

Politics to politicians - history to historians, The Partisan-Chetnik conflict in World War II

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No topic has ever caused or continues to cause so many debates and polemic opinions in our country as the internal conflict during World War II in Yugoslavia, also known as the "fratricidal war". Only a few of those debates ever had professional grounds, and the polemic has never ventured from the political level to the domain of scientific considerations where all stands are legitimate and are discussed with due respect for differing opinions, but also with acknowledgment of facts as the foundation of historical science. The essence of the scientific approach lies in the respect of the military and political context of events in the period which is analyzed, and in a rational consideration of the balance of powers. Subsequent considerations and hypotheses based on "what if", as well as the ensuing lamentations regarding figures and events, are void of scientific grounds and merely reopen the question – who is the true heir of the World War II tradition. This question is very important in shaping the identity of the society and of the military: it must not be biased by daily politics, but rather left to professional historians. Societies that are poorly constituted institutionally, often forget the old rule that history is generated by the fermentation of consciousness of generations of historians. All problems are usually ascribed to the other side, proclaiming it the source of all evil and misunderstandings. There is a lack of willingness to tackle painful questions and consider one's own role and position, this being the only right path towards a rational consideration of the past.

During World War II (WW II), the ethnic, ideological and religious conflict in Yugoslavia brought about a change of government and of the social system. No side came out of the war unharmed, and victory had its price. Though the victors also bore their scars, they got carried away and started to think that everything began with them. The winning side seemed to ignore the fact that political victory is only a precondition for subsequent social, economic, cultural and other types of change that will represent a measure of success of its rule. Blinded by their greatness, they saw nothing else, and the epopee of the winning army was particularly revived after the conflict with the Soviet Union, when the campaigns fought by the partisan divisions were equaled to the battles in the Eastern front, where 100,000 German soldiers died at Stalingrad alone. Our victors lost the sense of their own position and role in the WW II catastrophe. The greatest global cataclysm was marked the clash of the world giants: Germany, Japan, Great Britain, USSR and the US, and the fate of the winners was determined in the battlefields. The Yugoslav war theater was important, but it was only one of many. No decisive battles and frontal clashes of the major world powers ever took place here. We can certainly be proud of Neretva, Sutjeska, Ravna Gora, etc., but we were certainly not the center of the world. The participation of Yugoslavia in World War II was marked by anti-fascist efforts, collaboration with the occupying forces, and political haggling with all the allies. The course of the war in Yugoslavia was part of the European and global military and political events, and the oversimplified emphasis on the local level may lead us into a narrow framework, precluding the possibility of properly assessing our position and role. After the defeat in April 1941, the Yugoslav royal government was the promoter of the idea of resistance and anti-fascism, and as such it was given refuge by the Allies that also recognized it as the legitimate representative of a (militarily defeated) country. Had it not been pro-Ally and anti-fascist, that

government would not have been allowed to reach London and to continue its activities. Back in the country, the partisan and the Chetnik movements advocating resistance were still in the initial phase of organization and expansion. During World War II, the Yugoslav royal government acted within the limits set by the general efforts of the Allies. Had it understood the reality of global military and political events, it could have used the space available to it to create and expand the conditions for a deeper relationship with the events in the country or to shut itself within the "Balkan story" by failing to comprehend the events and the processes involved. It probably found consolation in the similarity of its position with the withdrawal of the Serbian government and army in World War I, and in the choice of the ally (because of the idea that Great Britain can lose battles but never wars). With the Nazi invasion of the USSR, and the entry into war of the US after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the previous choice of the ally confirmed and secured a safe haven. Some fear was caused by the quick defeat of France, producing a major psychological shock – bearing in mind that one of the victors of World War I was involved: the synonym of impenetrable Verdun, the guarantor of the Versailles peace system, and the country that Yugoslavia strived to imitate between the two world wars in its political, military, economic and cultural development.

The occupying forces annihilated Yugoslavia, dividing it among puppet states and régimes, and a certain number of officers that managed to avoid being taken prisoner and sent off to POW camps, pulled back using the vacuum of the recent occupation of the country to forge plans for setting up a resistance. Among them was also the group headed by Draža Mihailović – a Colonel at the time - that began organizing in May 1941 in Ravna Gora. A second resistance movement appeared in that same period – this one headed by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and already having a social component and striving for a change of government. The Chetnik movement – appearing on the scene as a military-political reaction to the occupation of the country – based its ideology on the need to protect national interests in view of the destruction and faced by the Serbian population, and developed its political platform only later on, during the war.

