Yugoslavia During World War Two: Story of a Nation’s Fight for Freedom

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On April 6, 1941, the tragic German invasion of Yugoslavia led to the formation of the Yugoslav Partisans that rose to oppose Nazi aggression. Under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, the Partisans triumphantly resisted the Axis and set the stage for Tito’s revolutionary rule of Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia was formed at the conclusion of World War One. Yugoslavia consisted of the following republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Serbia. In 1929, a world economic crisis hit, though it didn’t impact Yugoslavia until 1932. Germany significantly factored into Yugoslavian recovery from the economic crisis as a result of the German-Yugoslav Commercial Treaty in 1934 under which Germany served as the main outlet for Yugoslavian agricultural produce. In 1936, the two countries extended this treaty to a larger scale barter agreement, where Germany traded machinery for Yugoslav agricultural products. Yugoslavia also signed friendship treaties with Italy and Bulgaria in 1937 establishing a proactive relationship.¹

In the late 1930s, when Germany began invading countries near Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia realized the possible Nazi threat. When Italy joined forces with Germany and invaded Greece in October 1940, the Nazis became even more dangerous by bringing Axis Forces directly against Yugoslav borders and surrounding Yugoslavia.²

When Hitler demanded Yugoslavia join forces with Germany, Prince Karadjordjevic acquiesced, fearing for his people’s safety. However, the people rejected the agreement, resulting in the Prince’s exile to England. Demonstrations against the agreement with Germany included popular parole: “We would rather have war than a pact, We would rather be in a grave than a slave”.\(^3\) Within a month, Hitler invaded Yugoslavia, a turning point that led to tragic circumstances for the Yugoslavian people.\(^4\)

On April 6, 1941, Germany launched a massive surprise air attack on Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, killing over 2,000 innocent civilians.\(^5\) The Yugoslavian army didn’t have capable air defense, thus resulting in significant destruction to Belgrade under the full force of the bombing attack. The threat that a ground attack could come from anywhere due to Nazi controlling outside borders forced Yugoslavia to spread the troops across the country.\(^6\)

The first of many ground assaults launched from Bulgaria on April 7, 1941; German forces crushed the Yugoslav forces while suffering only 150 deaths themselves. Over the next few days, Yugoslavia endured attacks from many bordering countries, proving too much for the Yugoslav army, which officially surrendered on April 17, 1941.\(^7\)


The Axis Powers ruled Yugoslavia by splitting the country among themselves. However, a faction of fascist Croatian nationalists, known as the Ustase, sided with Germany shortly after the occupation of Yugoslavia, and as a reward, the Ustase were granted their own Independent State of Croatia (NDH). NDH included most of former Croatia, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina and minor parts of Slovenia and Serbia.⁸

The Ustase immediately initiated genocide against the non-Croatian population, with leaders declaring in a speech delivered on July 6, 1941: “This state, our country, is only for Croats and for no one else.”⁹ Throughout July and August 1941, the Ustase terrorized the Serbian and Jewish population in the NDH, going from village to village, burning houses, churches and slaughtering innocent people. Those lucky enough to escape death were either forcibly converted to Catholicism or expelled from the NDH.¹⁰

Axis Powers established many concentration camps throughout Yugoslavia during the first few years of the occupation. The deadliest camp was Jasenovac in NDH, operated by the Ustase. Constructed in August 1941, Jasenovac imprisoned Jews, Serbs, Romas, and other Ustase targets. The camp's location by the Sava River made it easier to transport prisoners in and out, while also making it nearly impossible to escape. Over the four years of Jasenovac

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existence, more than 500,000 Serbs, Jews, Bosnians, and Romas were killed by various methods of gruesome murder.\textsuperscript{11}

The Nazis coming to power in different countries across Europe allowed terror organizations like the Ustase to control their own respective countries. The Ustase and their goal of NDH caused them to target groups like the Serbs and Jews they believed were enemies. The conjectures that only a single race, religion, and ethnic group can govern is what led to the mass atrocities of World War Two in Yugoslavia and across the most of Europe.

