

Making Deals with the Enemy: Partisan - German Contacts and Prisoner Exchanges in Yugoslavia 1941- 1945

Dissertation

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Ich erkläre ehrenwörtlich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbständig angefertigt und abgefasst, und jene Personen und Institutionen, die am Zustandekommen der Forschungsdaten beteiligt waren, namentlich genannt habe. Andere als die angegebenen Quellen habe ich nicht verwendet und die den benutzten Quellen wörtlich oder inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen habe ich als solche kenntlich gemacht. Die Arbeit an der Dissertation und daraus entstandener Publikationen wurde gemäß den Regeln der „Good Scientific Practice“ durchgeführt.

Graz, am 20. Juli 2013

Gaj Trifković

Dedicated to my parents

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Abbreviations

- AVNOJ – Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije (Anti-fascist Council of People's Liberation of Yugoslavia)
- ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross
- KIA, WIA, MIA – Killed in Action, Wounded in Action, Missing in Action
- KPJ – Komunistička partija Jugoslavija (Communist Party of Yugoslavia)
- NDH – Nezavisna država Hrvatska (Independent State of Croatia)
- NOVJ – Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije (People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia)
- OSS – Office of Strategic Services
- OZAK – Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland (Operational Zone Adriatic Littoral)
- OZNA – Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda (Department for the Protection of the People)
- POW – Prisoner of War
- RSHA – Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Office)
- RSK – Russischer Schutzkorps (Russian Protective Corps)
- SA – Sturmabteilung (Storm Detachment)
- SD – Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service)
- SKOJ – Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije (Union of the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia)
- SS – Schutzstaffel (Protection Squadron)
- Supersloda – Comando Superiore Forze Armate di Slovenia e Dalmazia (High Command of the Armed Forces in Slovenia and Dalmatia, alternative designation of the 2nd Italian Army)
- ZAVNOBIH – Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Bosne i Hercegovine (State Anti-fascist Council of People's Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- ZAVNOH – Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske (State Anti-fascist Council of People's Liberation of Croatia)

Note on the use of the terms “Jäger” and “Wehrmacht”: “Jäger” (literally, “hunter”) divisions employed by the German army in Yugoslavia were a cross between infantry and mountain divisions. As the translation “light infantry” which is sometimes used in English-language works does not seem fully appropriate to me, I decided to leave the original German designation. “Wehrmacht” was the name of the armed forces of the Third Reich. It consisted of “Heer” (army, or ground forces), “Luftwaffe” (air-force) and “Kriegsmarine” (navy). In this book, the term will be used to denote the German armed forces in general. However, as the air force and the navy took a comparatively small part in the exchanges, “Wehrmacht” will sometimes stand for the ground forces alone.

Spelling and Pronunciation

All names are given in the original spelling, except geographic names with standard Anglicizations, like Belgrade (instead of “Beograd”), Syrmia (instead of “Srem/Srijem”), or Munich (instead of München).

Pronunciation guide for non-standard letters:

<u>Letter</u>	<u>Pronounced as</u>
C	“tz” in “blitz”
Č/Ć	“ch” in “chocolate”
Dž/Đ	“G” in “George”
J	“y” in “yes”
LJ	“ly” in “will you”
NJ	“ny” in “can you”
Š	“sh” in “ship”
Ž	“J” in “Jacques”

Introduction

Prisoner exchange is as old as warfare itself. Along with ransom, it was one of the few hopes for prisoners of war until the advent of modern international law. By the beginning of the 17th Century, prisoner exchange had become a recognized institute of rules and customs of war, with European states agreeing on exchange arrangements (so-called “cartels”) whenever they fought. The prime motive behind the exchange was the need to get one’s own trained soldiers back as soon as possible, but also to minimize the cost of keeping the enemy prisoners. The importance of the cartel began to fade with the French Revolutionary Wars (starting in 1792), which ushered in fundamental changes in the practices of war. The last known prisoner exchange arrangement between European states was signed during the Crimean War of 1854. Further developments in international law, aimed at granting unconditional protection to captives, and the fact that the states were now able to support large number of them, made prisoner exchanges obsolete by the early 1870s; the Hague convention of 1907 did not even mention them.¹ All these changes notwithstanding, prisoner exchange continued to be practiced whenever belligerents feared that their enemies would not be able or willing to honor international law. In the Second World War, major powers like Great Britain and Germany made exchange deals through third parties, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross or neutral countries.² Importantly, only the wounded and non-combat personnel were eligible for exchange and repatriation.³

Whereas the prisoners on all sides in the West (including North Africa and the Mediterranean) had a good chance of being taken alive and treated according to the Geneva Convention, the situation in the East and in the occupied territories was altogether different. The Nazi authorities had no intention of honoring the provisions of international law in what they saw as an ideologically motivated, life-or-death struggle with communism. In addition, members of the irregular forces were basically unprotected by contemporary law. The German armed forces knew only one way of countering guerrillas: unrestrained violence.⁴

¹ Peter H. Wilson, „Prisoners in Early-Modern European Warfare“ in: Sibylle Scheipers (Ed.), *Prisoners in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 52; Stephen C. Neff, „Prisoners of War in International law: the Nineteen Century“ in: *ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

² For the first successful British-German exchange in October 1943 see Neville Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy: Britain, Germany and politics of prisoners of war, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 162-171.

³ The Germans and the Allies exchanged able-bodied prisoners at least once, in Lorient, France in the fall of 1944: Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg?: Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44* (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2007), p. 491.

⁴ Ben Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 41-56.

Since the Germans could not be counted upon to spare their captives on humanitarian grounds, they had to be incited to do so by other means. Revenge killing of German prisoners was likely to do more harm than good; any such action would immediately provoke an even more savage response against the civilian population. The only option left to a guerrilla army was prisoner exchange.⁵

Swapping prisoners had always been a part of warfare in the Balkans. The near-perpetual, low-intensity conflict that went on in the region for centuries was a heavy burden on the comparatively small population, with every loss keenly felt. Therefore, local communities went to war with their neighbors primarily on their own terms, with little regard of how this fit the conceptions of central authorities. Frequent prisoner exchanges have been recorded between the Croatian nobles fighting for the Habsburgs and their Bosnian-Ottoman counterparts along the “Military Border” (*Militärgrenze*, or Vojna Krajina) that separated the two empires for approximately three centuries.⁶ It is also known that, at the beginning of the 19th Century, the Ottomans acquiesced to trading captives with Serbian insurgents whom they considered outlaws.⁷ The birth of nation-states in the latter half of that century introduced Western conceptions of law, but they failed to take root due to inner weaknesses and unstable political situation in the region. To make matters worse, the great powers did not help the process, by bending or even completely disregarding the rules of international law when it suited them. In 1914-1915, the Austro-Hungarian army committed numerous war crimes against Serbian civilians and captured soldiers under the pretext of fighting unlawful belligerents who broke the universally recognized rules and customs of warfare.⁸ In this atmosphere of legal uncertainty, Serbia and Austria-Hungary agreed in late 1916 to exchange sick and incapacitated soldiers through Switzerland. The success of the exchange prompted both sides to discuss exchanging able-bodied prisoners as well. Serbia was especially keen, as her manpower was severely reduced by three years of fighting. The plan foundered on the opposition of senior Allied powers, who saw no point in strengthening the Dual Monarchy with thousands of exchangees.⁹ The same patterns would be repeated three decades later. Axis

⁵ For instance, both notorious massacres of Kalavryta in Greece and Oradour-sur-Glane in France were preceded by unsuccessful attempts at prisoner exchange. Hermann Frank Meyer, *Von Wien nach Kalavryta: die blutige Spur der 117. Jäger-Division durch Serbien und Griechenland* (Möhnesee: Bibliopolis, 2002), p. 218; Robert Aitken and Marilyn Aitken, *Law Makers, Law Breakers and Uncommon Trials* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2007), p. 252.

⁶ Radoslav Lopašić, *Bihać i bihaćka krajina: mjestopisne i poviestne crtice* (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, 1890), p. 103.

⁷ Milivoje Stanković, *Prvi šumadijski partizanski odred* (Belgrade: Narodna Knjiga, 1983), pp. 26-7.

⁸ Jonathan E. Gumz, *Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 34-61.

⁹ Isidor Đuković, *Austro-ugarski ratni zarobljenici u Srbiji 1914-1915* (Belgrade: Signature, 2008), pp. 175-80.

powers would invade Yugoslavia and institute a brutal occupation with utter disregard for international law: those perceived as a threat, real or imagined, could hope for little mercy. Under these circumstances, prisoner exchange would again come into play as the only viable method of restraining the captors from taking extreme measures against their captives.¹⁰ Self-interest would once again prove a far more potent incentive than humanitarian considerations. What started as isolated cases, motivated by a spontaneous desire to save captured compatriots, soon evolved into a complex affair involving propaganda and intelligence issues, as well as political talks between two ideological arch-enemies.¹¹ The last point is particularly controversial, and is taken as proof by some authors that the Communist-led Partisans were not above collaborating with the Germans if this could further their political aims.

The records from the US National Archives will be my main source of German documents on prisoner exchange with the Partisans. These records were captured in 1945, microfilmed, and subsequently returned to archives in the Federal Republic of Germany. I was fortunate to begin writing my dissertation at the time when the documents became digitized and widely available through on-line exchange. My mentor once asked me how many German documents on prisoner exchange were to be found, on average, on a roll of microfilm (approximately 1,000 frames each). When I answered that I considered myself lucky if I found five pages with at least one sentence on the topic, my mentor's comment was the proverbial "needle in a haystack." Indeed, German primary sources on prisoner exchange with Yugoslav Partisans are fragmentary at best. This is largely due to the fact that the German army archives in Potsdam were severely damaged in a bombing raid in early 1945. Worst of all, it seems that the documents of the "Special command for prisoner exchange" in Zagreb were completely lost. For this reason, most details pertaining to the functioning of the neutral zone at Pisarovina come from Yugoslav sources. As far as the surviving army records are concerned, I got the impression that the commands exercised a degree of self-censorship, especially in the early years of the war – negotiating with Communist guerrillas, for whatever reason, was not something to brag about. The records of the German embassy in Zagreb provide a fair number of documents about the early exchanges. After the German army took

¹⁰ Sadly, international law remained a dead letter in the former Yugoslavia for the remainder of the 20th Century, and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s saw numerous prisoner exchanges between all sides. Two successor-states, the Republic of Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia reached a prisoner-exchange agreement in late July 1992 with the help of the International Red Cross Committee: http://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule128_sectionb (last accessed on 11 June 2013).

¹¹ For the discussion on sources, I used parts of an earlier article. The article (with the provisional title "Making Deals with the Enemy: German-Partisan Negotiations and Prisoner Exchange in Yugoslavia 1941-1945") has been accepted for publication by *Global War Studies* in January 2012. The manuscript will henceforth be cited as "Trifković, GWS article".

over the responsibility for the matter in early 1943, there is only an occasional reference. The reason for this is that comparatively few documents for the period from late 1943 until the end of the war are still in existence today. As this particularly applies to formations from corps-level down, it is difficult to reconstruct many locally negotiated prisoner exchanges from the German perspective.

Croatian State Archives proved to be a true treasure trove. Apart from the microfilmed records of military commands of all sides, this institution holds a valuable collection of documents which were transferred from the archives of the Yugoslav secret police in the mid-1990s. The collection includes the personal estate of Boris Bakrač (one of the main Partisan negotiators) and various documents pertaining to prisoner exchange, such as after-action reports, lists with names of exchanged persons, etc. The Archive of Hans Helm, named after the German police attaché in Zagreb, contains post-war interrogations of practically all German personnel who were involved with prisoner exchange in Croatia. I am aware of all the shortcomings of eyewitness reports, especially if they were given under pressure. As we shall see, some of these statements were indeed intended for use in political power struggles at the top of the Yugoslav Communist hierarchy. Due to the lack of official documents, however, they were critical in reconstructing the inner workings of exchange arrangements. Needless to say, I compared every detail from these documents with other sources, whenever possible.

I also consulted the holdings of the following institutions: the Military Archive in Belgrade (holds most of the Yugoslav wartime documents; especially interesting were the logbooks of telegrams received and sent between the Partisan Main HQ for Croatia and the Supreme HQ under Tito; the archive also holds the nearly complete correspondence between Partisan and German commands in Eastern Herzegovina from the summer of 1944, an important source for understanding the functioning of local prisoner exchanges in general); the Military Archive in Vienna (holds the personal estate of General Edmund Glaise-Horstenau and extensive materials belonging to Dr. Peter Broucek who edited the general's diary); the UK National Archives (documents on British-Yugoslav relations); the German Military Archive in Freiburg im Breisgau (rare German documents not to be found in the copies made for the US National Archives); the Archive of the Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina (one important contemporary Ustasha document on the early German-Partisan negotiations); and the Archive of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich (post-war interrogations of German personnel by the US Army).

Of the collections of published documents, *“Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije”* (“Collection of Documents and Data on the People’s Liberation War of Yugoslav Peoples”, hereafter “Zbornik”) deserves a special mention. “Zbornik” is a gargantuan, 173-part official collection of documents from Yugoslav archives pertaining to World War II in Yugoslavia. It is divided along both thematic (e.g. Volume XII: “Documents of the German Reich”, Volume VIII “Activities in the Adriatic”) and geographic lines (e.g. Volume I: “Fighting in Serbia”, Volume V: “Fighting in Croatia”, etc.). It started appearing in 1949 and the last volume came out in 1986. Because of the highly sensitive nature of the non-violent contacts with the Germans, the editors of the “Zbornik” left out most of the crucial documents. Since it was impossible to avoid any mention of them, the editors chose to either give false explanations, or none. For instance, when mentioning negotiations about a possible truce, the “Zbornik” adds that these were “of a tactical nature” and that the truce was rejected out of hand by the Partisans. A reader hoping to learn more from an accompanying footnote is often frustrated by a line stating that “the complete correspondence pertaining to this matter was not found,” or something similar.¹² Self-censorship on the part of the editors is also evident in the case of local prisoner exchanges made for exclusively humanitarian reasons: only one full document on one such case was published in the whole compendium. Interestingly, negotiations with the Italians over the same issue were apparently thought to be far less incriminating, and the “Zbornik” contains comparatively many references to them. Despite its shortcomings, the “Zbornik” is an invaluable asset to every researcher of wartime events in Yugoslavia and will be consulted extensively throughout this thesis.

For several reasons the phenomenon of prisoner exchanges was, to the best of my knowledge, never dealt with in its entirety in any monograph published in socialist Yugoslavia. First, any deeper analysis of the subject could not have been done without mentioning the political talks with the Germans. Political negotiations with the “fascist enemy” were a taboo topic until the mid-1980s, and even then were only presented to the public partially and with ideological coloring. Second, it was thought that the lionized portrayal of the Partisans, intensively built up over decades, would suffer from a lengthy presentation of their non-violent contacts with the invader, no matter how insignificant they were in the context of the overall course of the war. Local prisoner exchanges, solely aimed at saving comrades and conducted without ulterior motives, were not perceived as

¹² Trifković, GWS article.

dishonorable. As such, they were often mentioned in unit histories and reminiscences of Partisan veterans; the descriptions ranged in size from a single line to a book chapter.¹³

Studies related to the question of prisoners in wartime Yugoslavia in general are also few and far between. The topic was a step-child of the historiography of the socialist era; to the best of my knowledge, only one doctoral dissertation was written on the subject, and it remained unpublished (Đoko Ivanović, *Položaj ratnih zarobljenika u međunarodnom pravu*; Belgrade: Pravni fakultet, 1958).¹⁴ This should come as no surprise, because of the already mentioned issue of censorship and self-censorship. For the same reason, any historian coming from outside the country with the intention of providing an objective study of the matter would have faced immense difficulties in conducting research in Yugoslavia. The research on the topic in the West had therefore remained dependent on the available Axis documents and reminiscences of Axis participants, both of which were heavily biased and, at least in some cases, influenced by the atmosphere of the Cold War (the work of Karl W. Böhme on German prisoners in Yugoslavia comes to mind in this respect). After the collapse of the socialist system in the early 1990s, the previously restricted documents became available to researchers. The problem was that the scholarly communities in the successor states had in the meantime lost interest in the topic, preferring to concentrate on other lesser-known aspects of the war.

This dissertation is an attempt to plug this hole in the historiography, and provide a detailed analysis of the prisoner exchange phenomenon and the accompanying contacts between the German occupation authorities and the Yugoslav Partisans. The work will also be a contribution to the research on prisoners during the Second World War in Yugoslavia, a topic which has been long neglected in both (ex-) Yugoslav and Western historiography. More specifically, I will try to answer two major questions. First, whether the contacts between the Partisans and German occupation authorities had elements of collaboration, and second, whether prisoner exchange influenced policies on prisoners on both sides, and helped reduce the levels of violence for which this theatre of war became notorious. It should be by no means taken as the definitive work on the subject, but rather as a solid starting point for future research. Owing to the fragmentary nature of the sources, this will include a fair

¹³ Trifković, GWS article. Local prisoner exchanges have also found their way into the popular culture of Socialist Yugoslavia. Prisoner exchange with the Germans was part of the plot of the 1969 war movie “Kad čuješ zvona”; one episode of the popular TV-series “Kapelski kresovi” (1975) revolved around a prisoner exchange with the Italians in north-west Croatia (1975).; 1976 saw the release of a full-length movie “Devojački most”, which follows a group of Partisans tasked with escorting a number of Germans to the place of exchange. On the way, they have to fight both enemy patrols and their own mixed feelings about the mission.

¹⁴ I was unfortunately not able to obtain a copy of this work from the National Library of Serbia.

amount of guesswork; I have done my best to make it as educated as possible. Needless to say, I bear full responsibility for all errors and shortcomings of this work.

The thesis is divided in five chapters, each covering events which took place in a certain geographical region within a certain timeframe. Instances of prisoner exchange and negotiations will be described in chronological order. The descriptions will vary in size, depending on the availability of sources; both Yugoslav and German sources on the same event will be cited whenever available. The reader will notice that I rely heavily on eyewitness reports and recollections of veterans, from generals down to privates, to depict the events as vividly as possible. This will not only make the text a more enjoyable read, but, more importantly, help us understand one individual's perceptions of his enemy, captivity and prisoner exchange. In addition, I also tried to provide as much background information as possible (such as details on military operations, short biographies of less important personalities, etc.), so that the reader could get "the big picture" and put a particular episode in the right perspective. Most descriptions will be immediately followed by a short analysis and presentation of relevant findings; particularly controversial events are analyzed in separate sections. Approximately ten percent of each chapter is devoted to conclusions, where the results will be summed up and commented on at some length.

Chapter one deals with the events in Serbia from 1941 to 1944; chapter two describes the events on the territory of the NDH from 1941 to the beginning of 1943; chapter three analyzes the German-Partisan negotiations from the first half of 1943; chapter four (the centerpiece of the entire work) concentrates on the creation and functioning of the prisoner exchange cartel and the neutral zone at Pisarovina from 1943 to 1945; chapter five brings an overview of local prisoner exchanges in Yugoslavia in the last two years of the war; the "Closing Thoughts" will contain a short overview of the issues connected with the topic and the most important findings of this study. Appropriate maps will accompany each chapter; they will hopefully help guide the reader through the text. There are three appendices: the first is a statistical overview of prisoner exchanges, including the figures for both the Pisarovina cartel and the local exchanges; appendix two comprises a small selection of relevant photographs and facsimiles; appendix three contains short biographical notes on the prominent personalities mentioned in the text.

