic certainly deserves a book of its own; let's take a look at a couple of examples: in October 1941, the NDH police discovered a Domobran officer who collected weapons for the guerrillas in Petrovaradin; Partisan intelligence service in Karlovac had 15 officers and NCOs, as well as 60 privates from the local garrison working for it already in late 1941.

(„Zbornik DiPNOR-a“/I/17/15-18, *NDH Gendarmerie Petrovaradin to town commandant, October 1941*; *Milovan Dželebdžić, „Obaveštajna služba u NOR-u“*, Belgrade, VII, 1987, p. 79).

- **p. 397: „Tito and the Partisan leadership negotiated a ceasefire with the Germans while the two sides parleyed. This suited the Germans who had met stronger than anticipated opposition from the Partisans[...]The pause benefited the Partisans and allowed them to penetrate Chetnik- held territory.“**

There is simply no material evidence for the claim that the „March Negotiations“ led to the truce that Tito wanted so badly; the German „stop“ on the Neretva was caused by deteriorating relations with the Italians and the need to rest and reorganize their divisions in preparation for the spring and summer campaign.

(*Klaus Schmider, „Partisanenkrieg in Jugoslawien“*, Hamburg: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 2002, pp. 242-52; for similar conclusions, see Trifković, „Parleying“, pp. 185-91).

- **p. 397: „The Germans also offered Mihailović a ceasefire but he refused.“**
The Germans did not make any offers of this kind during the war. It was Mihailović who requested a ceasefire and German material help in order to fight the Partisans around Užice in mid-November 1941. During the Battle on the Neretva in March 1943, Mihailović's Chetniks were actually working actively together with the Axis forces, being instrumental in the relief of the important town of Konjic (German staff officers openly praised „the help of the brave Chetniks“).
- **p. 397: „Once over the river the NLA fought pitched battles with the Chetniks, forcing them from their stronghold in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina but unable to progress into Montenegro where the Chetniks had regrouped.“**

By mid-May 1943, the Partisans were in possession of large parts of northwestern and central Montenegro, with their advance guards operating as far as the outskirts of the capital, Podgorica.

(Schmider, „Partisanenkrieg“, pp. 272, 274).

- **p. 398: „Immediately after the Italian armistice, Mihailović sent out a general order to his commanders throughout Yugoslavia to attack German lines of communication and German troops.“**

Mihailović's offensive was actually limited to Serbia, Eastern Bosnia, and Sandžak; in the remainder of the country (e.g. Montenegro, Eastern Herzegovina, Dalmatia, not to mention Western Bosnia), the Chetniks were in the process of becoming German auxiliaries.

(Dejan Segić, „Četnici i kapitulacija Italije“, *Vojnoistorijski glasnik*, 1:2011, pp. 194-224; Schmider, „Partisanenkrieg“, pp. 322-25).

- **p. 398: „American OSS missions with the Partisans had become increasingly aware of the fact that the bulk of Partisan activity was directed against their domestic enemies rather than German or Ustaša forces. In fact, once the Partisans had recognition and support, they concentrated only on the civil war.“**

It is difficult to refute these claims in a concise manner, even though they have no basis in reality. Suffice it to say that more than a half of all Partisans killed during the war fell in the seventeen months between January 1944 and May 1945, precisely during the period when they enjoyed recognition and support from east and west alike. Translated into numbers, this reads ca. 105,000 out of 183,000 (the figures are derived from an internal survey made in the early 1960s; the real grand total was probably closer to 240,000). Given the rapid decline in combat capabilities of all lesser anti-communist factions, this sort of losses could have only been incurred in the fighting against the Wehrmacht. Even if one chooses to disregard the vast amount of literature and published primary sources on the subject, digitized version of the relevant German documents microfilmed by the US National Archives (most notably of the T-311 and T-314 series) had recently become widely available; they contain literally thousands of pages that paint an entirely different picture than the one presented by individual Allied observers.

(Vladimir Žerjavić, „Opsesije i megalomanije oko Jasenovca i Bleiburga. Gubici stanovništva Jugoslavije u drugom svjetskom ratu“, Zagreb, Globus, 1992, pp. 214-15; „Žrtve rata 1941-1945. Rezultati popisa“, Belgrade, SZS, 1966, pp. 52-53).

- **p. 399: „Tito had extended links to Macedonia and Kosovo and Partisans were established in Slovenia but, try as he might, Serbia eluded him: it remained largely loyal to Mihailović and King Petar.“**

Actually, the Partisan presence in Kosovo was far weaker than in Serbia: by the spring of 1944, practically the entire region between the Rasina and Bulgarian and Macedonian borders, minus the towns and communications in the South Morava Valley and its tributaries, was in their hands (and had more or less been since 1941). „Loyalty of the people“ is a very shaky concept: the majority of the people, as all the warring parties learned sooner or later, goes with whoever appears to be the strongest in a given moment. The allegedly deeply-rooted royalism of the Serbian peasant proved to be a hoax: the Communist rule, established in late 1944, was never challenged in a serious and organized manner like in some other provinces (e.g. Kosovo, Western Herzegovina). Even today, no one is seriously thinking of re-introducing monarchy to Serbia.

