The Boiling Cauldron

The Axis Occupation of Yugoslavia and the Origins of the Wartime Internecine Conflicts

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Abstract

The German invasion of Yugoslavia of 1941 set in motion approximately four years of internecine bloodletting. However, while the invasion itself was the trigger for the subsequent civil war, the basis for much of the ethnic and religious conflict had been laid long before the German invasion. Yugoslavia itself was born out of strategic necessity in the wake of the First World War by the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, but heavy-handed policies of Serbian political elites prevented the new state from achieving any degree of political or cultural unity. It was during the interwar period that Ante Pavelic's Ustasha movement, which would lay waste to vast swathes of Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian countryside, was born in response to Belgrade's repressive policies. To further aggravate the matter, Yugoslav governments in the interwar period, while desperately trying to maintain a posture of neutrality in international affairs, failed to strengthen the state, thus establishing a weak Yugoslavia entirely dependent on the goodwill of other powers for survival. Even though there was nothing predetermined about the invasion, the Yugoslav way was a dangerous game. As a result, following the German invasion of 1941, largely provoked by the Serbs themselves, the country reaped a grim harvest of violence which blossomed from the seeds of chaos sown in the interwar period. However, despite the intensity of the latent internecine conflict, neither the invasion nor the occupation contributed anything of strategic value to the Allied war effort. Apart from sapping the strength of Yugoslavia's constituent peoples, in the long run resulted in the
establishment of a communist regime in the postwar Yugoslavia, which itself failed to permanently address the issues of ethnic and religious divisions.
Table of Contents

Introduction...........................................................8
The Torturous Birth and Uneasy Life of the Yugoslavian State.........................................................12
A House of Cards: Yugoslavia on the Eve of the Second World War .........................................................24
The Crucible of Occupation (1941 - 1942) ...............43
The New Order that Wasn't (1943 - 1944) ..........67
Epilogue: The Downfall ...............................................74
Conclusion .................................................................79
Bibliography ................................................................81
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Introduction

The Second World War history of Yugoslavia, a victim of Hitler's war of aggression, remains relatively unknown among the general public and non-specialist scholars. Overshadowed by its swift defeat and squeezed between Hitler's victory in France and invasion of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia's contribution to the Allied war effort seems to fade into insignificance when compared to the titanic clashes at Moscow, Stalingrad or Normandy. While works of considerable length and depth, such as Milovan Djilas' *Wartime* or Stevan K. Pavlowitch's *Hitler's New Disorder* address the war and occupation, a vast majority of general Western books on the Second World War, such as Normans Davies' *Europe at War* and Antony Beevor's *The Second World War*, usually give Yugoslavia a perfunctory treatment. Likewise, Gerhard L. Weinberg in his seminal *A World at Arms* acknowledges the astounding bloodbath which occurred in the occupied state, but is otherwise short in his treatment of Yugoslavia. However, others, such as William Shirer in his *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* or Andrew Nagorski in *The Greatest Battle...*, tend to overemphasize the significance of Hitler's Balkan adventure, claiming that it delayed Operation Barbarossa and thus prevented Hitler from winning the war on the Eastern Front in 1941. Moreover, a majority of the works which actually analyze the invasion or the occupation, such as H. James Burgwyn's *General Roatta's War...* or Tim Kirk's *The Limits of Germandom...*, usually deal with it from either a single perspective of the resistance movements or the occupiers, or focus on individual aspects of the occupation to the exclusion of a composite picture. Finally, as Dejan Djokic's *Nationalism, Myth and Reinterpretation of History...* demonstrates, the anti-German coup, the subsequent German invasion and the Axis occupation

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are still subject to nationalist myths. The key purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is to construct a composite picture of Yugoslavia in the interwar period and during the war and to place it in the wider picture of the Second World War.

To this end, I will examine several key questions. The first step to this end is to explain the structural and historical origins of Yugoslavia's relative strengths and weaknesses prior to the Axis invasion which thrust it into the fray of the Second World War. Current research and available historical evidence indicates that the country's collapse in 1941 was a catalyst, rather than a sole cause for the outburst of sectarian violence in the years 1941 - 1945. Yugoslavia as a state was born out of necessity and contingency, and at the time of the Second World War was more of an ideal than a reality. Yugoslav national identity never formed spontaneously, both due to time constraints and the fragmentation of its constituent nationalities. Heavy-handed attempts at imposing it by decree, on the other hand, achieved precisely the opposite by further cementing ethnic divisions. A succession of dysfunctional quasi-democratic and pseudo-dictatorial governments in the interwar period further prevented the country from stabilizing and effectively utilizing its potential, which, in any case, would have been insufficient to stem the German tide or prevent the war from breaking out. Granted, the Yugoslav government in the 1930s did much to steer a safe course in the dangerous waters of contemporary European politics, but the long-term internal fragmentation was a decisive factor in setting in motion the crisis which provoked the German invasion. Moreover, several Nazi-occupied states which possessed a degree of national unity before the war, such as France and Belgium, while experiencing a level of partisan activity and internal score-setting, never succumbed to the internal chaos which beset the Balkans during the war. This suggests that a united Yugoslavia would not have experienced the level of internecine bloodshed it experienced in reality. I will demonstrate that there indeed existed an option for forming a diverse, but far more united Yugoslavia prior to the German invasion. This
option, however, was stubbornly resisted by the country's Serbian elites who, as a consequence, bear the onus of responsibility for Yugoslavia's interwar instability and disunity.

The second purpose of this dissertation is to explain the specific reasons for the German invasion in April 1941 in the context of German-Yugoslav relations, and the causes of the swift Yugoslav defeat. The coup d'état by nationalist Serbian officers which compelled Hitler to launch an invasion was as much a paradoxical product of Yugoslavia's pro-Axis foreign policy as it was of internecine ethnic divisions. Yugoslavia's accession to the Tri-Partite Pact in 1941 was merely the last straw for the Serbian nationalists who staged the coup. Furthermore, a united Yugoslavia, while certainly unable to defeat the invading Wehrmacht, would hardly have fallen apart with such astonishing speed and intensity as it did in 1941, and might have actually delayed Operation Barbarossa by a few weeks.

The third matter I will address is to assess the relative contribution of Yugoslavia to the Allied war effort and the ultimate outcome of the war. The popular argument that the Balkan diversion cost Hitler victory on the Eastern Front does not hold up to close scrutiny. Nationalist Serbian myths about the deep patriotism of the Serbian officers who staged the ostensibly anti-German coup in 1941 are equally simplistic. I will contend that while bloody and violent in the extreme, the German invasion and the subsequent civil war in Yugoslavia was a dysfunctional sideshow compared to the rest of the European war, and was not a reason the failure of Operation Barbarossa. Moreover, a vast majority of Yugoslavia's religious and ethnic factions spent most of their time battling one another and entering quasi-formal alliances and armistices with the occupiers, thus contributing little to defeating the Axis. While otherwise highly competent as a resistance movement, even Josip Broz Tito's communist Partizans\(^3\) attacked their monarchists

\(^3\) In this work, 'Partizans' spelled with a capital 'P' and a 'z' indicate exclusively Broz's communist insurgents. Whenever spelled with a lower case 'p' and an 's', it indicates insurgents of any kind.
rivals as often as they dealt with the German occupation troops. Nevertheless, despite their undeniable effectiveness at tying down the Germans and forcing them to launch one anti-partisan offensive after another, the troops used by the Germans were always either second-rate or trained primarily in specialist forms of warfare, such as mountain fighting or anti-partisan operations, and thus of little use on other fronts. Yugoslavia’s mostly self-imposed suffering was, in other words, needless and largely meaningless.

The final purpose of this dissertation is to examine the impact of the invasion and occupation of Yugoslavia on its postwar political and strategic alignment. Thanks to the Partizans' effective irregular warfare, material support from the Allies, and the Soviet military intervention in late 1944, Tito was able to achieve absolute power in the "liberated" Yugoslavia. This pushed the country into the Soviet sphere of influence until the Tito-Stalin split of 1948 when the former, ironically supported by the Western Powers, was able to assert his own independence. This break with Moscow made little difference to the Yugoslavs themselves, as their country experienced half a century of Communist rule which, in addition to its repressiveness, failed to address the fundamental divisions of Yugoslavia’s constituent peoples. It is to the history of these divisions, so important to any examination of modern Yugoslavia, that we shall now turn.
Chapter 1: The Torturous Birth and Uneasy Life of the Yugoslavian State

The violence and division which beset Yugoslavia during the Second World War had deep historical roots. Religious conflicts originated from the middle ages, when the Serbs converted to Orthodox Christianity, while the Slovenes and Croats turned to Roman Catholicism. The Slovenes and Croats, despite inferiority in numbers, were historically close to the major European powers and enjoyed relative stability and affluence. Bosnians, a Slavic Muslim minority, were a remnant from the Ottoman times. It was the Croats who dominated the northern region of what would become Yugoslavia. As a part of Austria-Hungary, they sought not national independence, but greater autonomy within the Habsburg state, the final objective of which was to establish a ‘Triple Monarchy’, that is, an equal division of power between Budapest, Vienna and Zagreb. Those federalist ambitions would remain a constant in Croatian politics within Yugoslavia, and partially contribute towards the chaotic character of the state.4

The Serbs, on the other hand, for a long period of time had existed on the fringe of Europe in both the cultural and territorial sense. Their close contacts with Russia distanced them from the powerful states of Western Europe, and the long struggle against the Ottoman Empire caused a virtual eradication of their aristocracy, leaving mostly peasants behind. The Serbian defeat at Kosovo Field in 1389 served to create a culture filled with a desire for revenge for the Ottoman conquest.5 Furthermore, until the dissolution of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires the fledgling, backward Serbia existed only as a buffer zone between the two. This instilled the Serbs with an acute sense of insecurity on one hand, and mistrust and resentment towards the Muslims on the other. Those sentiments were particularly strong even by the standards of this volatile region. On October 23-24, 1912 the Serbians defeated the Ottoman army at Kumanovo, taking

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Kosovo in the process. In the aftermath, they relentlessly persecuted the local Muslim Albanians in an attempt to change the ethnic composition of the region. This nationalistic frenzy would return with a vengeance during the occupation years, with Albanians routinely cooperating with the Axis and persecuting the Serbs.⁶

Yugoslavia, the name given to this fissile collection of states and peoples, was born of the demise of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, the relentless activism of Croatian and Slovene politicians of the Yugoslav Committee⁷, and strategic necessity. The creation of the unified south Slavic state, however, was a torturous process, as several factions competed for the right to represent the interests of the southern Slavic populations, and different national groups had contradictory visions for what the new state should be. The Croats, who had been confronted with the aggressive magyarization policies of Budapest on one hand, and the indifference of Vienna on the other, sought to protect their national identity. As Frano Supilo, one of the chief Croat champions of the Yugoslav project realized, an independent Croatia would be too weak to defend against domination or outright absorption by one of the great powers. As such, an enlarged south Slav state was a geopolitical necessity, if only a willing partner could be found.⁸

While the Croats, Slovenes and even many non-Belgrade ethnic Serbs believed in a federation based on national equality, the Belgrade-aligned Serbians harbored far greater ambitions. They hoped to establish a Greater Serbia dominated by themselves. Several long and short-term factors contributed towards this preference. Firstly, the Serbians had lived in the shadow of mighty empires, and knew their state existed only at their sufferance. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it was still considered normal and acceptable for strong states to subsume

⁷ Zagreb and London-based group of mostly Croatian politicians, which pushed for the establishment of a South Slav federation.
the weak. As such, only a strong, unified South Slav state could hope to retain its independence. Secondly, there existed a considerable ethnic Serb Diaspora in Bosnia, Croatia and the independent state of Montenegro. While not all of them were eager to join a Belgrade-run state, Serbian nationalists still insisted on uniting the entire Serb people in a unitary state. Finally, an opportunity presented itself when Ottoman power began to ebb as a result of territorial losses from the first two Balkan Wars. As a result, the Turks lost control of their Balkan possessions.

The decisive moment, however, came during the First World War, which pitted the Allied-aligned Serbia against both the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary. For Serbian nationalists, the dream of creating a Greater Serbia was not just a far-away desire. Many of them took deliberate steps to bring it about. In 1911, Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic and his fellow officers formed the 'Black Hand' (also known as Unification or Death) organization in the aftermath of the off-handed annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria. The new organization's basic purpose was to take whatever measures might be necessary to create Greater Serbia. Despite his relatively low rank, Dimitrijevic proved to be a capable plotter; he and his men had already assassinated King Aleksandar and his wife in 1903 following the monarch’s suspension of the constitution. The Black Hand's later activities, however, would prove far more disastrous.

The Europe of the early to mid-twentieth century was a veritable powder keg of militarism, jingoist nationalism, complex, often shifting alliances, and 'shades of barbarism which would once have amazed the most barbarous of barbarians'. The Balkans were not immune to these trends. While none of the Balkan states of that period was a formidable military power, nationalist fever in Serbia and among the ethnic Serb Diaspora ran high as a result of the Serbian victory over the

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9 Magas, Croatia, p. 497.
10 Davies, Europe, p. 874.
12 Davies, Europe, p. 875, 897.
Turks at Kumanovo and the subsequent annexation of Kosovo. Shortly after the Austrian annexation of Bosnia, which the Serbian nationalists saw as an insult due to their claims on the territory and the sizeable Serb minority living there, the Austrian Archduke Francis-Ferdinand visited Sarajevo. The date of the visit - 28 June 1914 - was inauspicious in the extreme, as it closely coincided with the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo and the Serbian national festival of St. Vitus' Day. It is debatable whether the choice of date stemmed from ignorance or a desire to further humble Vienna's new Serb subjects. Regardless, the result was a surge in nationalist Serbian sentiment, which manifested in the form of the successful assassination of the Archduke by Gavrilo Princip, a member of a local Black Hand cell.

Following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, Austria-Hungary, with German backing, declared war on Serbia, following which Russia decided to defend its southern client. Germany followed suit by issuing ultimatums to Russia and France, both of which were rejected. The conflict turned into a truly European war when the British declared war on Germany. The resulting conflagration of the First World War created conditions in which Yugoslavia could be established. Serbia, involved in the war from the beginning, issued a declaration at Nis in December 1914. It stated that the Serbs (in this case meaning the Belgrade-aligned ones) would fight for the 'liberation' of all south Slavs. The declaration, however, was not a product of high-minded idealism or sympathy for Belgrade's non-Serb Slav brethren. It was a way to prevent the formation of a rival south Slav state, which would either permanently sever Bosnia and ethnic-Serb-minority lands from Serbia, or embody a form of federalism, thus preventing Belgrade's hegemony. It was not an entirely misguided notion, either. Soon after the assassination of the Archduke, Ante Trumbic and Frano Supilo, leaders of the Croatian Party of Right (as in the right to

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13 Benson, Yugoslavia, p. 19.
14 Davies, Europe, pp. 875, 389.
16 Magas, Croatia, p. 463.
self-determination, not political right), fled to Italy, where they set out to lay the foundations of an independent south Slav state, incorporating Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro and Serbia.

