

OCCUPATION AND RESISTANCE

THE BALKANS AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

By May 1941 the Germans and their Allies had occupied Yugoslavia, Albania, mainland Greece and most of the Greek Islands in the Adriatic and Aegean. With his Balkan flank secure Hitler's invasion of Russia, though critically three months later than planned, could commence. In some respects Hitler's conquest of Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece was a pyrrhic victory. It is true that whilst the major centres of population, the transport hubs and, by and large, roads and railways were under the control of the German Army the interior was unpoliced though under constant threat of German counter insurgency operations.

Yugoslavia in particular was a complex country ethnically speaking. The two main ethnic groups were the Serbs and Croats with smaller groupings of Albanians, Macedonians and Slovenes. The Serbs were followers of the Orthodox Church whilst the Croats were Catholic. There were also significant Muslim minorities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Given this ethnic mix it was not surprising that tensions were high between the communities.

Opposing the Ustase and the NDH were two main resistance groups that emerged from the occupation of Yugoslavia. The Chetniks, lead by a former Yugoslav army Colonel, Dragoljub Mihajlovic, were Monarchists and supported the Yugoslav Government in exile. Originally made up from Serbian soldiers who had served in the Yugoslav Army the Chetniks established a form of civil and military government in eastern Serbia with the aim of creating a Great Serbian state. Being Monarchist and the having the support of the exiled Government the Chetniks were the resistance group of choice for the British but Mihajlovic's policy of expelling and then in time murdering both Croats and Muslims in order to create an ethnically pure state caused British to transfer its support to Tito and his partisans. In 1945 Mihajlovic was captured, tied and then executed for crimes against humanity and treason.

Opposed to the Chetniks, the NDH and the Germans the second resistance group were the partisans under Josip Broz better known as "Tito" and leader of the outlawed Yugoslav communist party. Tito's aim was the expulsion of all Axis troops and the establishment of a communist state. During 1942 and 1943 Tito evaded the German counter offensive against his forces by movement

rather than trying to hold territory. This was successful though the areas they passed through were subject to reprisals even if they had not supported the Partisans. In September 1943 the Italians capitulated and the Partisans captured large amounts of weapons and supplies.

In October 1944, with the Russian Red Army crossing Yugoslav's eastern borders, the partisans started their own offensive against the Germans troops from southern Yugoslav and Greece withdrawing northwards into Croatia and western Serbia. On 30 October Partisan and Red Army troops liberated Belgrade, the Partisans then turning on the surviving NDH and Chetniks.

Between 1941 and 1945 an estimated 1.7 million people died in Yugoslavia and Albania. Ethnic tensions resurfaced between 1990 and 1992 and civil war ensued with a further 140,000 people losing their lives.