Assess the wartime impact of resistance movements in Yugoslavia.



At the outbreak of World War Two, the social and political structure of Yugoslavia was complicated, to say the least!

It was country with seven frontiers; Italy, Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece and Albania. It was country with six republics; Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Hercegovina. It was country with five nationalities; Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian and Montenegrin. It was country with four languages; Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian and Macedonian. It was country with three religions; Serbian-Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim. It was country with two alphabets Latin and Cyrillic……. and finally one Boss - Tito[1].



Consequently, the country was heavily fragmented and factionalised from Fascists to Communists and a government loyal to the royal family in between.

This essay will attempt to unravel the complex resistance positions of the main Yugoslav factions, of how one was not effective whilst another was and another collaborated. To introduce these simply, firstly there were the Chetniks, the regular Yugoslav Army of the Homeland, led by Mihailovic, a Bosnian Serb; secondly the communist Partisans led by Tito and finally to the fascist Ustasha led by

[1] Walter, Roberts, Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies, Rutgers University Pres, 1973, page 5. Frontiers – Italy, Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania; Republics – Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Hercegovina; Nationalities = Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian, Montenegrin; Languages = Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian; Religions – Serbian-Orthodox, catholic, Muslim; Alphabets = Latin, Cyrillic; Boss = Tito

Pavelic, a Croatian. There were also many local militias in this poor, backward, mainly agricultural country. Consequently, there was no single resistance movement, each faction trying gain supremacy over each other for their own political aims and to influence the structure of post war Yugoslavia. Additionally, there were several invading countries; Germany, Italy, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, each with their ambitions on Yugoslav territory.

After the invasion by the Axis forces, there was immediate resistance against the new occupiers but besides fighting the invading oppressors the opposing factions fought each other in a Civil War and an ethnoreligious conflict; wars within wars. An example of just how complicated, there was actually an SS Division, comprising mainly Bosnian Muslims, the 13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS *Handschar* (1st Croatian) fighting the Partisans[2].

Externally, the Balkans became the highest priority for the Allies as the war progressed[3] and the influence on the resistance by the contribution of Britain with the SOE, sometimes referred to as Section D of MI6, was important. Russian support to the communists was minimal until the German invasion of Russia and its influence only became significant at the end of the war.

During the war period approximately 11% of the Yugoslav population died, around 1.75m Yugoslavs. These deaths were not consistent between the factions, and it is impossible to tell the numbers attributed to those killed fighting the invaders, or due to the Civil War or genocide; or who and how many changed sides and the levels of treachery[4].

Records of individual acts of resistance are scarce, but the Yugoslav resistance should be seen on a bigger scale, as an insurgency against the invader, rather than acts of sabotage by groups of terrorists. Here armies engaged each other and it is claimed that the resistance struggle in Yugoslavia was stronger than anywhere else in Western or Central Europe[5] and its effectiveness should be seen in the wider context of the German commitment of forces. It is difficult to establish how many German soldiers were killed, tanks destroyed, railway tracks destroyed, bridges blown up. Probably the best way of gauging effectiveness is not in these hard figures but the opportunity cost to the Germans of having to fight in Yugoslavia, of having an army bottled up, that could be fighting elsewhere. There would be benefits to the Allies when invading Italy and particularly for Russia by keeping these forces away from the Eastern Front. The costs to the Axis were not having these Divisions available elsewhere.

Before trying to assess the effectiveness of World War Two resistance it is necessary to understand the history of Yugoslavia, to try to put into context the competing factions, and why their memories were long and their bitterness deep. The Second World War did not solve these internal problems as it transitioned into a communist state, which following Tito's death in 1980, led to a second very bitter and violent civil war in the early 1990s.

The article "Royalist resistance movement in Yugoslavia during the Second World War" by Kosta Nikolic[6] covers the significance of early Yugoslav history. In the 19th century the area that became Yugoslavia was split between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. On 28th June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Habsburg throne was assassinated in Sarajevo, by Gavrillo Princip a Serbian nationalist, sparking the First World War. The Kingdom of The Serbs, Croats and

[2] Ben, Shepherd, Terror in the Balkans, Harvard University Press, 2012, page 241
[3] Evan, Mawdsley, World War 2, a new history, Cambridge University Pres, 2020, page 289
[4] Ben, Shepherd, Terror in the Balkans, Harvard University Press, 2012, Introduction page 1
[5] Evan, Mawdsley, World War 2, a new history, Cambridge University Pres, 2020, page 289
[6] Kosta, Nikolic, Royalist resistance movement in Yugoslavia during the Second World War, Institute of Contemporary History, Belgrade, 2018

Slovenes was created in 1918 comprising Serbia and the defeated Austro-Hungarian regions of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia Hercegovina, later joined by Macedonia and ruled by a Serb, King Peter Karadjord. King Peter died in 1921 and was succeeded by Alexander who, in an apparent effort to create national unity, in 1929 dissolved the government and declared a dictatorship, he changed the name to Yugoslavia; the nation of the Southern Slavs.