Therefore, both Serbia and the Habsburg Slavs sought to establish a common state as a countermeasure to the great powers. The Corfu Declaration of 20 July 1917, which proclaimed the intent of Slovenes, Serbs and Croats to seek union on the basis of a national right to self-determination, seemed to confirm the good will of both parties. This declaration, however, was born of necessity, timing and expediency, not friendship. Italy joined the Allies with hopes of territorial expansion into the Adriatic. The Treaty of London of 26 April 1915 formalized Italian claims on Istria and Dalmatia, which boasted vital port cities. Coupled with their control of the Western and Southern Adriatic, Italian control of Dalmatia could have easily transformed into local hegemony. Serbia and the Habsburg Slavs realized that divided they were too weak to openly challenge Italian claims. Furthermore, since October 1915, Belgrade and practically all of Serbia were occupied by Austro-Hungarian troops, thus greatly reducing the bargaining position of Greater Serbs. Under these circumstances, Belgrade expansionists temporarily relented in their demands for postwar Belgrade domination. Zagreb, on the other hand, willingly dissolved its own autonomous government after the surrender of Austria-Hungary, but before the union with Serbia as a sign of good will and to facilitate the establishment of a new government.

Despite this, the temporary accord quickly fell apart when the combined Allied forces regained Serbia in mid-1918 and the end of Austro-Hungarian domination of Croatia, Bosnia and Slovenia became a distinct possibility. Confronted with immediate ‘liberation’ from Serbia, whose dreams of local hegemony were well known, the Habsburg Slavs hastily proclaimed their own state on 29

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18 Davies, *Europe*, p. 907.
October. This quasi-Yugoslavia included Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia and Croatia, and was created more to secure a more equitable bargaining position with Rome and Belgrade than as a precursor to genuine independence. By the end of the war, Italy had occupied vast tracts of land in the eastern Adriatic, and both the ex-Habsburg Slavs and Belgrade Serbs knew they had to cooperate to secure those lands. The bargaining position of Serbia had strengthened considerably by then, however, as it had participated in the liberation of Southern Europe, and was one of the victors of the First World War. It is not difficult to see a thinly-veiled threat in the Serbian demands for a union on Belgrade's terms. Either Habsburg Slavs would yield and thus stand to regain the Adriatic coast, or Serbia would abrogate the previous agreement and use its army to occupy Bosnia, leaving the defenseless Croatia and tiny Slovenia to fend for themselves. Under these circumstances, the Zagreb-controlled Yugoslav Committee chose the lesser evil. Finally, after long, torturous negotiations, the Treaty of London was superseded by the Treaty of Rapallo, which divided the Adriatic coast between Italy and the newborn Yugoslavia. Italy received all of Istria, inhabited by some half a million Slovenes and Croats, who would be made subject to a brutal policy of Italianization from the 1920s onwards. This would, in many ways, be a laboratory for many methods employed by Italian fascists when the rest of Yugoslavia fell in 1941. It was but the first of the ex-Habsburg Slavs' sacrifices to the unity of the new state.21

The Serbian success soon proved illusory. Serbia suffered appalling loses in the First World War - as much as forty percent of its armed forces and approximately twenty five percent of the total population had perished by the time the guns fell silent. This weakened state had to control vast swathes of territory populated by peoples not always eager to accept Belgrade's hegemony. Furthermore, the tendency of the new postwar government to see the Serbs as the natural leaders of the southern Slavs exacerbated internal tensions. Its internal disunity ensured

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Yugoslavia's failure both to establish a functional state during the post-war years and to quell ethnic unrest in Kosovo and Bosnia. The ethnic Serbs were scattered across the land as well, which both gave them influence beyond the borders of the old Serbia and further alienated their non-Serb neighbors. The new constitution declared only the Slovenes, Serbs and Croats as deserving statehood. It was passed with a very narrow majority, which included the Bosnians, who were promised compensation for past disposessions. Despite seemingly creating a unified state, the constitution added ethnic and religious dissent to a state already marred by political ineptitude.22

Soon after the unification Svetozar Pribicevic, the leader of the Croatian Serbs, commenced a relentless policy of centralization, which would contribute to the growing resentment of the ex-Habsburg Slavs. As a consequence, postwar Yugoslavia ultimately came to consist of Serbia proper, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and Dalmatia. The old Habsburg realms were hit the hardest by these measures. These lands contributed the greatest percentage of the new state's tax income, while losing the most from the heavy-handed policies of Belgrade. Serbians constituted only twenty three percent of the total population, yet as a result of both preferential treatment and the genuine need to rebuild Serbia, as much as seventy nine percent of tax income was spent in Serbia proper. The domination of the central government and the military by the Serbs, the prevalence of nepotism, corruption and outright cleptocracy further aggravated the situation. The administrative division of the new state was highly artificial and was designed to maximize Serbian influence in elections and referendums. Furthermore, the chaos of pseudo-democracy and constantly shifting inter-party alliances, which were never strong enough to introduce much-needed reforms, prevented the state from functioning properly. The politics of interwar Yugoslavia was thus a parody of an effective parliamentary government, as little was

22 Benson, Yugoslavia, pp 21, 30-37.
below nationalist Serbian and multi-ethnic federalist parties' dignity when it came to trying to take one another down. Yugoslav society itself was largely composed of peasants, incapable of participating in a truly involved, mature democracy. The rise of populist peasant parties on both sides, such as Stjepan Radic's People's Peasant Party, superficially indicated the rise of an all-inclusive democracy. However, it was both a symptom and a cause of the dysfunctional political system and an overall lack of vision, as the uneducated, peasant electorate was incapable of an informed, responsible participation in political life. The constant political malaise, in addition to Yugoslavia's geographical location and erratic, inefficient industrialization further contributed to the country's political and economic marginalization during the interwar years.23

Compounding this rather bleak picture, lands beyond old Serbia were experiencing their own problems. Croatia fared relatively well, as Zagreb had become the commercial hub of the newly-formed Yugoslavia, and traded extensively with Austria and Hungary, who were all too eager to purchase Croatian livestock and cereals. This, however, exacerbated tensions with the economically ruined Serbia, which was under the constant threat of hunger, and had to deal with Serbs formerly inhabiting the defunct Austria-Hungary, who had been tremendously brutalized and persecuted by Bosnian and Croatian members of an Austrian militia during the war. The Muslim populations were justifiably afraid of the new order. Those in Bosnia dreaded reprisals from their erstwhile Serbian victims on one hand, and of marginalization by the new state on the other. The Kosovar Albanians' situation was far more desperate, as the Serbs perceived them as culturally and linguistically alien, and persecuted them by denying them religious freedom and outlawing their language. As a result, the annexed territories were in a state of a constant armed rebellion.24

23 Magas, Croatia, pp. 512-13, Benson, Yugoslavia, p. 46.
24 Benson, Yugoslavia, p. 29, p. 46.
Another divisive issue was the incoherence between contribution, needs and the division of power. Habsburg lands had long been a part of the organic trade system of the former Austria-Hungary, which continued on despite the dissolution of the state. These lands also possessed the infrastructure, industry and people who had the know-how which Serbia desperately needed to rebuild and modernize. The Croats and the other ex-Habsburg Slavs did and sacrificed much more towards the creation of Yugoslavia than their Belgrade-aligned counterparts. Conversely, Serbia responded with a fatal combination of weakness and arrogance; while Belgrade intended to build a state dominated by Serbia, it lacked the numbers, power and expertise needed to do so. Unlike Prussia in the united Germany, Serbia was too weak to completely dominate the state. Belgrade, through its stubborn policies and the incompetence of its officials, squandered both the crucial material contribution and the goodwill of the ex-Habsburg peoples. Many factors coincided to make Yugoslavia the failure it became in the end, but Serbian obstinacy could have been the most decisive of them.

On 6 January 1929, King Aleksandar Karadjordjevic established a royal dictatorship to break the parliamentary stalemate and pave the way towards the new Yugoslavia. He envisioned a new, 'Yugoslav' national identity, free from the burdens of old national, ethnic and religious loyalties. Imposing national identities by decree, however, is always fraught with danger. Directing such a policy at peoples vehement to maintain their own cultures only strengthened their resolve to resist. Moreover, it greatly contributed towards creating the basis of the chaos that would befall Yugoslavia in the wake of the German invasion. Aleksandar’s heavy-handedness ended up uniting the hitherto bitterly divided Yugoslav opposition against someone they saw, ironically, as the symbol of Serbian tyranny, especially as the king reverted to the policy of establishing central

control by Serbian supremacy. As a consequence of Aleksandar’s reign numerous political
dissidents sought refuge in neighboring states. The Croatian right-wing politician Ante Pavelic was
one of their number. He found his sanctuary in Mussolini’s Italy, where he founded the extreme-
right wing Ustasha movement. While neither the organization nor its leader were well-known in
the early 1930s, the seeds had thus been sown for much sectarian violence in the future
Independent Croatian State. The Ustasha, meanwhile, gained 'expertise' by launching limited-
scale attacks on the Yugoslav lands from their outposts in Italy and Hungary from as early as 1932.
Their crowning 'achievement' came in February 1934 during King Aleksandar’s visit to Marseille, 
when Hungary-based Ustasha agents assassinated the monarch and the French Foreign
Minister.27 Hungary was merely reprimanded, and long-term response never went beyond vague
promises of anti-terrorist measures.28 This episode revealed Yugoslavia's complete lack of
diplomatic clout.

King Aleksandar’s dictatorship lasted until September 1931, when it was replaced by another
round of bogus democracy. This partially reflected the overall crisis of European democracy, but
unlike elsewhere, Yugoslavia did not succumb to extreme political ideologies.29 This was another
factor which contributed towards the weak, disjointed character of the Yugoslav state. Belgrade’s
clumsy attempt to dominate the state was one of the reasons why Yugoslavia never developed a
true democracy. On the other hand, despite the quasi-fascist tendencies of Milan Stojadinovic,
the premier in the crucial years 1934-39, Yugoslavia never became an iron-fisted dictatorship,
either. The net result was a dysfunctional political system which was authoritarian enough to
alienate non-Serbs, but not strong enough to quash dissent. This dissent continued to grow and

27 Benson, Yugoslavia, pp 53, 56, 57, Christopher Ailsby (2004), Hitler’s Renegades: Foreign Nationals in the Service of
the Third Reich (Staplehurst: Spellmount), p. 152.
468.
29 Djokic, Nationalism, Myth and Reinterpretation of History, p. 74.
eventually contributed towards the complete demoralization of non-Serb troops during the German invasion of 1941.

Nevertheless, despite the internal chaos, Yugoslavia's foreign policy was relatively consistent. Flirtations with Europe's dictators were a major part of a sustained effort to retain political neutrality. Stojadinovic sent help to General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War and flirted with both Berlin and Rome for this reason. Belgrade signed a commercial treaty with Herman Goering in 1934 to establish closer relations with the Third Reich. Yugoslavia's efforts bore fruit, as shortly thereafter Hitler guaranteed Belgrade's safety from Italian aggression.30 Yugoslavia also imposed a trade embargo on Italy after its attack on Ethiopia in 1935 and maintained friendly relations with France. Then, in 1937, Belgrade signed a treaty of friendship with Mussolini.31 Taken as a whole, Yugoslavia's foreign policy was a desperate attempt to maintain neutrality in the midst of a potentially hostile Europe.

One of Yugoslavia's most protectionist acts in this respect was the signing of the Balkan Pact along with Greece, Romania and Turkey on 9 February 1934.32 The pact itself was intended to forestall the ambitions of revisionist states in Southern Europe, in particular Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary, especially as the League of Nations seemed disinterested in the fate of small nations. It was particularly vital for Yugoslavia, which was the target of Italian, Bulgarian and Hungarian territorial claims.33 The very necessity of such a pact, however, only underscored the inherent weakness of individual Balkan states and their need to stand together to have a degree of protection against revisionist powers. The pact was further weakened by being a strictly inter-

31 Benson, Yugoslavia, pp 57-62.
Balkan affair, and not a part of a broader collective security arrangement. As such, it remained a league of weaklings right up until the Second World War, when it was quickly superseded by bilateral relations of member states with the Third Reich, bringing an end to the very notion of collective Balkan security.\textsuperscript{34}

The internal fragmentation and a series of incompetent governments prevented Yugoslavia from effectively recovering from the Great War and strengthening its position. The 'Yugoslav' national identity never came to be due to conflicting visions of the new state and divisions along ethnic, religious and socio-economic lines. Serbian nationalism and the construction of a multi-national state based on the principle of equality were mutually incompatible. Authoritarian politics devoid of visionary, strong leaders further ensured Yugoslavia would keep going in violent circles, squandering its potential. This would later contribute towards the country's swift collapse in the wake of the German invasion of 1941, and the bitter guerrilla war that followed. Still, even truly united, Yugoslavia would have been too weak to influence 1930s European history in any meaningful way. It also did much to maintain neutrality in a world which had little tolerance for it. Thus, the chief mistake of the Yugoslav state in the interwar period was not the failure to use its meager international stature to influence the course of events, but the failure to put its own house in order to prepare for the gathering storm. When reckoning came, Yugoslavia was found truly wanting.