Amidst horrific tragedy, within a few months of Nazi occupation, resistance began to form all over Yugoslavia. At first, the uprising throughout Yugoslavia showed great morale with very little formal organization. With time, smaller groups gained additional resources, became better organized and more effective in resisting the occupation. However, the Germans in Yugoslavia would massacre 50 people per wounded and 100 people for each German soldier killed. These terrifying executions not only led to the deaths of thousands in Yugoslavia, but also reduced armed resistance due to fear from reprisals. \textsuperscript{12}

These small resistance groups would eventually form two main organized factions. One of them were Serbian nationalists, known as the Chetniks, who remained loyal to the King and gained initial British support since he had been exiled to England. For the first few months of the occupation of Yugoslavia, the Chetniks fought against the German invaders alongside the


other group, the Partisans led by Josip Broz Tito. However, later in the war, the Chetniks and Partisans fought each other while also resisting against German occupation.\textsuperscript{13}

Tito was born in 1892 into a peasant family from Croatian territory under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1913, he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Army and sent to Galicia to fight against the Russians and Serbs where he was seriously wounded in 1915.\textsuperscript{14} Tito spent several months convalescing in a Russian military hospital. Upon returning to Croatia in the 1920s, he joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) and soon advanced to the position of deputy of the Politburo of the KPJ Central Committee.\textsuperscript{15}

Tito went back to the USSR in 1935, where he served in the Communist International (Comintern). After a year with the Comintern, Tito won the confidence of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who named him Secretary-General of the KPJ, returning to Yugoslavia to rebuild the party.\textsuperscript{16}

When the Axis invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, Stalin ordered the KPJ against resistance due to the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact signed in August 1939. Stalin believed Hitler wouldn’t attack the Soviet Union. However, Stalin didn’t know that the Axis incursion into Yugoslavia was Hitler securing the southern flank prior to launching Operation Barbarossa, the imminent invasion of the USSR. When Germany attacked the USSR in June 1941, Tito called a meeting

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of the Central Committee of the KJP, which named him Military Commander.17 Tito called the people of Yugoslavia to arms with the slogan, "Death to Fascism, Freedom to the People!"18

Tito became the leader of the Partisans, a communist thinking group that hadn’t expressed strong allegiance toward former Yugoslav leadership but were fighting against the “fascist bandits and their murderous lackeys,” the Ustase.19 The prior communist organization acted as underground cells used to functioning in secrecy and with strict discipline, meaning Tito's partisans were very well-organized and extremely effective. The Yugoslav Partisan Movement initially succeed in liberating the town of Uzice and surrounding area from the invaders. Tito decided to set up partisan headquarters in Uzice, aiming not only to liberate Yugoslavia but establish the KPJ in liberated areas.20

Germany immediately realized the threat the Partisans posed, and therefore launched a series of attacks focused on exterminating them, known as the Seven Offensives. Operation Uzice, the first offensive against the Partisans, launched in September 1941. This attack pushed the Partisans out of their newly created headquarters and forced them to retreat towards Bosnia. Right after the first offensive, the Chetniks and the Partisans, with their different views, became enemies, fighting many bloody battles throughout the rest of the war.21 As referenced by author

Kosta Nikolic, the two resistance groups were “More intent on destroying each other than on fighting the common enemy.”

In November 1941, Tito declared the creation of the National Liberation Army (NOV) and later in 1942, the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ). Tito hoped to unite the people of Yugoslavia into a common cause and also gain legitimacy in the eyes of the allies for the Partisan movement. At the well documented AVNOJ meeting in Jajce, Bosnia on November 29, 1943, a temporary government outline was created, including a constitution for future Yugoslavia based on the Federation of the Republics and granting equal rights to all national minorities in the future state.

The Second Offensive came in January 1942, planning to surround the Partisan forces in what is now northeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the German army's failure to decisively engage the Partisans led to Operation Trio, the Third Offensive. German and NDH forces struck the Partisan base at Foca in Eastern Bosnia and forced the Partisans to retreat with only minimal losses. Immediately after, violent coups of Chetniks formed within their detachments in Bosnia. This caused many casualties within the Partisan troops in Bosnia along with a loss of many fighters, who joined the Chetniks.