On the 9th of October 1934, Alexander was assassinated in Marseilles by Croatian nationalists; his son Peter was only 11 years old and underage for the throne. Prince Paul, Alexander's cousin took the throne. The League of Nations stood back from the Italian involvement in the assassination just as it did with the invasion of Abyssinia; Yugoslavia became isolated from the international community and became more economically dependent on Germany; it had a border with Austria but after the Anschluss of March 11th 1938, it therefore had a border with Nazi Germany.

To reap as simply as possible, the Serbs had ruled continuously and placed Serbs in all the high positions in Yugoslavia since 1918; the Croatian nationalists, wanted their independence and hated the Serbs, they had assassinated the Serb King in 1934; Hitler and the Germans and particularly the Wehrmacht hated the Serbs because they blamed them for starting the First World War and the Communists wanted to turn the country into a socialist state.

At the outbreak of World War Two Yugoslavia was neutral, but the international situation was also complicated, Bulgaria, Hungary and Italy all had an aspirations to parts of Yugoslavian territory and tried to exploit the internal dissent of non-Serb minorities. Yugoslavia tried to counteract these with treaties; the Little Entente with Rumania and Czechoslovakia to counter Hungary; the Balkan Entente with Rumania, Greece and Turkey to counter Bulgaria whilst also developing closer ties with France and gaining membership of the League of Nations. However, Yugoslavia becomes encircled with Nazi allies when Hungary joins the Tripartite Pact 20th November 1940 and Rumania on 23rd November 1940. Germany is interested in the Balkans to protect their southern flank and for raw materials. The Serbs were politically aligned with the West being pro-British and anti-German, but also pragmatic, and after German pressure, Yugoslavia signs the Tripartite Pact on 25th March 1941 in Vienna.

On 27th March 1941 Serbian air force officers stage a coup and General Simovic is made Prime Minister. There is some evidence that British SOE were already underground in Belgrade and that they contributed to the coup, anticipating a war in the Balkans[7]. The US and Britain supported Serbia as an independent state; Churchill addresses Parliament supporting the Royal Family[8]. However, pragmatically, as surrounded by the Axis powers, Yugoslavia didn't want to sign any pact with Britain but did sign a non-aggression pact with Russia to last five years on 5th April. The stage is now set for Yugoslavia to be involved in the Second World War.

Hitler responds to the coup by invading Yugoslavia and Greece from Bulgaria on the 6th April 1941 with the Second and Twelfth Armies[9]. The new regime was still officially in the Tripartite Pact and there was no negotiation; Germany was breaking its own treaty. Codenamed Operation Punishment, it was designed not just to defeat militarily but break any spirit of resistance using maximum terrorising force[10].

The invasions were planned quickly, not as part of a grand German strategy such as for the invasions of France or Poland and using as few forces as possible. Significantly there was no occupation

[7] Phyllis Auty and Richard Clegg, British Policy towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece, 1975, The Macmillan Press, page 7
[8] Walter, Roberts, Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies, Rutgers University Pres, 1973, page 15
[9] Ben, Shepherd, Terror in the Balkans, Harvard University Press, 2012, page 76
[10] IBID, page 75

planning in the invasion plans[11].Hitler's objective was to secure the Balkans and south-eastern Europe quickly and create a buffer for Operation Barbarossa on 22nd June 1941, to stop any advance from the British and Greeks from the south.