(Glišić, *Venceslav and Gojko Miljanić*, „*Rukovođenje Narodnooslobodilačkom borbom u Srbiji 1941-1945.*“, *Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju*, 1994, pp. 213-14, 225; Savo Drljević, „*Kontrarevolucija na Kosovu i Metohiji – zavođenje Vojne uprave februara 1945*“, in „*Završne operacije za oslobodjenje Jugoslavije: učesnici govore*“, *Belgrade: VINC*, 1986, pp. 589-603; Ivica Lučić, „*Hrvatska protukomunistička gerila u Bosni i Hercegovini od 1945. do 1951.*“, *Časopis za savremenu povijest*, 3: 2010, pp. 631-70).

- **p. 399: „Tito would later claim that he had invited the Soviet forces to enter Yugoslavia. On its way to confront the main German forces in Hungary, the Red Army needed to move through Serbia and the Vojvodina. In doing so, they allowed the NLA to enter and begin establishing its authority. The Red Army obligingly made a swift detour into Serbia to help the NLA. After a week of heavy fighting, Belgrade was liberated on October 20 and the Red Army swept on to Hungary.“**

On 5 September 1944, the Soviet Forces were expressly forbidden from advancing into Yugoslavia. A fortnight later, the 3rd Ukrainian Front was ordered to prepare the 57th Army for the westward advance. This happened only days before Tito arrived to Moscow, and was certainly done on Yugoslav initiative. In fact, the Red Army could have easily continued its drive into Hungary without ever crossing the Danube. The Soviet direct involvement south and west of the river lasted longer than one week: it started on 27 September in Eastern Serbia and ended almost three months later in Sirmia, where one Soviet corps took part in the breaching of the German defenses east of Vukovar (the same corps had been deployed around Kraljevo in October-November). Furthermore, by the time the Soviets entered Serbia, the Partisans

had long „entered“ the country, having an equivalent of 16 divisions in the central, eastern, and southern parts of the country.

(„Русский архив: Великая Отечественная. Т. 14 (3-2). Красная Армия в странах Центральной, Северной Европы и на Балканах, 1944-1945: Док. и материалы.“, Moscow.: Терра, 2000, p. 214, *Stavka to 3rd UF, 20.9.44*; see also the following articles by Gaj Trifković in *Journal of Slavic Military Studies and Militaergeschichtliche Zeitschrift*: „Damned Good Amateurs: Yugoslav Partisans in the Belgrade Operation 1944“, *JSMS*, 29-2:2016, pp. 253-56; „The German Anabasis: The Breakthrough of Army Group E from Eastern Yugoslavia 1944“, *JSMS*, 30-4:2017, pp. 610-13; „Carnage in the Land of Three Rivers: The Strymian Front 1944–1945“, *MGZ*, 75-1:2016, pp. 101-02).

- p. 399: „On August 31, he ordered a general uprising, despite having been dismissed as Minister of War by King Petar. The mobilization was not a success: the Partisans used the cover of Ratweek to enter Serbia, and the Germans launched a large-scale attack on Mihailović’s forces. The arrival of the Red Army in northeastern Serbia in October, accompanied by its new Bulgarian allies, helped to overwhelm Mihailović’s forces and his organization collapsed.“

The „Battle for Serbia“ started long before August, 1944 and cannot be depicted without mentioning the German-Chetnik relations. Long story short, after his anti-Axis offensive from September-October 1943 (which ultimately failed), Mihailović found himself without allies and facing an impending Partisan „invasion“ of his heartland. With pre-war stocks depleted and no prospect of help from either Italians or the British, Mihailović turned to the only party willing to hear him out and being capable of providing ammunition: the Germans. The latter, for their part, needed the royalists, since their own military presence had dwindled to an equivalent of two-three heterogeneous regiments (other Axis formations, although numerous, were of limited use for active operations). In November-December 1943, the two sides signed a series of co-operation treaties not unlike those agreed between the Chetniks and NDH authorities in 1942. The alliance would continue even after these agreements expired in the early 1944, as witnessed by the presence of large (up to 10,000+ men) Chetnik contingents in all major German battles against the Partisans, most notably against „Morača’s Group“ in March-May, and in the southern parts of the country in July-August (incidentally, Operation „Ratweek“ had nothing to do with the arrival of the Partisan forces in Serbia). Mihailović’s mobilization of 31 August–1 September was caused primarily by the arrival of the 1st Proletarian Corps to Western Serbia and its impending attack on the general’s seat at Ravna

Gora, rather than an uprising against the Germans. During this entire period, the Germans never launched „a large-scale attack on Mihailović's forces“: they did launch several smaller punitive expeditions against some unruly Chetnik groups who were raiding trains and causing other incidents. Not even after the Chetniks in Central Serbia attempted to ingratiate themselves with the Red Army by turning against the Germans at Čačak and Kruševac in mid-October were the Germans ready to break with the royalists: the collaboration, based on the same premises, would continue practically until the final weeks of the war (e.g. the German-sponsored Chetnik offensive on Tuzla in December 1944, the involvement in the Axis operations in Northeast and north-central Bosnia, January-April 1945).

(See the following articles by Gaj Trifković: „*The Key to the Balkans: The Battle for Serbia 1944*“, *JSMS*, 28-3:2015, pp. 524-55; „*Damned Good Amateurs*“, pp. 277-78; „*The German Anabasis: The Breakthrough of Army Group E from Eastern Yugoslavia 1944*“, *JSMS*, 30-4:2017, pp. 622-23; „*The Yugoslav Partisans' Lost Victories: Operations in Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina 1944-1945*“, *Journal of Military History*, 82-1:2018, pp. 113-15).