\textsuperscript{34} Turkes, \textit{The Balkan Pact}, p. 139.
Chapter 2: A House of Cards: Yugoslavia on the Eve of the Second World War

Part I: An Uneasy Balance

Was the brutal conquest, occupation and fragmentation of Yugoslavia during the Second World War inevitable? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to identify the root causes of Yugoslavia's collapse. In the broadest sense, the greatest strategic cause of Yugoslavia's fall was the outbreak of the Second World War, which began as a consequence of a complex interplay of factors, none of which Yugoslavia, even strong and united, would have been unable to influence. It was a fact that even Yugoslav contemporaries realized, and, consequently, Yugoslavia did much to steer clear of international conflicts during the 1930s.35

While it is hardly important to Europe's march to war, considering Hitler's brooding, anti-Slav rhetoric, the brutal nature of the German occupation of Southern and Eastern Europe, and the subsequent invasion of the Soviet Union it is tempting to see the conquest of Yugoslavia as a part of a wider anti-Slavic program emanating from Berlin. However, Hitler's approach to several Slavic nations (specifically, Slovaks and Croats, both of which were allowed to establish their own client states), and his foreign policy towards Yugoslavia itself refute this view. While Hitler's ultimate goal was the subjugation of the Balkans as a part of his preparations for Operation Barbarossa, he had had no desire to invade, nor could he afford to in the early phase of his rule. During the early 1930s, the German armed forces were still a shadow of their former glory. In fact, Hitler and his generals assumed Germany would be prepared for a 'general war' only sometime in 1943. Furthermore, while certainly committed to expansion, Hitler was also highly opportunistic, and

often far less doctrinaire than is generally assumed. As a result, he chose to play a game of diplomatic advance-and-retreat before committing Germany to an all-out war.36

The Third Reich’s pre-war relations with Yugoslavia reflected this attitude. Hitler wished to establish solid relations with Yugoslavia from as early as 1933, and went to considerable lengths to placate Belgrade while the Reich was still weak. Eager to maintain good relations with the Belgrade government, the Fuehrer personally forbade the publication of explicitly anti-Yugoslav materials which were being disseminated by Ante Pavelic and other Croatian exiles.37 At the same time, in the opening years of the Third Reich Hitler avoided any binding commitments to Yugoslavia or any other state. In the convoluted mosaic of twentieth century European irredentism, Yugoslavia was a particularly egregious prospect. It faced territorial claims from Italy, which had already annexed Istria in the aftermath of the First World War and now hungered for the rest of Dalmatia. Bulgaria was embittered by the loss of territory in the Second Balkan War and the First World War, while Hungary was eager to reclaim its former imperial lands.38 As a result, siding too firmly with Yugoslavia might have compelled the Germans to assist it against its revisionist neighbors when the Reich was still loathe to stir things up. Furthermore, Germany, just like Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria, was a revisionist state. Yugoslavia’s neighbors were thus potential allies in the forthcoming showdown with the post-Versailles order. Antagonizing them over Yugoslavia was not in Germany's best interest. Thus, for the first years of his rule Hitler maintained what might be described as a posture of quasi-benevolent neutrality and correct, if calculated bilateral relations with Yugoslavia. Consequently, Germany avoided involvement in the

territorial squabbles that emerged between Mussolini and the Yugoslav government in the 1930s.\(^3\)

Despite his superficial benevolence, Hitler’s true intention was to turn Yugoslavia into a German economic satellite through an intricate web of trade agreements. He had mostly succeeded in doing this by the end of the decade. This had the double effect of securing his flank and gaining a pseudo-neutral trading partner in case of war.\(^4\) As he strongly believed in psychological advantage, the Fuehrer never missed an opportunity for a propaganda coup, either. When King Aleksandar was assassinated by an Ustasha extremist in 1934, Goering attended his funeral as the Reich representative. His visit was further boosted by sympathetic obituaries in the German press. If we are to believe Viktor von Heeren, the German Ambassador to Yugoslavia until the 1941 invasion, this won Germany considerable popularity both among the general public and with Prince Regent Paul himself.\(^4\)

During the rule of Milan Stojadinovic, the notoriously unpredictable Yugoslav Prime Minister in the years 1934-39, attempts were made to tie Yugoslavia even closer to the Reich. Superficially, there was a considerable basis for closer cooperation with the contemporary dictators. Stojadinovic admired what he perceived to be the unity and order of Nazi Germany, and maintained good relations with Mussolini at a time when hardly anybody appreciated the Italian dictator’s antics. When Austria briefly contemplated the return of the Habsburgs, if only in a private capacity, the Serbian government proposed an undefined joint military action with the


Germans to prevent a potential Habsburg takeover. At this point the Wehrmacht was still too weak to risk a general war, so it was likely a case of bluff and saber-rattling. The point remains, however, that Yugoslavia and the Reich had common interests in Central-Eastern Europe, and were not fundamentally at odds.

1936 was a watershed year in German-Yugoslav relations. Following the reoccupation of the Rhineland, the relationship between Germany and the smaller European states became increasingly unequal. As German power continued to grow, the Reich's policy towards Yugoslavia transformed into what might best be termed contemptuous pragmatism. At the end of 1936, the German Foreign Minister, Constantin von Neurath, was informed that Stojadinovic and Prince Regent Paul were willing to continue the rapprochement with Germany. An otherwise unremarkable statement becomes striking through the vocabulary employed. The message stated that Belgrade would do 'nothing to anger Germany'. It was far from an isolated incident or a case of excessive eagerness to please on Yugoslavia's behalf. By early 1938 Germany had become Yugoslavia's most important trading partner. A lengthy conversation between Stojadinovic and Hitler on 17 January 1938 is highly revealing in this respect. Over the course of the visit, Stojadinovic promised Hitler that Yugoslavia would not join any anti-German alliances. Hitler, while superficially cordial, stated in no uncertain terms that 'Germany would not support anything that was not in German interest'. The implications were clear. The Fuehrer would only support Yugoslavia as long as it fell in line with German interests. As a corollary, the Reich would not hesitate to punish any slight, real or perceived.

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This was not the end. Each successful diplomatic coup by Germany increased its influence over neighboring states, which established a vicious cycle. The stronger the Reich became, the more pressure it exercised over its neighbors. The more pressure it exercised, the more they yielded, and the stronger the Reich became as a result. When Germany annexed Austria in 1938, it gained a land border with Yugoslavia, and with it, a new means of pressure.\footnote{Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, p. 168, Rich, Hitler’s War Aims, p. 101.} Eager to please, Stojadinovic and the Yugoslav press praised the Anschluss, whilst steering clear of siding too firmly with Germany. Despite Stojadinovic’s talk of continued rapprochement and at least, superficially, common interests in some areas, closer ties with Germany were undesirable to Belgrade. At the core of Yugoslav foreign policy was the principle of neutrality and careful compromise. Yugoslavia had already seized sizeable territory in the wake of the First World War and, remembering the harsh Austrian occupation of Serbia, was unwilling to become involved in another conflict. Thus Belgrade was unwilling to align too closely with Berlin in the last years before the war.\footnote{Ian Kershaw (2009), Hitler (London: Penguin Group), p. 487.}

The fate of Stojadinovic was an indication of this. As the Prime Minister’s quasi-fascist tendencies and sympathy for the Axis powers grew excessive, he became a liability for the Prince Regent Paul, who eventually forced the former’s resignation. Dragisa Cvetkovic was appointed to head the new government on 5 February 1939. The change was mostly motivated by the desperate need to conclude some sort of agreement with the Croats in the light of the grim international situation and to put the country in order. On 20 August, the Cvetkovic-Macek Agreement was signed, which established the Croat Banovina. It granted the Croats a form of autonomy they had yearned for. It came too late, however, to make any meaningful difference in the greater scheme of things. The internal disunity of the country, which would turn into
bloodshed upon the collapse of the central authority was a product of decades of tensions and mismanagement. It was not something which could be fixed overnight. However, the necessity of strengthening the central state after the Nazi invasion of Poland ensured that no meaningful social reform was possible, as Belgrade became focused on mere survival. As Germany established its hegemony in Western and Central Europe, Yugoslavia yielded to Hitler on several key points, from economic matters to its treatment of Yugoslav Jews. Despite Stojadinovic's dismissal, the policy of neutrality was nearing its demise, with the fires of ethnic discontent burning ever bright.47

Yugoslavia's policy of neutrality had been contingent upon the relative balance of power in Europe, which had been destroyed by Germany's triumph over France. By 1940, Yugoslavia had all but become an economic satellite of the Third Reich, and the maintenance of good relations with Germany was a necessity of national survival. The trade agreements that had been

Figure 1: German Supremacy in Europe. Yugoslavia had been surrounded by potentially hostile states by March 1941.

established between Germany and Yugoslavia since 1939 required the latter to supply most of its raw materials to the Reich. Germany further pressured Yugoslavia with vague, abortive promises of arms deliveries. This had the double effect of preventing the Southern state from purchasing meaningful quantities of arms from other powers whilst tying it closer to Hitler. Owing to Yugoslavia’s usefulness to the Reich the former received a form of conditional protection from local irredentist states- Bulgaria, Hungary and Italy. It also introduced an effective leverage - either Yugoslavia would cooperate with the Reich, or it might face almost all its neighbors in a hopeless conflict. Ironically, until 6 April 1941 Germany was the sole reliable guarantor of Yugoslavia’s territorial integrity, if not complete sovereignty.49

Hitler did not want to become involved in other conflicts before removing the Soviet Union from the equation. He had gone to considerable lengths to placate Stalin by advising his Romanian allies to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the Soviets. At the same time, the Fuehrer believed the Reich needed its southern flank secured before embarking upon Operation Barbarossa. For that purpose, he had sent a division of German troops to occupy the Ploesti oil fields in Romania and deployed some fighters on Romanian soil to protect his prize from potential British and Soviet airstrikes. He further consolidated his position when Hungary, Romania and Slovakia joined the Tripartite Pact in November 1940. Bulgaria did so on 1 March 1941.50 Yugoslavia had become encircled. The only neighbor not yet involved in the Axis was Greece, which was already at war with Italy and would soon be subjected to a round of the now-perfected German Blitzkrieg. In order to complete his domination of the Balkans, in early 1941 Hitler subjected the Yugoslav government to increased pressure to join the Tripartite Pact. When Cvetkovic came to Germany for an official visit, he became a target of sustained carrot-and-stick

49 Pavlowitch, Hitler’s New Disorder, pp 8-9.
50 Ian Kershaw, Hitler, p. 585.
entreaties, first by the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, then by Hitler himself. Ribbentrop regaled Cvetkovic with a spiel about the forthcoming attack on Greece and its general implications to every state which might dream about upsetting the German 'New Order'. He also offered a rather cheery, if not entirely genuine picture of long-term German-Yugoslav trade and postwar prosperity. Hitler was, if anything, even blunter than the pompous Foreign Minister. When Cvetkovic visited him, the Fuehrer boasted about the might of the German war machine, with not-so-subtle hints about the forthcoming Operation Barbarossa. He also tempted Cvetkovic with Salonika as a possible reward for Yugoslavia's accession to the Tripartite Pact. The implications of both conversations were clear - there would be safety and additional rewards for submission, while resistance would leave Yugoslavia out of the New Order at the very best, and see its destruction at the very worst.51

Prince Regent Paul himself secretly visited Hitler at the Berghof shortly after the Yugoslav Prime Minister. Just like Cvetkovic before him, he was treated to a combination of thinly-veiled threats and promises. This time, Hitler did not even demand that the Yugoslav army join the forthcoming assault on Greece. The prospect of joining the Pact appeared, if anything, to be the lesser evil.52 The problem facing Paul was the contradiction between the necessity of foreign policy and popular sentiment. An alliance with Germany would be extremely unpopular with the Serbs. Neutrality, however, had long since stopped being a realistic option. Britain preferred to use Yugoslavia to tie down the Axis forces, preferably by fighting the Italian occupation troops in Albania. Hitler, on the other hand, hoped to secure Yugoslavia's closer cooperation before the attack on the Soviet Union, especially since all of Yugoslavia's neighbors save for Greece had joined the Tripartite Pact. The Serbian public was sympathetic towards France and Britain, but the

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former had been thoroughly defeated, while the latter was incapable of offering meaningful assistance, as future events would demonstrate.\(^{53}\) The Yugoslav government tried to stall for time, but under increasing German pressure it eventually decided to yield. The Pact accession protocol the Yugoslavs signed on 25 March 1941 contained riders and secret annexes which had not been offered to other members. Specifically, it assured the Yugoslavs that Axis troops would not use Yugoslav airfields, roads and railways, and that Belgrade's interest in the Aegean (specifically, the port of Salonika) would be 'taken under consideration.'\(^{54}\) The secret notes also stated Yugoslavia's participation in the forthcoming attack on Greece would not be required. No other state acceding to the Pact had received such special treatment. This implies the Reich's particularly strong desire to tie Yugoslavia close to the Axis, but not to destroy it. Nevertheless, according to the Reich's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler described the Yugoslavs' behavior at the signing of the Pact as truly funerary, thus indicating that to Belgrade's thinking, the Pact was a necessary evil. Judging from the anti-German sentiment among the Serbian public, this assessment was not too far off the mark.\(^{55}\)

These factors indicate that Hitler was far from eager to go to war against Yugoslavia. He cared more to prevent Yugoslavia from falling into British hands than to secure its active military cooperation. The invasion of Yugoslavia, therefore, had its origins not in a long-term policy of conquest on the part of Berlin, but in a series of unfortunate internal events. The coup of General Dusan Simovic and his backers was the crisis which marked the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia. Dusan's coup was highly spontaneous and aimed at Prince Regent Paul and the Macek-Cvetkovic Agreement, which more extreme Serbian nationalists saw as a betrayal of both the state's founding idea and Serbian interests. The coup was not in itself aimed against Germany,

\(^{53}\) Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder*, p. 11.
though the adherence to the Pact was the last straw for many Serb nationalists. There was no
direct involvement in the coup by the British, but their previous communications might have
contributed to the decision to launch it. Because of the vague nature of the British messages,
some of the plotters came to believe that British aid would be forthcoming in case of a conflict
with the Reich.\textsuperscript{56} Apparently, it had never occurred to the plotters that the Reich could strike
before British assistance arrived, or that Britain might be incapable of providing any. Surprised by
the coup, Prince Regent Paul lost his nerve and refused to crush it through military might. When
the desperate situation of Yugoslavia became clear, the new government, ready for anything to
save the country, promptly announced its continuing adherence to the Tripartite Pact. In a stroke
of grim irony, the putschists ended up endorsing the very policies they had rebelled against to
prevent the collapse of the country.\textsuperscript{57}

Until Simovic’s coup, Hitler had been convinced Yugoslavia would side firmly with the Anti-
Comintern Pact. He had had a love-hate relationship with the Serbs ever since the outbreak of the
First World War. He saw them as responsible for the war, and his anti-Slav bias further cemented
his lack of trust in the Serb-dominated neighbor. On the other hand, he admired the ‘brave and
warlike Serbs’\textsuperscript{58} fighting spirit, and was thus eager to ensure they would not strike at Germany or
any of its allies during Operations Marita (the invasion of Greece) and Barbarossa. The
overwhelming force used during the invasion itself proves that those were not mere words, as do
German overestimations of Yugoslavia’s capacity to resist. Nevertheless, the news of the coup
was a shock to Hitler, as Cvetkovic had only just announced Yugoslavia’s adherence to the
Tripartite Pact. Yugoslavia’s signing of the Tripartite Pact had been the crowning achievement of
Hitler’s diplomatic offensive in the Balkans. The possibility of his efforts suddenly becoming

\textsuperscript{56} Pavlowitch, \textit{Hitler’s New Disorder}, pp 15-16.
\textsuperscript{57} Magas, \textit{Croatia}, pp 543-544.
irrelevant sent the Fuehrer into one of his volcanic rages, and he immediately ordered the preparation of the Operation Strafgericht (Punishment) to 'destroy Yugoslavia militarily and as a state' in concert with the invasion of Greece. He stated in no uncertain terms that he would not even countenance declarations of loyalty from the new Yugoslav government. The exultant demonstrations of support for the coup from the Serbian public further contributed towards that decision.58

The invasion began on 6 April 1941 in true Axis style - without a declaration of war. All surrounding countries had joined the Axis, making the defense of Yugoslavia's lengthy borders untenable.59 If anything, when the Axis struck, Yugoslavia's strategic situation was even worse than that of Poland in September 1939. Overall, twenty nine German divisions participated in Marita and Strafgericht. Only ten were in action for more than six days. On 10 April, Zagreb was taken and the quasi-independent Croatia established. Belgrade fell only two days later. Only in Albania did the Yugoslav troops manage to push the Italians back.60 On the 17 April, faced with a collapse on all fronts, the Yugoslav government agreed to an unconditional surrender. The loses on both sides stood in stark contrast. Approximately 200,000 - 300,000 Yugoslav troops had been captured by the Axis, for the meager price of 558 German and 3500 Italian casualties.61

The Yugoslav response had been a far cry from the expectations of both the Reich and Belgrade. The Yugoslav army was large - 250,000 men were already mobilized for combat during the invasion, and an additional 500,000 were called up to report for duty by March 27. Only thirty