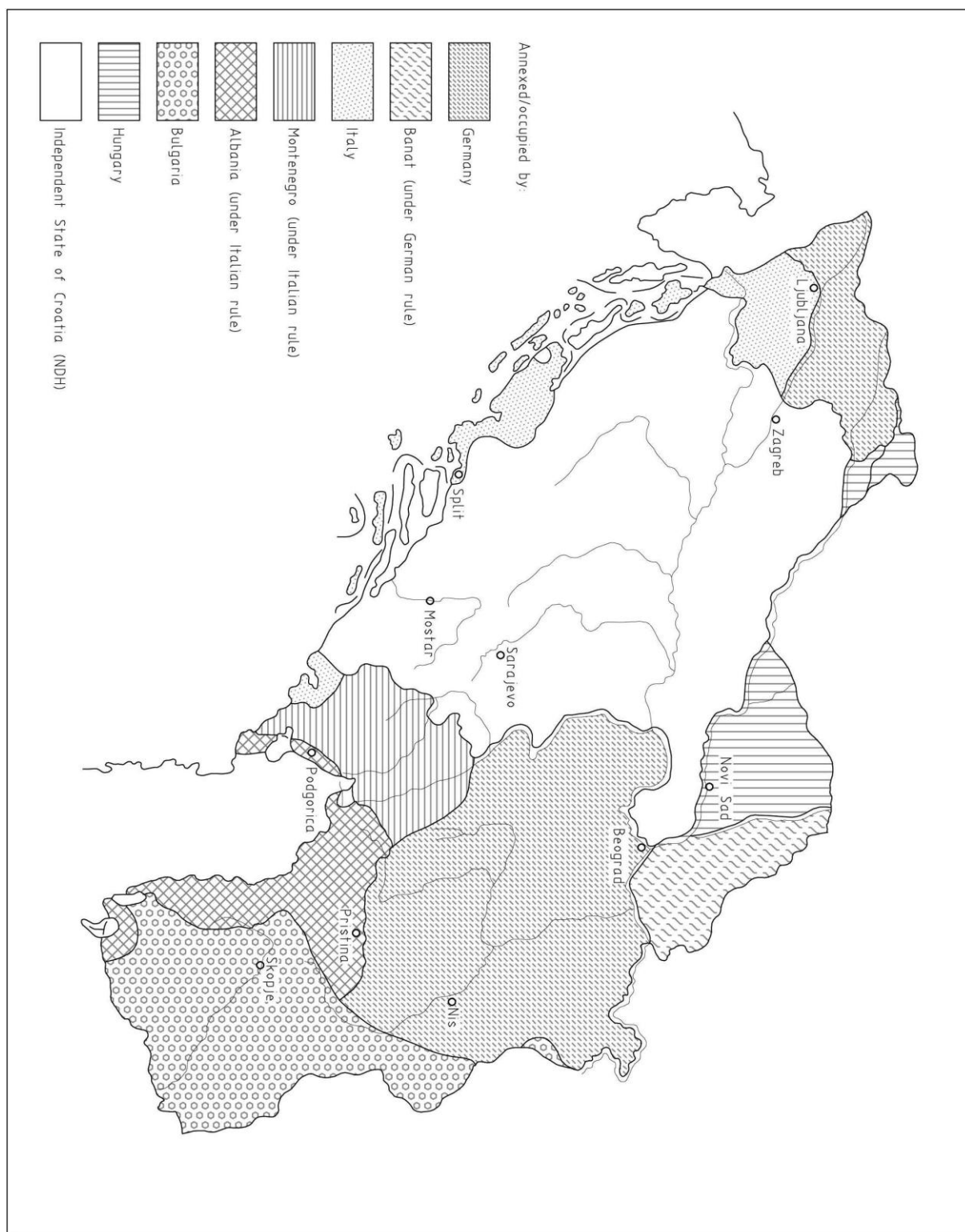


Figure 1: Occupation of Yugoslavia 1941

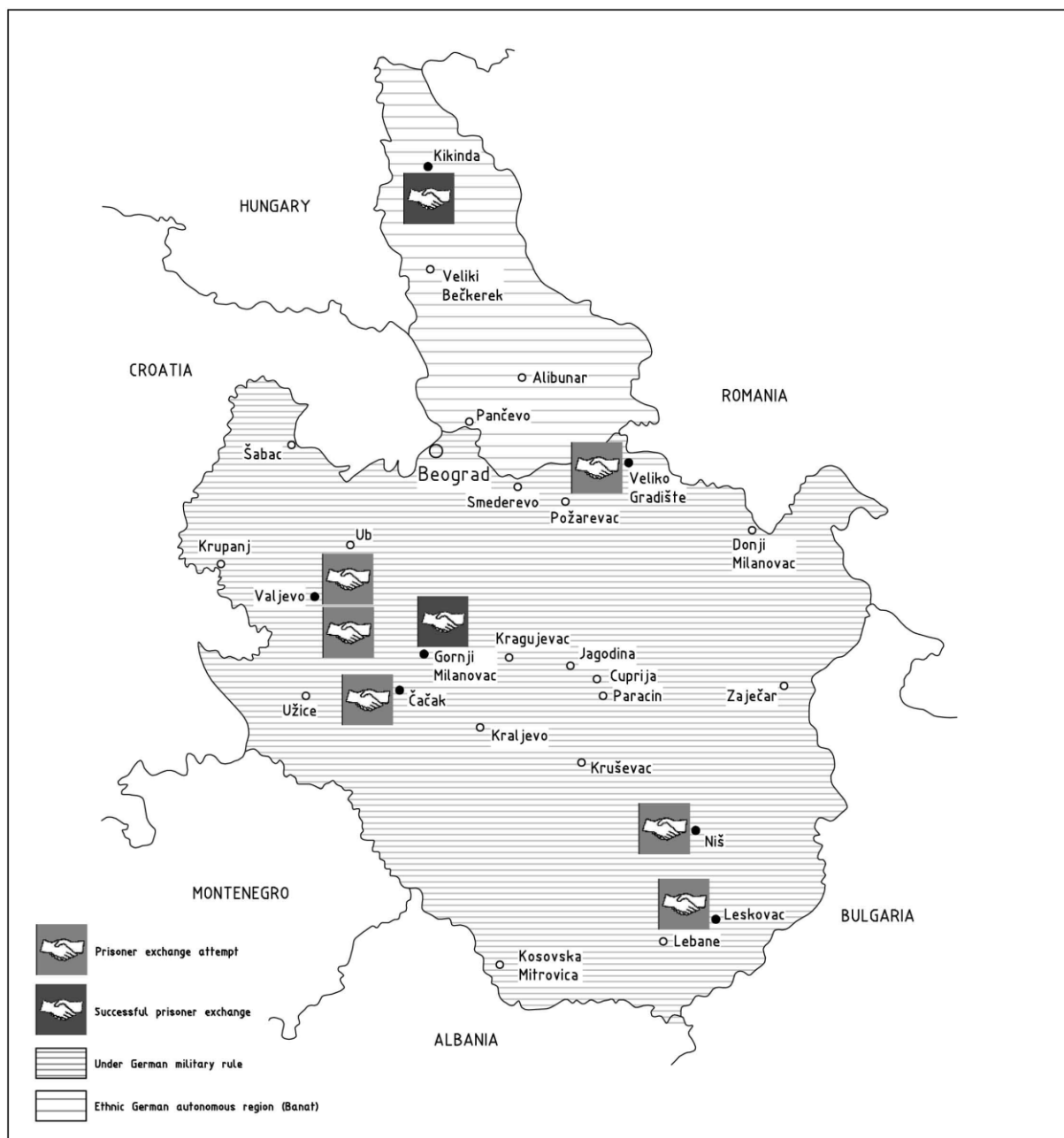


Figure 2: Serbia 1941

Chapter 1: Brutal until the end – Serbia 1941-1944

1. Prologue: March-April 1941

Serbia, with its large population, rich mineral and agricultural resources was the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's spiritual and economic heartland. It also hosted the Yugoslav capital, Belgrade, and linked Central Europe with Greece and Turkey via strategically important lines of communication. These facts escaped neither the Germans nor the guerrilla movements which came into life after the war had begun. Therefore, Serbia enjoyed a special position in Yugoslavia in terms of the occupation system and how the occupiers dealt with the resistance they encountered. The necessities of war would force the opposing sides in other parts of the country to agree to a limited de-escalation of violence when prisoners were concerned. Serbia, apart from the first months of the war, would remain excluded from these arrangements. Consequently, it would seem appropriate to deal with the events in Serbia from 1941-1944 in a single chapter.

By the early spring of 1941, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had still managed to stay out of the war which had already enveloped Europe a year and a half prior. In March, however, the diplomatic pressure of the Third Reich on the country to join the Tripartite Pact became unbearable. Consequently, on 25 March 1941 in Belvedere Palace in Vienna, Yugoslavia reluctantly signed the accession agreement, thus making the country a part of the Axis alliance. The news sent shockwaves through the country, stirring dissent both among the population and the Allied sympathizers in the officer corps. Two days later, the country was in chaos. A group of anglophile officers, led by Air Force General Dušan Simović, carried out a coup d'état, deposed the Prince Regent Paul, and made the underage Prince Peter the new head of state. The new government under Simović had no concrete plan for the future: although the abrogation of the Tripartite Treaty was extremely popular (especially amongst the Serbs), the government publicly reaffirmed the Axis powers that it would respect the obligations made in Vienna.¹⁵

This shaky promise was hardly taken seriously in Germany. Hitler reacted angrily on the news from Belgrade and already on 27 March 1941 ordered the Wehrmacht to destroy Yugoslavia militarily and as a nation “without waiting for possible declarations of loyalty of

¹⁵ Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945: the Chetniks* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 22-53.

the new government.”¹⁶ The plan for the attack („*Weisung 25*“ or Directive No. 25), called for the invasion of the country from multiple directions by the German Army and its Italian and Bulgarian allies as well as the Hungarians. On 6 April 1941, the Wehrmacht's armored spearheads crossed the Yugoslav border at several places, while the Luftwaffe simultaneously carried out massive air-raids on Belgrade and other cities. The Royal Yugoslav Army, which had not done much during the interwar period, owing to its predecessor's (the Serbian Army) exploits during the wars of 1912-1918, was utterly unprepared for the onslaught. Not only did it lack modern equipment, but more importantly, the morale and cohesion of any fighting force aspiring for victory on the battlefield.¹⁷ Consequently, its defenses crumbled instantly amidst the chaos caused by the invasion. Skopje fell on the 8th, Zagreb on the 10th and Belgrade on the 12th, the latter being captured in a ploy by only a light motorcycle detachment of Germans. On 15 April 1941, the nascent King and his ministers fled the country by airplane, leaving the rest of the nation and army to fend for itself. A day later, the German 16th Motorized Division captured the Yugoslav High Command near Sarajevo. On 17 April, Yugoslav foreign minister, Cincar-Marković and the representative of the High Command, General Radivoje Janković, met with a delegation of the 2nd German Army in the „White Palace“ (*Beli dvor*) in Belgrade to sign the armistice document. Although the Yugoslav government-in-exile repudiated the terms of the agreement, thereby keeping the country in the conflict on the Allied side, the war was effectively over. In one of the most successful examples of Blitzkrieg doctrine, the German Army managed to crush Yugoslavia in only eleven days, suffering less than 600 casualties with only 151 killed, 392 wounded and 15 missing in action.¹⁸

Even if Hitler originally had no intention of breaking up the Yugoslav Kingdom, his attitude changed quickly as a result of the Belgrade coup. He immediately offered his allies territorial gains in Yugoslavia in exchange for their participation in the campaign. Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria all had claims resulting from unfavorable peace treaties made in the aftermath of the First World War. Italy acquired a part of Slovenia and almost all of Croatian Littoral, occupying at the same time Montenegro and better part of Kosovo region. Hungary

¹⁶ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1949-1986), Volume II, book 2, p. 466, Conference with the Führer on the situation in Yugoslavia (27 March 1941). Here after abbreviated to: *Zbornik/volume/book/page*.

¹⁷ Croatian nationalists in the 108th Regiment rebelled near Bjelovar during the night of 7-8th April 1941 and proclaimed Croatia “a sovereign and independent state” the day after. Zdravko Dizdar, “Bjelovarski ustanak od 7. do 10. travnja 1941”, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 39, 3 (2008): 595 (available at http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&id_clanak_jezik=29738, last accessed 21 March 2012).

¹⁸ J.B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis 1934-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 286. Killed, wounded and missing in action will be abbreviated to KIA, WIA and MIA forthwith.

annexed the Bačka province and small parts of Croatia and Slovenia; Bulgaria received Macedonia and parts of southern Serbia. The Croatian mainland and Bosnia-Herzegovina were combined to form the puppet “Independent State of Croatia” (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska*, abbreviated to NDH). Germany de facto annexed those parts of Slovenia which were deemed historically “German” regions, that is, Upper Carniola, and Lower Carinthia and Styria.

The Third Reich was much more interested in economic, rather than territorial gains in the Western Balkans. Starting from 1935, Germany gradually brought Yugoslavia within its sphere of economic influence. By 1941, the former had practically obtained a monopoly on Yugoslav exports of agricultural products, as well as ores and nonferrous metals vital to the German war industry.¹⁹ Never losing sight of these considerations, Hitler made sure the region would continue supplying the needed raw materials irrespective of the new borders. In exchange for territorial expansion, Italy and all of the minor Axis states had to relinquish control or grant large concessions over the important resources to Germany. Thus, the mines in Italian-occupied Kosovo, NDH region of Herzegovina and Bulgarian-occupied Macedonia were run by German firms, while Hungary acquiesced to deliver the surplus of agricultural products from the Bačka.²⁰ The lines of communication in the region were of equal importance to Berlin. Substantial parts of both the main railway line to Greece and the River Danube (used for transportation of products from Romanian oil-fields) ran through Serbia proper. This fact, combined with Serbia’s large and supposedly unruly population, as well as rich farmlands and mines, convinced the Germans to place that territory under their direct military control.

In the course of the April campaign, some 360,000 Yugoslav soldiers were taken prisoner.²¹ Since the war was a regular one, these men were entitled to the protections afforded by the Geneva Convention, which the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had ratified in June 1931.²² The Germans, however, bent the rules according to their own will. While the prisoners belonging to certain nationalities, like Croats or Macedonians, were released shortly after the end of the campaign, German units had the order to treat the captured Serbian

¹⁹ For a brief overview of the German-Yugoslav economic relations on the eve of the Second World War see Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918-1988* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1989), Vol. II, pp. 321-33.

²⁰ For more details on these arrangements see Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford, CA: Stanford university Press, 2001), pp. 620-3.

²¹ Velimir Terzić, *Slom Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1941* (Belgrade: Partizanska knjiga, 1984), pp. 472, 498.

²² Dominik Vuletić, „Kaznenopravni i povijesni aspekti bleiburškog zločina“, *Pravnik* 41/2 (85) (2007): 130 (available at <http://hrcak.srce.hr/file/53823> , last accessed 22 March 2012).

officers “in the worst possible manner”. This was in reaction to the perceived treachery of the Serbs and also a tool of the divide-and-conquer policy the Third Reich was utilizing in the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia.²³

As the irregular warfare was considered synonymous with the Balkans, the Germans were certain that it would play a prominent role during the invasion of the country. Intelligence reports suggested that two days before the attack, the Yugoslavs had called for a guerrilla war (*Kleinkrieg*) against the enemy. The German units were therefore ordered to prepare themselves for sudden attacks and ambushes on individual vehicles.²⁴ Furthermore, it was assumed that not only the army, but also militia-like civilian organizations (*Wehrverbände*), such as armed wings of some political parties or the „Sokol“ association, would function as guerrilla units in the event of war.²⁵ Contrary to the German belief, the Royal Army did not place much worth on irregular warfare. Actions of special forces both at the front and rear were theoretically envisaged in the so-called „Plan S“, developed by the High Command in late 1939, as well as in similar documents known as „R-40“ and „R-41“ composed in the early 1940. The first concrete steps in this direction were taken only in summer of that year, when six „Chetnik“ (later „Assault“) battalions were formed.²⁶ These units received special training and were to fulfill a variety of tasks, including serving as a core for future guerrilla forces, carrying out raids on the enemy’s flanks and rear, fighting against airborne landings and enemy spies and saboteurs.²⁷ Although representing a part of the regular army and fulfilling all the provisions of the Geneva Convention (wearing recognizable insignia, obeying a clear chain of command, etc.), their legal status was questioned by their enemies. According to the German intelligence services, the Chetnik units would perform their tasks using either civilian clothes or German uniforms, which, in turn, would put them outside the protection of international law. The following remark was made at a command conference of the German 73rd Infantry Division held at the beginning of April 1941:

²³ *War Journal of Franz Halder* (Office of Chief of Counsel for War Crimes, 1950), Vol. VI, p. 61, entry for 9 April 1941.

²⁴ National Archives and Records Administration, Records Group 242, microfilm publication T-315, roll 1063, Intelligence summary (4 April 1941) [Forthwith abbreviated to: NAW, microfilm publication, roll, frame number (if available), title of the document, date (in brackets)]. Interestingly, the chapter “Fighting Methods of the Enemy” in the document mentions only irregular tactics.

²⁵ NAW, T-312, Roll 424, Yugoslav armed forces (10 January 1941). “Sokol” was a youth gymnast society founded in Prague in 1863 from where it spread to all Slav populated countries. In time, it acquired a strong Pan-Slavic streak.

²⁶ The word “četnik” is derived from “četa”, meaning “company”. The term was coined at the beginning of the 20th century as guerrilla units (“četas”) were formed to fight the Ottoman rule in present-day Macedonia.

²⁷ Aleksandar Životić, „Četničke jedinice Vojske kraljevine Jugoslavije u Aprilskom ratu” in: *Istorija 20. veka* 1 (2011): 41-2. (available at [http://scindeks-clanci.nb.rs/data/pdf/0352-3160/2011/0352-31601101039Z.pdf#search=„ČETNIČKE JEDINICE VOJSKE KRALJEVINE"](http://scindeks-clanci.nb.rs/data/pdf/0352-3160/2011/0352-31601101039Z.pdf#search=„ČETNIČKE JEDINICE VOJSKE KRALJEVINE) , last accessed 22 March 2012).

“Whenever the troops meet the men of the ‘Assault Battalions’, they are to be shot without mercy.”²⁸

Neither the war diary of the 73rd Division, nor the post-war Yugoslav/Serbian sources can confirm that the quoted remark was the official policy towards the members of the Assault units during the April war. There had been several clashes with the advancing German troops before the assault units were taken captive with the rest of the army.²⁹ There was, however, at least one instance when the Germans used the existence of Chetniks/irregulars as a pretext for committing a war crime. The incident occurred on 11 April 1941 in the village of Alibunar in Vojvodina. On that day, the spearheads of the Wehrmacht’s 46st Panzer Corps encountered unusually strong resistance by the Yugoslav units on the outskirts of the aforementioned town. Worse still, one German major was shot by a sharpshooter as he entered the village.³⁰ The SS motorized division “Das Reich” exacted vengeance by rounding up Yugoslav prisoners and civilians from Alibunar and adjoining villages and executing them as “Chetniks”, that is as unlawful belligerents.³¹ The killings lasted for eight days and claimed an estimated 200 victims.³² This episode illustrates the arbitrary way in which the Germans interpreted international law and bent its provisions in a manner suiting them the most. Although the massacre at Alibunar can be seen as an exception in the Balkans Campaign in the Spring of 1941, such behavior would become the calling card of the occupation forces during the following months and years.

²⁸ NAW, T-315, Roll 1063, Points for command conference (undated).

²⁹ Životić, „Četničke jedinice“, pp. 42-6.

³⁰ The incident is mentioned in Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, p. 286, although the author erroneously mentions 56th instead of 46th Panzer Corps.

³¹ Lajco Klajn, *The Past in Present Times: The Yugoslav Saga* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), 82. See also the interview with Serbian historian Čedomir Popov in the TV-documentary “Jugoslavija u ratu 1941.-1945.” (Beograd: Radio-televizija Srbije, Televizija Beograd, 1991-2), Episode 4.

³² For a more detailed description of these events and the list of names of the executed persons see Srđan Božović, *Nemački zločin u Alibunaru 1941.* (Pančevo: Zavičajni muzej Pančevo, 2004). Reference to the number of victims is on p. 84. I would like to extend my thanks to the Museum of Pančevo for kindly providing me with the copy of this book.

2. Interregnum, April-June 1941

The Germans spent the period from late April to the beginning of July organizing their administration of rump Serbia.³³ At the head of the occupation apparatus stood “Military Commander in Serbia” (*Militärbefehlshaber in Serbien*), an officer holding the rank of general, responsible for all military and civilian aspects of running the country. The country was divided between four areas (*Feldkommandatur*) and nine district commands (*Ortskommandatur*) to which existing Serbian civilian and police structures were subordinated. In order to ensure full and prompt fulfillment of the duties imposed on the country, on 30 April 1941 the Germans formed the Serbian Commissary Council under Milan Aćimović. It was made up of fifteen commissars responsible for various areas, including internal affairs. The backbone of the latter was the constantly expanding Serbian gendarmerie, which enforced law and order in the country.³⁴ One German police battalion (the 64th) was tasked with similar duties.

The operational control over German forces in Serbia was in the hands of the “65th Higher Command for Special Purposes” (*Höheres Kommando zur besonderen Verfügung 65*). This was a corps-sized formation with three infantry divisions and other, smaller units attached to it. The 704th, 714th, and 717th Infantry Division were all formed in April 1941 as a part of the 15th mobilization wave of the Wehrmacht. As they were envisaged as occupation units, their organization was different from the units raised for combat duties. Firstly and most importantly, their paper strength was set at 6,152, which amounted to roughly half the strength of a front-line division. Secondly, the men serving in these troops were well past their prime with the average age of a soldier being above thirty. Thirdly, the divisions were short of artillery, engineering and radio equipment, and were not motorized.³⁵ The smaller units included the 562nd, 592nd and 920th Territorial Defense (*Landeschützen*) battalions whose personnel were comprised mostly of those deemed unfit for front-line duty. Their task was primarily to guard strategic points and lines of communication. All in all, the 65th Higher

³³ After the division of spoils between the Axis powers, Serbia was practically reduced to its pre-1912 borders. Consequently, this chapter will deal mainly with the events which took place in this region, with an occasional reference to the episodes occurring in Vojvodina.

³⁴ In mid-May 1941, 1,932 gendarmes reported back to duty. When the gendarmerie was renamed the “Serbian State Guard” (*Srpska državna straža*) in March 1942, its strength was estimated at 15,000 men: Milan Borković, *Kvislinška uprava u Srbiji 1941-1944* (Belgrade: Sloboda, 1979), Vol. I, pp. 42, 292.

³⁵ NAW, T-315, Roll 2262, 000067, Message to 11th Corps (27 May 1941); NAW, T-315, Roll 2236, 000708, Forming of the 704th and parts of 718th Infantry Division (4 April 1941); Georg Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und der Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939-1945* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1978), Vol. I, p. 57.

Command could muster some 22,500 mostly over-aged and under-equipped men with which to counter potential troubles.³⁶

The occupation regime was harsh: a wide range of subversive acts including hiding arms, sabotage or attack on German personnel was punishable by death. Serbia had to pay for the costs of the occupation and deliver a large portion of its agricultural and mining output to Germany or other German-occupied areas. Striking as well as the hoarding of goods was prohibited, as was holding demonstrations, illegal distributing of leaflets and listening to non-Axis radio stations. The slightest insult to the occupying forces, such as impoliteness towards a soldier in a streetcar or not making room for an officer on a sidewalk was threatened with harsh penalties.³⁷ All these measures were employed to one end; to instill fear in the population and make any notion of armed resistance appear futile. While the threat of violence had the desired effect on the urban population, “still under shock of the recent events”, trouble was already brewing in the province. Small groups of former Yugoslav soldiers roamed the countryside, each group following its own path and agenda, but all armed and refusing to surrender. There exist numerous reports of Chetniks, who allegedly looted villages and attempted to scare the people out of obeying the invader. The Germans carefully monitored the security situation in the country, reacting promptly to those events which even remotely suggested guerrilla activity. The reports by the local authorities concerning the latter have often proved to be exaggerated. For example, there had been an alleged bomb attack in Prijepolje, which turned out to be the result of an incompetent handling of explosives. In many cases, the problems were caused by bands of ordinary criminals, who were “nothing new in the Balkans” and were a problem in peacetime as well.³⁸

Ordinary bandits, renegade soldiers or guerrillas, they were all treated in the same way if caught. Four days after the Yugoslav Army had capitulated, a German patrol came to the village of Dobrić (near Loznica) in search of hidden arms. A fire fight broke out, in which one German soldier was killed and two wounded. The village was subsequently torched. Seven days later, the German 2nd Army issued the first guidelines for reprisals in the occupied country. The instructions read that any person caught with arms in Serbia stands outside of protection of international law and is to be executed immediately. In the event of attack on German personnel, all men capable of bearing arms in the vicinity of the incident should be

³⁶ Estimate for the end of August 1941: Klaus Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg im Jugoslawien* (Hamburg: Mittler-Verlag, 2002), p. 586.

³⁷ Tomasevich, *Occupation and Collaboration*, p. 175.

³⁸ NAW, T-315, Roll 2236, 000507-8, Report of the 60th Motorized Division (17 May 1941).

treated in the same way, and their corpses hanged for added psychological impact. Taking hostages after an attack was deemed “wrong” (probably for reasons of expediency), and troops advised to carry on in the manner mentioned previously. On 29 April 1941, the 11th Army Corps issued an instruction according to which reprisals could normally be ordered by battalion commanders and above. If, however, circumstances rendered this non-feasible, then they could be ordered by the most senior officer present.³⁹ In mid-May, Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs, the commander of the 2nd Army, let it be known that for each German soldier killed, one hundred Serbs will be shot in reprisal. Although there is no evidence that the order was ever carried out, it proved that the Germans were (at least theoretically) envisaging such draconian measures even before there existed any real possibility of a massive uprising which could endanger their position in Serbia.⁴⁰

In May and June, the reports of alleged guerrilla groups and their activities became more and more numerous. Some highlights concerned the laying of mines in a tunnel, and cutting telephone and telegraph wires. Serbian gendarmes were usually deemed capable of dealing with these incidents. The Germans did intervene once however, on 3-4 May in Tara Planina (ca. 40 km west of Užice), when parts of the 2nd Battalion of the 116th Regiment had a firefight with some 100 irregulars. They were dispersed without any casualties on either side.⁴¹ One report, dated 23 June 1941, concerning yet another guerrilla group deserves to be quoted in some length. A lieutenant of Croatian birth was returning home from Bulgarian captivity when he was captured on 16 May by Chetniks between Valjevo and Čačak.