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23 Colakovic, R. "Decisions from AVNOJ's Second Meeting." 30 Nov. 1943. Pp. 2-4


In the winter and spring of 1943, the Axis forces made multiple attempts to surround the Partisan bases in Northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina. During these maneuvers, the Partisans were forced to fight their way through weak points in the Nazi lines to avoid complete annihilation. These Nazi attacks came to be known as the Fourth and Fifth Offensives. Even though the Nazis failed their main strategy of capturing Tito and eliminating the Partisans, the Partisans suffered over 20,000 casualties over two months.26

The allies shifted their support from the Chetniks to the Partisans, as they proved more effective in fighting the Axis Powers. The British would send supplies to the Partisans usually through airdrops, providing important assistance in surviving the German Offensives and intertwined frequent skirmishes against the Ustase and the Chetniks.27

As World War Two neared its end, Germany launched two final offensives against the Partisans at the end of 1943 through June 1944. The Nazis first planned Operation Kugelblitz, but this time the Partisans were considerably larger, forcing the Nazis to spread out their troops, proving not to be effective when the Partisans were able to slip through openings in the German lines. Germany’s last attempt to destroy Tito and his Partisans, named Operation Rosselsprung, came on May 25, 1944, when a combined airborne and ground assault launched on the Partisan’s

headquarters in Drvar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tito himself, along with many others, escaped before the headquarters were bombed, making the surprise attack a failure.28

Following each German major offensive that failed to capture or eliminate Tito and his followers, the Partisans became stronger and more experienced than they were before. The Seven Offensives proved to be challenging for the Partisans as Branko Sasic, a fighter among their ranks stated: “We didn’t have good shoes and would sometimes go days at a time without food.”29 However, the Partisans were willed by Yugoslav people who believed resistance was the only alternative to death and suffering. Endurance and determination along with Tito’s leadership, exemplified the Partisans and their goal of freeing the Yugoslav people.

By 1944, after years of fighting against the Ustase, Germans, and Chetniks, the Partisans liberated most of Yugoslavia. As the Partisans continued in their fight for freedom, Allied Powers advanced across the rest of Europe along with the Red Army, which liberated many countries in Eastern Europe throughout 1944. These accomplishments gave the resistance groups in Yugoslavia a boost in morale and confidence, allowing them to push forward and free Yugoslavia from Axis rule. A final joint operation between the Partisans and the Red Army liberated Belgrade on October 20, 1944. Large scale assaults during the upcoming months by the NOV and the Red Army continued to drive out the Nazis until May 7, 1945, when Yugoslavia was finally, entirely liberated.30

28 Popovic, Predrag. "Sedam Ofanziva, Sedam Poraza Ocupatora" ["Seven Offensives, Seven Defeats for the Enemy"]. Odbrana, 1 May 2015. 30
After the liberation of Yugoslavia, Tito and Partisan leaders became the new Yugoslavian government that AVNOJ outlined in their meeting on November 29, 1943. Tito became the president of the new government, while his subordinates from the partisans formed the rest of the governing body. In order to keep Yugoslavia united, Tito banished all nationalists, including the Ustase and Chetniks, war criminals, and members of the former royal government. Tito used the secret UDBA to eliminate Nazi collaborators and to try and execute en masse members of Ustase and Chetniks, including General Draza Mihailovic, the Chetnik leader, who was executed in March 1946.  

Initially, the economy and society were collectivized in Soviet fashion by confiscating belongings and property from the wealthy, but Tito began to resent Stalin's constant meddling with his government. Stalin, unhappy with an independent Yugoslav foreign policy, tried to depose of Tito multiple times, but would not go so far as to invade Yugoslavia. Tito sent Stalin a letter during this period stating that if he continued to send assassins to Yugoslavia, Tito would reciprocate, but would need to do it only once.  