61 Pavlowitch, Hitler’s New Disorder, pp 17-20, Davies, Europe at War, pp. 91-2.
percent of these troops, however, answered the call in time, and Simovic’s coup had thrown the army command structure into turmoil. The ethnic tensions of Yugoslavia's past also came back with a vengeance. The Croats and Bosnians often surrendered after minimal resistance, unwilling to defend the country which had brought them so much grief. The Yugoslav forces were also grossly lacking in aircraft, anti-tank weapons and armor. The internal divisions, combined with Comintern, German and Ustasha propaganda further destabilized the country. Demoralized by these factors, numerous reservists never reported for duty. The invasion, which commenced with a three day bombing offensive against Belgrade, was swift and successful, and came to an end in a mere twelve days, demonstrating in a particularly brutal way both German supremacy on the continent and the folly of the Simovic coup. Lightning victories in Yugoslavia and Greece also contributed to Hitler's growing sense of his own infallibility, and further bolstered his confidence in Barbarossa's success.63

The name of the operation Strafgericht betrays a considerable part of Hitler's real intent. Despite his assurances that it was only intended to prevent the British securing a foothold in the Balkans and to protect the German flank during Barbarossa, it was also a punitive response to the insult Yugoslavia had given the conqueror of Europe. That was the reason the Wehrmacht was told to apply 'the harshest cruelty' to the Yugoslavs. Nevertheless, strategic considerations might have played a part as well. With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that the Yugoslav army was grievously unprepared for large-scale warfare. Defense is always easier than offense, and the Yugoslavs failed miserably at protecting their state, which implies they would be even more unprepared for an offensive against any Axis state. Still, in the 1940's Yugoslavia's capacity for defense was rated quite highly by both the Axis powers and Belgrade. Hitler was noted as saying

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62 Ailsby, Hitler's Renegades, p. 156.
63 Kershaw, Hitler, pp 607-8.
that it might take two to three weeks to conquer Yugoslavia if the country did not enjoy a considerable natural defense in the form of mountain ranges. This implied that the 'warlike Serbs', protected by their natural defensive barriers, would prove even more resilient foes.64 The German High Command shared Hitler’s basic assessment. It believed that the Yugoslav army would put up a respectable defense, and that it would take an equally formidable assault to overwhelm the southern state.65 The Yugoslav general staff, on the other hand, was permeated by an odd combination of pessimism and hubris. It had no illusions about Yugoslavia's chances against the German war machine. On the other hand, it grossly overrated the Yugoslav army's capacity to resist. Shortly before the Axis offensive, Prince Regent Paul was informed that the national army could hold out for two months at best. According to the Yugoslav minister of war, Yugoslavia could resist for up to six weeks, unless help arrived.66 Considering this information, it becomes understandable why Hitler would prefer to remove a reasonably threatening state from the equation before embarking upon the campaign of his life.

What was the connection between Strafgericht and Marita? Arguably, there was no direct causal link between Mussolini’s attempt to conquer Greece and Hitler’s decision to invade Yugoslavia. Italy had been a liability to the Third Reich from the beginning. Just like Germany, Italy was an expansionist state with considerable geopolitical ambitions. Likewise, imperial overstretch proved to be one of the key reasons for the Italian failure to secure its desired territory. However, the similarities must not be overstated. Mussolini entered the war only when France faced immediate collapse in June 1940, eager to secure the spoils of the conquest at a minimum cost. However, the Italians soon developed a reputation for botching almost every military campaign they had attempted. The few victories they have won had been attained at a considerable cost.

64 'Memorandum by an Official of the Foreign Minister’s Secretariat', April 7, 1941, in DGFP, Series D, Vol. XII, pp 486-487.
65 Magas, Croatia, p. 543.
66 Pavlowitch, Hitler’s New Disorder, p. 12, Magas, Croatia, p. 543.
By the time General Erwin Rommel arrived in Africa with several panzer divisions to aid Mussolini's troops, the British forces had killed or captured approximately 130,000 Italians and massive amounts of equipment in what amounted to a Stalingrad-level catastrophe long before Barbarossa.⁶⁷

Even worse, despite Rome and Berlin ostensibly being partners in their attempt to reorganize Europe, there was virtually no policy coordination on the strategic level between them.⁶⁸ Thus, Hitler occupied the Ploesti oilfields and ordered an invasion of the Soviet Union without informing Mussolini of the former. The Duce had resented Hitler's off-handed coups ever since the latter's occupation of Prague in March 1939. Mussolini's takeover of Albania shortly thereafter was largely a case of an expansionist tit-for-tat, and a premonition of things to come. As the Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano noted, Mussolini, despite his incessant bombast, was an insecure sham, deeply jealous of Hitler's successes and afraid of being left behind.⁶⁹ Mussolini's subsequent invasion was thus reflective of the deeper tensions and flaws in the Axis alliance, and not an expression of a joint strategy to subdue the Balkans. He embarked upon the Greek campaign without a clear objective besides salving some of his frustration with Hitler's policy of presenting him with fait accomplis.⁷⁰ For his part, Hitler, ever wary of the importance of symbols, knew Mussolini's embarrassing failures reflected badly on the Axis as a whole. Furthermore the Greek dictator General Metaxas' decision to allow RAF aircraft on Greek soil further aggravated Hitler, who worried incessantly about the safety of the Ploesti oil fields. For these reasons, Hitler ordered operation 'Marita' to be launched from southern Bulgaria. Its objective was to occupy at

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⁶⁸ Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Galeazzo Ciano (1947), *Ciano’s Diary* (William Heinemann Ltd), pp 523 - 524.

⁷⁰ Overy, *The Origins of the Second World War*, p. 64.
least northern Greece with the possibility of overrunning the whole country if need be. Yugoslavia did not factor into Hitler’s offensive designs at that point, though this state of affairs caused the Fuehrer to increase pressure on Yugoslavia to join the Tripartite Pact.\(^71\)

The German invasion of Yugoslavia was, therefore, not inevitable. However, judging by Hitler’s diplomatic and economic offensives in the Balkans, Yugoslavia would have likely not avoided subjugation by Germany in terms of economic ties and foreign policy. As such, was the decision to join the Tripartite Pact the right one? After all, Hitler has broken treaties and pacts with far more powerful states, most notably the Soviet Union. Dejan Djokic claims on these grounds that fighting the Third Reich was the best (if not inherently good) option for the Yugoslavs, as cooperation with Hitler would have seen their country conquered by the Soviets down the track and added to their collection of puppet states.\(^72\) This assessment, however, is questionable. First, it presupposes the inevitability of the Soviets’ ultimate victory. Granted, the Soviet Union possessed a marked material superiority to the Reich, and was highly likely to prevail in a war of attrition.\(^73\) Despite those benefits, it came close to catastrophe in 1941. The survival of Stalin’s regime that year was as much a matter of German strategic and logistical overstretch, the tenacious defense of Moscow and poor weather as of questionable decisions on the part of Hitler and Oberkommando der Wehrmacht. Thus, there was nothing predetermined about the Soviet conquest of the Balkans in 1944 and 1945. Second, even if the Soviets had triumphed in the end, the fate of Yugoslavia would hardly have been worse than it was in reality. Following the end of the war, Yugoslavia experienced a Communist takeover, followed by half a century of communist


\(^{72}\) Djokic, *Nationalism, Myth and Reinterpretation of History*, p. 88.


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dictatorship.\textsuperscript{74} Being defeated rather than 'liberated' by the Soviet Union would have likely led to a similar outcome, but without the horrors of Ustasha rule in Croatia, over a million victims of the civil war and four years of enemy occupation. Finally, the German invasion of the Soviet Union was motivated by specific strategic goals, not the dubious joy of breaking the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact for its own sake. Yugoslavia lay outside of Hitler’s intended Lebensraum, and had so far been highly submissive to the Reich. It is unlikely that Germany would have moved in to occupy the country unless the Reich’s vital interests were endangered or unless the military situation warranted it. In any case, the hypothetical Hungary-like takeover of Yugoslavia would have been far shorter than the occupation which really occurred, as the Third Reich tended to take over its allies only when they were on the brink of pulling out of the war. Germany’s allies capitulated only when invaded by either the Western Allies or the Soviet Union, which in itself precipitated the collapse of the Reich. Thus, a hypothetical German occupation of Axis-aligned Yugoslavia would have been brief indeed, and, arguably, less destructive than what really occurred.

Occupation and dismemberment, therefore, were not a foregone conclusion. Still, the existing internal divisions and side-effects of trying to impose Greater Serbia upon the entire population of Yugoslavia had sown the seeds of sectarian violence. In this respect, Yugoslavia was like a minor powder keg which needed but a few sparks to blow up. In this case, what set in motion the catastrophic chain reaction was Yugoslavia’s joining of the Tri-Partite Pact and the signing of the Macek-Cvetkovic Agreement. These events, paradoxically, were intended to protect Yugoslavia internally and externally, yet they provoked Dusan Simovic’s coup, which, despite the latter’s decision to adhere to the Pact in the end, led to the German invasion.

\textsuperscript{74} Benson, Yugoslavia, pp 86-87.
What was the impact of the Yugoslav campaign on Operation Barbarossa? Attacking the Soviet Union in April, exactly at the time of Hitler’s Balkan operation, would have been foolhardy, as the roads were still barely passable due to the rasputitsa (mud season). What about the possibility of a mid-May campaign, which was when Barbarossa was originally supposed to commence? As defeat drew near in spring 1945, Hitler claimed that the Balkan campaign had delayed Barbarossa long enough to prevent the German victory before the onset of winter. This, however, is not entirely true - the mud season had lasted unusually long in 1941, and the forces from Yugoslavia had returned swiftly and in good shape. Goebbels’ diary entry from June 16, 1941 is highly dismissive of the Soviet capacity for effective resistance. Despite his rather arrogant tone, though, the propaganda minister admitted that the Greek campaign had cost Germany ‘dearly in materiel’, and that it was the reason for Barbarossa’s delay until June 22. Hitler’s table talk of that period does not even mention the Yugoslav campaign. Indeed, the forces which had taken part in operation Marita were originally supposed to bolster Barbarossa’s southern flank. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Goebbels’ entry is that it does not mention Yugoslavia even in passing, in itself an indication of that campaign’s relative insignificance. Moreover, Stalin himself had expected the Yugoslavs to hold out for approximately two months. The swift German victory was thus an unintended shock and awe campaign, which convinced Stalin that the Wehrmacht was too powerful for the Red Army to tackle. This contributed to his order to ‘avoid any provocation in the border area’, an order that was one of the reasons for the apathetic Soviet reaction in June. Therefore, it could be argued that the German victory in Yugoslavia not only did

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77 Goebbels in his Diary (16 June 1941).

not delay Barbarossa, but that it marginally contributed towards its initial successes and Stalin's breakdown in the wake of the German invasion on 22 June 1941. Finally, the 25,000 German soldiers left behind on occupation duty in Yugoslavia were inexperienced, and thus of little use on the demanding Eastern front.79

The Yugoslav operation was over so swiftly and with such minimal losses that it is unlikely it influenced Barbarossa in any meaningful way. Furthermore, the kind of troops Hitler needed for an effective Blitzkrieg offensive were mechanized infantry and panzer divisions, none of which were left to occupy Yugoslavia. Practically all the panzer and armored infantry divisions not already engaged on the Eastern Front by December 1941 were either in action in North Africa or stationed in France, Norway and the Reich itself. The Yugoslav campaign, therefore, did not deprive Hitler of the troops he might have otherwise used elsewhere, especially around Moscow. His own conquests in the West and the need to rescue Mussolini in North Africa did. Thus, the true tragedy of the attack does lies not in the swift defeat of the Yugoslav army or the subsequent brutal occupation, but in the fact that Simovic and his plotters cannot even claim credit for derailing Barbarossa. The conquest, however, was just the beginning of Yugoslavia's torment, for while the Germans had won a brilliant military victory, they would lose the Balkan 'peace'.80

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80 Mazower, Hitler's Empire, pp. 400 - 401, Map 6.
Chapter 3: The Crucible of Occupation (1941 - 1942)

Part I: Into Chaos:

While Hitler's orders to destroy Yugoslavia both as a state and as a military power were quite clear, the fate of the Reich's new conquest, while violent and chaotic, was more nuanced than conventional wisdom suggests. After all, the destruction of Yugoslavia did not necessarily imply the destruction of its constituent parts. The Reich, seeking to sow dissent among its new enemies, had commenced a propaganda campaign even before 'Punishment' began. Nazi radio stations near the Yugoslav-Reich border had been ordered to broadcast programming emphasizing the tensions between the Serbs and the Croats, and offering sympathy to the latter.\textsuperscript{81} This blatant attempt to divide and conquer fell on fertile ground, as Serbian rule had long been unpopular among the Croats. Following Yugoslavia's collapse, the latter welcomed the Wehrmacht into

\textsuperscript{81} 'The Consul General at Zagreb to the Foreign Ministry', 3 April, 1941, in DGFP, Series D, Vol. XII, p. 436.

Figure 2 Yugoslavia dismembered by the Axis states
Zagreb, and established an independent Croatian state with the victors’ approval. This was allowed, in part, to reduce the number of troops needed for the occupation. Vladko Macek of the Peasant Party was offered to head the new government, but refused, partly because he believed in a united Yugoslavia, and partly because he had no desire to become Germany's stooge. In retrospect, this was a fatal mistake. Following Macek’s refusal to lead the puppet state the Germans installed the Italian-backed Ante Pavelic, who enjoyed minimal support, as the self-proclaimed 'Poglavnik' ('Headman') of Croatia.82

As soon as Yugoslavia officially surrendered, it faced total political and economic dismemberment by the victorious Axis. This, however, soon turned into a squabble which underlined the unstable nature of the alliance and the varying visions of each state's leader. Luca Pietromarchi, head of the Italian Armistice - Peace Cabinet believed all of Istria and Dalmatia as far as the Istrian Alps should be annexed into Italy or at least turned into de facto Italian possessions to secure Mussolini's control of the eastern Adriatic seaboard. There were only 4020 Italians living in all of Dalmatia at the time of Yugoslavia's fall. Mussolini nevertheless claimed that territory on dubious historical and pseudo-scientific basis. In contemporary Italian thought, Dalmatia was seen as intrinsically Italian, and was intended for 're-Italianization'. In light of the meager local Italian minority and the quack research employed to 'prove' the case, this would in practice mean expropriation and exile for most of the locals, and forcible Italianization for the rest. Another consideration was also to deny those territories to the nascent Independent Croatian State (NHD), which had claims to those very lands, in order to establish a regional counterbalance to Nazi Germany. Mussolini himself envisioned an extension of the puppet Albanian state into Montenegro and Kosovo. Thus, tensions between the Axis 'partners' had

82 Benson, Yugoslavia, p. 73.
begun even before the Vienna Conference, which decided the fate of the newly-conquered territories.  