*“The leader of [this] Chetnik group is Colonel of the General Staff Mihailović Draža. He has with him, among others, Major Palošević, cavalry captain Reljić, gendarmerie captain Uzelac and 1st lieutenants Ilić and Martinović Ratko, as well as non-commissioned officers [NCOs] and men of various branches of the armed forces. Their liaison officer is the reserve cavalry major Mišić Aleksandar, the son of the late Vojvoda Mišić. He now lives in Struganik (south-east of Valjevo) and supplies the group with money, arms, ammunition and food. The presence of this group is known to all teachers, communal leaders and gendarmerie stations in the vicinity [...], as well as to the gendarmerie commander in Gornji Milanovac [...].”*⁴²

³⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2236, 000487-8, Order of the 2nd Army (28 April 1941).

⁴⁰ Venceslav Glišić, *Teror i zločini nacističke Nemačke u Srbiji 1941.-1944.* (Beograd: Izdavačko preduzeće „Rad“, 1970), p. 35. The order was posted around Serbia on 19 May 1941.

⁴¹ NAW, T-501, Roll 245, 000119,122, 127, War diary for April 1941 (Entries no. 10, 17, 24)

⁴² NAW, T-501, Roll 245, 000129-30, War diary for April 1941 (Entry no. 30).

This is one of the first mentions of Dragoljub Draža Mihailović, a man whose guerrilla organization would cause headaches to the Germans more by its existence, than by its actions.⁴³ Mihailović formulated his strategy upon establishing himself on Ravna Gora Mountain between Valjevo and Čačak in mid-May 1941. Knowing the tremendous power of the Wehrmacht, but also certain of ultimate Allied victory, Mihailović was opposed to rash action against the invader. Rather than engaging the Germans openly, he planned to build up his organization, gather arms and equipment, actively fighting the German only sparingly. When the Allied armies arrived at the borders, he would issue a call for a general uprising, help chase the Germans out of the country and restore the monarchy. His movement was nominally all-Yugoslav, but in fact almost exclusively Serbian with a strong chauvinistic streak.

The above-mentioned 1st lieutenant Ratko Martinović had many difficulties with Mihailović because he broke the rule of not engaging Germans “until the right time has come” (as the contemporary phrase went). The event which brought him trouble almost ended with a prisoner exchange. Just before re-joining Mihailović on the slopes of the Suvobor Mountain, Martinović and two of his companions ran into a lone German soldier repairing a car near the village of Svračkovac. “Such fear on our part, and there was this one German standing carelessly in the heart of Serbia, so to speak. This was too much for me. I lost my temper and told Živić ‘Cover me, I’ll take him prisoner.’” The German, “Hans from Leipzig” was quickly overpowered, disarmed, and taken along. Recovering from the initial shock, he had regained self-confidence. He even tried to explain to Martinović and his comrades, it is they who should be his prisoners, given the fact that Yugoslavia had capitulated. The captors deliberated what to do with him. Beside liquidation, there was talk of exchanging him for some Serbian officers who were in prison in nearby Gornji Milanovac. In the end, Hans was let go without his sidearm and with a letter for the local German command, threatening it with retaliation in case the villagers were molested because of this incident.⁴⁴

Martinović kept silent about the event when he re-joined Mihailović. When the latter heard of what had transpired, he was furious and sternly reprimanded the lieutenant. It was the last straw for Martinović, whose burning desire to fight the invader could not be quenched by

⁴³ Mihailović (1893-1946) had a distinguished military career up to 1941 spanning thirty years and three wars. However, his implacable anti-communism, political ineptitude, poor choice of subordinates and inability to assert his authority contributed to the fact that his organization, the “Yugoslav Army in the Homeland” (better known as the Chetniks of Draža Mihailović), finished the war fighting on the losing side. More information on his Chetniks will be given at appropriate places in the text.

⁴⁴ Ratko Martinović, *Od Ravne Gore do Vrhovnog Štaba* (Belgrade: Rad, 1979), pp. 102-7.

sitting idly on Ravna Gora. Therefore, he left and eventually joined another group, diametrically different to Mihailović's Chetniks in both ideology and stance towards the invader.

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*, KPJ) was founded in 1919, and immediately acquired a large following. In general elections in November 1920 it received nearly thirteen per cent of the popular vote. Fearing its growing influence, the ruling circles issued a proclamation (*Obznana*) in December, banning the Party from participating in the dealings of the Constitutional Assembly. When two young Communists assassinated the interior minister Milorad Drašković in July 1921, the party was banned altogether, labeled terrorist and fought with all means at the disposal of the state apparatus. The KPJ went underground, rapidly losing members to both voluntary resignations and harsh police measures. By the mid-30s the Party was small, internally divided, and with little influence both at home and in the Communist International (Comintern). In early 1937, the KPJ received a new leader, metal worker and professional revolutionary Josip Broz, better known under his *nom-de-guerre* Tito. Tito rescued the Party from disbandment (seriously contemplated in Moscow at the time), made it financially self-sufficient and enforced strict discipline. As a result, by the summer of 1941, the KPJ had a membership of nearly 12,000 dedicated men and women who were well practiced in underground work. To this number, one should add another 30,000 or so members of the Communist Youth organization (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije-SKOJ*).⁴⁵

The KPJ was, as all other communist parties, put in a difficult position by the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement in August 1939. Although undeniably anti-fascist, the Party had to make necessary changes in its propaganda, as per instructions from Moscow. Consequently, the war raging between Germany on side, and France and Britain on the other was portrayed as a typical "imperialist" one, whereby all sides were portrayed as equally bad.⁴⁶ At the same time, the Party also began to prepare for a possible conflict with the Axis powers by forming the "Military Committee" responsible for training the membership and gathering arms and ammunition. Communists were taken aback by the Coup of 27 March and the massive anti-German demonstrations all over the country. Swept by popular enthusiasm, numerous KPJ members spontaneously took to the streets. This, however, went against the directives, which stipulated restraint and conserving of manpower for a final showdown with

⁴⁵ A.H. Pape et al., *Drugisvjetski rat* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1980), p. 269.

⁴⁶ Branko Petranović, Momčilo Zečević: *Jugoslavija 1918-1988: Tematska zbirka dokumenata* (Belgrade: Rad, 1988), pp. 416-7, 443.

the “class enemy.”⁴⁷ The same gap between patriotic feelings and following the official line from Moscow caused the Montenegrin Communists in May 1940 to agitate against serving in the Royal Army. This provided the foundation for the myth that the Communists sabotaged the Yugoslav armed forces during the April War. In fact, the KPJ welcomed the opportunity to present itself as the only true patriotic force, and its members took part in the war both as conscripts and volunteers. The speed and totality of defeat seemed only to confirm the Party’s repeated claims of “pro-fascist” and “defeatist” ruling circles centered on the Karađorđević dynasty. The April War benefited the KPJ in another, important way: since the bourgeois parties had ceased to exist, the Communist Party was the only organized political force left in the country. All this, combined with utter disillusionment caused by the Spring catastrophe, made the KPJ acceptable to large portions of society.⁴⁸

3. The Uprising: July-October 1941

The relative peace in occupied Yugoslavia was irreversibly shattered as news of the German invasion of the Soviet Union was published on the morning of 22 June 1941. The uncomfortable ceasefire between the Nazis and the Communists on the basis of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement was thus over. Knowing from where the danger would now be coming, German security services prepared to seize all known Communists and veterans of the Spanish Civil War (“Spanish fighters” or “Spaniards”) on 22 June. Although dozens of suspects were taken into custody in Serbia in this opening round of the conflict, most managed to duck the blow.⁴⁹

The leadership of the KPJ was not surprised by the news of Operation “Barbarossa”. It immediately prepared a proclamation for the people of Yugoslavia, calling them to arms against the occupier. Five days later, the Politburo met in Belgrade, christening the “Main Headquarters of the People’s Liberation Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia” with Tito at the helm, and ordered party cadres to the countryside to hasten the preparations for the uprising. A week later, on 4 July 1941, these groups were ordered into action, specifically sabotaging

⁴⁷ Aleksei Timofejev, *Rusi I Drugi svetski rat u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2010), p. 216.

⁴⁸ Jozo Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, pp. 79-84.

⁴⁹ NAW, T-501, Roll 245, 000424-5, War diary entries for 22 and 23 June 1941. By the beginning of August, the Germans reported 412 communist “functionaries” shot: NAW, T-501, Roll 249, 000756, Report to intelligence section of the Wehrmacht Commander South-East/12th Army (2 August 1941).

lines of communication, ambushing smaller enemy units, and generally making life for the invader as miserable as possible.

As July progressed, the security situation in Serbia was deteriorating. There was a steady rise in sabotage, arson, disarming and assassination of Serbian officials.⁵⁰ Originally made up mostly of KPJ and SKOJ members, these guerrilla groups were beginning to receive non-Party volunteers in ever growing numbers. The idea of a general uprising was made all the more appealing by several factors. First, the swift German victory in April had come with a price. Due to the impending invasion of the Soviet Union, front-line divisions had to be withdrawn from Yugoslavia starting in May, which gave them no time to secure either all prisoners⁵¹ or equipment. As a result, huge numbers of light weapons remained unaccounted for, most of them being hidden by peasants across the country. Second, the number and quality of the replacement troops (divisions of the so-called 15th mobilization wave) was substantially lower than that of the original occupation force. Adding to the difficulties, the Serbian gendarmerie had only recently been reconstituted, remained numerically weak. Third, by August 1941, occupied Serbia was flooded with an estimated 100,000 refugees⁵² from other parts of Yugoslavia. Some of these desperate people, mostly Serbs from Bosnia and Croatia, often sought to redress their grievances by joining the guerrillas. Last, but certainly not least, there was a strong psychological motive, namely the deeply rooted belief in the might of Russia based on pan-Slavic sentiment as opposed to communist ideology; even the royalist officers believed that the Germans would lose the war in a matter of months.⁵³

German armed forces and the various security units were rarely targeted by the guerrillas during the first weeks of the uprising. The latter felt too weak to attack the

⁵⁰ On 7 July, two gendarmes were killed by Communist guerrillas in the village of Bela Crkva (near Krupanj). The date was celebrated as the „Day of the Uprising“ in socialist Yugoslavia. For the German report on the incident see NAW, T-501, Roll 245, 000159, Report by Feldkommandatur 816 (10 July 1941).

⁵¹ Koča Popović, a former Spanish fighter and a reserve captain in the Royal Army related his experiences from the April War, which vividly illustrates the carefree-attitude of the Germans while handling the Yugoslav prisoners. Popović and his transport unit were marching in the vicinity of Ivanjica, Serbia, when their column was overtaken by a German motorcycle. A German NCO, „stern in voice, but relaxed and polite“, approached Popović and ordered him to head with his unit to nearby Arilje and surrender it there. When the German requested from Popović to deliver his sidearm, the latter protested, saying he needed the gun to maintain discipline. The NCO seemed convinced by this argument, and left. As soon as the Germans were out of eyesight, Popović „disbanded“ his unit, every soldier heading home fully equipped: Aleksandar Nenadović, *Razgovori s Kočom* (Globus: Zagreb, 1989), pp. 34-6.

⁵² Borković, *Kvislinšk auprava*, Vol. I, p. 199.

⁵³ Veselin Đuretić, *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama* (Beograd: Veselin Đuretić, 1988), Vol. I, p. 48. Milovan Đilas stated in an interview that he had estimated that the war would last no more than two to three months. His opinion was shared by the majority of his colleagues from the Politburo. Tito was more cautious; his estimate was six months. TV-documentary *„Jugoslavija u ratu 1941-1945“* (Beograd: Radio-televizija Beograd, 1991-2), Episode 5.

Germans, and concentrated their efforts on gendarmerie and municipality offices instead, where they burned archives and appropriated (or in the parlance of their enemy, ‘plundered’) local funds. The German personnel rarely ventured outside their garrisons located in urban areas. On one such occasion, on 12 July 1941, a wood-cutting party comprised of eight German privates went to work near the village of Jautina, outside of Valjevo. Just as they were beginning with their job, they found themselves surrounded by some thirty guerrillas. Two soldiers, who were preparing a meal in a nearby house, were warned by the house owner Mladen Mitrović and his wife, and made their escape unnoticed. The six remaining men were probably the first German prisoners taken by the Yugoslav Partisans.⁵⁴ What ensued highlights the initial confusion as what to do with German captives. It also lays delusions about the true nature of this war bare, no doubt the result of the propaganda agenda of the KPJ prior to 22 June 1941. As evident from proclamations to Axis soldiers, such as the one from mid-May 1941, the Party stressed the class dimension of the conflict, calling upon the German soldiers not to fight for the “small clique of big capitalists, like Krupp, Siemens, Göring and others”.⁵⁵ Consequently, the reactionary officer class, and not the ordinary soldiers, was perceived as the real enemy. For this reason, six men in Jautina were let go after being made aware that the guerrillas were after their superiors, and not them.⁵⁶

As July was nearing its end, and as guerrilla actions inflicted the first casualties upon the German occupying forces, the various high commands attempted to formulate a strategy for combating the insurgents. The reports from the field indicated a “downright communist uprising” in the country carried out by an estimated 30,000 insurgents. Surprisingly, the heads of various German services were not overly anxious. It was noted that the majority of the Serbian population “was not swept by the Communist wave”, implying that the guerrillas lacked popular support.⁵⁷ As the German occupation forces units stationed in Serbia were not trained for this kind of warfare, their actions and reactions were bound to fail. This, in turn, only served the Communists, who were quick to exploit the propaganda value of any German blunder, regardless how small. Therefore, it was decided that the police (both German and

⁵⁴ The Valjevo Partisan Detachment carried out the operation: *Hronologija Narodnooslobodilačkog rata 1941-1945* (Belgrade: Vojno-istorijski institut, 1964), p. 64.

⁵⁵ Glišić, *Teror*, p. 321.

⁵⁶ NAW, T-315, Roll 2236, 000942-3, Report by Mladen Mitrović (12 July 1941) and Report on the capture of the wood-cutting party (17 July 1941). For two similar incidents in August see Aleksandar Vitorović, *Srbija u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi: Centralna Srbija* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1967), pp. 78, 105.

⁵⁷ This conclusion was probably made on the base of the numerical strength of the CPY and its branches. The Party’s influence on the population was, however, disproportionate to its size. Throughout the war, Communists would remain a minority in the ranks of the Partisans, and would yet wield absolute control. Despite the intelligence gathered and experience in country, many high-ranking German officials would, inexplicably, use this erroneous reasoning for the entirety of the war.

Serbian) should be responsible for quelling the rebellion.⁵⁸ Pursuant to this, the Military Commander in Serbia communicated to the Ground Forces High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, OKH) that additional reinforcements were not necessary.⁵⁹ The events of the following weeks were to prove these conclusions entirely wrong.

On the morning of 27 July 1941, two German police motorcycles were ambushed outside of Valjevo. One policeman was killed, and an NCO was captured. This NCO, Corporal (*Rottwachtmeister*) Wilhelm Schmidt was brought to the camp of the Valjevo Detachment. The members of the detachment's headquarters debated what should be done with him. In the end, the decision was made to exchange him. The deputy commander of the detachment, Dragojlo Dudić's, wife and daughter were in the Valjevo prison as was jurist Stavatije Stanišić, a member of the KPJ's district committee for Valjevo, whose wife was with the guerrillas and pleaded for his exchange. According to Rodoljub Čolaković, a high-ranking Communist official with the detachment, Dudić insisted Stanišić, who was "worthier to the cause", should be saved instead of his spouse and daughter.⁶⁰ Schmidt was therefore ordered to write a letter to the *Feldkommandatur* stating he was well treated, and plead for his exchange for Stanišić.⁶¹ Before the answer could come, Schmidt and two other captured Germans made their escape on the night 16-17 August 1941 by exploiting the confusion caused by a sudden attack on the column they were marching with.

Both sides made interesting experiences during their brief encounter. One thing which attracts attention in the report made by Schmidt after his escape, are the details of his treatment in captivity. In his own words, he has "not been treated badly from the beginning", receiving the same food as "the bandits", and even occasionally received a few cigarettes. As the guerrillas were constantly on the march, he could not be isolated from the rest of the group. According to the detailed description of organization and persons he provided later on, it is evident that he had interacted daily with his captors, and that they made few attempts to conceal their activities from him. "That Sergeant [sic] Schmidt [...] has become tame lately [...] He now tries to ingratiate himself with our supply officer [*ekonom*] Ratko, he bows

⁵⁸ NAW, T-501, Roll 245, 000598-9, Political situation in Serbia (23 July 1941).

⁵⁹ NAW, T-314, Roll 1531, 000244, Commanding General in Serbia to Army High Command (3 August 1941).

⁶⁰ According to Dojčilo Mitrović, the author of the book, "*Srbija u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi: Zapadna Srbija*" (Belgrade: Nolit, 1975, p. 97), guerrilla fighters of the Kolubara Company went on a prisoner-hunt as soon as they heard Stanišić was captured. Stanišić died in a fire fight on 20 August, still a German prisoner. Dudić's wife and daughter were incarcerated in various camps and prisons during the war and, miraculously, survived: Dr. Rade Poznanović et al., *Tragom izdaje: svedočenja o izdaji četnika I streljanju na Nrušinu, U Valjevu 1941* (Valjevo: Lazar Ninković, 1987), p. 291.

⁶¹ The letter is not to be found in the otherwise extensive documentation of the 704th Infantry Division preserved in the U.S. National Archives.

humbly to every Partisan, and tries to pose as our friend” wrote Čolaković. It seems that Schmidt had tried to convince the latter that he was a private, and not a corporal, thinking this would save his life. He added that his officers did not care about enlisted men and would not agree to the proposed exchange. He further pleaded with the guerrillas to let him go, and in return he would help them capture an officer, whom they could then exchange for Stanišić. Once free, he promised to help out Stanišić while he is in prison, and even help him escape. By clumsily playing the “class card”, Schmidt only gave impetus to an unwated reaction. Čolaković, who did not hide his contempt for these captured Germans in his memoirs, wrote: “That’s the first time I realized that these people in field grey uniforms, who conquered the whole of Europe, do not have a shred of pride or ordinary human decency in them.”⁶²

This was the first attempted prisoner exchange between the two opposing forces in Serbia. The above provided account is corroborated by contemporary documents, participants’ memoirs and the official Yugoslav historiography, which, apart from minor details, recount the same version of the events. This is, however, an exception. As we shall see, the majority of local prisoner exchanges are clouded in varying degrees of controversy.

On 8 August 1941, in the village of Nevade just outside of Gornji Milanovac, elements of the Čačak Partisan Detachment ambushed a German automobile killing one occupant and capturing another, while the third managed to escape. A few days later, Gambert (the captured NCO) returned from his captivity. German and Yugoslav sources differ as to what happened between the 8th and Gambert’s return. According to one contemporary report of the Čačak Partisan Detachment, the guerrillas offered to exchange the NCO for six of their comrades who were in prison in Gornji Milanovac, with the Germans acquiescing.⁶³ The official monograph on the Čačak Detachment offers a slightly different story, saying that the Germans reacted to the ambush by arresting forty people, including a KPJ member Milutin Todorović Žica. They then began a series of reprisals, torching a few homes, and shooting one peasant and two captured Partisans. „Still, they were forced to negotiate and then to release the hostages in exchange for their NCO“.⁶⁴ Čolaković recalled later that a village teacher had told him about the exchange in Gornji Milanovac, adding that the released NCO spoke publicly of

⁶² NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 000371-4, Questioning of Wilhelm Schmidt and Heinrich Faßbender (19 August 1941); Rodoljub Čolaković, *Zapisi iz oslobodilačkog rata* (Sarajevo: Oslobođenje, 1985/6), pp. 78, 92-3.

⁶³ *Zbornik*/1/2/51-2, Čačak Partisan Detachment to Partisan Main HQ for Serbia (25 August 1941). The report gives “Maks Premel” as the name of the captive.

⁶⁴ Milojica Pantelić et al., *Čačanski narodno-oslobodilački partizanski odred „Dr. Dragiša Mišović“* (Čačak: Čačanskiglas, 1982), p. 99.

his good treatment during captivity, and was therefore transferred from the town.⁶⁵ Another version of the events claims that the exchange took place, but that the Germans nevertheless burned several homes and killed a man in whose dwelling they had found a weapon cache. The author adds that the mere fact that the Germans agreed to negotiate signaled that they acknowledged the Partisans as a regular army.⁶⁶ The available German sources do not make mention of an exchange. The daily report for 11 August 1941 merely states that the missing NCO was “released”.⁶⁷ According to Franz Egger, a soldier stationed in Gornji Milanovac at the time, the release of the NCO was a consequence of the decision by his commander to shoot four captured “Communists”.⁶⁸

As we have seen, captured German soldiers were, on the whole, treated appropriately during the first month or so of the uprising. The same could not always be said about those Volksdeutschen, or ethnic Germans living in Yugoslavia, who were unlucky enough to be taken captive.⁶⁹ The *Volksdeutschen* profited most from the occupation of the country, and were integrated into the occupation system by serving as auxiliary policemen, translators, etc. For that reason, and for the fact that only a tiny number of them joined the uprising, they were perceived as traitors and thus not protected by international law. On 8 August, the local branch of the KPJ lost three of its leading members in the town of Čuprija. Two of them were recognized and shot on the street by the local ethnic Germans. The war diary of the Commanding General in Serbia for the same day notes that the bandits stopped a train near the town and shot several ethnic Germans. A day later, “the Communists issued an ultimatum (to whom and from whom unknown), that if their captured comrades (who captured them and where they were captured being unknown) are not released, they would shoot more ethnic Germans”.⁷⁰ The attack on the train was carried out by a non-communist group led by Ilija Uzelac, who later became a Chetnik and fought the Partisans. It is unlikely that he would have issued an ultimatum in order to save the captured Communists. According to the Serbian gendarmerie, the Communist guerrillas did raid the mines in Sisevac and Senj on 9 and 11 August, and shot altogether six persons there. According to the post-war Yugoslav

⁶⁵ Čolaković, *Zapisi*, p. 137. The war diary of the Commanding General in Serbia noted that Gambert was „treated decently”: NAW, T-501, Roll 246, War diary entry for 9 August 1941.

⁶⁶ Mitrović, *Zapadna Srbija*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Daily report for 11 August 1941.

⁶⁸ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Interrogation of Franz Egger (22 October 1941).

⁶⁹ Ethnic Germans were the largest minority in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, totaling nearly half a million people according to the census of 1931. By the beginning of the April War, the vast majority of them were members of the *Kulturbund*, a pro-Nazi organization with strong ties to Berlin: Tomasevich, *Occupation*, pp. 201-2.