Two factors marked profoundly the subsequent events in Yugoslavia: the crimes committed against the Serbian population, and the German attack on the USSR. The ordeal of the Serbian population prompted it to spontaneously organize itself in order to protect its very existence from the Ustashi massacres (in Sanski Most, in Herzegovina etc.), independently of the two resistance movements that were still in the initial organizational phase. In fact, the refugees and the news pouring into Serbia, prompted Mihailović to embrace the idea of defending the Serbian people, radicalizing his attitude towards the culprits for the ordeal of the Serbs and forcing him to re-examine the preexisting state concept, although he held the position of minister of defense in various subsequent Yugoslav governments. In fact, this issue will mark his later destiny – within the Allied considerations for the reality of war and the future of Yugoslavia.

The Nazi attack on the USSR, served as a signal for the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to launch a call for armed resistance based on the traditional solidarity ties with Russia and the Slavic nations. This became particularly evident – in spite of the rather bearable Italian occupation – in Montenegro in July 1941, after the defeat that did not mark the destruction of the resistance movement, but created a division within it. In the autumn of 1941, resistance became active in Western Serbia and Partisan-Chetnik negotiations on cooperation took place (Mihailović-Tito talks), but failed to yield an agreement. Whilst the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was in favor of armed resistance, Mihailović advocated the "wait and see" strategy, insisting that resistance should wait for a more favorable moment in order to minimize victims. The Allied fronts were

far away, Great Britain had no strength for concrete operations in the Balkans, and the USSR suffered defeats as the German army was advancing towards Moscow. It was in this period that Mihailović managed to establish radio-contact with the Yugoslav government in exile, and that the Allied Mission (Hudson) including Yugoslav officers came to Yugoslavia, boosting Mihailović's self-confidence. The Yugoslav government backed Mihailović and he was promoted general and given Allied legitimating, something that the other (communist) movement - the partisans, did not have then.

To pacify the occupied territories, the Germans embarked on a seek-and-destroy operation, resulting in the pacification and the expulsion from Central Serbia of the resistance nucleus that withdrew towards Sandžak, and in the legalization of a certain number of Mihailović's Chetniks within the framework of the Nedić regime. In fact, this German intervention accelerated the schism between the partisans and the Chetniks that turned into an open conflict – creating the conditions for civil war. With time, the communist movement – guided by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia – became the prime enemy for Mihailović. The situation was quite similar for the other side – concerning the struggle for power and the future arrangement of the state. The starting positions were so different that no agreement was possible between them.

For the government, Draža Mihailović became the embodiment of the hope for salvation, and a remedy for all the problems and troubles of exile. With him, the government found a temporary answer to its problems, although this meant merely postponing them rather than solving them. On the other hand, Mihailović considered the government to be his political backer and a transmitter located on the highest observation post from which insight into Allied plans and programs could be gained. Blinded by its importance (the "March 27th" demonstrations) and acting clumsily regarding the USSR, the Yugoslav government worked against itself from the perspective of the internal situation in Yugoslavia. It squandered the capital of its previous authority (March 27, the weakly resistance in April 1941, and the news of resistance operations in the country), and lacking in objective perspective of reality, it merely imagined its policy. In fact, it was far from pursuing an operational policy, lagging behind the rapidly evolving events, losing initiative and merely registering events – limiting its reactions to comments.

In a country where "first blood was drawn" and where the desire for vengeance was building up, the sphere of rational considerations and thinking was completely clouded. The proverbial Balkan complexity, characterized by ideological, religious and ethnic conflicts, became utterly evident in 1941-1945. During this period, in fact, the withdrawal into a national frame indicated the tendency towards a clear demarcation from "foreign" and "external", resulting in the overemphasis of one's own attributes and the belittlement of everything else. A prospective existed only for those that were capable of anticipating the future dictated by the victorious Allied centers, whilst others – trying to "survive" – jumped on that victory train later. All those that failed to understand this were condemned to stay on a dead track, and to be described by history (as W. Churchill said in his memoirs) with "subtle differences in patriotism", having anti-fascism as their basic correction in WW II. Identifying an international foothold had crucial importance, as well as the awareness of the fact that any policy not having an alternative was a bad one. The expectation of an Allied landing in the Balkans – which never came about – was a losing choice. Following the British assessment of the sustainability of the Yugoslav concept, the key issue – formulated clearly in an intelligence report – was the "constructive approach regarding the Yugoslav national differences" that the National Liberation Movement had.

Mihailović's attempts to operate independently from British influence and the efforts to protect the Serbian existential interest, gave no results. In time, they merely became Mihailović's cries for help like those of a shipwrecked sailor on high seas, for he ignored the fact that the Government was also on a raft in the ocean of global politics. Slobodan Jovanović – the premier of the Yugoslav Government – ventured into politics as an old man, in difficult times of war, and in the years of exile, and his overall results were disastrous. In as much as Jovanović's juridical-historical involvement in 19th century politics yielded major achievements, his practical political activities in 1941-1943 were without any result. Circumstances made him decide to link his final political efforts in his old age to the fate of General Mihailović. It seems that Slobodan Jovanović counted on certain backing by General Mihailović, and that – just like Mihailović – he thought that the other resistance (communist) movement in Yugoslavia would be ideologically unacceptable to the western Allies, primarily to the British.