Tito’s general strategy for the years after the war had been to restore the economy of Yugoslavia, crippled by the war. In early 1947, the Yugoslav Rebuilding Plan began, keeping all economic activity closely monitored. The detailed production plan throughout Yugoslavia

limited job choices. Enterprises had required labor quotas to meet, and the strict rations controlled consumption of nearly all goods. This plan for reconstruction turned out successful, doubling Yugoslavia’s industrial output.\textsuperscript{33}

Tito continued decentralizing the economy, putting more power into the hands of workers' councils on the principle of self-management. To maintain power and Yugoslavia’s independence from the USSR, he turned to the West for financial aid. Freed to a degree of the Soviet threat, Tito’s policy of "non-engagement" developed into a policy of "nonalignment." Tito overhauled foreign policy to promote a non-aligned bloc between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Convening a meeting of 25 non-aligned states with India's Jawaharlal Nehru and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1956, a third, alternative neutral bloc was formed with Tito as First Secretary-General of the Non-Aligned Movement, which today consists of over 120 countries.\textsuperscript{34}

On the domestic front, Tito’s government maintained a balance among the different ethnic groups and nationalities of the multi-ethnic country. Yugoslavia consisted of six federal republics, six major and eighteen minor nationalities, three major religions and five primary languages. Tito’s wisdom, statesmanship and iron fist kept everyone unified. Yugoslavia’s ties with the West encouraged trade and especially summer tourism helped boost the country’s standard of living.\textsuperscript{35}

Most importantly, Josip Broz organized and led the most impactful resistance within an occupied territory in World War Two. The Partisans triumph for independence over the Nazi occupation and many resulting tragedies, following the years of fighting with utmost resilience and leadership set Yugoslavia on a path of profound success in politics, economy, and society in general. 36

On May 4, 1980, Marshal Josip Broz Tito passed, leaving the country without its sole unifying figure. Tito was the last of the World War II leaders to leave the world stage. His funeral services included delegations from 127 countries, making it the most attended funeral of a country leader in the 20th century.37 Tito’s achievements, whether controversial or glorifying, garnered the enormous respect he earned form the rest of the world.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


Another resource I used in my paper was a book with documents produced by Tito, which showcase some of his most impactful and important speeches during the war, providing me with some great quotes. Since the book consists of articles written by Tito, the information received has given me direct insight into Tito's way of thinking, allowing me to write from a different perspective.


Written by Josip Broz Tito, this original document provided me with information about the resistance in Yugoslavia during the occupation. It gave me context for the liberation of Yugoslavia, explaining how unorganized resistance movements had started forming across Yugoslavia and some of the atrocities the Nazis would commit during their rule of Yugoslavia. This source also played a key role in my research on how the Nazis were able to suppress resistances by enacting terrible reprisals.

Colakovic, R. "Decisions from AVNOJ's Second Meeting." 30 Nov. 1943.

This original document from AVNOJ's second meeting had greatly contributed to my paper, presenting information on the creation of AVNOJ and the decisions made by during their meeting. One of the most valuable choices that were made during this meeting included a future
government outline along with a constitution for postwar Yugoslavia. Tito’s main goal for the meeting had been to unite the Yugoslav people into a common cause.


Branko Sasic, the person I interviewed, was in the Yugoslavian Partisans during WW2. From this interview, I received a lot of information about the difficult conditions in Yugoslavia during the war. Mr. Sasic also talked about how they received resources from during the fighting. Overall, this Interview allowed me to understand what it was like to be alive during these hard times for the Yugoslavian people.


This book is a primary source because it is a selection written by Tito about some of his best military speeches and decisions. This source has provided me with some great information about what Tito thought about the Partisan resistance. Some of these details were the tasks of the Partisans and the oath taken by the men who fought in the Partisan resistance.

"Yugoslav Partisans Form Own Regime." The Atlanta Constitution (1881-1945), Dec 05, 1943, pp. 1. ProQuest.

Published during World War Two, this newspaper article had a lot of good information about the governing body the Partisans were creating for the territory they had triumphantly won back from the Nazis. The article also gave some of the details of a large conflict between the Nazis and Partisans along with a few surprise attacks on the Nazis by the Partisans, allowing me to notice the fighting of the resistance.
Secondary Sources


This website presented me with information about what was going on in Yugoslavia in the few months before the German invasion of Yugoslavia. The most important message I received from was the quote, "We would rather have war than a pact, We would rather be in a grave than a slave," which was shouted on the streets of Belgrade after Prince Karadjordjevic signed the Tripartite Pact.