⁷⁰ NAW, T-501, Roll 245, 000226, 228, War diary for August 1941 (Entry no. 168 and 175). The Germans, not knowing the rank of the three Serbs killed in Čuprija, paid scant attention to this incident.

historiography, the raids took place between 10-12 August, whereby at least nine ethnic Germans were captured and two executed, allegedly by mistake. There is however, no mention of an ultimatum.⁷¹ The Germans from Čuprija retaliated on the following day. They executed some captured “bandits and their ringleaders” by hanging, because the latter allegedly used the same method on the captured ethnic Germans.⁷²

In the interim, the Valjevo Detachment had captured another potentially valuable prisoner. Marko Babić, the mayor of Valjevo, was caught by the Partisans with his wife and municipal cashier during an ambush on 20 August 1941. Not dismayed by the failed attempt to exchange Corporal Schmidt, the detachment decided to try its luck again. Contemptuous of the Serbian quisling administration and knowing it had no real power, the guerrillas wanted to deal directly with the German town command (*Standortkommandatur*). The cashier, Vasilije Nožica, was released the same day with the message: “The communists want to offer the German Wehrmacht an exchange”. The Partisans would release the mayor if the Germans would do the same with Milica Mešterović, mother-in-law of Dr. Pantić.⁷³ He added that the guerrillas were also looking for other prisoners in order to exchange them for their comrades in Valjevo prison. The town command immediately informed the intelligence section of the 704th Infantry Division. It in turn forwarded the matter to the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst* or SD) in Belgrade, which had been responsible for the arrest of Mešterović.⁷⁴ Mayor Babić was not released immediately after the capture, as suggested by some post-war publications.⁷⁵ The Germans in Valjevo were informed at the beginning of September that Babić had been seen in the town of Ub with Dr. Pantić. The planned exchange never materialized and on the night of 6-7 September, he was released by his captors.⁷⁶

⁷¹ *Zbornik*/I/21/31, 34, Overview of Partisan activities in August 1941 (Entries for 9 and 10 August 1941). Mitrović, *Zapadna Srbija*, p. 89; Boško Živanović et al., *Pomoravlje u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi 1941-1945* (Svetozarevo: Sreski odbor saveza boraca NOR-a, 1961), pp. 207-8.

⁷² NAW, T-501, Roll 245, 000230, War diary for August 1941 (Entry no. 181). The Partisans in Vojvodina, home to the majority of the Yugoslav ethnic Germans, showed more prudence in dealing with captured ethnic Germans. In late August 1941, they captured a local German official outside Kikinda and had him exchanged for a relative of one of their comrades on 22 August; Đorđe Momčilović, *Kako do brigade: Trinaesta vojvođanska udarna brigada* (Kikinda: Odbor za negovanje tradicija Trinaeste vojvođanske udarne brigada, 1979), p.120.

⁷³ Dr. Miša Pantić was the chief medical officer of the Valjevo Detachment. He was killed in early 1942.

⁷⁴ NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 000316-318, 321, Specific occurrences (22 August 1941), Intelligence section report (23 August 1941), Additional statement by municipal cashier Nožica Vasilije (24 August 1941), Report by Nožica Vasilije and Milan Milošević (22 August 1941).

⁷⁵ Milosav Bojić, *Posavski partizanski odred: Posavina i Tamnava u oružanom ustanku* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1987), pp. 123-4.

⁷⁶ NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 001016, 1058, Intelligence section report (6 September 1941), Special leader [*Sonderführer*] Baumann (10 September 1941). According to an eyewitness report, Mešterović was still in Valjevo prison in early December 1941: Poznanović et al., *Tragom izdaje*, p. 292.

By mid-August the situation in Serbia had deteriorated to a point where the previous directives on counter-insurgency efforts had to be fundamentally revised. The order concerning the exclusive use of police for fighting the guerrillas was thus rescinded only three weeks after it had been issued. Each of the three divisions were now given operational areas, and each of their battalions was ordered to undertake anti-guerrilla operations whenever necessary, using platoon/company sized “hunting groups” (*Jagdkommandos*). Other measures included the withdrawal of Serbian gendarmerie from the countryside into the regional centers and the introduction of convoy systems.⁷⁷ These measures brought no tangible improvement in the security situation, as evident in the letter from General Paul Bader, commander of the 65th Higher Command, to Armed Forces Commander South-East (*Wehrmachtsbefehlshaber Südost*) written on 28 August. After listing the tremendous difficulties three under-equipped occupation divisions had in trying to stamp out the fires of resistance, the general requested reinforcements in men, tanks and motorized vehicles.⁷⁸

At the same time, the German occupation forces suffered a series of defeats in Serbia which exposed just how fragile the occupation system was. On 31 August 1941, the Chetnik detachment of Lieutenant-Colonel Veselin Misita stormed the town of Loznica, on the Drina River, and took 93 German prisoners. Other German outposts in Western Serbia, like Banja Koviljača, Stolica and Bogatić were also raided. On 1 September, large insurgent force, including elements of the Valjevo Detachment encircled the town of Krupanj, which was secured by two companies of the 724th Infantry Regiment. The Germans, who had barricaded themselves in the hospital building, received a courier the next day with the following ultimatum:

*“I summon the commander to surrender the garrison until 9 o’clock tonight [...] If you do not accept, all the Germans will be massacred [...] Terms: lay down your arms, in which case I vouch for the lives of German soldiers until the end of the war.”*⁷⁹

It was signed by 1st Lieutenant Ratko Martinović who, together with the orthodox priest from Krupanj, Vlado Zečević, led the “independent” Chetnik units in the siege of the town.⁸⁰ The

⁷⁷ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Combat against communist bands (13 August 1941); *ibid.*, Transcript of 65th Higher Command, Operations section, No. 406/41 (14 August 1941); *ibid.*, Operations section, No. 384/41. (17 August 1941).

⁷⁸ NAW, T-314, Roll 1531, 000244, Cable to 12th Army/ Wehrmacht Commander South-East (28 August 1941).

⁷⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 001338, Translation of the ultimatum to Krupanj (6 September 1941).

⁸⁰ Beside Mihailović Chetniks, there were also Chetniks led by Kosta Pećanac, the head of the pre-war „Chetnik Organization“ and the leader of the so-called „Toplica Uprising“ against the Bulgarians in 1917. On 27 August 1941, he called upon the population to obey the occupiers and put his men at disposal of the Germans.

offer was turned down, and the Germans attempted to break out on 4 September with the support of “Stuka” aircraft. They did not get far: the column was forced to stop and surrender just outside the town.⁸¹

No less than 173 soldiers of the Wehrmacht were captured at Krupanj with their equipment. Altogether, the German forces suffered 414 KIA, WIA and MIA in the first week of September.⁸² The news of the events in Western Serbia hit like a bombshell and finally drew attention of the Wehrmacht High Command and Hitler to the brewing unrest in the South-East. On 16 September 1941, the notorious “Directive 31a” was issued. The 342nd Infantry Division, a front-line unit, was made ready for transfer to Serbia, and so were other, smaller units. All counter-insurgency efforts were to be directed by General Franz Böhme, the commander of the 18th Mountain Corps. Field-Marshal Wilhelm Keitel issued a separate order, which expounded upon the Führer’s instruction that the uprising must be quelled with the harshest means available. Consequently, fifty to one hundred hostages were to be executed for each German soldier killed.⁸³

In the interim, the insurgents had to consider what to do with the large number of German captives. There were rumors that the guerrillas wanted to exchange the prisoners at the rate of one German for a hundred Serbs.⁸⁴ On 21 September, the Partisans indeed tasked one of the captives, Private Schaarschmidt, to compile a list of all prisoners in order to “commence exchange negotiations.” The captured Germans thought it was composed with the sole purpose of deceiving them, since the alleged exchange never materialized. Some veterans on the opposite side recalled that there were attempts to contact the German garrison in Valjevo on this matter but that these failed because the latter did not want to talk to “bandits”.⁸⁵ There is no mention of this offer in the available German documents. The

Additionally, there were armed groups which called themselves Chetniks without clear affiliation with either of the two leaders. While Lieutenant-Colonel Misita was Mihailović’s man, Martinović and Zečević led their own detachments and co-operated closely with the Partisans. Ostracized by the nationalists, they eventually went over to the former, both ending the war as high officials of the „Second Yugoslavia“.

⁸¹ For a detailed description of the events from the German perspective see NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 001101-4, Report on the breakout from Krupanj on 4 September 1941 (6 September 1941). For the Yugoslav view see Martinović, *Od Ravne Gore*, pp. 277-89.

⁸² NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Daily report for 9 September 1941.

⁸³ For the wording of the so-called “Keitel Order” see NAW, T-314, Roll 1531, 000097-8, Communist uprising in the conquered territories (16 September 1941).

⁸⁴ NAW, T-314, Roll 1531, 001053, Dr. Keidel: Report on the fighting in Krupanj, his time in captivity and his escape to Bjeljina, Croatia (undated).

⁸⁵ NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000642, Report by the members of the former 10th Company, 724th Infantry Regiment on time spent in captivity (undated); Vojin Đurašinović, “Partizanska republika”, in: *Užička republika: Zbornik sećanja* (Užice: Narodni muzej-Muzej ustanka 1941, 1981), Vol. I, p. 223.

Germans, however, noted at about the same time that the Partisans wanted to capture all of the Valjevo defenders in order to exchange them later.⁸⁶

The Partisans were aware of the propaganda value of captives. For this purpose, they were used for clearing away the rubble in Krupanj and made to attend the Communist rallies, thereby showing the population that the Germans were not invincible. On the whole, the prisoners were treated decently, apart from their cramped living conditions at the outset of their captivity. One of the prisoners therefore requested from a political commissar that they should be treated according to international law. The fact that his request was granted shows the Partisans' intent to treat their prisoners as those of a belligerent power in order to be recognized as such by their enemies.⁸⁷

The Partisans were not alone in the attempt to use the prisoners to further their political aims. Mihailović's Chetniks, who were besieging the town of Šabac together with the Partisans, used it as a pretext for establishing contact with the German occupation forces. In a series of conciliatory letters, they offered to return some of the wounded prisoners, underlining at the same time that they were not the same as the Communists and that they wished an armistice. Indeed, the Chetniks released eight German wounded to the Šabac garrison on 20 September 1941.⁸⁸ These were some of the earliest ominous signs of a rift

⁸⁶ NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 000856, Testimony of the student Dragoljub Žarić (22 September 1941).

⁸⁷ NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000637, Testimony of NCO Pfüler (undated). The Germans, of course, refused to recognize the Partisans as lawful belligerents. The V United States Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, which tried a number of high-ranking German commanders from the Balkans in the so-called "Hostage Case" in 1947, found that the Yugoslav Partisans, on the whole, did not meet the requirements of the Geneva Convention. In 1959, a paper prepared by the United States Army's Judge Advocate General's School pointed to the flaws in court procedures, such as a lack of Yugoslav witnesses and documentary materials. The paper did not question the tribunal's verdict, questioning instead its value as a possible precedent: *A Treatise on the Juridical Basis of the Distinction Between Lawful Combatant and Unprivileged Belligerent* (Charlottesville, VA: Judge Advocate General's School, 1959), pp. 61-3, 78-81. Freely downloadable at www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/treatise.pdf; last accessed on 11 June 2013).

⁸⁸ NAW, T-312, Roll 460, Daily report for 20 September 1941. For more on Chetnik-German correspondence around Šabac see Dragoslav Parmaković, *Mačvanski partizanski odred* (Šabac: Fond narodnooslobodilačke borbe Podrinja, 1973), pp. 425-8. The Germans toyed with the idea of retrieving their captured men from the Chetniks via unofficial contacts. A document dated 10 September states that the "Chetnik leaders should be advised to release these men." A handwritten note was added: "Captain Račić [Chetnik commander at Šabac] allegedly has 160 German prisoners from Loznica[...] General Nedić already contacted, he said he had already tried to achieve their release": NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Operations section (10 September 1941). Milan Nedić (1877-1946) was made Serbian Prime minister on 29 August and tasked with forming a government which would replace the Commissary Council. The first contacts between him and Mihailović's emissaries took place in Belgrade between 29 August and 6 September 1941: Miodrag Zečević, *Dokumenti sa suđenja Ravnogorskom pokretu 10. juni- 15. juli 1946* (Belgrade: SUBNOR Jugoslavije, 2001), pp. 178-9. The correspondence between the Cer Chetniks under Račić and German commands continued for at least two more weeks. The Commanding General in Serbia cabled to the 342nd Infantry Division on 4 October: "Answer to Chetnik leader: return the German prisoners; name the date and place; surrender your weapons, in which case full amnesty." NAW, T-501, Roll 250, Cable to 342nd Infantry Division (4 October 1941).

between the two resistance movements, a rift which would some six weeks later develop into an open confrontation.⁸⁹

Keeping prisoners of war was a characteristic of a regular army, something the Partisans strove to be. The original plan of action drawn-up in July called for the creation of small units whose main activities would be small-scale in nature, such as sabotage and assassination. Tito was at the time wary of enemy strength and did not want to precipitate the general uprising before the circumstances became favorable, i.e. before the Red Army was within the striking distance of Yugoslavia.⁹⁰ The course of events over the next weeks made him revise this strategy. The weak quisling apparatus was brought to the verge of collapse by repeated attacks; vast tracts of territory were liberated; the Germans barricaded themselves in the towns, a sign of weakness which did not go unnoticed by the population. Inspired by the success, Tito decided to step up the intensity of the actions against the occupier and broaden the base of the resistance. On 10 August 1941, "Bulletin No.1" of the Main Partisan Headquarters proclaimed the guidelines for the armed struggle, which, among others, unequivocally stated the Partisan detachments are open to all patriots and not only Communists.⁹¹ Although cautioned by the Comintern to concentrate solely on the anti-occupation struggle and leave the revolution for the post-war period⁹², the KPJ was from the outset linked to the uprising. The "People's Liberation Councils" were originally formed in the Partisan-held regions as bodies tasked with supplying the Partisan units. Soon, however, they took over administering the civilian population on the whole, replacing the old municipality system, which had already been shattered by guerrilla attacks. Just as these organs were perceived as a legitimate expression of the popular wish to break with the old ways, so were the Partisan detachments represented as the regular army of the new Yugoslavia.

On 26 September 1941, Tito held a meeting with the Politburo and Partisan commanders from across the country in the West Serbian village of Stolice. The conclusions made here were a step further in the process of regularization within the Partisan forces. The "Main Headquarters of People's Liberation Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia" was

⁸⁹ Mihailović and his Chetniks began to play an active part in the uprising in September. The string of Partisan successes and the growing public support they enjoyed as a result forced Mihailović into action. He stated this as his main motive to German officers in November 1941: Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, p. 145; Jovan Marjanović, *Draža Mihailović između Nemaca i Britanaca* (Zagreb: Globus, 1979), p. 156.

⁹⁰ Milovan Djilas, *Wartime* (New York: Harcourt Brace-Jovanovich, 1977), p. 8.

⁹¹ For the full text of the bulletin, see *Zbornik*/II/1/11-8, Bulletin No.1 of the Main Headquarters of National Liberation Partisan Detachments (10 August 1941).

⁹² Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Vol. II, p. 153.

renamed to “Supreme Headquarters”, each province in turn receiving its own “Main Headquarters”. The units were to be commanded by a trio consisting of a commander, his deputy and a political commissar. The time was deemed ripe for a wholesale popular uprising and the recruitment base was ordered to be widened as much as possible. The detachment remained the basic unit of the Partisan army, although two or more of these could be grouped for large-scale actions. Detachments were to be divided into battalions, companies and platoons. A further strengthening of discipline was ordered; the Partisan salute with the clenched fist was officially introduced, and so was the official insignia consisting of a red star and an appropriate national tricolor (Serbian/Croatian, etc.).⁹³ Efforts to build up a regular army and to be recognized as such by both friend and foe would continue to play a very important place in the overall strategy of the KPJ. That is precisely what the partisans wanted to achieve in Serbia by keeping prisoners and treating them according to international law, namely, recognition as a lawful belligerent.

The fall of Krupanj and the majority of the surrounding area proved to be only the beginning of a massive surge of guerrilla activity in the whole of Serbia save the Banat. All German district commands sent panicky reports throughout September on the wave of sabotage aimed at cutting off garrisons, the supply of raw materials, attacks on German units and the Serbian gendarmerie.⁹⁴ Arilje and Ivanjica were evacuated on the 18th and Čajetina on 20 September, which made the German hold on Užice and Požega untenable; both towns were evacuated a day later. Gornji Milanovac fell on 29 September, followed by Čačak on 1 October; Kruševac and Šabac were attacked; Valjevo and Kraljevo were besieged. The insurgents had thereby gained control of two thirds of occupied Serbia exempting the urban centers. It is estimated that at this point the Partisans had around 14,000 fighters divided into 23 detachments.⁹⁵

There are several events during this period which deserve to be examined in greater detail. The first two such events took place at the beginning of September around Jagodina. On the 1st, a train was stopped between Čuprija and Paraćin and three German soldiers were captured. They, along with a “fifth-columnist” from the same train, were shot on 5 September.

⁹³ *Vojna enciklopedija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1973), Volume V, p. 773.

⁹⁴ See NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Situation reports by FK 809 Niš and FK 816 Užice, and, to lesser extent, FK 610 Pančevo and FK 509 Belgrade (8 and 18 September 1941).

⁹⁵ The taking of strategically located towns was devised at a meeting of Partisan detachment commanders on 16 September in order to link up the “liberated territories” of Central and Western Serbia: *Oslobodilački rat naroda Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institute JNA, 1957), Vol. I, pp. 57-8. The strength of Mihailović’s Chetniks in September is hard to gauge. The Germans estimated it at several thousand men: NAW, T-315, Roll 2238, 000251-2, Estimate of insurgents’ strength in Serbia (22 September 1941).

The Yugoslav historiography does not give an explanation as to why the captives were executed. One explanation could lay in the fact that the Partisan unit which had carried out the attack (Paraćin-Ćuprija Company of the Pomoravlje Detachment) lost its commander on 29 August to a trial, which accused him of dereliction of duty: among other charges, he had set some captured gendarmes free. It is possible that the new commander wanted to christen his tenure with a shedding of enemy blood.⁹⁶ Three days after the execution, another company of the same detachment ambushed a convoy on the Kragujevac-Ćuprija road, killing three and capturing seven Germans, including a doctor. They dispatched a letter to the *Feldkommandatur* in Niš requesting a similar number of their own in exchange for the captives. As no answer was forthcoming, six prisoners were shot. “The doctor was given the choice whether to join us or stay with his compatriots “, reads the official monograph of the Pomoravlje region, and admits candidly: „Since he chose to stay and solidarize with the others, he was shot as well“.⁹⁷

The German reports from that period do not mention the exchange offer. Either the letter never made it to the city, or the *Feldkommandatur* chose to disregard the offer. The latter indeed may have been the case, as only several days earlier, on 5 September 1941, Field Marshal List, Wehrmacht Commander in the South-East, issued an order which strictly prohibited both surrendering and negotiating with the insurgents.⁹⁸ The *Feldkommandatur* in Niš did contact its superiors in Belgrade in connection with captive guerrillas on 8 September. It informed the Commanding General in Serbia that it did not carry out the shooting of fifteen to twenty Communists for fear of reprisals. Ten German soldiers were known to have been captured in the area in the first week of September, and the local military authorities feared for their lives if the said captive Partisans were shot. The district command added that it would send all Partisan prisoners from Jagodina it had in its custody to the regiment in Ćuprija, so that the latter can take reprisals for the “murder of the German soldiers at

⁹⁶ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Daily report for 2 September 1941; Živanović et al., *Pomoravlje*, p. 214-5. One German managed to escape, which induced both the executioner and the company commissar to the same, fearing possible punishment.

⁹⁷ The German sources reported eleven rather than ten KIA and MIA resulting from this incident: NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Daily report for 11 September 1941; Živanović et al., *Pomoravlje*, p. 178. Such candidness was rare in the official historiography, even for the books appearing at the end of the socialist period. Even more remarkably, the monograph in question was published in 1961. The 714th Division found the bodies of seven men “including a doctor belonging to the OT” near Ćuprija in early December: NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 000076, Intelligence Summary for the period 20 November- 4 December 1941 (5 December 1941). “OT” stands for “Organization Todt”, an organization tasked with military engineering both in Germany and in the occupied territories.

⁹⁸ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Quelling the Serbian insurgency (5 September 1941). The main purpose of the order was to prevent further mass surrenders such as that in Krupanj from occurring again.

Jagodina.”⁹⁹ The last sentences refers, in all probability, to the Germans killed immediately in the ambush on 8 September, since, according to a Yugoslav document dated 12 September, the Partisans were still waiting for an answer to their exchange offer.¹⁰⁰

On the whole, the tone of the report from Niš was highly uncommon for the German commands in Serbia in 1941. It probably had to do with the —relatively —mild character of the local district commander, Colonel Karl Freiherr von Bothmer.¹⁰¹ German occupation forces did not normally consider the possibility of reprisals against their captured comrades, or threats in this direction. The official “Bulletin” of the Supreme Partisan HQ in its September double issue (published on 1 October), carried the proclamation which said that the German and quisling authorities were arresting, torturing and murdering Serbs in Belgrade and other places in the country on a daily basis. “Herewith we declare that from now on we shall consider as hostages countless spies, fifth-columnists and hundreds of German prisoners in our custody. Ten of these will be shot for each killed Partisan or an arrested anti-fascist”.¹⁰² The Bulletin adds that eight “German fascists” have already been shot for the torching of some villages in the vicinity of Valjevo without providing further details. This proclamation was meant as a threat, rather than the beginning of a new policy towards the captured Germans. There is no evidence that the Partisans ever carried out reprisals along the lines proclaimed in the aforementioned issue of the Bulletin. The execution of the eight Germans might have been meant as an example, or was carried out for propaganda purposes. As evident from the quoted sources, the way in which prisoners were handled depended more on individual commanders and circumstances on the ground, than on a prescribed set of policies.

The “no negotiations” order issued by List was far more likely to be obeyed in the second-largest city in Serbia than in the interior of the country. Battalions, sometimes fifty or

⁹⁹ NAW, T-501, Roll 249, 000735, Shooting of Hostages (8 September 1941).

¹⁰⁰ See the report by Petar Stambolić, in which he mentions the exchange request and the intention to liquidate the captives if the exchange doesn’t take place: *Zbornik*/I/1/120, Report by CPY Instructor for Pomoravlje region (12 September 1941).

¹⁰¹ Von Bothmer (1880-1947) became known for his letter to the Commanding General in Serbia from early August, where he voiced his protest against the randomness of reprisals in general and refused to pass a death sentence without a proper investigation: NAW, T-501, Roll 249, 000740, Hand grenade attack on the Park Hotel in Niš on 3 August 1941 (6 August 1941). Bothmer was extradited in 1947 to Yugoslavia to stand trial for crimes committed by the occupation forces in the Niš area. As he was the district commander there until 1943, he was pronounced guilty for numerous executions which took place in that period and sentenced to death by firing squad: Đorđe N. Lopičić, *Nemački ratni zločini 1941-1945* (Belgrade: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2009), p. 57.