The Yugoslav army was overwhelmed, German forces invade from Austria, while Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria invaded over their borders supported by the Italian air force. A huge German air-raid on Belgrade is said to have killed between 5,000 and 10,000 civilians. It was a short campaign and major towns and cities fell quickly; Skoplje on the 7th, Nis on the 9th, Zagreb on the 10th, the Italians occupied Ljubljana on the 12th and on the 13th Belgrade surrendered. Yugoslavia surrenders quickly on 17th April and 170,000 Serbians were sent to German POW camps, whilst the defeated Croatians were freed to form the Ustasha

To create further divide and rule, Germany partitions Yugoslavia into nine territories; East Slovenia to Germany, Italy took a large art of the Adriatic coast, the islands and Montenegro while sections of Serbia were taken by Hungary, Bulgaria and Italy. Germany creates the fascist "Independent State of Croatia", the Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska or NDH, under the leadership of the extremist Ustasha Fascists run by Ante Pavelic who had organised the assassination of King Alexander in 1934 from exile in Italy. The Ustasha was dedicated to creating an independent Roman Catholic Croatia and the NDH included some of Serbia and all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Ustasha collaborated with the German occupation by raising a conscripted an army to fight any resistance. To make their state more purely Croatian and catholic, they set about exterminating its Serb, Jewish and Romani inhabitants with a reign of terror and genocide, supported by local catholic priests in some villages; it is estimated that this Ustasha brutality killed over 500,000 which shocked even the Germans and occasionally obliged the Italians to intervene. The Vatican was informed what was being done in the name of Christianity, but it appears there was no interest[12]. Although many Yugoslavs reacted to their brutality by joining the resistance movements, the Ustasha remained in control of Croatia until May 1945, when the German army protecting them collapsed and Pavelić and his supporters fled from the communist Partisans[13].

"Terror in the Balkans"[14] by Ben Shepherd covers Wehrmacht behaviour and their atrocities against the population which could be seen to be consistent with the "Final Solution" dispelling the myth of the "clean Wehrmacht". The Wehrmacht immediately carried out brutal SS style retribution, particularly settling old scores against the Serbs, who they held responsible for starting the First World War, where they were defeated by the Serbs, and the subsequent emasculation of the German army. The Germans had a pecking order for the populations of their occupied countries; for example, the French were superior to the Serbs & Slavs who were superior to the Poles, who they considered the lowest lowlife.[15] Lieutenant General Franz Boehme issued a genocide order against the Serbs saying they were a minor race, no better than slaves[16] which was carried out against the whole population. For any attacks against the Wehrmacht, their retribution was extreme; for any soldier killed they were authorised to kill 100 locals; for a wounded soldier it was 50 locals[17].

One massacre was significant; following Partisan attacks on a German column when twelve were killed and around thirty wounded, at Kragujevac on the 21st October 1941. Accounts differ but the

[11] Matteo, Milazzo, The Chetnik movement and the Yugoslav Resistance, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975, page 2
[12] Michael, Foot, Resistance, Granada Publishing, 1976, page 189
[13] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ustasa
[14] Ben, Shepherd, Terror in the Balkans, Harvard University Press, 2012,
[15] IBID, page 85
[16] IBID, introduction page 1
[17] Walter, Roberts, Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies, Rutgers University Pres, 1973, page 31

effects would have been the same; approximately 2,300 males[18] were rounded up; 600 were taken hostage against further attacks, several hundred were released to bear witness to the indiscriminate killing of the remainder.[19] Because there was no occupation plan, most of the crack invasion troops were withdrawn to Operation Barbarossa, leaving behind a poorer quality, under resourced force, comprising mainly older, less experienced and poorly equipped Austrians[20], who under stress typically carried out these reprisals.

The German invasion wasn't total and approximately 300,000, mainly Chetnik, officers and men disobeyed the capitulation and disappeared into the mountains or back to their villages with their weapons[21]. Kosta Pecanac was the official leader of the Chetniks; but not wanting to be part of the resistance, he collaborated with the Axis by making a deal with the Germans puppet prime minister of Serbia, General Nedic. Additionally, there were local groups of Chetniks who fought amongst themselves as well as fighting the occupiers and there were also Chetniks loyal to Serbian Fascists under Dimitri Ljotic. Any reference to Chetnik collaboration with the Axis could be from any of these groups.

Mihailovic a professional soldier, split with Pecanac and took the remnants of the Yugoslav Army into the mountains to recruit an underground force, ready for an uprising against the Germans and to support a return of the King and the government. After the coup, the British thought that the Serbs were the only Yugoslavs capable of resisting the Germans and the SOE made contact with Mihailovic and assessed the post invasion resistance. The British with Churchill leading, recognised the government in exile in London along with the USA, and Mihailovic became the "symbol of Resistance" for Yugoslavia. Exclusive support to Mihailovic was British policy at the end of 1941, even though the Chetniks had stopped resisting by then and there were questions over collaboration with the Italians. British policy was to create and support a united Yugoslav Resistance, retain Yugoslavia as a single state after the war with King Peter in charge of a Royalist government, keeping the communists out of any power the Balkans. King Peter joined the RAF and also transmitted to his subjects via the BBC. The British government judged Prince Paul a collaborator as he signed the Tripartite agreement with Germany and was forced to spend the war in exile in Kenya.

