

MURDOCH UNIVERSITY

The Boiling Cauldron

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

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10/31/2013**

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution, including Murdoch.

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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.

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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.¹ 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 1941.² 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

¹ Gerhard L. Weinberg (1994), *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp 216, 219 - 221, 523 - 525.

² Andrew Nagorski, *The Greatest Battle: Stalin, Hitler, and the Desperate Struggle for Moscow that Changed the Course of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster), p. 24.

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 Partizans³ 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 Partisans' 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.