¹⁰² *Zbornik*/II/2/83, Bulletin Nos. 7 and 8 of the Main Headquarters of National Liberation Partisan Detachments (1 October 1941).

more kilometers apart from each other, had a nigh-impossible task of securing every strategic point and line of communication in their operational areas. They rarely fought as a cohesive unit but were rather divided into several tiny garrisons, usually of company strength, always encircled in one form or another. In such an atmosphere of isolation, these units had to learn to fend for themselves and, in the process, sometimes interpret orders in a lax way. The town of Veliko Gradište on the Danube was attacked by the Partisans and the Chetniks on 20 September 1941. Its garrison consisted of only 12 German customs officials and members of the Water Protection police (*Wasserschutzpolizei*) assisted by 65 Serbian customs officials and gendarmes. The Germans barricaded themselves in their headquarters, holding out for five hours after the attack began. As their situation appeared hopeless, they agreed to the Partisan offer to leave the town unmolested in exchange for their weapons. One policeman was allowed to cross the Danube in a rowing boat and bring over a bigger vessel with which to take his comrades out. However, before he came back, the Partisans changed their mind: they took the remaining Germans prisoner, loaded them on two Lorries and shipped them to their base at Rabrovo, some 22 kilometers away. The Germans were soon joined there by their colleague, who returned with a boat to collect them and was captured as well. They were treated well and subjected to only a superficial interrogation: the Partisans were keen to find out if there were officers among them. Around 1000 hours in the morning of 21 September, one of the captives, Peter Strüder, was chosen to accompany a Partisan envoy to nearby Požarevac in order to negotiate with the Germans. Instead of Požarevac, they went back in a car to Veliko Gradište, which had by then been re-occupied by German units. They met with Lieutenant Buschmann of the Water Protection Police and informed him of the Partisan terms: reprisals against the population of Veliko Gradište, Rabrovo, Kučevo and Golubac must not be undertaken; twenty to thirty recently arrested political prisoners in Požarevac must be freed and not harmed in any way. Buschmann agreed to the first point, but declined the other two. He instead offered the exchange of prisoners on a ratio one-to-one, adding that aircraft would bomb Veliko Gradište if the German prisoners were not released by 1600 hours in the afternoon. The envoys returned to Rabrovo with the news. The Partisan command demanded that the terms be put in writing, which was conveyed to Buschmann as the negotiators returned to Veliko Gradište for the second time that day. He agreed, but before the negotiators could travel to Rabrovo again, an army lieutenant intervened, saying these terms were unacceptable to the army. As a result, further negotiations were cancelled, Strüder was taken

across the Danube to Rumania, and the Partisan envoy was shot. The Germans pulled out of the town, which was bombed soon afterwards by dive-bombers.¹⁰³

The willingness of Lieutenant Buschmann to defy his standing orders and accept negotiations in order to free his fellow officers of the Water Protection Police came to naught. The authority in this matter lay in the hands of the unnamed lieutenant of the Wehrmacht who, obviously, saw no reason to break the rule prohibiting negotiations with the guerrillas. In the grand scheme of things, he should not be the only one to whom blame for short-sightedness and rigidity be attributed. The Communist Party's local branch assured its superiors that "the negotiations were led without our approval and we have criticized it sternly." In the same report, the authors wrote that the negotiations broke down because the two sides could not agree on the extent of territory for which the Germans would "vouch security."¹⁰⁴ This detail was not mentioned in Buschmann's report but would nonetheless explain the decision of the army officer to cut the talks short. If indeed this was the case, and if the Party insisted on hedging the prisoner exchange on this matter, then the words of Moma Marković, written almost half a century after the events, make sense:

"The HQ of the Detachment agreed to negotiate, but I objected to it. When I later heard of secret negotiations [...] between our and German high commands, I remembered my own narrow view of negotiating with the enemy, and the lost opportunity to save at least some of the arrested comrades in this way".¹⁰⁵

Although the negotiations were unsuccessful, the mere fact that the Germans acquiesced to talk to the Partisans on an equal footing was perceived as potentially valuable propaganda. Consequently, Tito had no qualms about publishing the news about the events in Veliko

¹⁰³ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Report on the Attack on Veliko Gradište by Peter Strüder (23 September 1941). In addition to the slain envoy, the German relief force shot another 24 "bandits" captured along the way: NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Activity report of the Water Protection Police for the period 15 August-24 September 1941 (Entry for 20-23 September 1941).

¹⁰⁴ Zbornik/I/1/129-30, Report by the CPY district committee for Požarevac (21 September 1941).

¹⁰⁵ Slavko Odić, Slavko Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba 1941-1942: šta se stvarno događalo* (Zagreb: Centar za informacije i publicitet, 1988), Volume III, p. 147. Momčilo-Moma Marković (1912-1992) was an „instructor“ of the Central Committee of the CPY for the Požarevac district, making him the highest Party authority there. Almost exactly half a year later, a German informant, Franz Ketčeg, denounced a Chetnik named Boško Šarunac for taking part in the capture of "nine Water Protection policemen in Veliko Gradište" who were later shot. The report doesn't mention when the execution took place: NAW, T-315, Roll 2243, 00618, Intelligence section, Report by Franz Ketčeg (25 March 1942).

Gradište in the “Bulletin of the Supreme headquarters”, adding that German offers were rejected out of hand.¹⁰⁶

On 28 September 1941, the German column coming from Kraljevo to Čačak was ambushed at the town's outskirts. Apart from one captured lorry, the German occupation forces also lost three men to the local Partisans. A letter was sent to the German command in Čačak, proposing an exchange of the three captured soldiers for a number of hostages held in the town's prison. The local command responded immediately: “Since the German armed forces are leading an uncompromising struggle against communism, the offer is refused”. Two days later, the captured Germans were brought before a trial and shot. This was done in response to the execution of a wounded Partisan Damjan Matović several days before.¹⁰⁷

The 6th Company of the 920th *Landeschützen* Battalion had been garrisoned in the town of Gornji Milanovac since the beginning of July. As it turned out, the unit found itself in the heart of the guerrilla-infested region of Central Serbia. The town was effectively cut off from the rest of the country by frequent sabotage on the rails and roads leading to it. Therefore, it was decided at the end of September that the company should evacuate Gornji Milanovac and join the garrison in Kraljevo. On 26 September 1941 a peasant warned the company about an impending attack. It came three days later, as elements of the Takovo Chetnik and Čačak Partisan detachments entered the town. The *Landeschützen* maintained a resolute defense, turning down a surrender ultimatum which was issued to them after two hours of fighting. Realizing that their position was not likely to approve, they were more willing to listen to the second Chetnik envoy, which appeared half-an-hour later. He guaranteed safe conduct to Čačak if the company would leave the town on the same day. “920th *Landeschützen* Battalion has evacuated Gornji Milanovac with honor” reported the company commander Captain Zerlacher. Furthermore, he requested that the town and its inhabitants be spared from any possible reprisals, for they have behaved loyally throughout the fighting.¹⁰⁸ The guerrilla offer, however, turned out to be a ruse. Knowing the Germans were far more likely to talk with the Nationalists than with the Communists, the Partisans agreed to the idea that the Chetniks should do the negotiating in order to lure the garrison out

¹⁰⁶ *Zbornik*/II/2/97, Bulletin Nos. 10 and 11 of the Main Headquarters of National Liberation Partisan Detachments (1 October 1941).

¹⁰⁷ NAW, T-315, Roll 2262, 000187, 205, War diary entries for 28 September and 1 October 1941; Pantelić et al., *Čačanski NOPO*, pp. 133-4. According to Pantelić, the ambush took place on the 27th.

¹⁰⁸ NAW, T-501, Roll 250, 000983-4, Report by Franz Egger (22 October 1941) and 001003, Message from Gornji Milanovac (29 September 1941).

of the town.¹⁰⁹ Three kilometers from Gornji Milanovac, the 6th Company was surrounded by the guerrillas who demanded its immediate surrender. The Germans had little choice but to comply. The material spoils were divided half-half between the two guerrilla movements, while the 62 prisoners went to the Chetniks. After clearing the rubble in Čačak over the following days, they were first sent to Ravna Gora, and then to Požega.¹¹⁰

By 1735 hours on 29 September, the Commanding General in Serbia was getting anxious as to the whereabouts of the 6th Company, cabling to Kraljevo: “Report immediately if the *Landesschützen* from Gornji Milanovac arrived”.¹¹¹ As the company continued to be at large, a reconnaissance flight was put up, but failed to spot any movement in the town. On 1 October, 3rd Battalion of the 749th Infantry Regiment from Kraljevo was tasked with breaking through to Gornji Milanovac. If the 6th Company was not encountered there, the population should be taken hostage and the town razed.¹¹² The battalion started its advance on 5 October and had to fight its way along the 40-kilometer road to Gornji Milanovac, taking casualties in the process. Once the battalion arrived, it took all male inhabitants it could find, some 120-170 in all. Among these hostages was one Chetnik commander, who was scheduled to meet his superiors the next day. Captain Fiedler, the commanding officer, hoped to use this man to contact the Chetnik command and “exchange the hostages for the captured *Landesschützen* [...] for he thought this was the ultimate objective of the whole action”. Fiedler also did not torch the town for fear this would diminish the chances of a positive answer to the exchange offer. In the meantime, an SOS call was raised from nearby Rudnik, where another German outfit was embroiled in heavy fighting with the guerrillas. Fiedler decided to direct his battalion there and relieve the hard-pressed unit. Assuming he would have to go through Gornji Milanovac on his way back, he decided to postpone the taking of hostages and burning of the town until his return from Rudnik. The battalion was, however, ordered to take another route on its return trip to Kragujevac, and it arrived there on 10 October.¹¹³ Four days later, the battalion was ordered to Gornji Milanovac again and tasked with rounding up the

¹⁰⁹ Pantelić et al., *Čačanski NOPO*, pp. 131-2.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 158; NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Daily report for 3 October 1941. Both Egger and Franz Kleinod (who had been captured on 4 October in Stragari and thereafter joined the prisoners from Gornji Milanovac), confirmed they were treated decently during their captivity: NAW, T-501, Roll 250, 000986-7, Report by Franz Kleinod (22 October 1941).

¹¹¹ NAW, T-501, Roll 250, 001011, Message to “Leichtsinn” (29 September 1941).

¹¹² NAW, T-501, Roll 246, War diary entry for 1 October 1941.

¹¹³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2262, 000213-4, 218, War diary entries for 5-6 and 10 October 1941; NAW, T-315, Roll 2238, 000086-8, To Commanding General in Serbia (10 October 1941). Chief of the general staff of the 65th Higher Commando, Colonel Erich Kewisch, commended Captain Fiedler in his report for his overall conduct. This implies that the higher authorities did not always insist on a strict interpretation of Field Marshal List’s order of 5 September which forbade any negotiating with the guerrillas.

hostages. On 15 October it reached the town, but now only forty people could be arrested — persons who “held out” and had been waiting for the Germans to return; Gornji Milanovac was razed to the ground.¹¹⁴ This time, attempts to exchange the hostages were not made. They were needed elsewhere for a much more sinister purpose.

4. Quelling the Uprising: September-December 1941

Hitler’s order of 16 September marked the beginning of a massive German effort to crush the rebellion in Serbia. Even before the order was given, the reinforced 125th Infantry Regiment arrived from Greece and began operating in Western Serbia in the vicinity of Valjevo. The main push began on 23 September, as three regiments of the 342nd Infantry Division started crossing the Sava River in order to raise the siege of Šabac and eliminate the insurgents from the Mačva region. This operation was marked by the exhibition of extreme brutality towards the civilian population. The division issued a proclamation ordering the deportation of every male person between 16 and 65 years of age to the detention camp at Šabac. Those who did not respond to the call or those who were caught wandering in the open, were shot; the mere suspicion of an affiliation with the guerrillas was enough to warrant execution. By 20 October, the division had shot some 4,000 people and deported another 21,500, the vast majority of which were innocent civilians.¹¹⁵

The reason why the 3rd Battalion of the 749th Infantry Regiment did not seek a prisoner exchange when it arrived in Gornji Milanovac for the second time probably lay in the order issued by General Franz Böhme on 8 October. This order was a replica of the one signed by Field Marshal List on 5 September, and it was issued with similar intent. Just as the surrender of Krupanj had provided the stimulus for List’s order, the capture of the *Landesschützen* outside of Gornji Milanovac gave Böhme cause to issue his order in October. Consequently, all units of the Wehrmacht were prohibited from negotiating with the insurgents for any reason whatsoever. Furthermore, it stipulated that guerrilla envoys did not enjoy the

¹¹⁴ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, To FK 610 Pančevo (20 October 1941). One other report says the number of hostages was 133, but this may include persons captured from the villages situated along the road to Kragujevac: NAW, T-314, Roll 1531, 000173, Report for the period 10-19 October 1941 (20 October 1941).

¹¹⁵ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 71. The majority of these executions were carried out before the infamous “Rule 1:100” became official policy. Ironically, Schmider concludes that this rule brought some moderation to the indiscriminate terror practiced by the 342nd Infantry Division in Mačva.

protection of international law, and were to be shot (or shot at) whenever encountered.¹¹⁶ Although similar in provisions to its predecessor, Böhme's order would be followed more often than List's. Unlike List, Böhme had the means of ensuring that his instructions would be carried out, namely, the necessary force to back them up, with one extra division in the field already and a second scheduled to arrive in the near future. Furthermore, he intended to "intensify" the already bloody counter-insurgency making it instead a total war against the guerrillas and the Serbian population. The war would be fought with unprecedented brutality until one of the opponents was utterly vanquished. Surrender would be no option for either of the two.

Even before the "Keitel Order" which called for the execution of up to one hundred Serbs for every German killed and fifty for each German wounded, was officially issued to the divisions on 10 October 1941, Böhme put his views into practice. On 2 October, a convoy belonging to the 521st Army Communications Regiment (*Armeenachrichtenregiment*) was ambushed by the 1st Šumadija Partisan Detachment not far from the town of Topola:

„Bandits have arranged the attack in such a way that the column received fire from three sides at once. Before the convoy came to a halt, it had already suffered casualties. In the following fire fight coordinated defense was not possible, since the bandits were firing from well-built positions. The convoy was destroyed [...].“

One officer, 1st Lieutenant Lehr, was among the Germans who were captured. Fearing the worst, he approached the guerrilla commander and purposed to organize an exchange of his men for captured Communists in Belgrade. The former simply replied "No!" Lehr tried again, offering safe conduct to Belgrade for the Partisan commander, so that he could organize the exchange himself. Lehr added that the Partisans could get ten Serbs for one German. The new propositions were turned down "brusquely".¹¹⁷ At that moment, a Partisan courier arrived with the message that a second German convoy was approaching the scene. Upon hearing this, the Partisans executed fourteen prisoners, including two seriously

¹¹⁶ NAW, T-501, Roll 250, 001296, Negotiating with insurgents (8 October 1941). In pursuance of this order, the Germans shot two Partisan envoys who demanded the surrender of the garrison in Ub: NAW, T-315, Roll 2236, 000304, War diary entry for 27 October 1941.

¹¹⁷ For a full report by one of the survivors see NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 000109-11, Intelligence section, Activity report for October 1941.

wounded, with machine-gun fire. They took the remaining six prisoners with them as porters and hurried away.¹¹⁸

All in all, the Germans lost 22 KIA, 3 WIA and 10 MIA during this attack. It appears that the execution of prisoners was a matter of expediency, rather than a premeditated act. “The only way for the Partisans to escape to safety before the [other] Wehrmacht unit came, was to have the prisoners either shot or freed”, remembered one German survivor; “To take the wounded with them would have cost too much time.”¹¹⁹ It is doubtful that such a seemingly large group of prisoners would have been freed even in August, when releasing captives was not unusual.¹²⁰ In light of the steadily escalating terror, especially in Mačva, this would have hardly been an option at the beginning of October. Likewise, the proposed exchange would have had little chance of being accepted by the new military authorities in Belgrade.¹²¹

According to the initial reports, the executed soldiers were terribly mutilated, implying that they had been tortured before being shot. The corpses were therefore sent to Belgrade in order to be examined by a team of doctors. Their report concluded that “there were no traceable signs of mutilation or torture.” Böhme, however, clung to the first version for propaganda purposes.¹²² It was in line with his efforts to raise the fighting spirit of his men

¹¹⁸ One Partisan document states there were seven prisoners who were brought to the prisoner camp in Gornji Milanovac: *Zbornik/I/20/105*, Activity report of the 1st Šumadija Detachment for the period 26 September-14 October 1941 (14 October 1941). Partisan losses were one heavily and two lightly wounded men.

¹¹⁹ Walter Manoschek, *Serbien ist Judenfrei: Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Vernichtung der Juden in Serbien* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1995), p. 82.

¹²⁰ German prisoners continued to be occasionally released until late August/beginning of September: *Zbornik/I/20/67*, Activity report of the 1st Šumadija Detachment for the period September (24 September 1941); NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 000065-6, Interrogation of Private Müller (1 September 1941).

¹²¹ According to the official monograph of the 1st Šumadija Detachment, the commander of the 714th Infantry Division, General Friedrich Stahl, tried to defuse the situation in his operational zone with negotiations. Immediately after the Topola ambush, he sent a civilian courier to the 1st Šumadija Detachment who offered the Partisans a deal: the Germans would refrain from taking reprisals if the guerrillas would be willing to abstain from further attacks on the lines of communication. The local Partisan commander dismissed the offer without consulting the detachment's HQ: Stanković, *Prvi šumadijski partizanski odred*, p. 276

¹²² Manoschek, *Serbien ist Judenfrei*, p. 83. Both primary and secondary German sources pertaining to the war in Yugoslavia contain numerous references to alleged mutilation of the bodies of dead German soldiers by the Partisans. Contemporary reports, German veterans and some early post-war researchers usually attributed this practice to a particular tendency for brutality that the peoples from the Balkans had developed over centuries of uninterrupted warfare. Sweeping generalizations like this are misleading for several reasons. First of all, they served to dehumanize the enemy and make one's own war crimes appear to pale in comparison, or even make them look justified. The Partisans usually stripped the bodies of enemy soldiers of valuables, including the uniform and the footgear, and left them unburied. Both the weather and wild animals could produce similar effects to mutilation and is confirmed in one early German report from Serbia. The document reads that the body of one soldier was found mutilated, and that the injuries were caused by a dog (NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 000428, After-action report Bela Crkva, 16 August 1941). It should be noted that this report was written before Böhme came to Serbia and launched the campaign of unrestrained violence (I have never

and make the escalation of violence all the more acceptable.¹²³ On 3 October 1941, he ordered that for each of the 21 killed soldiers (one was still in hospital, gravely wounded) one hundred hostages should be shot. The executions, targeting mainly Jews and Roma, took place over the next week on the outskirts of Belgrade. This event ushered the beginning of the so-called “Bloody October”, as the application of the “1:100” rule came into full swing. It was applied again in Kraljevo in a series of executions which took place between 15 and 24 October, as the 717th Infantry Division shot some 2,000 people in reprisal for German casualties incurred in the fighting around the town. What would be the worst atrocity took place in Kraguevac on 20-21 October, as 2,300 hostages were shot in response to the attack launched on the 3rd Battalion during its second raid on Gornji Milanovac, when the unit suffered nine dead and incurred 27 wounded.¹²⁴ “The situation in Serbia is somewhat better”, concluded the staff of the 65th Higher Commando on 20 October, “foremost because of the application of reprisal measures.”¹²⁵

“Deathly horror [...] had gripped Serbia” wrote Milovan Đilas in his memoirs.¹²⁶ The guerrillas were taken aback by the cold, calculated mass terror. Partisan commands and Party bodies were reporting about “great fear” among the population, which occasionally spread to guerrilla units. Confusion was ripe: some units were avoiding going into action in order not to

come across a similar report in German documents after September 1941). Second, it is based on a stereotype that the Balkans was a half-civilized “dark corner of Europe” where warfare was still conducted according to tribal traditions. The Partisan army was made up of hundreds of thousands of people who came from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Ritual mutilation of enemy dead is known to have been practiced by Montenegrins as late as the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913 as a way of proving bravery in battle (Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913: Prelude to the First World War*; New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 136). If this tradition survived the interwar period and strong presence of Communist ideology in the country is hard to gauge. It is also unlikely that such customs were being followed in the regions where tribal society was long gone and where Central European cultural influences had been present for decades or even centuries (such as Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina under Habsburg rule), or in the newly independent states that experienced rapid modernization such as Serbia. There can, of course, be no doubt that the Partisan army had its fair share of sadists. For instance, Đilas recalled how a Slavonian Partisan once decapitated a captured Ustasha with a sabre (Đilas, *Wartime*, pp. 326-7); Jovo Kapičić, a high ranking Partisan functionary, told an interviewer in 2010 how he and his comrades in Montenegro had in 1941 doused the corpses of Italian Blackshirts with gasoline and set them alight (Tamara Nikičević, *Goli Otoci Jova Kapičića*, Podgorica, 2010, p. 37). In any case, until this topic has been sufficiently researched, war-time reports and veteran memoirs should be taken with a grain of salt.

¹²³ See Böhme’s proclamation of 25 September 1941, in which he called upon his soldiers to avenge the losses of the Austro-Hungarian army suffered in the ill-fated campaign against Serbia in 1914: Manoschek, *Serbien ist Judenfrei*, p. 60.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 155-68.

¹²⁵ NAW, T-314, Roll 1531,000173, Situation report for the period 10-19 October 1941 (20 October 1941).

¹²⁶ Đilas, *Wartime*, p. 94.

provoke German reprisals.¹²⁷ The ‘Jovan Kursula’ Detachment that was besieging Kraljevo at the time wanted to forestall reprisals that would inevitably result from the planned attack on the town. The Partisans therefore threatened the local enemy command with the shooting of eight Germans if their demands were not met. These included the cessation of mass arrests, the release of captives, putting an end to the burning of Serbian property and a 1,800,000 Dinar indemnity. The last request was that the Germans “recognize [the Partisans] as a lawful belligerent.” The ultimatum remained unanswered.¹²⁸ Other detachments, like the one operating around Požarevac, tried to fight terror with terror. After the renewed bombing of Rabrovo village on 8 October which caused huge civilian casualties, the unit’s command decided to shoot all German prisoners at hand.¹²⁹ Although such a course of action was not a part of the official policy, it seems that it was adopted by the majority of those units which chose to respond to the reprisals in kind. “The enemy changed his attitude towards German prisoners. They are [now] usually being maltreated and shot” reported Lieutenant-Colonel Gravenhorst to the Commanding General in Serbia at the end of the month.¹³⁰

According to German reports, that is exactly what happened with Major Renner, the area commander at Leskovac. He was taking part in a local anti-partisan sweep around Lebane on 11 November when he was caught with one of his escorts by the Partisans. The next day they were both reported killed.¹³¹ One Yugoslav source claims the Germans reacted to his capture by threatening to lay waste to the entire area if the major was not promptly returned. The Partisans made an offer to exchange him instead. The Germans declined, and in their written answer addressed the guerrillas as “Partisans” and not as “bandits”. Although this small detail was taken by the Partisans as a sign of recognition, it was a bad omen for the captives: the major and his escort were executed, the former as a war criminal. The case of mistaken identity may have contributed to such a turn of events since the Partisans were convinced the man they caught was Major Paul König, the already notorious perpetrator of

¹²⁷ *Zbornik*/I/20/111, Activity report of the 1st Šumadija Detachment for the period 26 September-14 October 1941 (14 October 1941); *Zbornik*/I/20/123, Letter from CPY’s District Committee for Southern Banat (14 November 1941).