British support in Yugoslavia came under the command of General Headquarters Middle East based in Cairo but they didn't react to the conflict very quickly because the SOE was effectively a secret organisation taking its orders from London[22]. There was conflict between the Foreign Office, led by Anthony Eden, with a long-term political strategy of keeping communism out of the Balkans and the SOE with short term military tactics of supporting the Partisans against the Germans[23] but also to distract the Axis from the Allied landings in Sicily in August 1943.

On the 22nd June 1941, following Operation Barbarossa the Comintern sent a message to all communist organisations stating, "Take into consideration that at this stage, your task is the liberation from Fascist oppression, not Socialist uprising". This was a message that the Homeland of Russia should take priority over everything else, but Tito ignored it[24]. On the 4th July, the Yugoslav politburo appointed Tito as head of the military wing of the CPY, (Communist Party of Yugoslavia) he had approximately 10,000 men available for his Partisan National Liberation Army but many of his officers had experience of fighting in the Spanish civil war. The Partisans initially used typical

[18] IBID, page 34
[19] Michael, McConville, A small war in the Balkans, Macmillan, 1986, page 24
[20] Ben, Shepherd, Terror in the Balkans, Harvard University Press, 2012, pages 236 to 237
[21] Matteo, Milazzo, The Chetnik movement and the Yugoslav Resistance, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975, page 5
[22] Phyllis Auty and Richard Clegg, British Policy towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece, 1975, The Macmillan Press, page 3
[23] IBID pages 22 to 26
[24] Walter, Roberts, Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies, Rutgers University Pres, 1973, page 22.

guerrilla methods to take a target but generally they could not hold it. They regularly ignored three of directives of the Hague Convention of 1907; they were not readily identifiable; they carried hidden weapons and they mistreated and murdered German prisoners and collaborators. As their strength grew, with estimates of the size of the army ultimately at around 260,000 and they fought out in the open like a regular army[25].

Tito was immediately effective; the Partisans first success was in Montenegro where in two days the Italians and the Montenegrin nationalists, the Zelenasi, were defeated and large quantities of arms and equipment were captured by the Partisans[26]. By late August Partisan sabotage in Serbia on transportation, municipal offices and mining installations had made travel so dangerous for the Germans that they were restricted to travel in convoys; it was not safe to travel singly[27].



Initially the Chetniks and the Partisans coordinated and fought side by side in Serbia, but they didn't trust each other. An example of this distrust and animosity was that in late 1941, in the first Axis offensive, the Partisans captured the Serbian town of Uzice including its rifle factory, printing press and the entire banknote reserve of the Yugoslav National Bank. Later, Mihailovic alongside the Germans retook the town and drove the Partisans into the mountains[28]. This incident is seen as the start of the Civil War.

With British pressure in October and November 1941, Mihailovic and Tito met to try to agree a unified approach to resisting the Germans, even though the Chetniks and Partisans were already fighting each other, it achieved nothing as they had different ideas of resistance[29]. Russia did not contribute, and it is questionable if the Partisans would have been so successful if pressure had been applied on Tito to follow the decree of 22nd June. Tito wanted to strike at the invaders immediately to cause a distraction for the Germans on the Eastern Front and relieve some pressure on Russia, ignoring the German reprisals. By comparison, Mihailovic, taking his orders from London, withdrew from fighting the Germans believing that the retribution against the Serb population, particularly after Kragujevac was too costly and that the Serbs should accept the hardships until an Allied victory and liberation was imminent. He was believed to have said his priorities were the fight the Partisans, the Croats, the Moslems and the Ustasha, in that order[30] and some of his forces fought with the Italians against the Partisans.