After the Teheran Conference the guidelines of the Allied policy concerning Yugoslavia became clear: assisting the partisan military movement that voiced its plans of becoming the international political representative of Yugoslavia at the session of the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) held in Jajce in November 1943. Božidar Purić – Prime Minister of the Yugoslav Government – was not prepared to compromise with the British policy and sacrifice Mihailović, and this is exactly why his government fell in May 1944. Pressured by the Allies, Petar II - King of Yugoslavia gave the mandate to Ivan Šubašić who renounced to General Mihailović. Šubašić reached a compromise with Josip Broz Tito (the Agreement of Vis and the Belgrade Paper) concerning the creation of a joint government (royal and NKOJ). Later on, at the end of 1944 and in early 1945, other compromises ensued and the Yugoslav King – faced with British pressure – accepted the concession of transferring royal prerogatives to the Regency. Thus reduced, the legitimacy of the Yugoslav government blended into the government of the National Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia (NKOJ) which expanded its international capacity. Reacting to these moves by the partisan movement, in January 1944 General Mihailović held a congress in the village of Ba near Gornji Milanovac, moderating his previous radical stands. However, not having become part of the Šubašić government, he stayed on the other – dead track. The missions he sent from Yugoslavia during 1944, the McDowell mission in August 1944, the hopes he placed in the US and his address to the Allied commanders at the end of 1944, were nothing but desperate attempts due to tardive reflexes in political reasoning and realignment. Slobodan Jovanović – though Prime Minister of the Yugoslav royal government - never met with Winston Churchill, whilst Tito's trusted emissary Vladimir Velebit manage to do so twice (in May and July, and once again during the Tito-Churchill meeting in (August) 1944).

Taking everything into account, it seems overly simplistic to say that the British backed Mihailović, that they supported him unreservedly, that the royal government appointed him leader of the resistance in Yugoslavia, and that he was abandoned at the end of the war. Facts indicate that after they were interrupted (end of 1941) contacts with him were established only in April 1942, that the British were controlling the radio-messages between the royal government and Mihailović, that they had a multilayered view of the Yugoslav war situation because of their obligations towards the USSR, that problems in cooperation appeared as early as 1942, that he was asked to pursue a more active fighting role against the enemy, and that the Yugoslav government and General Mihailović were given limited and not unreserved support. The question can be raised from another perspective: how did the Yugoslav government and Mihailović manage and behave in those limiting circumstances, notwithstanding all the problems that they faced? This provides part of the answer to the question - when did the government and Mihailović fall behind in the assessments of

the winning side in the war, because the USSR was on that side too and it supported its champion in Yugoslavia. The war period spanning from 1941 to 1944 was marked by a quick sequence of events that were concatenated and required stands to be taken and decisions to be made. During that arc of time the royal government and Mihailović have clearly shown a lack of resourcefulness.

The communist movement did not want to risk misunderstandings regarding the USSR sponsorship. Instead, it resorted to tactical withdrawals, moderating radical stands, and accepting suggestions and criticism from Moscow (negotiations in March 1943). As far as British policy is concerned, we believe that it would be overly simplistic and unscientific to consider it anti-Serbian, to insist that it betrayed General Mihailović, that it made possible the victory of communism in Yugoslavia, that Tito tricked Churchill, that the British Prime Minister fail to cope with him etc. The aforementioned policy was primarily focused on its own (British) interests, and considering the history and the colonial dispersion over the continents - on a global one, leaving others (smaller nations) the option to fit into the global processes and seek their place within them. Anyone failing to see this faced the threat of standing against global events having as its stakeholders the major powers, and making small nations and states - in view of their power and might - merely objects of those events. The Yugoslav royal government placed its hopes in General Mihailović and vice versa. Once the royal government began to lose its bearing, General Mihailović was abandoned – gradually – to himself, to face the Balkan winds of change that had no consideration for political adversaries. Politics has always been based on realistic considerations for what is tangible and possible. The leaders of the rival movements could not side with the new government and had to be eliminated.

The communists did not create Yugoslavia in 1918, but within the framework of the global military-political events, they manage to win it back and adapted it to their needs. A report by Vlatko Maček can be quoted to this effect: "Yugoslavia entailed a fatality of its own and it had to come about". If founding represents the beginning of disintegration, than this process required several generations to go through. Today, the issue of national reconciliation is neither historical nor historiographic, but a political one and history should be left to experts.