¹²⁸ *Zbornik*/I/1/633-4, Supplement to the war diary of the 18th Mountain Corps for the period 18 September-6 December 1941 (entry for 21 October 1941). Gojko Nikoliš, *Korijen, Stablo, Pavetina* (Zagreb: Liber, 1981), p. 319.

¹²⁹ Mitrović, *Centralna Srbija*, p. 247. On 21 November, a peasant informed the German command in Negotin that Privates Marx and Chigotin, who had been captured on 4 October, were executed in Rabrovo: NAW, T-315, Roll 2237, 001179, 704th Infantry Division, Intelligence section, Telephone request (21 November 1941).

¹³⁰ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Ten-day report (29 October 1941). Tito’s often quoted order of 8 November 1941, which prohibited murder or maltreatment of enemy prisoners, was referring to the Chetniks, rather than the Germans, as was made plain in the order’s preamble: *Zbornik*/I/1/223. For the beginnings of the open confrontation between the Partisan and the Chetniks in Serbia, see below.

¹³¹ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Daily reports for 12 and 13 November 1941.

the Kragujevac massacre.¹³² The other version of events claims that Major Renner was killed in the battle and his escort captured. Thereupon the Serbian quislings sent a delegation from Leskovac in order to arrange the exchange of some of Nedić's men for the captured German sergeant. These efforts were doomed to failure since the local German command would not free the three Partisans who were demanded in return.¹³³

How did the Supreme Headquarters of the Partisans react to the October events? The "Bulletin" published on 20 October vowed revenge upon "the fascist invaders" for the crimes they committed, but this appears to have been written for propaganda purposes only.¹³⁴ There was a large number of German prisoners at hand, which could have been used for reprisals. There were two reasons why these reprisals did not take place. First, the Partisan leadership feared that the calculated executions of prisoners would provoke even more drastic counter-measures by the Germans. The events in October showed that they were willing to continue to apply the one-to-hundred ratio as long as there were any hostages left in the country. Aleksandar Ranković, the second-highest ranking functionary in the Partisan leadership tasked with internal security, was of the opinion that the German prisoners represented a burden and should be eliminated. "Tito forbade it, because he wanted us to adhere to the provisions of international law".¹³⁵ By doing this, the Partisans would acquire a degree of legitimacy, which they sorely lacked at this point in time. The Germans considered them to be bandits, and the British threw their support behind Mihailović as the sole legitimate representative of the Yugoslav resistance. The worst thing for the Partisans was that even the Soviet Union would not support them publicly, sacrificing "internationalist solidarity" to the strengthening of the alliance with Great Britain.¹³⁶ Lastly, there was persisted the faint hope that the German occupation forces would reciprocate Partisan goodwill and begin treating captured guerrillas with a modicum of decency.

¹³² Milivoje Perović, *Južna Srbija* (Beograd: Nolit, 1961), pp. 122-3. The belief that it was actually König who was killed that day at Lebane held for almost half a century. Some attribute it to the rumor that König gave a cigarette case engraved with his name to Renner which the Partisans subsequently found. In 1952 a plaque was erected on that place and even a song was written about the incident. Once it was proven beyond doubt in the 80's that the executed major had not been König, a new plaque was set in 1990. It is still something of a local myth with the inhabitants periodically arguing about who exactly shot "König" that day, allegedly in a fire fight which resembled Western duels: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Srbija/t47431.sr.html> , last accessed 24 April 2012.

¹³³ Vujadin Blečić, "Oko Leskovca 1941. godine" in: *Ustanak naroda Jugoslavije 1941: Zbornik sjećanja* (Beograd: Vojno delo, 1964), Vol. V, p. 821.

¹³⁴ *Zbornik*/II/2/95-6, Bulletin Nos. 10 and 11 of the Main Headquarters of National Liberation Partisan Detachments (1 October 1941).

¹³⁵ Venceslav Glišić, "Razgovori s Rankovićem": <http://www.pecat.co.rs/2010/01/razgovori-sa-rankovicem/>, last accessed 12 April 2012.

¹³⁶ Branko Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svjetskom ratu* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1992), p. 274.

Although not condoned by Moscow, the KPJ continued with its revolutionary agenda, adding further trappings of a belligerent power in both a military and political sense. The center of these activities had been the town of Užice ever since the Partisans entered it in late September. They now controlled a relatively large urban center with accompanying infrastructure, and had some 70 million Dinars found in the local branch of the state bank to finance their war efforts. More importantly, they captured a weapons factory which had been left untouched due to German short-sightedness. By November, the output from the factory helped equip some of the estimated 10,000 fighters which were concentrated in and around Užice.¹³⁷ On the political side, the compact territory of some 19,000 square kilometers was administrated by a net of “National Liberation Councils”, all answerable to the “Central Council” formed on 17 November 1941. This was, in fact, an attempt to create a provisional Serbian government, a political body with which to counter not only the Nedić cabinet, but also the Yugoslav government-in-exile in London. Behind the scenes, the state-building process in Užice was accompanied with what might be styled as “revolutionary terror”, carried out by the forerunner of the future secret police. On the surface, the connection to the Soviet Union could best be seen on 7 November 1941, as chosen Partisan units marched past the Politburo, who were standing on an elevated platform, an imitation of the famous parades held on the Red Square in Moscow. The combination of all these factors led the quisling propaganda to dub the Partisan-controlled territory “The Red Republic of Užice”. As so often, the name not only stuck, but was embraced by the Partisans and thus found itself a way into official historiography.¹³⁸

There were some 330 German prisoners in guerilla custody by the end of September. The majority of prisoners were transferred out of Krupanj to Pecka at the beginning of October. From there they were marched to Užice, where they arrived on or about 25 October. There were some 200 of them, the rest (mostly heavily wounded) being left behind and subsequently recovered by the advancing German forces in Loznica, Krupanj and Tronoša

¹³⁷ *Zbornik*/XII/1/718, Report to the Wehrmacht Commander South-East (5 December 1941).

¹³⁸ Milovan Đilas mentioned in his memoirs the methods used in fighting the “fifth column” in Užice: “Torture was applied selectively, in special cases, and executions were carried out secretly at night”: Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 101. According to statistics compiled in 2002, Partisans executed 78 persons in Užice and its surroundings in 1941: Gojkoškoro, *Istina je u imenima: Stradali u užičkomokrugu u Drugom svetskom ratu* (Užice: Spomen-obeležje Kadinjača, 2002), p.255. Wild rumors circulated about the nature of the “Užice Republic”. One witness, an industrialist who escaped from the town, told the Germans that the Communists opened an “Institute for free love”, which was run by a Jewish girl, Vita Gutman, who strolled the town streets dressed in men’s clothes and carrying a machine-gun: NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 001119, Statement by Đorđe Popović (30 November 1941).

Monastery.¹³⁹ Upon their arrival, the prisoners were led through the town center, a propaganda coup which did not fail to produce the desired effect:

*“The German soldiers had to march barefooted in worst weather all the way from Krupanj to Užice. They were without clothes, dressed only in underwear and wrapped in rags [...]. They were starved and sickly. Everyone in the town was saying the same: who would have thought we would see the Germans again so soon, and in such a condition.”*¹⁴⁰

Although some of the bystanders demanded revenge for the massacres of Kragujevac and Kraljevo, the townspeople were generally well disposed towards the German prisoners. According to the pro-Axis sources, the reason for this lay in a strong anti-communist sentiment of the local populace which found its expression in providing food and other commodities to the captives. Yugoslav sources explain it by the inborn humanity of the Serbian people and the belief that by doing good to the German prisoners, good would be done to their kinsmen who were in captivity in Germany.¹⁴¹ While both arguments may have played a part in the formation of the public sentiment, there was also a third factor, one which probably played an overriding role in this matter. Up to this point, Užice was by large spared the horrors which befell the rest of the country. This could be partly attributed to the mild occupation rule which had undertaken relatively few reprisals. As a result, the population bore the Germans no ill-feelings, or at least they were not as strong as in other parts of Serbia.¹⁴²

The prisoners were quartered in the academic high school building in the center of the town. There was no overcrowding and they received regular, if monotonous, rations. Both facts contributed to the fact that there was not a single documented case of death among the prisoners due to malnutrition or disease. They were divided into sections which would leave the camp in the morning and return in dusk after performing physical labor in the town. This included clearing off rubble after air-raids, wood-cutting or helping at the local hospital. The

¹³⁹ From the original 330 men, 56 were killed by mistake in an air-raid on 10 September 1941 and another eight were executed by the guerrillas. The Germans recovered an additional 59, mostly heavily wounded, when they retook Loznica, Krupanj and Tronoša Monastery in the first three weeks of October: NAW, T-501, Roll 249, 000819, Cable to 18th Mountain Corps (25 September 1941); NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000735, Statement by Kurt Steinert (15 December 1941); NAW, T-312, Roll 460, Daily reports for 13 and 17 October 1941, NAW, T-312, Roll 460, Daily report for 21 October 1941.

¹⁴⁰ NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 001117-8, Statement by Đorđe Popović (30 November 1941).

¹⁴¹ Vojin Brašapac, “Kroz Užičku republiku od Kragujevca do Prijepolja” in: *Užička republika: Zbornik sećanja*, Vol. I, pp. 399-400; Branka Savić, “Sa radio stanicom” in: *ibid.*, Vol. II., p. 505; NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 001119, Statement of Đorđe Popović (30 November 1941).

¹⁴² See the report by Major König (who later conducted the Kragujevac Massacre), in which he accused the Feldkommandatur in Užice for being „utterly soft” on the town's populace: NAW, T-315, Roll 2238, 000676, Situation report on Užice and Požega (20 September 1941).

only dangerous work they were forced to perform came in the aftermath of the massive explosion which shook the munitions factory in the vaults of the National Bank on 22 November. An estimated 130 people were killed in the accident. The prisoners were rushed onto the spot and ordered to enter the vaults, search for survivors and retrieve the bodies. Once there, they were issued with gas masks because of the dangerous fumes which had filled the underground galleries. Miraculously no prisoners were injured, although the stored ammunition and explosives kept exploding for the next several days.¹⁴³

As we have seen earlier, the Yugoslav Communists were captive to their own propaganda which viewed the on-going European war through Marxist-Leninist lenses. These beliefs maintained despite the strain placed upon them by the alliance between the “first land of socialism”, the Soviet Union, and the arch-imperialist power Great Britain. As late as September 1941, the “Bulletin” of the Partisan supreme command was reporting on alleged widespread riots in Germany caused by a popular wish for peace and alliance “with the brotherly Russian working people”.¹⁴⁴ Although reports on contacts with ordinary German soldiers provided a disappointing picture of their class consciousness, the Partisans were not yet ready to abandon their dogmatic approach. The relative security of their Užice stronghold gave them both time and ability to mount an organized attempt to “re-educate” their German prisoners. Only privates and lower NCOs were deemed suitable for re-education. Officers, Nazi Party members or those thought to be connected to the infamous Gestapo were usually sorted out and sentenced to death. Eight prisoners were executed on these grounds in Krupanj. The Partisans were quick to add that the ordinary soldiers would be treated as prisoners of war, but “incendiaries and murderers” would be tried and punished as war criminals.¹⁴⁵

Various methods of persuasion were used with the prisoners. The Communists first tried by proclaiming that “one’s comrades” received better treatment than mere “prisoners of war”, thereby hoping to cause a rift among the Germans. Apparently, all the camp inmates were content to remain the latter. To add to the physiological pressure, an interrogation room for “fifth-columnists” was placed one night directly above the prisoners’ dormitory. In the

¹⁴³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000646, Report by the members of the former 10th Company, 724th Infantry Regiment on time spent in captivity (undated).

¹⁴⁴ *Zbornik*/II/2/62, Bulletin No. 6 of the Main Headquarters of National Liberation Partisan Detachments (18 September 1941)

¹⁴⁵ NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000642, Report by the members of the former 10th Company, 724th Infantry Regiment on time spent in captivity (undated). Rodoljub Čolaković mentions five, instead of eight executions: Čolaković, *Zapisi*, p. 273. In Gornji Milanovac in late September, three Germans were found out to be members of the Nazi Party and were shot: Živka Đurić, “Takovski bataljon u borbama oko Gornjeg Milanovca”, in: *Užička republika: Zbornik sećanja*, Vol. I, p. 434.

morning the captors apologized to the Germans for the unpleasant sounds which may have been heard during the night. The Partisans also tried with pro-Soviet propaganda by holding a lecture called “The tactics of the Red Army”. As Yugoslav lecturers could not make the desired impression on the listeners, the prisoners were ordered to choose the “teachers” from amongst themselves. However, first the explosion in the munitions factory and then the rapidly changing situation at the front prevented this plan from being realized.¹⁴⁶

The prisoners were once made to paint Communist slogans. To their captors’ astonishment, they wrote the Cyrillic letters perfectly well but were completely oblivious of the elevated message these symbols were carrying. “Robots”, “sheep”, and “apathetic” were the terms most frequently used to describe the Germans by the Partisans who engaged in “political work” with them. What the latter could not understand was that amongst the German prisoners, eighty percent were workers and peasants yet they proved completely impervious to Communist ideology, not even knowing who Ernst Thälmann and Karl Liebknecht were.¹⁴⁷ The guerrillas, who prided themselves on being an all-volunteer army, and represented only those who truly understood why they fought, were equally bewildered by the frequently encountered “orders-are-orders”-attitude (*Befehl ist Befehl*) of their captives. These oddities notwithstanding, the Germans were meek and sometimes servile towards their captors, which stood in stark contrast to their behavior on the battlefield. This only served to deepen the scorn most of the Partisans felt for them.¹⁴⁸

In the interim, the Serbian insurgency began showing the first signs of internal strife. Mihailović, whose participation in the Serbian uprising was never a matter of conviction, but rather a necessity, began to reconsider the usefulness of his uneasy alliance with the Partisans. He reasoned that the Communist attacks were merely bringing suffering to the Serbian population without causing much damage to the Germans. His main worry was the fact that the Partisans were gaining strength and could be a serious competitor in the power struggle after the war. He overtly continued his contacts with the Partisans meeting with Tito on 26 September and again on 7 October 1941, on both instances attempting to resolve differences and smooth co-operation between the two movements. At the same time he was secretly

¹⁴⁶ NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000645, Report by the members of the former 10th Company, 724th Infantry Regiment on time spent in captivity (undated).

¹⁴⁷ Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) and Ernst Thälmann (1866-1944) were the most prominent representatives of German communism. The Yugoslav Partisans named a unit made up of German volunteers after the latter in 1943.

¹⁴⁸ Mitra Mitrović, “Crno-Belo” in: *Užička republika: Zbornik sećanja*, Vol. I, pp. 353; Borka Demić-Pihler, “Poslednji čaj za ranjenike” in *ibid.*, p. 613; Branka Savić, “Sa radio stanicom” in: *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 505.

contacting the Serbian quisling and German authorities in Belgrade, seeking arms and ammunition for use against the Communists, and made a plan for an all-out attack on Užice.¹⁴⁹ The attack came on 1 November but the Chetniks were beaten back in the heavy fighting which raged in the area over the next few days. The Partisans subsequently went on the offensive and had Mihailović's base at Ravna Gora surrounded. Considering the fact that the Kremlin was at the time striving hard to build an alliance with Great Britain, the protecting power of both the Yugoslav government-in-exile and Mihailović, Tito ordered restraint and agreed to a cease-fire.¹⁵⁰

The Partisans believed that they knew who stood behind the opening of hostilities. Captain Duane T. Hudson, an agent of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), arrived at Ravna Gora in late October as the official British representative to the Yugoslav resistance. Having for years heard Soviet propaganda about the scheming Secret Intelligence Service, the long arm of all imperialist powers and reactionary forces, the Partisans were convinced it was Hudson who had brought the order to attack from London. Additional proof of this alleged conspiracy came on 9 November when a British transport plane made the first air-drop of supplies to the Chetniks. Although small, this shipment re-affirmed the conviction of Mihailović's men that they were regarded as the sole legitimate resistance movement in Yugoslavia. To the Partisans, it was proof of British double dealing, who on the one side pursued an alliance with the Soviet Union, and on the other, actively fought Communists.¹⁵¹

The Partisan-Chetnik split could not have come at a better time for the Germans. Another front-line division, the 113th, had just arrived from the Eastern Front and took up positions to the east of the guerrilla-held territories around Užice and the Suvobor Mountain. On 25 November 1941, the 113th and 342nd Infantry Divisions, aided by elements of another four divisions and Serbian quisling forces started "Operation Užice" designed to destroy the guerrillas in Western Serbia. The speed and ferocity of the German onslaught astonished the Partisans. Their units withdrew quickly, taking heavy casualties in the process. The main base in Užice was hastily prepared for evacuation. On 28 November, a column of 115 German prisoners entered the town. These were soldiers captured in Gornji Milanovac and Struganik

¹⁴⁹ The meeting between Mihailović and German delegation took place in the village of Divci, outside Valjevo on 11 November 1941. German minutes of the conference can be found in NAW, T-314, Roll 1457, 001314-1329; also printed in *Zbornik/XIV/1/871-8*.

¹⁵⁰ Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, pp. 146-151.

¹⁵¹ The theory that Hudson brought the order to attack the Partisans from London persisted for many years in Yugoslav historiography: see *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. I, p. 115. See also a quote from the post-war memoirs of a high-ranking Partisan leader and adjoining discussion in Venceslav Glišić, *Užička republika* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1989), pp. 226-8.

in late September/early October and had previously been Mihailović's prisoners. In the course of fighting against the Chetniks, Partisans found them and had them transported to Čačak, and from there to Užice.¹⁵² In the afternoon, a 40-men strong security detail was ordered to evacuate all of the prisoners, now numbering more than 300, from the town. The long column's first stop was the railway station, where it boarded a train bound west around 2000 hours. It reached the station of Kremna, some 35 kilometers west of Užice after a three hour ride. From there, the column marched due south to the village of Gornja Jablanica, where it halted. Most prisoners had wooden shoes or sheets wrapped around their feet and could walk only with great difficulty. The sound of gunfire was growing louder, which meant that the German army was not far. The Partisans locked the prisoners in the local school and held a council of war in order to decide what to do with them. Some held that the Germans should be executed. Others disagreed, partly because carrying out such a move in the village would put its inhabitants at risk. The council lasted until dawn when it was decided to leave the prisoners where they were and continue the retreat without them. On their way south, the security detail met a group of several hundred Partisans, among them Slobodan Penezić Krcun, the second-highest ranking security officer with the Supreme HQ. He was enraged by the decision to release the prisoners and had the commander of the security detail tied to a tree. This officer was spared only because his fellow fighters pleaded for his life.¹⁵³

The prisoners in the school could hardly believe their luck when on the morning of 1 December 1941, they realized that their guards had disappeared. A peasant was dispatched to fetch the nearest German unit he could find. German units in the area were on the lookout for any trace of the prisoners. Upon finding out they were in the vicinity, the Germans promptly rounded up hostages in adjoining villages in case something should happen to the captives.¹⁵⁴ Soon afterwards, a motorized column of the 342nd Infantry Division entered Jablanica and freed altogether 315 soldiers and one officer. The prisoners were first sent to Užice, to the

¹⁵² The Germans kept tabs on the missing soldiers. One report dated 24 October 1941 puts them in Mionica, near Valjevo. A soldier who was released by the Chetniks reported three weeks later that his comrades were still alive, but that the prisoner camp had been moved from Ravna Gora. On 15 November, these prisoners were reported in Čačak: NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000414, Report by Chetnik leader Matić (24 October 1941); NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Daily reports for 14 and 15 November 1941.

¹⁵³ Miloš Gordić, "Čuvao sam nemačke zarobljenike" in: *Užička republika: Zbornik sećanja*, Vol. II, pp. 486-9; Milan Penezić, "Puštanje na slobodu nemačkih zarobljenika u Jablanici" in: *ibid.*, pp. 632-3.

¹⁵⁴ Gojko Škoro, "Izbeglice u Kremnima" in: *Užička republika: Zbornik sećanja*, Vol. II, pp. 668. Once the prisoners were found unharmed, the hostages were set free.

same high school building which was used as a prisoner camp. After recuperating, they were sent first to Belgrade on 6 December and then returned to their respective units.¹⁵⁵

Parallel to the evacuation of the prisoners, the Partisans were also evacuating their wounded from Užice. By the evening of 28 November some 700 wounded were concentrated around the hamlet of Kraljeve Vode, on the Zlatibor Mountain, some 23 kilometers south of the town. There, they heard the news that Užice had been taken by the Germans. The next day, everyone who could move was sent further south, towards the Uvac River. About 130 heavily wounded remained in Kraljeve Vode because there was neither time nor means to get them to safety. One could only hope that the Germans would show clemency once they arrived. On 30 November, elements of the 342nd Infantry Division entered the village and found the wounded Partisans. The villagers were rounded up to be interrogated or to be used as porters. 28 of them had a much more gruesome task. Their job was to carry the wounded to a nearby ravine where they were all executed by firing squad.¹⁵⁶

The news about the fate of their comrades quickly reached the Partisans. Although accustomed to the occupier's brutality, many had hoped that even the Germans would not dare commit such an atrocity against helpless wounded.¹⁵⁷ Unfortunately, it was soon clear that the worst did happen. Rumors about the massacre spread like wildfire. It was widely believed that the Germans used tanks and crashed the wounded under their tracks; some said that the Germans who were treated in Partisan hospitals were especially zealous in killing the victims on the Zlatibor Mountain. Likewise, it turned out that those meek and even servile prisoners, who were treated well in Užice, were now denouncing all the Partisans they knew from the days of their captivity.¹⁵⁸ Consequently, rage superseded disbelief. Milovan Đilas wrote:

¹⁵⁵ NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000923, 724th Infantry Regiment to 704th Infantry Division (7 December 1941).