Strafgericht had been a principally German victory, and as such, the Reich became the arbiter of the new Balkan order. German-occupied Serbia was soon placed under the nominal control of General Milan Nedic's collaborationist government, which, in turn, was responsible to German military authorities. On 21 April, Ribbentrop informed the Italian delegation to Vienna that the Reich's annexation of the economically developed Northern part of Slovenia was 'irreversible'. The German-annexed two thirds of Slovenia were to be 'made German again'. In practice, this amounted to the cultural and political destruction of the country, with the employment of the usual Nazi policy of expulsions and Germanization of the 'redeemable elements'. The Italians received mere scraps from the German feast. The Germans did, however, recognize Dalmatia and Montenegro as falling within the Italian sphere of influence. Moreover, Mussolini obtained the rest of Slovenia, which received quasi-autonomy within the framework of the Italian new order - the Slovene language remained in use, as did old religious and cultural institutions.

The Germans refused to mediate between Croatia and Italy, leaving Pavelic and Mussolini to their own devices, partly in an attempt to avoid distractions from the Reich's more pressing plans. The negotiations led to a compromise solution which arguably won Mussolini the worst of both worlds - Italian annexations of ethnically Croatian territories were just about substantial enough to alienate Pavelic, but not sweeping enough to turn Croatia into an economic or political slave to Italy. To further aggravate the matter, the annexed territories remained economically intertwined with the old Yugoslav lands, which remained either occupied by the Germans or incorporated into NHD. In the end, Germany annexed northern Slovenia, which was thereafter subject to a

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83 Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp 71 - 82.
85 Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp 84 - 89.
relentless Germanization drive. Italy received a vast swathe of the Dalmatian coast and took over Montenegro and non-German occupied regions of Slovenia. In addition, Italy received most of Kosovo and western Macedonia. Bosnia, Croatia and 'unattached' remnants of Slovenia were integrated into the newly-established NHD. Several other Axis vultures had also gathered over Yugoslavia’s corpse even before the Germans issued a death certificate. King Boris of Bulgaria and the Hungarian Regent Admiral Horthy visited Hitler on 19 and 24 April 1941 to ask for spoils from the fallen Yugoslavia. Horthy was eager to regain the old Habsburg lands, while the Bulgarian monarch wanted the lands Bulgaria had lost in the Second Balkan War and parts of Macedonia inhabited by the Bulgarian minority. They both duly received their intended scraps. Bulgaria was awarded eastern Macedonia and the Pirot district, while Hungary regained the northern borderlands of Baranja and Bazka.86

What was left of Serbia remained under German military occupation, mostly as a means of securing the country’s raw materials and infrastructure. This was the Germans’ modus operandi in the former Yugoslavia - to maintain an economic and political stranglehold at a minimum cost. As such, due to the demands of the Eastern front, only two under-strength divisions remained on occupation duty throughout 1941. Another method of achieving the German goal was to maintain order by proxy. To this end, the Nazis used their puppet regime under Nedic. His basic purpose was to maintain a semblance of order and cooperation in the suppression of resistance movements, in particular Tito’s Partizans. The Serbian general was not a fascist of the Vidkun Quisling persuasion. Nevertheless, he agreed to form a collaborationist government in part to prevent further harm from befalling the Serbs, and partly out of political realism. He hoped that, by cooperating with the Germans, he would be able to establish a rump, agrarian Serbia within

the Nazis' New Order. This, however, was not to be. Serbia under Nedic's leadership became an extension of the Reich in terms of the ruthless persecution of ethnic minorities. When faced with a collapse of the tenuous order as a result of the Ustasha atrocities and German reprisals against the Serbs, he attempted to resign several times, but the German occupation authorities "persuaded" him to remain in his post. As a result, he found himself between a rock and a hard place, especially as the war turned decisively against the Axis. To the Partizans and the Yugoslav government in exile the general was a traitor, while to the Germans he was an unreliable puppet, not unlike Philippe Petain in Vichy France. His belief in collaboration as the lesser evil would not save him in the end, though.

German policy in Slovenia was even more ruthless. The Nazis wanted to annex northern Slovenia as a part of their wider aim to extend the Greater German Reich in Central and Eastern Europe. To this end, Reichsfuhrer-SS Heinrich Himmler implemented an intense Germanization and expulsion program in northern Slovenia. The SS leaders estimated approximately 220,000 - 260,000 Slovenes had to be expelled to prepare the ground for "re-Germanization" of the region. Unsurprisingly, this provoked bitter resistance among the Slovenes, to which the Germans responded with typically violent repressions. Initially, the resistance failed to inflict any meaningful damage on the Germans. However, as the war situation deteriorated and the Partisan ranks grew, the Nazi administration found itself increasingly beleaguered. The expulsion program also had the unintended effect of further provoking massacres and expulsions of Serbs, as the 'undesirable' Slovenes were being resettled in NHD, thus compelling the Ustasha to "make room"

87 Ailsby, Hitler's Renegades, p. 157.

88 Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp 49 - 52, 57 - 58, Rich, The Establishment of the New Order, pp 288 - 294. According to the official Yugoslav version, Nedic killed himself by jumping out of the window when he was imprisoned and accused to treason. Regardless of whether the story is true or not, it is unlikely he would have been spared had he lived for a while longer.

for the new arrivals. This episode was an ominous precursor to the difficulties the Germans faced when they tried to introduce similar policies across the occupied Eastern territories. It was a lesson they chose to ignore at their own peril.  

The situation in the Italian sector was somewhat less extreme, but still quite grim. The Italian annexation of South-Western Slovenia had not been on the cards until the fall of Yugoslavia. It was motivated by Mussolini’s desire to create a further buffer between Germany and Italy, Fascist expansionism and the Duce’s quasi-romantic plans to recreate the ancient Roman Empire. Despite that, the annexation was a grim farce. Not even with the best intentions in the world could South-Western Slovenia be considered Italian - of the province’s 339,751 inhabitants, only 458 were Italian at the time of the annexation. Furthermore, Slovenia had formed an integrated economic whole with the rest of Yugoslavia, Croatia and Northern Slovenia in particular. As a result, the new Italian subjects became forced to purchase their own electricity, food and raw materials (largely taken over by the Reich) to an extent unseen in the old Yugoslavia. Thus, Rome found itself in possession of a high-maintenance country which would prove all but impossible to Italianize. To add to the problem, Slovenia was not immune to the latent fratricidal struggle between the Partizans and non-communist movements. Eager to win over the undecided majority, an assortment of rightist, Catholic and anti-communist movements clashed with Tito’s Partizans in autumn 1942. Approximately 9000 Partizans gathered in Slovenia and the neighboring areas, but were defeated by a joint Italian-German-Croatian offensive shortly thereafter.  

Pavelic-led Croatia was Germany’s steadfast ally, as it owned its quasi-independence to the Reich. It joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1941 and participated in the great round-

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91 Pavlowitch, *Hitler’s New Disorder*, pp 139 - 146, Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, pp 82 - 84.
up of European Jews, expelled numerous Serbs to make room for the Slovenes coming from Slovenia and sent symbolic contingents to participate in the "anti-Bolshevik crusade" on the Eastern Front. Soon after the establishment of the new state, Hitler met with Pavelic for a discussion concerning their future relations. Despite his typical assurances of 'friendship and respect', Hitler bluntly stated that the relationship between the two was primarily pragmatic, and that he hoped to develop beneficial economic ties with Croatia. On paper, there were enough similarities between the Ustasha and the Nazis to make the relationship work, at least ideologically. Pavelic's movement was an expanded version of a minor nationalist group from the immediate postwar period which had striven for the preservation of Croat national identity. His Ustasha were a particularly explosive incarnation of blood-and-land Croatian nationalism, according to which only blood and ancestry determined one's Croatian identity, staunch anti-Yugoslavism and anti-Semitism. Pavelic had participated in the parliamentary politics of interwar Yugoslavia until King Aleksandar's dictatorship forced him into exile. His goal was to build a purely 'Croatian' state, and, following the fall of Yugoslavia in 1941, the Poglavnik followed this objective with a grim combination of fervor and ruthlessness. The Ustahas' methods were reminiscent of those of the Germans in the occupied Eastern territories, and featured the full repertoire of expulsions, ethnic cleansing and concentration camps. The largest concentration and extermination camp in Jasenovac would reach levels of infamy comparable to Auschwitz. Overall, about 390,000 Serbs perished in the orgy of terror and violence. As a result, the fate of the new state quickly became irreversibly intertwined with that of the Third Reich. If the Reich won, Pavelic's regime would be safe, but the collapse of Germany would bring about an unrelenting nemesis. Pavelic's policies, however, brought more than just moral repercussions - the mass

92 'Memorandum by an Official of the Foreign Minister’s Secretariat', 9 June, 1941, in DGFP, Series D, Vol. XII, pp 977 - 981.
exodus of Serbs and other minorities became one of the key reasons for the outbreak of open rebellion across all of former Yugoslavia.94

The treaty of 18 May 1941 formally established the borders between Croatia and the new Italian provinces in Dalmatia as well as the basis for political, economic and military cooperation between the two. However, the ostensible "friendship" between them did not last long. As soon as he was firmly in the saddle, Pavelic initiated a vicious campaign of genocide, exile and forcible conversion of Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism. He lacked popular support, though. By the time he took over, he enjoyed the support of approximately 40,000 out of 6 million Croats in all of Yugoslavia. Pavelic's policies of 'national intolerance' for the sake of 'future stability' proved to be a grim joke, as by the summer of 1941 the Ustasha had already proved both barbaric and inept at maintaining law and order.95 From the outset, the very name of the Independent State of Croatia was reflective more of its founders' wishful thinking than of reality. Being a German client state, it was far from independent. Moreover, it was anything but fully Croatian since it included Bosnia-Herzegovina and sizeable ethnic minorities (in excess of forty percent of the whole population of the country), and it was hardly a functional state due to the administrative and organizational chaos instituted by the Ustasha. State-sanctioned atrocities committed by the Ustasha militia against Jews, Orthodox Serbs and members of rival Croatian movements (in particular Macek's Peasant Party) prompted the Italians to move in to restore order. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Hitler had not opposed the Ustasha pogroms of Jews and Serbs. As a result, entire villages were destroyed and the country all but descended into unprecedented

94 Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp 4-5, Davies, Europe at War, pp 350 - 351, Mazower, Hitler's Empire, pp 320, 323, 307, 365, 394.

95 'Memorandum by an Official of the Foreign Minister's Secretariat' (9 June, 1941), in DGFP, Series D, Vol. XII, pp 977 - 981. Hitler himself entreated Pavelic to pursue a policy of 'national intolerance' for the next fifty years in order to establish an undefined future 'stability'.
chaos and barbarity before the Italians and the Germans assumed control. Thus, the ramshackle state quickly degenerated into a nasty three-sided struggle for political, economic and military influence, from which only the Germans benefited. They ended up strengthening their political and economic domination of the country, essentially turning it into a quasi-protectorate policed by its Italian allies. It was all gain, with little pain sustained directly by the Reich.

As the Ustasha commenced their campaign of "ethnic cleansing", many Serbs fled to German-occupied Serbia, where they joined the nascent Chetnik movement, formally led by Colonel Dragoljub Mikhailovic. Mikhailovic was a careful, if unimaginative individual. His basic intent in the wake of the Yugoslav collapse was to maintain the legitimacy and structure of the Yugoslav state and to build up his forces in preparation for an Allied invasion. His inner circle was an eclectic group without a unified vision for post-war Yugoslavia, but they agreed on one thing - a premature uprising had to be avoided. Nevertheless, largely due to Ustasha atrocities, the Chetnik and Partizan actions soon coalesced into the first general uprising in Nazi-occupied Europe in June 1941. The measures adopted by the German occupation forces to quell the uprising were as harsh as anything the Reich had employed in Poland. Every attack on German soldiers resulted in disproportionate retribution, while the local Jews were expropriated, deprived of the right to work in numerous professions, and often simply shot. The local Serbs fared little better. In September 1941, General Franz Bohme was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the occupation troops. He intensified the reign of terror by introducing the 'hundred hostages for a single German soldier' rule. Under Bohme's rule the mass executions swiftly spiraled out of

96 Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp 185 - 203, 93-99.
97 For the sake of clarity, in this work, 'Chetnik' spelled with a capital 'C' indicates bands and individuals at least formally subordinated to Mikhailovic, while 'chetnik' spelled with a lower case 'c' indicates independent or openly collaborationist groups and individuals.
control, as the occupation troops often had to round up random male Serbs to meet absurdly high reprisal quotas set by the administration. Germans in Serbia also tended to target all insurgents, regardless of their political orientation. This stands in stark opposition to the Italians, who frequently cooperated with the Chetniks against the communist Partizans and the Ustasha. On occasion, they even provided arms to their quasi-allies and fought alongside them.99

The fragile occupation order thus swiftly broke down. The first uprisings had been largely provoked by Ustasha atrocities, and were initially a decentralized and spontaneous affair. Nevertheless, two main factions soon came to dominate the latent insurrection, the still-disorganized Chetnik movement, and Tito’s Partizans. Both managed to establish a working relationship for the duration of the uprising, despite their vastly differing visions for postwar Yugoslavia. The Partizans were all-inclusive across national, gender and religious boundaries, and thus far more successful at attracting new recruits. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which dominated the Partizans, had other advantages vis-a-vis Mikhailovic and other resistance movements. To begin with, it had been outlawed under King Aleksandar’s regime and subjected to a campaign of repression. As a result it had become a disciplined organization, used to illegally operating under considerable pressure. Moreover, it was dedicated to a specific cause, which gave it a single-minded drive Mikhailovic and his backers lacked. Under Tito’s ruthless leadership, the Partizans would attack the Germans whenever and wherever they could, disregarding potential hostage executions. The hostage shooting itself contributed to the desperation of the population, as those seized by the Germans usually had nothing to do with the attacks. Under such conditions, many more would oppose the Germans, seeing that they had nothing to lose. Mikhailovic’s movement, on the other hand, was extremely fragmented, and in any case

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conserved its forces, awaiting a future Allied landing. Politically, it represented a vague nationalist Serbian option. As a result, it recruited mostly among Montenegrins and Serbians.\textsuperscript{100}

During the uprising, the military commander in Belgrade was caught off balance, and the ongoing offensive on the Eastern Front made it impossible for the Wehrmacht to transfer substantial troops to quell the uprising. This allowed Tito and Mikhailovic, who liaised throughout the conflict, to liberate considerable swaths of Serbian territory and establish a skeleton civil administration. Ultimately, the uprising was of little military value to the outcome of the Second World War, but was milked by Allied propaganda for all it was worth. London recognized Mikhailovic as the leader of the non-existent "Chetnik" movement. This move would come back to haunt the newly-promoted general when he first failed to deliver, then became the main target of the victorious communists. Britain also sent in liaison officers, which advised Mikhailovic to conserve his strength and bide his time. They were, in any case, preaching to the choir - Mikhailovic's forces had been bled dry during the uprising. Likewise, Tito's movement had been knocked out of commission for the foreseeable future. By the end of 1941, the uprising had been practically quelled by ruthless reprisals. Nevertheless, following the end of the rebellion, the 'supervisory' puppet government under Nedic proceeded to establish bilateral, quasi-formal relationships with some of the surviving Chetnik bands.\textsuperscript{101}