Continued British support of Mihailovic was dependent on him stopping the civil war and concentrating on fighting the Axis forces.[31] This didn't happen and suspicions about collaboration

[25] Ben, Shepherd, Terror in the Balkans, Harvard University Press, 2012, introduction page 4
[26] Walter, Roberts, Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies, Rutgers University Pres, 1973, page 24.
[27] IBID, page 25.
[28] Michael, Foot, Resistance, Granada Publishing, 1976, pages 191 to 194
[29] Walter, Roberts, Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies, Rutgers University Pres, 1973, page 26
[30] Phyllis Auty and Richard Clegg, British Policy towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece, 1975, The Macmillan Press, page 76
[31] IBID, page 78

continued; Mihailovic was a great procrastinator, in late 1942, a number of sabotage and attacks against Axis held targets were proposed by British SOE and agreed with local commanders, but Mihailovic did not give the ultimate order. Targets such as the copper mines at Bor, the Trepeca Lead zinc mine and the railway lines between Skopje and Nis and Skopje and Kraljevo. As a final test of his loyalty to the Allies, in December 1943, the British called on Mihailovic to destroy two railway bridges vital to the Germans, in an area of Serbia he claimed to have under local control, over the rivers Morava and Ibar. This sabotage would have the severely disrupt German activity in Macedonia and Greece. There was the usual procrastination over a number of weeks and the bridges remained intact[32].

By the 8th June 1943, Chiefs of Staff Middle East concluded in a message to London, that the Partisans were "the most formidable anti-Axis element in Yugoslavia"[33]. The SOE had simply judged, that the Partisans were killing more Germans and recommended that British support be withdrawn from the Chetniks in early 1944[34] and switched to the Partisans. This change of sides from supporting a monarchy to supporting communists would be s an embarrassment for the British government, but it would be justified as the best way to defeat the Axis.

The Partisans were already well equipped by late 1943 as they had captured Italian armaments including artillery pieces, but the British and now the Americans supplied more. Probably the most significant was the sharing of the island of Vis with a British commando unit. This gave Tito not just a base to raid the Dalmatian coast using the requisitioned local fishing fleet, but also an airstrip which provided Allied air support for delivering supplies and evacuating wounded[35].

The effectiveness of the Partisan resistance and the seriousness that they were taken by the Axis was that the Axis conducted an almost continuous military campaign against them. There were seven separate offensives: the first in Serbia in November 1941, two in 1942 in Bosnia and then Montenegro, in 1943 in Herzegovina, Montenegro and Dalmatia and finally two more in 1944 across most of the whole country. These must have been brutal conflicts, not just against the Partisan army but also in retribution against the local population; however, they were Pyrrhic victories for the occupiers. The offensives were all mounted by several divisions of good troops, sometimes led by a Waffen SS division, using armour and air support. These alone justify the Partisan activities as they would have consumed substantial Wehrmacht resources of men, vehicles and petrol which could have been used elsewhere, primarily the Eastern Front.[36]

This essay has tried its best to unravel this complex period of bitter conflict in Yugoslav history of wars within a war. In an effort to simplify the situation there are many characters and details that have not been included, along with involvement of the Italian army and the American OSS and the structure of the German army. To sum up the resistance simply, where there was treachery and fighters changing sides; the Ustasha collaborated from the beginning, the Chetniks were more interested in a Civil war and the Partisans were the most effective.

There is a question of if, or how, successful resistance can be established. The measurement of a resistance movement's impact has to be subjective, a value statement; it cannot be calculated objectively, or scientifically, with a % success rate. Additionally, there is the question of how the resistance in one country is judged more or less valuable or impactful than another. The Tito led resistance of the Partisan National Liberation Army was on large scale, engaging the Axis with

[32] IBID, pages 80 to 84
[33] IBID, page 14
[34] IBID, pages 84 to 86
[35] Michael, Foot, Resistance, Granada Publishing, 1976, pages 196 to 197
[36] IBID, page 193

guerrilla tactics and also a series of battles in the open over a long period. This was not the same as underground resistance such as in France running networks, supporting secret agents, collecting and sending intelligence back to London, creating disorganisation and sabotage, and running escape routes for Allied airmen[37]; the resistance efforts and their impact in these two countries are not comparable but both extremely valuable each in their own way.

Hitler must have been aware of the opportunity cost to the Wehrmacht in Yugoslavia, when he claimed at the end of his life that the Balkan campaign fatally delayed Operation Barbarossa by five weeks, from originally scheduled 15th May 1941 to 22nd June 1941. He didn't achieve the quick result he anticipated and 600,000 German troops and their motorised spearhead units were tied up very effectively by the insurgency and resistance, that could have been deployed on the Eastern Front.[38] Five weeks of probable advance in good conditions before the start of the Russian winter, putting the Russians further on the back foot, could have had important implications on the outcome of Operation Barbarossa and the Second World War.

[37] Michael, Foot, Resistance, Granada Publishing, 1976, pages 235 to 254
[38] Evan, Mawdsley, World War 2, a new history, Cambridge University Pres, 2020, pages 113 - 115