¹⁵⁶ Miladin Marjanović-Ujko, "Nemci su ranjenike streljali dum-dum mecima" in: *Užička republika: Zbornik sećanja*, Vol. II, pp. 655-8. Daily report for 1 December to Armed Forces High Command states that the 342nd Infantry Division has, among other activities, reached Ribnica, some three kilometers south-east of Kraljeve Vode. It reported 106 killed Partisans and another 72 captured for a loss of only one wounded. It is obvious that the executed Partisans were simply counted as killed, a common practice in Wehrmacht's counter-insurgency reports: NAW, T-312, Roll 425, Daily Report for 1 December 1941.

¹⁵⁷ Nikoliš, *Korijen*, p. 340.

¹⁵⁸ Glišić, *Zločini*, p. 77; Čolaković, *Zapisi*, Vol. II, pp. 206-7; Bojić, *Posavski odred*, p. 474; some former prisoners were indeed sent back to Užice where they helped identify their "tormentors" who were executed shortly thereafter: NAW, T-315, Roll 2239, 000647, Report by the members of the former 10th Company, 724th Infantry Regiment on time spent in captivity (undated). Not all the Germans acted in the same way, however. Two Partisans, Pavle Radovanović and Dragoslav Jovanović, were released from prison thanks to the intervention of a German soldier. In August 1941, he was found wounded by Radovanović and Jovanović. They

*“The massacre of the wounded was a decisive turning point in our dealings with the Germans. Thereafter the Partisans gave the Germans measure for measure and killed their prisoners, except in special cases; nor would we in the leadership come up with any reason to oppose this.”*¹⁵⁹

This event also signalled the bloody end of the “Užice Republic”. There was no doubt that the Communist-led guerrillas suffered a heavy blow. Most of their army melted away, as did most of their supplies and heavy weapons. An estimated 2,000 fighters managed to cross the Uvac River into the Italian occupation zone and thus save themselves from the pursuing Germans. Serbia was lost for the time being.¹⁶⁰

The bitterness of defeat, a growing sense of isolation and wishful thinking on the part of Tito and the rest of the Politburo had far-reaching consequences for the strategy of the Partisan movement over the next half-a-year and beyond. Their reasoning was as follows: First, the “Chetnik treason” as it was called was in large measure blamed for the collapse of the Užice Republic and the diminishing of guerrilla activity in Serbia in general.¹⁶¹ The existence of the common enemy, the Axis powers, did nothing to temper the deep antagonism which existed between the reactionary circles and the Communists. Anti-communism, rather than anti-fascism remained their prime conviction. Draža Mihailović and his entourage propagated this by abstaining from fighting at first and then joining it half-heartedly, only because he feared he would lose public support altogether. He was known to have contacts with Nedić and Dimitrije Ljotić,¹⁶² both of whom were working openly with the Germans. Some of his commanders came from Pećanac’s organization and were known for still having connections to it. Worse still, this quiet collaboration with the occupier was not only condoned by the British government, but also openly acknowledged by dispatching Hudson as

dressed his wounds and helped him reach the German garrison at Topola. He met them again in prison by coincidence, recognized them and paid his debt in kind: Stanković, *Prvi šumadijski partizanski odred*, p. 483.

¹⁵⁹ Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 113. Ranković confirmed Djilas’ statement in one of his post-war interviews: Venceslav Glišić, “Razgovori s Rankovićem”: <http://www.pecat.co.rs/2010/01/razgovori-sa-rankovicem/>, last accessed 12 April 2012.

¹⁶⁰ For the estimate of the Partisan strength see Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 103. The Germans reported 707 Partisans killed in combat, 93 executed and 312 captured by 4 December 1941. They also captured 2723 rifles, 28 MGs, one mortar and four cannons as well as large quantities of war materiel: NAW, T-501, Roll 250, 001102, Report on casualties and war booty in Operation Užice (10 December 1941).

¹⁶¹ The treason was symbolically sealed when one of the Chetnik commanders (only loosely connected to Mihailović) delivered 365 captured Partisans to the Germans in Valjevo. They were shot on 27 November 1941: Tomasevich, *The Chetniks*, p. 150.

¹⁶² Dimitrije Ljotić (1891-1945) was the leader of the „Zbor“ movement, the Serbian political party combining elements of fascism and Nazism with Orthodox mystique and Serbian Nationalism. His armed followers, organized in “Serbian Volunteer Detachments”, were the only native formation in which the Germans had full confidence.

well as arms shipments. The worst of all was that Soviet Union accepted the version of events presented by the British and did little to help the Partisans, either militarily or via propaganda.¹⁶³

The feeling of desperation in the Partisans' ranks was alleviated to a certain extent by the news emanating from the Eastern Front. Beginning on 5 December 1941, the Red Army began their long-awaited counter-offensive and managed to push the Wehrmacht from the gates of Moscow. The old belief in the quick victory over Germany came to life again. The Red Army was expected to be on the Danube in the next several months.¹⁶⁴ This meant the war would be over soon and the question of who will hold power in Yugoslavia thereafter gained importance. Given that reactionary circles sided with the Axis, the class enemy and the collaborator became one and the same. A series of messages from the Politburo to the regional party leadership commands reaffirmed the importance of the class struggle and ushered in the beginning of the so-called "Second phase of the revolution", i.e. open struggle for power.¹⁶⁵ These directives resulted in the purging of Partisan ranks of those individuals who were not standing entirely on the Party line. In some areas, like East Herzegovina and Montenegro this soon evolved into whole-sale terror against all those perceived as "Kulaks" or "counter-revolutionaries". By the Spring of 1942 this policy led to a strong diminishing of popular support for the Partisans and the strengthening of the Chetnik movement. The change of the Party line came only after Tito managed to attain a direct radio link with Moscow. The Comintern criticized the Yugoslav party in March for narrowing the base of the resistance movement and for sectarian errors. It also confirmed the validity of the "Popular Front" policy aimed at uniting all patriotic forces irrespective of political affiliation in the struggle against the Axis powers. Revolution would have to wait for the time being.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ It should be noted that Mihailović was hardly a friend of Germans at the time. Right after the completion of Operation Užice, the Germans launched Operation Mihailović. His headquarters was overrun, two of his closest lieutenants were tried and shot and Mihailović himself barely escaped, thereafter a wanted man with a 200,000 dinar bounty on his head. Knowing, however, that most of his men had fought the Communists, the Germans granted them POW status according to the Geneva Convention. Additional reasons were the wish to deepen the rift between the two guerrilla movements and to weaken Mihailović's own ability for aggressive actions in the future. *Zbornik*/XII/2/1037-9, Fighting against the uprising in the South-East from June 1941 to August 1942. NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 000074, Intelligence summary for the period 10-19 November 1941 (19 November 1941).

¹⁶⁴ Stalin's words during the November-Day parade in Moscow that the war will be over in 1942 were taken for gospel by Tito and the rest of the Politburo: Petranović, *Srbija*, p. 321.

¹⁶⁵ See for instance Politburo instructions to the Sandžak and Slovene branches of the CPY from early January in *Zbornik*/II/2/141-2, 154-7.

¹⁶⁶ Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Vol. II, pp. 184-5.

In the aftermath of Užice it was obvious that the upcoming struggle could not be carried out by the old Partisan detachments. These were local units, tied to their regional recruitment bases and with only a small number of dedicated Communists in their ranks. They lacked mobility and cohesiveness, which was amply proven during the retreat from Serbia. What was needed was a “New Model Army” of a Partisan type. On 21 December 1941 in Rudo, East Bosnia, the “1st Proletarian Shock Brigade” was formed. It had some 1,200 fighters well equipped with automatic weapons, 650 of whom were either members of the KPJ or SKOJ. Although not obvious at that moment, the formation of this unit would turn out to be one of the war-winning decisions. By replacing the stationary detachment with a fully mobile brigade with high firepower and motivated members, the Yugoslav Partisans would soon be able to win the upper-hand in fighting against their numerous domestic enemies. The Proletarian Brigades, so their statute read, were “the striking fist of the Yugoslav peoples under the leadership of the Communist Party [...] [and a] guarantee against the continuation of both national and social oppression”. Apart from being at the forefront of both the liberation war and the revolution, the Proletarian Brigades were also “a cradle of the future people’s army”; they were the first quasi-regular units of the Partisan movement. Its creation represented a milestone in the process of regularization already begun within the guerrilla ranks.¹⁶⁷

5. Events in Serbia 1942-1944

The scale and the brutality of the German counter-insurgency effort in Serbia in late 1941 sent shockwaves throughout the country. The downfall of both resistance movements in a matter of days cost them not only in material terms but also propagandistically. The exhausted population was beginning to realize that the relative stability offered by the Nedić administration under the slogan “Peace, work and order” was preferable to vague notions of national liberation or patriotic duty. It was obvious to all that the Germans were far too strong to be pushed out of the country without outside help. Mere survival became the prime concern for the majority of the population.

The Germans were content but not over-confident as a result of their Autumn operations: “The uprising will probably flare-up again in the Spring”, concluded one German

¹⁶⁷ Pape et al., *Drugi svjetski rat*, Vol. I, p. 276 and *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 102.

report.¹⁶⁸ Still, the expulsion of Partisans from Western Serbia and the heavy blows dealt to Mihailović had won the Germans some precious breathing space. The two front-line divisions which carried the main brunt of the fighting, the 113th and 342nd, were scheduled to leave Serbia, the 113th already in January and the 342nd as soon as the planned operations in Eastern Bosnia were concluded.¹⁶⁹ That would return the occupation apparatus to its Summer strength, with three garrison divisions and some additional smaller units. A solution was found in strengthening the Serbian quisling administration and its armed formations. One of the means of doing this was to allow a large number of Mihailović's former men to become "legalized", i.e. make them a part of the occupation apparatus. The Germans knew well that most of these units clandestinely remained loyal to Mihailović. Still, the legalization was regarded as a way to bring these potential guerrillas under a degree of control by making them fully dependent on the Germans for arms and ammunition. By mid-1942, the strength of Serbian quisling formations, i.e. Ljotić's Volunteers, the Pećanac's and legalized Chetniks rose to 16,401.¹⁷⁰

Mass reprisals were regarded as the centerpiece of the pacification effort in Serbia.¹⁷¹ Even so, the quota 1:100 proved impractical, as there were always problems with finding enough hostages. Additionally, the much improved security situation after the completion of the Autumn operations allowed for a relaxation of the reprisal policy. On 22 December 1941, General Paul Bader, Commanding General in Serbia, signed an order which halved the reprisal quota: fifty hostages for each German killed, and 25 for each wounded.¹⁷² The implementation of reprisals would be the main task of the newly appointed "Higher SS and Police Leader in Serbia" (*Höhere SS-und Polizeiführer Serbien*), SS-General August Meyszner, who arrived in Belgrade in early February 1942. Until his removal two years later, Meyszner would remain the chief opponent of further relaxation of the reprisal policy among the higher German officials in Belgrade.

¹⁶⁸ NAW, T-501, Roll 246, Ten-day report (10 December 1941).

¹⁶⁹ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. I, p. 171.

¹⁷⁰ NAW, T-501, Roll 249, Strength of Volunteer and Chetnik detachments in Serbia (15 May 1942). The Serbian State Guard (Gendarmerie) had an additional 15,000 men. The Russian Protection Corps (*Russisches Schutzkorps*) was formed in September 1941 of White Russian emigres in Serbia to provide protection to important military and economic objects, and had a strength of nearly 1, 500 in late 1941: *Zbornik/XII/1/753*, Report to Wehrmacht commander in the South-East (5 December 1941).

¹⁷¹ According to one German document from early Spring 1942, the number of executed hostages since 1 September 1941 was 21,889: NAW, T-311, Roll 175, 000247, Activity report for April 1942 (Entry for 9 April 1942).

¹⁷² NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 000009, Activity report for December 1941 (undated); Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 83.

The National Liberation Movement in Serbia was thoroughly shattered by the downfall of the “Užice Republic”. The units dissolved as morale dropped in lieu of the relentless German onslaught and punitive expeditions. The Supreme HQ never lost sight of Serbia, or of its importance, and over the next years, efforts were made to light the fires of resistance again. Already in December 1941, Tito ordered that Partisan groups which remained in Serbia after the fall of Užice were to be reinforced by fighters who had escaped to Sandžak. The enterprise ended in a total fiasco. The units, some 2,000 in all, had to march through the worst imaginable weather in the rugged mountainous terrain of Western Serbia. The region, depopulated and barren, could not offer shelter or supplies. To boot, Serbian quisling forces were ready and waiting for the weary Partisans. The campaign evolved into a fighting retreat, the number of Partisans constantly declining due to exhaustion and casualties. The last group of some seventy men held a council of war and decided to cross the Drina River and rejoin the Supreme HQ in Eastern Bosnia.¹⁷³

The situation in the urban centers was not any better. The Germans, in addition to their own *Sicherheitsdienst* personnel, had an experienced group of Serbian agents at their disposal. These were mostly pre-war members of the IV Directorate of the *Special Police*, specialized in dealing with Communists. In several well-planned actions beginning in October 1941 they managed to shatter the KPJ’s underground network in all major cities in Serbia. For instance, Belgrade’s organization was penetrated no less than three times by the Autumn of 1942, which resulted in heavy losses to the Party cadre. Arrested Communists and their sympathizers were usually sent to the concentration camps at Sajmište and Banjica which served as gathering points for hostages taken in the event reprisals were called for.¹⁷⁴

In the face of the unrelenting terror practiced in the cities by the Germans and in the countryside by the Serbian quisling forces, the Partisans had understandably great difficulties in getting back on their feet. The only part of the country in which they were permanently present during 1942-1944 was Southern Serbia, in the original Bulgarian occupation zone.¹⁷⁵ In the other regions, their activity was sporadic at best, aimed more at survival than at actions against the occupier. One factor which greatly contributed to this state of affairs was the rise

¹⁷³ Petranović, *Srbija*, pp. 322-5.

¹⁷⁴ It is estimated that CPY lost four members of the Regional Committee for Serbia, eighty members of the district, area and local committees, as well as over a thousand other members in urban centers during the war: Petranović, *Srbija*, pp. 333-4.

¹⁷⁵ The Bulgarian occupation zone was expanded gradually, as the Germans shuffled ever more of their own troops to the neighboring NDH. By mid-1943 the Bulgarian zone included nearly all of occupied Serbia excluding Belgrade and its environs.

of the Chetnik movement of Draža Mihailović, now officially named “Yugoslav Army in the Homeland” (*Jugoslovenska vojska u otadžbini*, JVUO). As we have seen earlier, a large number of Mihailović’s followers were legalized in early 1942 while he remained underground with a small number of active fighters. After suffering heavily during the German Autumn operations, he reverted back to biding his time. Accordingly, his movement would spend time organizing, gathering armaments and supplies and preparing for the expected Allied invasion of Yugoslavia. In order to not provoke German reprisals, actions against the occupier would be reduced to an absolute minimum. The frightened population supported his approach and was wary of providing volunteers to the Partisan movement.¹⁷⁶ Mihailović also made use of this respite to engage the Partisans and win complete control over the Serbian countryside. The Partisans, too weak to attack the Germans, concentrated on their domestic enemies instead. Resistance against the occupier has thus ground to a halt in favor of an all-out civil war.

The whole of 1942 in Serbia was thus marked by low, though constant, guerrilla activity. The Germans countered the threat by the application of reprisals. As both guerrilla movements changed their priorities and now avoided attacking the Germans, concentrating on lines of communications and quisling forces instead, the reprisal rules had to be changed as well. They were gradually expanded in order to cover both acts of sabotage as well as attacks on auxiliary troops and local administration.¹⁷⁷ In comparison with 1941, the German troops rarely engaged the Partisans and when encounters did occur, they were very small in size and the casualties negligible. From April to December 1942, according to incomplete statistics, the Germans incurred some 37 KIA, 44 WIA and 22 MIA in Serbia due to guerrilla actions.¹⁷⁸ Judging by the absence of any further information on the fate of the missing soldiers, it is safe to assume that most were killed or executed by their captors. The Germans suspected that the

¹⁷⁶ See for instance *Zbornik*/I/20/168, 241, 290, Reports by Požarevac Detachment on 29 June, 16 October and 31 December 1942.

¹⁷⁷ See Bader’s order of 22 November 1942 prescribing quotas 1:10 for each killed and 1:5 for each wounded employee of the quisling administration. The same order made any sabotage on land communications punishable by shooting of up to a hundred hostages: NAW, T-501, Roll 352, 000591-3, Letter to Premier Nedić (22 November 1942).

¹⁷⁸ The figure is compiled using the ten-day reports of the Commanding General in Serbia including: Ten-day reports from 10, 20, 30 April 1942 in NAW, T-501, Roll 247; 10 and 22 May; 1, 10 and 20 June; 1, 11, 21 and 31 August in NAW, T-501, Roll 248; 1 and 20 July 1942 in NAW, T-501, Roll 351 (Casualty figures for 10 July not available); 11, 20 September; 1, 11 and 31 October (Casualty figures for 20 October not available); 11 and 20 November; 1, 12, 20 and 31 December 1942 in NAW, T-501, Roll 352. Most of the figures for August, September and October are expressly denoted as „Losses in Croatia“ and have not been included in the total. The vast majority of altogether 87 KIA, 237 WIA and 15 MIA from the first three months of 1942 were lost during the Winter operations in Bosnia. Only a small number of these were incurred in Serbia. See ten-day reports from 10, 20 and 30 January, 10 and 20 February, and 1, 10, 20 and 31 March in NAW, T-501, Roll 247.

guerrillas hid the bodies in order to avoid reprisals. On 10 October 1942, the Commanding General in Serbia issued an order according to which hostages would be executed if missing soldiers did not return within certain period after their disappearance. Judging by the available documents, the reprisal quota was the same as for a soldier killed in action (fifty hostages). The hostages would be shot in groups of ten every several days. If the missing were released in the meantime, the executions would stop. If not, they would continue until all fifty hostages were executed.¹⁷⁹ These measures were not very effective in insuring the retrieval of captives unharmed. Two Luftwaffe meteorologists were captured by the Partisans in the vicinity of Donji Milanovac on 19 October 1942. The search for them went on for the next several months. Only on 12 February 1943 were the culprits caught and admitted that both men were liquidated four days after capture. Because of the allegedly gruesome way in which the prisoners were executed, the local German command requested that in addition to the fifty hostages which had been already shot, a further 200 be executed as well.¹⁸⁰

There can be no doubt that such a widespread application of terror hemmed the growth of the Partisan units in Serbia at the time.¹⁸¹ Their leadership recognized the adverse effect of the reprisals on the fighting spirit of their charges but nonetheless attempted to spur them on to new ventures.¹⁸² The Supreme HQ's proclamation of 10 February 1943 ordering all guerrilla units in Yugoslavia to step up their attacks on the occupier could not have remained unanswered by the Serbian Partisans. They also counted on the physiological impact of one successful action on both the population and their own fighters. In this respect, they were quite prepared to accept the inevitable large-scale reprisals. On 15 February, they ambushed a *Kübelwagen* (German version of Jeep) just outside Požarevac. Its occupants, wounded in the fire fight, were executed on the spot.¹⁸³ The fact that one of them was Colonel Hensel, commander of the 734th Grenadier Regiment, who might have been a valuable during an exchange, did nothing to influence the Partisans' attitude. They were not looking for prisoners but rather to deal a violent blow against the occupier which would show both friend and foe that they were far from being annihilated.

¹⁷⁹ NAW, T-501, Roll 352, 000301, Precautionary measures against enemy attacks (10 October 1942).

¹⁸⁰ NAW, T-315, Roll 2245, 001233, War diary entry for 23 February 1943.

¹⁸¹ The number of Partisans in early 1943 was estimated at about 1,200 fighters: Petranović, Srbija, pp. 339.

¹⁸² See *Zbornik*/I/5/10, Proclamation of the Partisan Main HQ for Serbia to all subordinated units in (1 January 1943).

¹⁸³ *Zbornik*/I/5/73-77, Report by Morava Company to Požarevac Detachment (16 February 1943); NAW, T-315, Roll 2245, 001211, War diary entry for 15 February 1943.

The “no quarter–no negotiations” policy continued to be practiced by the Serbian Partisans throughout the remaining period of the occupation, with few exceptions.¹⁸⁴ Sometimes, the Partisans tried to differentiate between the “innocent” and “guilty” prisoners. As all of their detachments in Serbia were static, regional units the Partisans had a chance to observe the behavior of certain members of the occupation forces within their operational areas. For instance, during the skirmish which took place on 24 April 1943 south of Smederevo, the Partisans killed four Germans. At least one of them, a certain “Hans” known for his brutality, was executed after surrendering. Four wounded soldiers, captured in the same fight, claimed they were forced to fight and were left alone.¹⁸⁵ Still, the release of captured Germans was rare by the second half of 1943: the prisoners were mostly shot immediately after capture.¹⁸⁶ Different from the case of the Chetniks, the application of reprisals doesn’t seem to have affected the Partisans’ policies in this respect.¹⁸⁷

The German policy towards captured Partisans changed little from 1942-1944. In mid-March 1942, General Bader issued an order according to which the members of both guerrilla movements could be spared and used for forced labor. In reality, this order had only substituted the firing squad with slow, agonizing death through exhaustion, exposure and disease in the work camps in northern Norway.¹⁸⁸ This regulation notwithstanding, the Partisans continued to face the prospect of summary execution after capture; persons

¹⁸⁴ According to Yugoslav authors Đurica Labović and Milan Basta, the representatives of the Main HQ for Vojvodina made a verbal agreement with the commander of a German artillery regiment in the town of Belegiš (45 kilometers north of Belgrade) in mid-July 1944 according to which the Germans would refrain from plunder and maltreatment of civilian population in exchange for the cessation of guerrilla attacks on the regiment (Đurica Labović, Milan Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom 1941.-1945.*, Zagreb: Naprijed, 1986, pp. 261-4). One member of the American intelligence service OSS (Office of Strategic Services) observed that both sides “adopted a ‘live-and-let-live’ policy toward one another” in the region in 1944: Kirk Ford Jr., *OSS and the Yugoslav Resistance, 1943-1945* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M, 1992), p. 152.

¹⁸⁵ *Zbornik*/I/5/141, Report by the CPY’s district committee for Mladenovac (1 May 1943). The German sources mention five wounded, without mentioning whether they were captured or not: NAW, T-501, Roll 249, 000339, Daily report for 25 April 1943.

¹⁸⁶ See the daily reports of Military Commander South-East for 7 and 15 January 1944 for additional instances of execution of German prisoners: NAW, T-501, Roll 352, 000857, 895.

¹⁸⁷ Nine German workers were captured in mid-September 1943 on the Draglica-Kokin Brod road. After the Germans had threatened retaliation, these men were set free. The author of the daily report for 16 September concluded that this incident “proves again the sensitivity of the DM [Draža Mihailović] movement to reprisals”: NAW, T-313, Roll 483, 000163, Daily report of Military commander South-East for 16 September 1943. I have never encountered a similar comment in the German reports pertaining to the Partisans. The Chetniks, although they usually released German prisoners, sometimes treated them just as the Partisans did: on 27 September 1943 seven German customs officials and some thirty Bulgarians near Užice were captured. The latter were released, while the former remained in captivity notwithstanding the German threats. After their bodies had been found on 14 October, the Germans executed 250 hostages: NAW, T-501, Roll 266, 000940, 930, 900, 892, Daily reports of Military commander South-East for 27 September, 3, 14 and 17 October 1943.