While conducting research, I wanted to learn more about the invading German army strategy and the Yugoslavian defense plan. This source also provided Yugoslavian army weaknesses, allowing me to share reasoning for how Yugoslavia was conquered so quickly by the German invaders.


This book details the Seven Offensives and how they affected Tito and Partisans, including the many challenges they faced. I also used this book to gain knowledge about the Partisans forming the National Liberation Army, a crucial part of my paper. Jelena Batinic also
talked about the initial success of the Partisans when they liberated the town of Uzice in her book.


In order to learn more about Tito's legacy that he left, I read through this newspaper article, published on the day Tito died. The fact that Tito had kept Yugoslavia together was an amazing accomplishment due to the fact that Yugoslavia consisted of six republics, six major and 18 minor nationalities, three religions, and five major languages. This information will be crucial in my paper because it will help show how diverse Yugoslavia is and how hard it would be to keep a nation with many different views united.


This textbook about World War Two provided me with significant information about the tragic Invasion of Yugoslavia along with some context about what was happening before the war. I also read about the Partisan movement throughout the war and how it was able to grow, including the liberation of Yugoslavia and major fights that went on in Yugoslavia. I also obtained the particulars about how the Ustase were able to make the Nazis grant them their own independent state.


Throughout my research, I had read a lot about the British supporting the Partisan movement. However, no source had been as specific as this book, providing me with the most detailed description of this allegiance. Mr. Freeman had also written about the differences
between the Chetniks and the Partisans, giving the reasoning for their skirmishes later on in the war.


Another source that I used to further explain Tito’s legacy was this article published in the *Hartford Courant*. It had presented me with information about how Tito was able to implement the idea that the People of Yugoslavia are Yugoslavs first, and anything else second along with how Tito stood up to Stalin when nobody else dared to.


While writing about the tragedies occurring in Yugoslavia throughout World War Two, I had consulted this source. This website had supplied me with a large amount of information about the Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia, helping me write an important section of my paper. With this, I am able to further explain how this was a terrible tragedy for the Yugoslav people.

**Nikolic, Kosta. *Istoria Ravnogorskog Pokreta*. Edited by Dejana Ocic, Belgrade, Zavod za Udzbenike, 2014.**

This source provided me with the numbers of the casualties in Yugoslavia during the war. I also read about the three major groups that had formed in Yugoslavia and how the Partisans were able to triumph over many hardships and prevail in liberating Yugoslavia. The fact that the Chetniks had started fighting against the Partisans and the quote, “More intent on destroying each other than on fighting the common enemy,” refering to the Partisans and the Chetniks, were also very important to my paper.

To further understand the genocide in Croatia, I had read through this conference proceeding. It provided information about the tragedies going on in Yugoslavia during the Second World War. I have also used a few quotes from this source displaying the cruelty of the leaders of the Independent State of Croatia. I display this information on my paper in order to show how tragic life in the NDH during the war.


While writing my paper, I wanted to dig deeper onto the Seven Offensives, an important part of the Partisans' story. This source went into detail about each offensive, making it extremely valuable in research. Predrag Popovic also included many images in his article, helping me further understand what it was like during the time.


Geoff Swain's biography on Tito presented me with a large amount of information on Tito's entire life. However, the most important information I acquired from this book to my paper was Tito's story before he became the leader of the Partisans, providing me with Tito's military background and how he gained his passion for communism. The closing paragraph of my paper, an indescribably valuable part of my paper, was also written using this source.

One of the first sources that I had referenced was Duncan Wilson's book about Yugoslavia. It had helped me understand the context of the invasion of Yugoslavia and some information about the occupation, which was the tragedy. I learned about the several events leading up to the invasion of Yugoslavia and how the country was divided up between the axis powers during the occupation. I also read about how Tito and the new government after the war was able to restore the Yugoslavian economy. All of this was essential knowledge in showing what happened before and after the war.