Following the end of the 1941 uprising, Mikhailovic chose, partially as a result of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) mission's advice, to postpone further offensive operations. Other reasons for this decision were the exhaustion of his ramshackle organization, a low likelihood of a second front in 1942, and the desire to avert further reprisals against the already brutalized Serbs. Furthermore, despite being officially endorsed in London, Mikhailovic's control

\textsuperscript{100} Benson, Yugoslavia, pp 75-77, Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp 299 - 323.
\textsuperscript{101} Mazower (2008), Hitler's Empire, pp 239 - 40, Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp 37, 63 - 67.
of scattered Chetnik bands was tenuous. In practice, every local commander was a law unto himself. This is not to say Mikhailovic was entirely impotent - by the end of 1942, he had established an effective intelligence network throughout Serbia and Montenegro, and had ongoing relations with British Intelligence. However, his status with the Germans and Nedic was ambiguous. Officially, Mikhailovic resisted both, as demonstrated by his agents' infiltration of Nedic's collaborators, and the fact that in December 1941 a bounty was offered for him. By July 1943, the bounty had reached the sum of 100,000 Reichsmarks in gold, equal to the one offered for Tito.102 Those facts hardly marked him as a collaborator. At the same time, however, some of the local commanders formally under Mikhailovic would enter temporary agreements with the 'legal' chetniks, especially against the Partizans and the Ustasha.103

In 1942 Bosnia-Herzegovina had also degenerated into a bloody quagmire of competing authorities, sectarian conflicts and dubious loyalties. The Bosnians were the most vacillating of all minorities in the former Yugoslavia, as they had committed atrocities against the Serbs, but were understandably fearful of the Ustasha. As a result, they cooperated with whoever was the most likely to provide security. The Italians failed to meet these expectations. However, the Germans proved more accommodating, establishing Muslim-only SS units, such as the SS Handschar division. While mostly used for garrison duty and anti-guerilla operations, the establishing of the unit won the Germans considerable points with the Bosnians.104 Meanwhile, Tito, having been defeated both in Serbia and in Montenegro, had moved his headquarters to Bosnia, where he again set out to ply his violent trade, partly at Moscow's behest. Bosnia-Herzegovina was formally a part of NHD, with all the attendant atrocities. The Ustasha and their Muslim allies had already managed to alienate the local Serb minority, which had thus provided an ample source of

102 In fact, the newspaper advertisement about the bounty featured both Tito and Mikhailovic on the same page.  
manpower for various chetnik groups. Tito's troops would often 'avenge' the Bosnian Muslim and Croatian atrocities through murder and pillage of their own, partly in order to win over the local Serbs and prevent them from going over to the chetniks. The Italians and the chetniks, often acting in collusion and semi-formal alliances, resisted the Ustasha and launched attacks against communist bands and strongholds. The Germans, acting together with Ustasha auxiliaries, were far more ruthless, as illustrated by the June 1942 Kozara anti-insurgent offensive, which pitted 30,000 German and Croatian forces against some 3500 Partizans. The offensive, while aimed primarily at the local 'insurgents' (in itself a vague category), led to a massive loss of life and property among the civilian population as well. The fact that even though Tito's troops numbered less than four thousand, the Germans reported 12,000 'insurgents' dead and 14,000 prisoners executed by 24 August testifies to the scale of the carnage, as does its being just one of seven anti-partisan drives the former Yugoslavia would see.\textsuperscript{105}

Meanwhile, the situation in Montenegro was equally confusing. Despite their 1941 setbacks, Tito's Partizans continued their struggle, alienating numerous Montenegrins as a result of the atrocities they had committed. Several independent groups of chetniks vied for control as well, fighting the communists and resisting the occupying Italians, who were spread too thin to establish effective control over all of Montenegro. The solution to this problem was simple - the local Italian commanders established quasi-formal, working relationships with the local chetniks. The Italians provided the chetniks with food, ammunition and limited funds in return for the latter's offensive operations against the Partizans and an agreement to leave Italian troops alone. Mikhailovic himself moved his HQ to Montenegro, and unsuccessfully tried to establish control over the wayward local chetniks, but never managed to turn them into a unified underground

army. Throughout 1942, Montenegro remained in a state of uneasy equilibrium brought about by a temporary convergence of interests. 106

Despite these setbacks and being on the run for most of 1942, Tito managed to establish his provisional government and quasi-state in parts of NHD and Bosnia. He was able to significantly increase the Partizans' numbers from 3000 - 4000 who had set off from Foca in June 1942 to about 9000 when they arrived in north-western Bosnia at the beginning of November. Several factors contributed to this turn of events. The first one was the genocidal policy of the Ustasha and the increasingly brutal German reprisals, which produced a constant stream of refugees. Tito's Partizans, while ultimately multinational, consisted primarily of Croats and Croatian Serbs, and was largely Croatia-based throughout the war. This fact belies Pavelic's claims that the Partizan forces were primarily Serb, and underscores the Ustasha failure to secure the allegiance of all of Croatian society. The second reason was the stagnation of the already loose Chetnik movement, which never achieved a substantial following among non-Serbs. Conversely, the all-inclusive nature of Tito's movement, combined with vigorous recruitment drives, gave him influence beyond a single ethnic group. The results were considerable. By the end of 1942, there were as many as 40,000 Partizans troops and auxiliaries across all of Yugoslavia. Moreover, numerous Croats, disgusted by the genocidal character of Pavelic's rule, joined Tito's movement. By the end of the war, they would make up about a third of the Peoples' Liberation Army. Finally, Tito himself remained an obscure figure for the first year and a half of the German-Italian occupation. This proved to be a blessing in disguise which prevented him from becoming an important target for the occupation authorities. 107

106 Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp 104 - 114.
Part II: An Operetta Empire

Whilst the Germans tried to Germanize Slovenia and keep Serbia under control, Mussolini plodded away, establishing his operetta empire. There was one critical difference between the Italian and Nazi variants of imperialism. Despite both being based on race as the key determinant of one's worth, Italian fascism never degenerated into the rigid, genocidal nightmare similar to that planned and partially effected by the Third Reich. Still, despite their self-proclaimed 'civilizing mission' Italian fascists never envisioned an all-inclusive super state along the lines of the Roman Empire or the Soviet Union, either. Instead, they intended to establish a rather rigid racial and cultural hierarchy of the nations they would subdue, only a small minority of which would have a chance of acquiring Italian citizenship. Italy had gained considerable experience at managing colonial and occupied territories by ruling Albania, Libya, Ethiopia and the Dodecanese in the interwar period. Each of those lands had been subjected to a different regime depending on its intended fate; Albania was a formally separate 'national entity', which was never annexed into Italy, but which was subordinate to it in all but name; a Fascist younger brother, as it were. The Dodecanese had been annexed to Italy, and subjected to a program of institutional, cultural and ideological assimilation. Italy's African possessions, on the other hand, were inhabited mostly by 'racially inferior' peoples, and thus subjected to a colonial rule typical of European empires of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Despite that, the Italian empire's chief problem was the incoherence between its ambitions and real capacities. Indeed, the formalities intended to ascertain the eligibility for Italian citizenship in the new territories commenced on 8 September 1943 - the very day Italy capitulated. The Italian plans for Empire proved ephemeral indeed.108

Mussolini had joined the Axis alliance partly in order to establish Italy's much-vaunted 'spazio vitale', partly to avoid the humiliation of belying his rhetoric, and partly out of opportunism. At the conference in Vienna on 24 April 1941, when the Germans dismembered Yugoslavia and distributed most of its lands among the Axis powers, Italy, surprisingly enough in light of its embarrassing failures, received most of the lands it had requested. Nevertheless, the division of Yugoslavia and Greece brought home the fundamental inequality of the Axis members. The new territories were there to be dispensed only thanks to the German strength of arms. It was due to the Germans' lack of desire and inability to occupy all of the Reich's new conquests as well as relative magnanimity towards their Southern ally that Italy was permitted zones of occupation at all. Still, the Italian gains came with a nasty rider. The Germans swiftly established control of the former Yugoslavia's most important economic interests. As a result, Italy experienced the worst of both worlds - as nominal overlord, it maintained a sizeable occupation force, but was unable to assume control over the state with all the benefits it might have brought. For example, Dalmatia, which the Italians gained after the German conquest, had been integrated with the larger economic unit of Yugoslavia, which, in turn, had been a German economic satellite even before the war. Those connections carried over into the New Order. Likewise, even though the Germans recognized Croatia as being within the Italian sphere of influence, they had achieved a sweeping economic penetration by the time Italy set its sight upon Croatian resources and industry. Another curse in disguise was the fact that the Reich recognized Italy as the guarantor of Croatian independence, thus making Mussolini responsible for the occupation while granting the Italians little, if any, economic benefit. The Italians left more occupation troops across the former Yugoslavia than the German four under-strength divisions that held the dismembered land throughout 1941. The Second Army, which would henceforth occupy the Italian zone, consisted of nine divisions, which represented a considerable drain on Italian strength, especially as
Mussolini's army was far smaller than Hitler's. In an extension of the trend, throughout 1942, only three under-strength German divisions guarded the German occupation zone.\textsuperscript{109}

The inherent weakness of Mussolini's occupation troops was another problem. They were not particularly mobile, stretched too thin to exert complete control over Italy's new conquests and they suffered from poor logistics. The brewing civil war in the occupied territories and the lack of unified command only exacerbated these problems. Still, the key difference between the German and Italian dispositions of troops and a veritable symbol of Italy's chief military weakness was that while ever since June 1941 the Germans committed the bulk of their troops to the Eastern front, most of the Italian troops until the fall of Mussolini in 1943 were deployed in the occupied territories. 850,000 Italian troops, which constituted about two thirds of all Italian troops abroad, were assigned to occupation duty throughout the Mediterranean. Out of this considerable number, as many as 650,000 men were defending and policing Italy's new Balkan possessions. It was a far cry from the 'eight million bayonets' Mussolini had once boasted of.\textsuperscript{110}

The Italian policy in Croatia until September 1941 was to combine a military presence with non-interference in domestic issues. It turned out to be a highly dysfunctional arrangement. Just as the Foreign Minister Ciano and the King of Italy had predicted, Italian intransigence over Dalmatia had alienated Pavelic and the Croatian nationalists who were eager to secure the Eastern Adriatic coast.\textsuperscript{111} Furthermore, the local Orthodox Serbs were appalled by the initial passivity of the Italians in the face of the Ustasha atrocities. The Italians could not sit on the fence indefinitely. Nevertheless, the showdown with the Ustasha came about not out of humanitarian considerations, but out of fears that the chaos in Croatia would spill into Italy's new Dalmatian

\textsuperscript{109} Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp21, 30 - 32, 244, Mazower, Hitler's Empire, pp 339, 345 - 348, Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp. 91 - 104.
\textsuperscript{110} Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp 130 - 136.
\textsuperscript{111} Ciano's Diary, pp 336 - 337.
lands and not-entirely unreasonable suspicions that German support was turning Croatia into a virtual Reich protectorate. This is not to say that humanitarian considerations were non-existent - many Italian officers and frontline troops did express their disgust at the Ustasha's barbaric practices. The Italian occupation, despite its pragmatic origins, led to the end of the worst Ustasha excesses. It was following the re-imposition of relative order that the Italians set about trying to win over both Croats and Serbs for anti-Communist activities.112

In light of this information it is something of a paradox that, save for death camps, Italian practices in their own zones of occupation were a scale model of the German ones. They featured the full repertoire of reprisal shootings, prisoner and transit camps and ruthless counter-insurgency tactics. Italian transit and concentration camps were set up in Slovenia, Montenegro and sectors of NHD. The conditions within these camps were appalling. Even though the Italians never actively exterminated the minorities of their ramshackle empire, the control and 'pacification' methods employed by them were a direct sequel to their practices in Abyssinia and Libya. Those methods were intended partly to terrorize the local population into submission, partly to deny the Partizans their supplies and recruitment grounds, and partly to establish the picture of Italian soldiers as every bit as ruthless as the Germans. As such, it was another paradox that they simultaneously did much to protect the local minorities. Despite the relative weakness of the Italian army, it often shielded Yugoslav Jews and Orthodox Serbs from Nazi and Ustasha genocidal actions. While Mussolini himself formally assented to Ribbentrop's demands to help round up the Jews, the army and civilian officials often acted against this, with the Duce's clandestine assent. What is even more telling is that extending Italian control into parts of the nominally independent Croatia was seen as an improvement by many locals. Nevertheless,

humanitarian considerations played little part here, as those acts of mercy were intended more to
demonstrate the Italians' independence of action vis-a-vis the Reich than to build up the myth of
the 'Good Italian'\textsuperscript{113}, which General Roatta was trying to dismantle, anyway.\textsuperscript{114}

Although there was no unified anti-Italian resistance movement in the occupied lands, the
Italians never truly won over the local governments of the occupied territories. Very often, the
line between resistance and collaboration was blurred, as a resistance movement might fight
another one with the tacit approval of the occupiers, but without accepting subordination to
them. It is worth noting that few of those quasi-auxiliaries were dedicated Fascists - most of them
cooperated with the occupation authorities out of pragmatism or in collusion rather than due to
ideological sympathies. This pseudo-collaboration commenced in late 1941, when the Italians
established contacts with Bosnian-Herzegovinian groups. Dalmatian and Slovene movements
joined the fray in the summer of 1942. The Italians' basic strategy was to divide and conquer -
they would first foment dissent among various splinter factions and buy them off with material
goods and money once the time was ripe.\textsuperscript{115}

Out of all the "assistants" to the Italians, the chetniks were the most formidable. The Italians
would enter into arrangements with them in order to avoid having to hunt down other partisan
movements by themselves, and to counter German hegemony in the occupied lands. Two main
factions of chetniks operated in the occupied country: one under the overall command of
Mikhailovic, approved by London, and another under the control of Nedic's collaborationist
government. They are a fine case study of the blurred line between collaboration and resistance,
as Mikhailovic's fighters would sometimes be officially "approved" by Nedic's government. Some

\textsuperscript{113} Mussolini and many of his generals were worried about the levity of many Italian rank-and-file troops and their often lenient treatment of the locals. In their opinion, this contrasted negatively with the Germans' reputation as fearsome, ruthless fighters, and was unbecoming of the modern-day Roman legionaries.
\textsuperscript{114} Mazower, Hitler's Empire, pp 349 - 50, 400 - 1, Burgwyn, 'General Roatta's war', pp 314 - 329.
\textsuperscript{115} Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp 299 - 323, Davies, Europe at War, pp 40, 318-319.
chetnik units could not be tamed at all, as they carried out massacres of Bosnian Muslims, partly in a belayed reprisal for the Bosnians' cooperation with Austria Hungary in the First World War. On the other hand, they protected the Serb civilian populations from the genocidal terror of Ustasha, with the approval of Italy, no less. The fragmented character of the movement makes Mikhailovic's direct responsibility for the atrocities and collaboration difficult to ascertain. What is certain, however, is that multilateral partisan activities soon degenerated into a spiral of death and terror, with no side holding the moral high ground.\textsuperscript{116}

The level and type of collaboration depended largely on the intended fate of a given territory. Dalmatia and Slovenia were intended for eventual annexation, and the local population received little opportunity for political self-expression. Since military and paramilitary groups are, generally speaking, tools designed to achieve a political or ideological goal, they were given little recognition in Southern Slovenia (stubbornly defined as belonging to Italy) and the Dalmatian coast. Several nationalist, anti-communist movements were active in Slovenia and Dalmatia, but their cooperation with the Italians was temporary and opportunistic. They intended to use the temporary leeway to eliminate Tito's Partizans before turning on their erstwhile sponsors, while the Italians were eager to quell communist activity by proxy. In any case, the movements which did collaborate with the Italians ended up committing atrocities against non-communist civilians as well, and, as a consequence, lost what little popular support they had enjoyed. The strictly pro-independence groups, willing to establish a satellite Slovenia, could not find common ground with the Italians, and 'took to the forests' or disbanded soon after the Italian takeover. In Dalmatia practically all Italian-approved movements were formally integrated with the Regio Esercito (the

Italian expeditionary force). This included a Chetnik faction commanded by Mikhailovic's representative in Dalmatia.\textsuperscript{117}

The situation in NHD was more complicated. By early 1942 it had already become clear that the Ustasha had failed as administrators. Pavelic had become the 'mayor of Zagreb, minus the suburbs'. Many local mayors had started to supply the local Partizans or chetniks with weaponry and tolerated their presence, especially since they provided a bulwark against the Ustasha. Pavelic, realizing that his policies of 'purity' and extreme nationalism were failing, tried to win over the local Muslims and Serbs, but had minimal success. The former were growing increasingly disillusioned with the Ustasha, who never defended them against the chetniks and the Partizans. The latter had been mercilessly persecuted and would not believe a single word Pavelic said. The Poglavnik dismissed some of the most extreme Ustasha and established a puppet Orthodox Church in Zagreb, but those conciliatory moves were not enough to erase bitter memories of a year of murder and pillage.\textsuperscript{118}

Thus, from September 1941 to June 1942 Croatia was under joint German-Italian occupation. Nevertheless, the situation was far from stable. A murderous free-for-all between the Ustasha, the Chetniks and Tito's communists continued, despite Italian entreaties for the former two to join forces against the Partizans. The relations between the Italians and the Pavelic government were poor, the latter claiming (not entirely without reason) that the Italians wished to dismember Croatia, and the former mistrusting the Ustasha for the murderous chaos they had instigated.

Finally, in order to establish a working relationship, the Italians and Croatians signed an agreement in June 1942, loosening the terms of the occupation, ending the conflict between the

\textsuperscript{117} Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp 299 - 323.

\textsuperscript{118} Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp 132 - 139, pp 238 - 252.
Ustasha and the Chetniks and entrusting routine administration to the Croats. The arrangement, however, almost instantly fell apart. As soon as the Italians withdrew their troops from the regions stipulated in the agreement, the murderous religious, racial, national and ideological war broke out again. Atrocities swiftly followed, thus demonstrating the need for a third party to maintain order and protect the local minorities, if only to prevent further chaos. As a result, despite being theoretically removed from the fray, the Italians introduced a vigorous drive to recruit local helpers, including non-Ustasha Croats. By 7 March 1943 these auxiliary units numbered over 30,000 men, a vast majority of them operating in Croatia. Chetnik bands constituted a large percentage of those troops. Nevertheless, despite their overall laudable role in protecting the local minorities, they just as often engaged in brutal reprisal against Catholic Croats. They also participated in campaigns against Tito's Partizans to good effect. Thus, they drew the ire of both the Ustasha and the Partizans. The Italians' attempt to get the local paramilitary movements to 'slit each others' throats' worked.\footnote{Rodogno, Fascism's European Empire, pp 185 - 203, pp 299 - 323.}

As far as the repressions against the local populations are considered, the watershed moment occurred on 1 March 1942. It was then that General Mario Roatta, CIC of the Second Army which occupied the Italian zone of occupation in the former Yugoslavia, issued Circular 3C to his troops in which he outlined the methods and purpose of anti-partisan drives. According to Roatta, the Italian presence in the occupied territories would be permanent and anti-partisan offensives were supposed to prepare the ground for Italian colonization. Again, it never envisaged a wholesale, industrialized genocide which the Nazis had already began to implement in Poland and the occupied Eastern territories, but it was entirely devoid of humanitarian considerations and was, by its nature, expansionist to the detriment of the local population. If a massive exodus, imprisonment or expulsions were to occur, all the better, as it would give the Italians the pretext...
to exile the local population or at least thoroughly suppress them. That such a policy might provoke the very actions they were hoping to prevent apparently never occurred to the Italians.120

In short, Italian policy in the Balkans was to pit one resistance movement against another, partly in order to spare Italian blood, and partly to eliminate them or at least damage their standing with their Allied backers through collaboration with the occupiers. With the Chetnicks, they largely succeeded. The former’s unwillingness to take on the occupation troops, especially in the German zone, prevented them from bolstering their nationalist credentials. Furthermore, the policy of temporary cooperation with the Italians against the Partizans largely compromised their standing, and would later play a part in Tito's collective denunciation of the Chetnicks as fascist puppets. On the other hand, the relentless war the Ustasha, Chetnicks, Italians and the Germans waged against Tito's movement proved to be a blessing in disguise for the Partizan leader. Tito would use every opportunity to attack the occupation troops, and managed to survive all the offensives his enemies launched against his Partizans. This allowed him to claim credit both for effective resistance and for his uncompromising stance towards the occupying powers, despite the fact that he had yielded to the temptation of collusion as well. This would later contribute to the Allies' decision to support Tito at Mikhailovic's expense.

Describing the relationships between the occupation authorities, their metropolitan overlords and specific resistance movements as chaotic and messy would be a massive understatement. Officially, the Germans and Croats were against any cooperation with the Chetnicks, but local commanders and realities often overrode the official directives. According to an SS General Karl Wolff, it was impossible for the German troops to occupy the whole country. Instead, they held to

cities and larger towns, thus turning the rest of the country into a sort of 'Wild South', a breeding ground for various resistance movements. Mussolini himself supported arrangements of a purely military nature with the Chetniks, in part to override German control of the conquered lands. The latter, despite theoretically being subordinated to Mikhailovic and dedicated to the restoration of a Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia, in practice had no unified chain of command. Every band's leader could, in effect, decide on what his policy would be. To further aggravate the situation, some of them were more willing to align with Nedic's collaborationist government in Belgrade or even with the Communists, despite their ostensibly nationalist and rightist credentials.\textsuperscript{121} The fragmented nature of the movement largely accounts for the fact that some Chetnik units had closely cooperated with the occupiers while the 'movement' as a whole was never aligned with the Fascists. It did not help that the word Chetnik originated from 'cete' - a generic term for a brigand band which does not by itself indicate a specific movement. Since Nedic's gendarmerie has also been known as 'chetniki', it made it easier for Tito's backers to later claim they were the only ones who had fought the Fascists, and that therefore the 'Chetniks' were the collaborators. The situation, already chaotic on the eve of the Soviet counteroffensive near Stalingrad, would fluctuate even more as the Axis lost the initiative.\textsuperscript{122}


Chapter 4: The New Order that Wasn't (1943 - 1944)

Part I: Black, White and 'Perfidious Albion'\[123\]

1943 was a critical year for both the Allies and the Axis. On 31 January 1943, Field Marshall von Paulus' Sixth Army surrendered in the ruins of Stalingrad, thus irreversibly shattering the myth of German invincibility and almost fatally wounding the Wehrmacht.\[124\] The surrender won the Soviet Union tremendous amounts of prestige, and '(gave) heart to anti-Nazi resistance movements all over Europe'.\[125\] These developments influenced both Axis and Allied strategies in the Balkans. As the tide turned, Churchill himself began to muse about attacking the 'soft underbelly' of the Axis powers. The fall of Africa compelled the Italians to increase their occupation troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina to sixteen divisions in preparation for another anti-partisan sweep. Hitler was worried about the possibility of an Allied landing in Southern Europe, and knew that the Chetniks were likely to support an Allied invasion. Consequently, General Alexander Loehr, CIC of the German forces in the Balkans, announced that the German occupation troops would disarm the Chetniks. Despite maintaining a sizeable presence in their occupation zones (about thirty divisions), the Italians folded, their only form of protest the refusal to participate in the operation. In any case, much of the Italian army had to be repositioned due to the deteriorating situation in Africa and the threat of an Allied landing in Italy. In the end, only two divisions were left in Dalmatia and a further two on the Croatian coast. It was a far cry from the previous Italian ambitions and the sizeable force Mussolini had maintained there.

Those troops, in addition to Germany's four divisions, were nevertheless only a minor a drain on Axis resources, even though the first anti-insurgent sweep of 1943 coincided with the nadir of

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\[123\] That is what the exasperated Mikhailovic called Britain when met with demand for anti-German activities he thought were uncalled for.


\[125\] Davies, *Europe*, p. 1032.
the Stalingrad crisis. Short of manpower, the Third Reich usually left overage conscripts, untrained German reservists and the forces of its equally inadequate allies on occupation duty even in the Soviet Union. It was no different in Yugoslavia. Furthermore, in the years 1941 - 1942 German occupation troops had been mostly static garrison units, unfit for mobile warfare. A vast majority of the German units in Yugoslavia were under-strength, often amounting to little more than brigades or regiments, despite being officially designated as divisions. Worse still, those quasi-divisions were often composed of older, sick or disabled men.126

It was these ill-equipped troops that the Germans, fearful of a potential Allied landing in the Balkans, had to use to wipe out the major resistance movements before this happened. In December 1942, Himmler ordered that the whole operational area be considered enemy territory, and that it be 'turned into a desert and not to spare anyone, women and children'. The civil war thus took on a new inhuman, unstoppable momentum. However, there were genuine, military reasons for the operation as well. The Partizans had become a force to be reckoned with by early 1943. General Giuseppe Pieche, head of Italian military intelligence in NHD, claimed in January that the Ustasha state was on the brink of being overrun by Tito’s forces. He was not alone in his assessment. By the end of 1942, Tito had conquered the territory the size of a small country, centered on the town of Bihac.127 The so-called Fourth Offensive, known by the Germans as Operation Weiss (White), conducted between 20 January - 15 March 1943, was supposed to dislodge the Partizans from their stronghold in Bosnia and Croatia and push the survivors further south to eradicate them. Upon the conclusion of the operation, the Chetniks would be disarmed as well. The operation employed three full German divisions, unsuspecting Chetnik auxiliaries and several additional battalions sent from the Eastern front. Italian troops also played their part as

126 Melson, German Counterinsurgency in the Balkans, pp 708, 711 - 715.
127 Magas, Croatia, pp 572 - 578.
blocking detachments to prevent Tito’s forces getting out of the intended encirclement. The operation proved to be a failure, and despite forcing Tito and his forces out of their stronghold, the Germans could not inflict a crippling defeat on their adversary. The Partizans’ retreat during Weiss was long and arduous, but never degenerated into an outright rout. Tito’s troops, while underequipped and burdened with 3000 wounded, proved quite resourceful and managed to pin down the German occupation divisions for long enough to break through to the East. Despite some mistakes on Tito’s part, the Germans failed to decapitate the Partizan leadership.

Forewarned about German intentions, Tito’s troops staged an effective fighting retreat, breaking through the Italian blockade and getting out of the Axis noose.¹²⁸

In the wake of operation Weiss, negotiations between the Partizans and the Germans regarding exchanges of prisoners commenced, which resulted in a temporary ceasefire. The Partizans used it to regroup and focus exclusively on the Chetniks for the time being. Moreover, during the negotiation sessions in Zagreb, the Partizan representatives clearly stated they would fight the British if they were to land in the Balkans. Still, it is questionable whether this would really have been the case. More likely it was a case of the Partizans telling the Germans what they wanted to hear, while getting ready for further operations. It was no different on the German side. The Wehrmacht used the negotiations to reorganize their local troops for another offensive.¹²⁹ Both sides, therefore, engaged in negotiations and temporary ceasefires for purely pragmatic reasons. The Germans and Italians were eager to let the Chetniks and the Partizans bleed each other white, while Tito wanted to get rid of Mikhailovic before the expected Allied landing in the Balkans. It was an attempt by all sides to outplay one another. Tito wanted


¹²⁹ Pavlowitch, Hitler’s New Disorder, pp 161 - 162.
Yugoslavia to be "liberated" by the Soviet Union, but at the same time he reached out for help from anybody, including the Western Allies, and certainly would not have fought them unless they turned directly against him. The temporary ceasefire was merely a breather for both sides. It was a respite the Germans used to prepare for operation Schwarz (Black).  

Operation Schwartz, conducted between 15 May and 15 June 1943, was intended to succeed where Weiss had failed. Its purpose was the elimination of all armed bands in Montenegro and Sandzak (the former Partizan base), and the capture of Mikhailovic. Milovan Djilas estimated that Schwartz pitted some 120,000 Axis troops versus 18,000 Partizans. The operation was far more successful than its predecessor, inflicting considerable losses on the Partizans and wounding Tito himself. According to Djilas, the Partizan losses numbered approximately 7000 men and women. Conversely, the Axis losses amounted to a few hundred. The German forces, including the returning Prinz Eugen SS division, which had already participated in Weiss, were thorough and merciless. Nevertheless, the Partizans never completely fell apart. Schwartz failed to knock out the communist resistance, which managed to get out of the operation's 'dead zone', albeit at the cost of abandoning their wounded to maintain maximum speed and flexibility.

What was the impact of both anti-partisan offensives on the strategic conduct of the war by Germany? Available research suggests it is unlikely the anti-insurgent drives had any identifiable impact on the Eastern Front. Manstein had achieved his winter victory in the Donets basin using the forces available at hand, while by the spring of 1943, the Germans fielded 2.7 million men on the Eastern Front, as opposed to 5.8 million Soviets, who also enjoyed a four and a half to one superiority in tanks and three to one advantage in heavy mortars and guns. The Red Army had

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130 Djilas, *Wartime*, pp 229 - 245.

also become highly mobile thanks to Lend-Lease jeeps and trucks, and had been reorganized into a modern, effective fighting force, capable of utilizing mass of infantry, tanks and artillery. Conversely, the troops engaging in anti-partisan warfare in Yugoslavia were a poor relative of the German forces on the Eastern front. They consisted mostly of security battalions and under-equipped and under-trained infantry divisions. The SS division Prinz Eugen, constituted in late 1942, was one of the few genuinely able-bodied units, but even this division had been established as a specialist unit, dealing primarily in anti-partisan operations. As such, those units would have been of little use on the Eastern Front. Furthermore, since 'Eugen' was a mountain division, it would have been of little use in the vast plains of the Ukraine or in the marshes of Belorussia. Finally, it received first-class equipment only in 1943, when the tide had already turned against the Reich. As a result, those meager forces would have not been enough to turn the tide if transferred to the Eastern front either before or after Kursk.

Moreover, the casualties and consequences of operations on both the Eastern and Italian fronts were far more detrimental to the German situation than the Nazis’ failure to take out Mikhailovic and Tito. A month after the conclusion of Schwartz, the Soviets and Germans clashed at Kursk. It was the first instance of a Blitzkrieg offensive being defeated before it reached its operational goals. The Soviet defensive victory allowed the Red Army to immediately embark upon a successful counter-offensive, which pushed the Germans beyond the Dnieper. At the same time, the Western Allies invaded and conquered Sicily. The fall of the island and the subsequent Allied invasion of the southern provinces of the country was the catalyst for Mussolini's downfall and

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132 Melson, 'German Counterinsurgency in the Balkans' pp 708, 711 - 715.
Italy's withdrawal from the war.\footnote{Finaldi, Mussolini and Italian Fascism, p. 156.} Kursk cost the Germans the initiative in the East, 50,000 men and considerable amounts of materiel, while the fall of Mussolini led to the capitulation of Hitler's principal ally in Europe. Compared to these developments, Weiss and Schwarz were mere sideshows.\footnote{Glantz, The Soviet-German War, pp 56 - 61, Beevor, The Second World War.}

However, the end of German ascendancy in the East and the new Allied foothold in Europe influenced the Allies' strategic plans. The invasion of France was being planned for summer 1944, while the restructured Red Army began to push the Wehrmacht from the vast swathes of the occupied Soviet Union. Both the Western Allies and the Soviets wanted to tie down as much of Hitler's slowly waning armies as possible. Furthermore, the Americans and the British hoped to deceive Hitler about the location of further landings. Yugoslavia seemed perfect for both purposes. To further evaluate the local resistance movements, Churchill sent in several SOE missions. Their purpose was simple. In the words of Fitzroy Maclean, an envoy to Tito's Partizans, it was his task to 'find out who was killing more Germans', and was therefore worthy of Allied assistance.\footnote{Foot, SOE, pp 216 - 222.} The Allied emissary to the Chetniks was equally blunt, stating in a moment of candor that Mikhailovic must realize that 'we (the Allies) can make or break him'. The final assessment of both movements was poles apart. Another Allied emissary, Erik Greenwood, was astonished by the Chetniks' unwillingness to engage the occupation troops. The emissaries suggested that Mikhailovic attack the Nazi-controlled copper mine in Bor and stop the traffic on the Danube. The Chetniks did not carry out either attack. Granted, at the request of the British, in the closing months of 1943 Mikhailovic's men engaged in a sustained sabotage of the local German logistical routes, but refused to attack the occupation troops head-on.\footnote{Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp. 66, 91 - 104.} It was different with Tito, whose
forces engaged the occupiers whenever possible. The SOE mission sent to their headquarters in 1943 was impressed by the level of organization and commitment to their cause, despite their own political views.\textsuperscript{138} After receiving reports from its liaison officers, the British government decided to support Tito, eventually cutting aid to the Chetniks altogether. It did not realize that Tito had initiated contact with local German officers, attempting to convince them to allow him to deal with the Chetniks without interruption. Tito, while accepting British help, was doing his best to make sure the Red Army would be the one to 'liberate' Yugoslavia and install a communist government led, of course, by Tito himself.\textsuperscript{139} In the end, though, the Allies decided to support Tito because he was far more effective than Mikhailovic. Moreover, they were careful not to antagonize Stalin, and in any case believed (or feigned to believe) that Tito, Mikhailovic and the Yugoslav government in exile could coexist in a liberated Yugoslavia. The Allies did not seem to realize there was an unbridgeable ideological gap between the various resistance movements, and that the prospect of a landing would only inspire them to try to eliminate each other before the Allies arrived.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{138} Stafford, \textit{Secret Agent}, p. 175, 180 - 186.

\textsuperscript{139} Benson, \textit{Yugoslavia}, pp 80 - 5.

\textsuperscript{140} Pavlowitch, \textit{Hitler's New Disorder}, pp 166, 189 - 190.
Epilogue: The Downfall

As a result of Mussolini’s fall from power and catastrophic setbacks on the battlefield, Italy officially capitulated on September 8 1943. Following the Italian surrender, the Partizans raced against the Germans and the Chetniks to capture Italian strongholds and the weaponry they still contained. They managed to disarm four full Italian divisions and parts of nine other. That was not their only boon. As many as 40,000 former Italian troops joined the Partizans after the fall of the Fascist government in Rome. This, in addition to the official Allied recognition, supplies they provided and the declining influence of the Chetniks allowed Tito to greatly increase his power.  

The Partizans’ ranks swelled - according to some reports, there were 110,000 of them by the end of 1943. While those numbers need to be taken with a grain of salt, as they originate from fragmentary German estimates, the implication is clear - in the eyes of the occupiers, the newly-formed Yugoslav Liberation Army had become a force to be reckoned with. Finally, in late 1943, during a Partizan conference in Bosnia a new, federal Yugoslavia was established, and Tito promptly set forth to delegitimize the royal government in exile, which he succeeded in doing by mid-1944.

As Italy dropped out of the war, Germany had to confront crises of its own. Following its failure to destroy the Soviet forces at Kursk, it found itself on the strategic defensive for the rest of the war. It kept suffering catastrophic losses in manpower and equipment which it could not hope to replace without a lengthy respite which its foes would not offer. This considerably influenced

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141 Djilas, Wartime, p. 304.

142 Benson, Yugoslavia, pp 80 - 5.

143 Magas, Croatia, p 566 - 585.

the situation in the Balkans, as the Germans found themselves stretched ever thinner. To make up for this weakness, the Reich unleashed two new SS divisions - Prinz Eugen, composed of ethnic Germans gathered from across Yugoslavia, and Handschar, composed of Bosnian Muslims and active and former Ustashas. The new commander in chief of the Adriatic Operational Area also tried to enlist the help of various chetnik bands, partly to fight the Partizans by proxy, and partly to damage Mikhailovic's standing with the Allies. With Mikhailovic, this proved to be an easy task. His influence had been overrated by all, and, while officially in charge, he was constantly faced with unsavory fait accomplis by his "subordinates". As long as he remained in the fray between the Germans, the Allies, the Italians, the Partizans and the Ustasha, it was next to impossible for Mikhailovic to conduct a balanced policy. However, while Mikhailovic's graces with the Allies and his own government diminished over time, Tito proved to be a far more resilient target. A most curious question is why did the Germans not play the anti-British cooperation proposal card to damage Tito's reputation, and by proxy sabotage the Grand Alliance? There is no conclusive evidence to answer this question, but a likely answer is that a combination of factors prevented this. The deteriorating war situation likely pushed such considerations to the background, and it is not likely any written agreement about a joint Partizan-German was ever signed, as such a document would have been too incriminating for the shrewd Partizans to risk. As a result, merely saying that Tito promised to cooperate with the Germans would most likely have been taken by the Allies for desperate propaganda, and would not have been acted upon. In any case, armed with Italian weaponry looted following the armistice of 3 September, having bolstered its numbers with new "volunteers" and ex-Italian troops and enjoying the growing confidence of the Western Allies, the Partizans had grown into a regular army by the end of 1943.145

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Despite these undeniable triumphs, the Partizans still faced a dangerous enemy. As the Soviet Juggernaut approached the pre-war borders of the Reich, Hitler grew desperate to reassert control over the Balkans. As a result of this desperation, Tito's faction came dangerously close to defeat between November 1943 and May 1944, during the final two anti-insurgent drives by Germany. Tito himself barely escaped after a German paratroopers' assault on his headquarters. The Partizans survived those final attempts at annihilating them, however, which paved the way to an important agreement with the Soviets. By Milovan Djilas' own admission, the Partizans would have been unable to take Belgrade just by themselves. Realizing this, Tito asked for Soviet assistance in the second half of 1944. The Soviets were very accommodating and Stalin agreed to support Tito with a tank corps and to equip twelve additional Partizan divisions. As victory drew near, Tito grew increasingly ruthless, staging show trials of collaborators and burning pro-chetnik villages along the way to Belgrade.146

Following the success of Operation Bagration in summer 1944, Stalin launched another strategic offensive against Hitler's Balkan allies. The Reich was retreating on all fronts, and an opportunity to repel the occupiers appeared at hand.147 Tito had agreed to allow the Red Army into Yugoslav territory in exchange for assistance in "liberating" the country. While it is unlikely Field Marshal Tolbukhin would have relented in case of Tito's refusal, the assistance of the Red Army made the Partizans' task far easier. As the Red Army embarked on its revenge against Hitler's Reich, his remaining allies faced annihilation as well. Croatia had all but fallen apart. 'The Mayor of Zagreb' realized his fate was tied to that of the Reich, and pledged unwavering support to Hitler in September 1944. The imminent end created some strange bedfellows. The Ustasha and the remains of Nedic's paramilitary forced found themselves joining forces with anti- and

146 Pavlowitch, Hitler's New Disorder, pp 215 - 238.

147 Glantz, The Soviet-German War, pp. 76 - 81.
non-communist resistance movements to prevent a Communist takeover.\textsuperscript{148} Mikhailovic, disowned by the Allies and his own King, desperately tried to reorganize his underequipped and demoralized troops and entered temporary arrangements with Nedic and the retreating Germans.\textsuperscript{149} This was all increasingly irrelevant, however, as the Germans continued to withdraw from the central and eastern Balkans, leaving their last allies to fend for themselves.

The civil war raged on, despite the Allied and Soviet endorsement of Tito. Eleven divisions, most of them second-rate, which held Croatia and the approaches to Austria and Northern Italy in 1944 and 1945, were just enough to secure the German retreat from Serbia and Greece, and would have easily crumbled if the Soviets had decided to take Zagreb. It was only due to the fact that they faced only Tito's new regular army that they were able to resist until the spring of 1945.\textsuperscript{150} The Partizans' crowning achievement came on 20 October 1944, when the combined Partizan-Soviet forces captured Belgrade, after which they finished off the remaining Chetnik forces.\textsuperscript{151} Soon thereafter Tito proclaimed the 'Democratic Federative Yugoslavia', and promptly set to convert his newly-gained military might into political power. By the end of the year, the erstwhile Partizans had formed an effective civilian administration and an army of no less than 300,000 men and women. This new Yugoslav army in a way avenged the defeat of 1941 by receiving the surrender of the German forces, comprising 300,000 men (approximately as many as had been

\textsuperscript{148} Mazower, Hitler’s Empire, p. 505.

\textsuperscript{149} Pavlowitch, Hitler’s New Disorder, pp 215 - 238.

\textsuperscript{150} Pavlowitch, Hitler’s New Disorder, pp 238 - 252.

\textsuperscript{151} Davies, Europe at War, pp 120 - 21.
captured by the Germans in 1941), in Trieste on May 15.\textsuperscript{152} Ironically, Pavelic and his inner circle outlived Hitler's Reich, as he had fled to Austria only on 6 May. The former Poglavnik proved to be a veritable moral Houdini, as he was able to spent the rest of his life first in Argentina, a refuge for many ex-Nazis and their stooges, and ultimately in Franco's Spain. Mikhailovic himself was executed in 1946 on trumped-up charges of treason. The surviving chetniks were subjected to forced marches, internment in concentration camps and executions, in part as a massive postwar reckoning, and in part to remove any potential opposition to Tito's new regime.\textsuperscript{153}


\textsuperscript{153} Magas, \textit{Croaia}, pp 577 - 578.
Conclusion

The history of both pre-war and Axis-occupied Yugoslavia is a sobering one, which illustrates the dark side of human nature. Even though the idea of Yugoslavia as an umbrella state for minor nationalities during the period of ruthless imperialism was sound, the reality proved to be a far cry from the theory. Under the incompetent rule of Serbian nationalists, the newly-formed Yugoslavia of the 1920s spent the entire interwar period going in violent circles and squandering its limited potential. While its foreign policy of neutrality was entirely defensible, it relied entirely on the goodwill of foreign powers and the skill of Yugoslav diplomats. In the fissile land which was interwar Europe, it was a shaky ground on which to build national security. Moreover, Belgrade's heavy-handed policies ended up exacerbating the very divisions it was trying to address, thus setting the state for much of the internecine violence which erupted in the wake of the German invasion of 1941.

The desperate attempts by Yugoslav politicians, especially Milan Stojadinovic, to appease the Third Reich and develop satisfactory relations with other great powers were insufficient to shield Yugoslavia from the war. Nonetheless, the Yugoslav government of the 1930s was entirely aware of its country's inherent weakness and knew it had to stay away from international conflicts. The Balkan Pact was one way to turn several minuses into a major plus. However, as Nazi Germany grew in power and established an economic and political stranglehold over the Balkan states, the Pact became increasingly irrelevant. Following the Third Reich's lightning victories over Poland in 1939 and France in 1940, the only real alternative to suicidal resistance to German supremacy was complete submission to the Nazi New Order. While the latter, epitomized by Yugoslavia's signing the of Tripartite Pact, was bad enough in its own right, the exceedingly irresponsible coup
by General Simovic and his backers provoked the German invasion of 1941. The Wehrmacht was an enemy Yugoslavia did not have a prayer against.

Swiftly defeated and subjected to an occupation largely as a result of its own internal divisions, the country swiftly sank into a mire of internecine violence. Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina came under the sway of Pavelic, a ruthless, incompetent dictator who quickly squandered his newly-won power, while the explosive combination of ideology, mass murder, reprisals and expulsions made the Balkan cauldron boil as never before. None of the sides in the civil war could claim the moral high ground, as most of them set out to fight one another by any means available, including village burnings, requisitions and mass reprisals. This made their respective causes increasingly irrelevant to the common folk who aimed primarily to survive the war and protect their meager belongings. Tito was the only leader who successfully recruited numerous supporters from among the despondent population, but even he intended primarily to seize power to realize his ideological vision of a communist Yugoslavia. The occupying powers, despite several notable attempts to put an end to the needless slaughter, mostly committed atrocities of their own, thus contributing to the overall turmoil.

Arguably, the most sobering aspect of the wartime Yugoslav history is that the German occupation and the local resistance, for all its grim intensity and the 1.5 - 2 million victims it cost, contributed little of practical value to the Allied war effort.\textsuperscript{154} The troops Germany, the only truly powerful Axis member in Europe, left on occupation duty were second rate and underequipped, and thus unfit for the Eastern Front where the fate of the war was decided. The casualties the Germans suffered during their anti-partisan drives amounted to as much as those suffered weekly or even daily during the periods of intense fighting on the Eastern Front. As a result, the

\textsuperscript{154} Weinberg, \textit{A World at Arms}, p. 894
internecine struggle in Yugoslavia had virtually no impact on the final outcome of the war. Even worse, the end of the war did not put an end to ethnic conflicts, but merely put them on hold for the duration of Tito's rule. The Yugoslav dictator himself failed to achieve the chimera of permanent Yugoslav national identity and unity. Following his death in 1980, old enmities quickly reasserted themselves. The career of Slobodan Milosevic, the most notorious of the recent Serbian chauvinists, is a sobering testament to Tito's failure to permanently unite the nationalities of Yugoslavia. Even now, the Balkan cauldron is filled to the brim with grim heritages which are likely to arouse strong emotions for the foreseeable future. Whether the contemporary inhabitants of the regions can learn from their own history and look at its lessons with detachment is not merely an academic question, but one which will determine the future of that fissile land and decide whether it will move on from the dark past into a brighter future, or remain mired in its violent past.
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