¹⁸⁸ Out of 4,200 prisoners shipped to Norway, only some 2,400 returned to the country after the war: Glišić, *Teror*, pp. 122-3.

suspected of aiding them were brought to prisons and camps and used as hostages. Hostages were normally taken and reprisals exacted according to the 1:50 or 1: 25 quota whenever a guerrilla attack caused a loss of German life.¹⁸⁹ Slight changes in the reprisal rules came in late July 1943. It was decided that those casualties, which were caused by German actions (i.e. when the guerrillas were forced into direct confrontation), would be exempted from the application of reprisal rules. The casualties resulting from guerrilla actions (like ambushes, acts of sabotage) were still to be avenged as per existing directives.¹⁹⁰ On 6 August 1943, Bader ordered that captured Partisans be shot or hanged “only in exceptional cases”; due to shortages of forced labor, and were from that point on to be treated as prisoners-of-war.¹⁹¹ The final change in the reprisal policies came in late December of the same year. The new regulations brought several novelties. The most important of these were the abrogation of fixed reprisal quotes (henceforth to be decided on a case-to-case basis) and the provision according to which casualties in combat, incurred either as the result of guerrilla or German actions, were “in principle” not to be expiated.¹⁹² Clauses such as “exceptional cases” and “in principle” were vague enough to allow the occupation authorities to circumvent the new orders whenever they saw fit. Although the overall number of hostage executions dropped sharply in the last year of the war in Serbia, the Germans continued executing captured Partisans from time to time right until the end of the war.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Both the attack on Col. Hensel’s car and the one south of Smederevo were expiated by the execution of 550 hostages over the ensuing days. One should note that in the first case the German authorities executed a hundred, rather than fifty hostages for each of the four killed: Glišić, *Teror*, p. 71; *Zbornik*/I/5/456, War diary of the 104th Jäger Division for the period 25 April-14 May 1943 (entry for 24 April 1943). Only rarely was the application of repressive measures cancelled. The destruction of the village of Dubac was ordered on 19 March 1943 since a harvest-collecting party in its vicinity was attacked. Because the local Feldkommandatur failed to do so in the three ensuing weeks the Commanding General in Serbia rescinded the order, adding that reprisal measures must be carried out without delay in the future: NAW, T-501, Roll 249, 000237, Message to FK 610 (8 April 1943).

¹⁹⁰ NAW, T-501, Roll 252, Reprisal order of the Commanding General in Serbia (31 July 1943).

¹⁹¹ Glišić, *Teror*, pp. 170-1. This last measure was the result of Hitler’s new order that generally recognized the rights of captured guerrillas. For more information on this decision, see Chapter IV.

¹⁹² The appointment of Hermann Neubacher as Hitler’s representative for the entirety of the South-East in late August 1943 helped usher an end to the mass terror that had been practiced since 1941. Although it took him several months to outmaneuver the hard-liners like Mayszner, he managed to bring about the relaxation of reprisal rules in Serbia. Neubacher, a practical politician, sought to unite all nationalist elements with the Third Reich in a joint front against communism. Reducing the size and scope of reprisals was one of the means to facilitate future collaboration with the Nedić government: Hermann Neubacher, *Sonderauftrag Südost 1940-1945: Bericht eines fliegenden Diplomaten* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Verlag, 1956), p. 137. For the full text of the new order see NAW, T-501, Roll 267, 000033-6, Reprisal measures (22 December 1943).

¹⁹³ For instance, the Germans shot fifty Partisans for the death of a police captain in late January 1944 (NAW, T-501, Roll 352, 000927, Daily report for 22 January 1944); Thirty “Communists” were shot in Serbia in the week prior to 3 April 1944 (NAW, T-78, Roll 331, 6288550, Daily report for 3 April 1944); In mid-May, 25 hostages were shot in Sandžak after the Partisans failed to release some captured German soldiers (Ibid., 6288817, Daily report for 14 May 1944); The Commander-in-Chief South-East reported that altogether 110 Partisans were

The first part of 1943 was marked by momentous events on the battlefields of Europe and Africa. In May, “Army Group Africa” capitulated in Tunisia. On 12 July, the first phase of the Battle of Kursk ended in a German failure to penetrate Soviet defenses. Two days earlier, the much awaited “Second Front” was opened as the Western Allies invaded Sicily. The fall of Italy was expected to occur in the following months. This, combined with the successes the Partisans enjoyed in the rest of Yugoslavia and the general discontent caused by two years of harsh occupation, made the Partisan cause all the more attractive to the Serbian population. During the latter half of 1943, the communist-led guerrillas managed to strengthen their positions in the country and even to move on to form brigades, the first of which was composed of fighters from Serbia in 1942. On 28 August 1943 Tito ordered the Main HQ for Serbia to limit the size of the operations against the occupier and concentrate on organizing, recruiting and fighting quisling formations and the Chetniks of Draža Mihailović instead.¹⁹⁴ However, the German grip on the country was still not weak enough in order for these large units to operate freely. Therefore, some had to be disbanded while others were either evacuated to Bosnia or had to seek refuge in the unruly south of the country.

Tito and the Supreme HQ were always conscious of the great importance Serbia held for the region as a whole. Whoever held it, held Yugoslavia. These considerations were primarily political in nature: Serbia, the bastion of Draža Mihailović and his royalist movement, was seen as a potential Yugoslav Vendée, which could endanger the on-going revolution. Therefore, Tito ordered Bosnian and Proletarian units to start concentrating along the left bank of Drina River already in September 1943. From there, these units were to invade Serbia as soon as the circumstances permitted. After this concentration had been dispersed by German operations in late Autumn and early Winter, Tito decided to try again, this time approaching from the south, from Sandžak. The plan was to secure a foothold in the south-western part of Serbia, and use it both for strengthening the local Partisans and as a springboard for future operations. Starting in mid-March 1944, two Partisan divisions (the 2nd Proletarian and 5th Krajina) crossed the Lim River and reached positions south of Kraljevo. The Germans parried by using the only reserves they had in the country, one police regiment and one regiment of the “Brandenburg” Division. These served as a backbone of a large but heterogeneous force, including Bulgarians, White Russians, Serbian State Guard, Volunteers

executed in reprisals in Serbia in June 1944 (NAW, T-311, Roll 190, 000802, War diary entry for 10 July 1944); On 11 July 1944, forty Partisans were executed for an attack on an ethnic German refugee convoy in the Banat (Ibid., 000808, Daily report for 11 July 1944). According to an incomplete survey, 148 inmates of the Banjica concentration camp were shot from August to October 1944 (Glišić, *Teror*, p. 140).

¹⁹⁴ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol.I, pp. 611-2, 615-6, 619-20.

and, most importantly, Mihailović's Chetniks.¹⁹⁵ With them, and with the help of the signals intelligence which allowed them to read all the communication between the Partisan divisions and the Supreme HQ¹⁹⁶, the Germans managed to push back the Partisan force first to the west and then across the Lim. By mid-May, Western Serbia was again fully under German control.

The second invasion attempt came in the Summer of the same year. This time, the Partisans amassed much larger forces which could now count on being re-supplied by Allied air-drops. After successfully avoiding destruction in German operations in June and July, this group managed to cross the Ibar River in early August 1944 and gain a permanent foothold in Serbia. At the same time, the Germans attempted to liquidate the traditional Partisan stronghold in Southern Serbia in a series of operations lasting from June until August. The guerilla bastion became even more dangerous as the recruitment drive in the Spring yielded enough manpower to allow the Partisans to form five purely Serbian divisions. The fighting there managed to steal the initiative from the Germans for a brief period. The breakthrough of two additional Partisan corps across the Ibar River in late August and the quickly approaching Soviet forces changed the situation in Serbia completely. While the Partisans and the Soviets began their advance on Belgrade, the Germans were attempting to escape out of the swiftly closing bottleneck.¹⁹⁷

The fighting in Serbia in the second half of 1944 was marked by great brutality towards the prisoners, in particular towards the Germans. 'Pay-back' was to be exacted. After almost three years, the Partisan were again in Serbia in force. The headiness of victory and the burning desire to avenge the crimes committed by the Germans and their collaborators were the main factors which influenced the attitude of the Partisans towards their captives.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Beginning in late November 1943, several of Mihailović's senior commanders signed written agreements with the Wehrmacht, stipulating cease-fire and collaboration in the struggle against the Partisans: Tomasevich, *Occupation*, p. 224. Although the Chetniks co-operated with the Germans and received ammunition shipments in the above-mentioned battles, the Germans did not trust them and still viewed them as potential enemies: *Zbornik*/XII/4/250-1, Instructions for dealing with Chetniks (16 May 1944).

¹⁹⁶ Petar Višnjić, *Prodor II. i V. divizije NOVJ u Srbiju 1944* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1968), pp. 379-81. Thanks to imperfect ciphers and the low discipline of Partisan radio operators, the Germans managed to read 91 per cent of all enemy messages prior to April 1944: NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000457, Notice from intelligence section (14 October 1944).

¹⁹⁷ Owing to the worsening situation on the southern flank of the Eastern Front which, by the beginning of September, reached Bulgaria and Romania, Hitler ordered the 350,000-strong Army Group E to begin evacuating Greece. Army Group F, deployed in Yugoslavia, was tasked with keeping the communications in its operational area open. Due to Soviet and Partisan pressure, large parts of Army Group F found themselves in danger of being surrounded and had to fight their way out of Serbia.

¹⁹⁸ The depth of hatred against the Germans in general was witnessed by two German defectors who came with the Red Army to Kragujevac, the scene of massive reprisals in the Fall of 1941. The moment the Partisans

Although orders prohibiting arbitrary execution of prisoners were released several times during September and October, most of the units did not observe them.¹⁹⁹ This was especially the case when the prisoners were recognized for having been particularly brutal during the occupation.²⁰⁰ Since there is no evidence the Partisan commands ever used disciplinary measures to curb such behavior, one can safely assume they wanted to appease the public outcry for revenge by relieving the German prisoners of their privileged status guaranteed by international law.

Given that the operations in Serbia were to a large degree carried out by joint forces of the Yugoslav Partisans and the Red Army, it is sometimes impossible to discern who bore the greater responsibility for the war crimes which occurred. The published Yugoslav documents indicate that the Soviets often insisted the Partisans deliver them the captured Germans; sometimes, taking them by force of arms.²⁰¹ There was a great deal of arbitrariness in the way they were treated afterwards. One group could not hope for mercy: Soviet citizens who were fighting in German uniform.²⁰² On the other hand, one Soviet officer, Boris Sluistky, remembered there were orders not to deliver the prisoners to the Partisans, because they routinely shot them. High command advised the units to send them to provisional POW camps instead. This statement is corroborated by German eyewitnesses, who confirmed on more than one occasion that it was the Soviets who put an end to the mass executions of prisoners by the Partisans. These seem to have been especially frequent after the liberation of

and the townsfolk saw them wearing Wehrmacht uniforms, they demanded from the Soviets that the two Germans be immediately handed over for execution. The Red Army soldiers had great difficulty in preventing the lynching and persuading the Yugoslavs that the Germans in question were anti-fascists: Heinz Kühnrich, Franz-Karl Hitze, *Deutsche bei Titos Partisanen: Kriegsschicksale auf dem Balkan in Augenzeugenberichten und Dokumenten* (Schkeuditz: GNN Verlag, 1997), pp.75-6.

¹⁹⁹ See the orders of the 1st Proletarian Division (11 September 1944) and the 13th Proletarian Brigade (1 October 1944) in *Zbornik/ I/12/9-10* and *Zbornik/ I/13/38*, respectively. German intelligence picked up a similar order by the 1st Proletarian Division, which strictly forbade the shooting of prisoners and ordered their concentration at Banjica camp instead: NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 001101, Signals intelligence summary (17 October 1944).

²⁰⁰ See for instance the description of the arbitrary execution of two Germans in Zaječar, one of which was known for his brutality, in *Sedma srpska udarna brigada: zbornik sećanja* (Belgrade: Stručna knjiga, 1988), Vol. I, pp. 208-9. While Đilas admits that similar events were fairly common in this period, he maintains that the shooting of German army prisoners was not practiced in Serbia: Djilas, *Wartime*, p.424. In light of the available evidence, his statement cannot be validated.

²⁰¹ See *Zbornik/I/14/210*, 229, reports by 12th Proletarian Corps (19 October 1944) and 17th Slavonian Brigade (22 October 1944), respectively.

²⁰² The 4th Krajina brigade reported to its commander on 14 October 1944 that the Soviets pressed them to shoot all Turkestanians captured as members of German formations. Instead, these prisoners were sent to the divisional HQ with the remark that they "should sort it out with the Russians and act accordingly": *Zbornik/ I/13/350*. Fitzroy Maclean remembers a conversation he had with one Red Army soldier in Serbia at that time about what the Soviets did with the prisoners. Large groups were sent to the rear, the soldier said, "but if, he added, there are only few of them, we do not bother" and he winked. I wondered how many prisoners it took to constitute a large group." Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), p. 508.

Belgrade on 20 October 1944. Furthermore, both post-war testimonies and contemporary accounts it can be confirmed that the German prisoners from the Yugoslav capital were at one point transferred to the Soviets. The latter first tried to win them over for their cause and thereafter sent them east, to the Soviet Union.²⁰³ The fact that the majority of prisoners were delivered to the Soviets, and that the Yugoslav leadership was now in a position of strength made the exchange of these men impossible.²⁰⁴

With the fall of Belgrade, the battle for Serbia was practically over. The Germans held a strip of land in the west of the country around the so-called “Kraljevo Bridgehead” (*Brückenkopf Kraljevo*) until early 1945 when all units of Army Group E reached the safety of Bosnia. With control of Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, Tito’s position as the new ruler of Yugoslavia was undisputed. Militarily speaking, the Partisans for the first time controlled large swaths of territory which were not cut off from the outside world. This enabled them to harness all agricultural, industrial and manpower resources available there and put them to martial use. The process of regularization within the Partisan army could now be completed, with Serbia furnishing the soldiers, and the Soviet Union the military hardware for the units now taking the field in Syrmia and Eastern Bosnia.

6. Analysis of Prisoner Exchange in Serbia in 1941-1944

As we have seen, Serbia enjoyed a unique position in the strategic considerations of the main protagonists of the war in Yugoslavia. The region owed this to a particular combination of geographic, economic and historical reasons which had made it the heartland of Yugoslavia. Consequently, both the German occupation regime and the Communist-led resistance movement treated Serbia differently than the rest of Yugoslavia. Such a state of affairs naturally also influenced the way in which the enemies interacted, including the treatment of prisoners and prisoner exchanges.

²⁰³ Timofejev, *Rusi*, p. 380. See the eyewitness reports in Karl W. Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Jugoslawien* (München: Verlag Ernst und Werner Gieseking, 1962), Volume I/1, pp. 89-90; NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000707, Appendix to interrogation of Vosdine Illitsch (19 November 1944).

²⁰⁴ In early November 1944, the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) offered to broker an exchange arrangement with the Yugoslav government through its delegate to Serbia, Dr. Rudolf Voegeli. The Armed Forces High Command agreed, but added that that the approval must under no circumstances be mistaken as a recognition of the „Tito's bandit government“: NAW, T-77, Roll 1419, 001099-1100, Subject: ICRC's care for German prisoners held in captivity by Tito's bandits (9 November 1944).

The Yugoslav Partisans were faced with the perpetual dilemma of all guerrilla movements: what to do with the prisoners? They at first did not have the facilities to accommodate them and bringing them along carried with it a huge security risk. The most expedient way would be to take no prisoners at all. However, in the first few months of fighting, the Partisans rarely opted for this solution. They instead chose to release enemy prisoners, knowing full well it would undo the main dividend of prisoner-taking, i.e. causing the enemy an irrecoverable loss. The only profit which could be drawn from such conduct was of a physiological and propagandistic nature. It would win the captors moral high ground, deepen their self-confidence and shatter the enemy's. Sparing a surrendering enemy, nominally a rule of international law but practically only a dead letter as far as the war in Eastern Europe was concerned, fitted well into the credo of the Communist-led guerrillas. It was modeled after the system of principles of the Communist Party and further developed in the first months of the uprising. In short, it aimed to create a new army comprised of self-conscious volunteers, an army which would uphold the noblest virtues of the people it represented. Consequently, the main accent was put on winning over the population by orderly conduct and punishing harshly those who disobeyed discipline. The ideal of a truly righteous army would be incomplete if it did not include chivalrous treatment of the captured enemy.

Aside from these universal ideals there was also a strong ideological streak lurking behind the policy towards the captive Germans. It resulted from a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist world view taught at Party meetings and repeated incessantly in Communist propaganda. This was the conviction that class differences lay at the core of historical processes. Thereby the worker-peasant class was invariably oppressed by the bourgeoisie. In the armies of capitalist countries, the former was represented by the rank-and-file and the latter by the officer class. While this may have been true of the Tsarist army Lenin sought to subvert during the First World War, the advent of Fascism and Nazism made such considerations obsolete by the early 1940s. Nevertheless, the notion of class solidarity prevailed in the first phase of the insurgency in Serbia. The ordinary German soldiers, who were eighty percent workers and peasants, were still seen as "oppressed" and were let go when captured individually. Those few officers which had been captured were usually executed on the spot. The Yugoslav Communists toyed with these notions as late as November 1941, a lasting monument to dogmatic blindness. Although prisoners were not simply let go by that time, these considerations were largely responsible for the good treatment of the captives in Užice.

Tito, moreover, had practical reasons as well for keeping the German prisoners. He overruled a pragmatic but short-sighted solution to the prisoner question as proposed by Ranković. The latter reasoned that the German authorities did not reciprocate by treating the Partisan captives well, and they could not be compelled to do this by the threat of mass reprisals against the prisoners in Užice. Therefore, there would be no moral obstacles to liquidate the former and there were certainly no practical reasons for keeping them alive any more. Tito's opposition to this course of action was based on his long-term political considerations. The fight the Communists took up in early Summer was not only for the liberation of the country but also for the revolution. On the ground, this fight was reflected in incessant attacks on the pillars of the *Ancien Régime*, the administration and the Gendarmerie, which were now serving the occupier. They were replaced by Communist-controlled bodies, the National Liberation Councils, which were nominally provisional but were in fact conceived as the foundations of the post-war administration of the country. In the same vain, the Central Council formed in Užice in early November was meant to represent an interim Serbian government. These moves were considered illegitimate, not only by the British and the Yugoslav government-in-exile, but also by the Soviets, who expressly cautioned against any attempts at seizing power by revolutionary means while the war raged.

Parallel to the attempts to create civilian administration and provide it with an air of legitimacy, the KPJ strove to organize the Partisan detachments in such a way that they would resemble a regular army. If the Germans would recognize it as such, then the Allies and the Soviets would have to follow suit. The regularization process began as soon as the decision was made to broaden the base of the resistance by including all those who wished to fight against the occupier. Internally, the process was marked by the forming of platoons, companies and battalions and by the introduction of a tight chain of command and strict discipline. *Esprit-de-corps* was strengthened by the introduction of an oath, insignia and the clenched-fist salute. Outwardly, the recognition could come only through adhering to the rules and customs of warfare, particularly with regards to the treatment of enemy captives. The existence of POW camps was the most visible symbol of both the adherence to international law and the increasing strength of the National Liberation Movement. Although mass atrocities perpetrated by the Germans in October 1941 made the Supreme HQ consider taking reprisals against German prisoners-of-war, nothing of the sort happened. It would only bring both additional suffering to the civilian population and squander any chances of recognition as a belligerent force.

Regardless of the generally good treatment of German prisoners, both before and during the Užice period, the occupying forces consistently executed captured Partisans. Their deliverance clearly had to be achieved in another way. The quid pro quo of captive for captive presented itself as a logical solution. This matter, however, was not officially regulated and depended much on a commander's personality, the importance of a particular captive to his fellow combatants, and a particular set of circumstances on the ground. The issue whether the exchange would be asked for or not was deferred to the commander's (and political commissar's) discretion. The chances were better if the individual suggested for exchange was important for the cause, for example, if he or she was a member of the Communist Party. Next came the closest relatives of Partisan leaders. They faced retribution owing to the family ties they had to those who had "gone into the woods". Their captivity also posed a security risk for the whole Partisan organization in a particular region, for they were often intimately involved in the underground activities of their relatives. In any way, the choice had to be made carefully, since the number of prisoners and hostages far exceeded the number of captured Germans. Offering an exchange also resolved an unpleasant moral dilemma: one wanted the assurance of having tried everything to dispense with the prisoners peacefully before resorting to extreme measures. A prisoner exchange also solved the trouble of feeding and guarding prisoners, a task for which the Partisans could hardly spare either a loaf of bread or a rifle.

Offering a prisoner exchange could be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Whoever made the first step of approaching the enemy automatically appeared weaker, regardless of whether the offer was made in order to save lives or otherwise. It also pointed out to the enemy the persons who were of special interest to the other side. This was especially dangerous to the Partisans, since the Germans could now pick out their sympathizers from a multitude of hostages. Still, as there was apparently no other way to get their people back unharmed, the Partisans usually assumed this risk. Had they stood under the protection of international law, they would certainly be less inclined to contact the enemy.

Through offering an exchange, the Communist-led guerrillas were, in a way, trying to "force" the Wehrmacht to acknowledge them. By delegating responsibility for the fate of the captured men to the enemy if he declined an exchange offer, the Partisans were hoping for an answer. When the Germans did answer, and this did not always happen, it was widely regarded as a sign of recognition. Even the choice of words could have a positive impact on the self-esteem of the guerrillas (such as at Lebane in November 1941) when the German

command addressed them as “Partisans” and not as “bandits.” In this respect, the Partisan message to the Kraljevo garrison in early October is worthy of special mention. It was not an exchange offer per se, but rather an ultimatum threatening reprisals against prisoners if the demands were not met. The most important and far-reaching demand was for the recognition of the Partisans as a belligerent force. It was the first time one Partisan command openly asked for such a thing, and linked it to the treatment of German captives. Although made on a local level for immediate purposes, the last point reflected the wish of the National Liberation Movement as a whole to be accepted as an equal adversary. The demand for the recognition would play prominent part in the future prisoner-related negotiations between the two sides.

What happened in the town of Veliko Gradište on the Danube in late September should be also mentioned here again. On this occasion, the Partisans conditioned the prisoner exchange with the written guarantee from the Germans that the territory under the control of the former would not be endangered in any way. This was the first offer of its kind, and as we shall see in the following chapters, it would resurface often in similar negotiations in the future. It is little wonder then that the German army officer present refused to accept such terms, even if it meant death for the seven captured Germans. This brings us to a fine example of how factors such as a commander’s personality and the sense of belonging to a particular unit could influence the outcome of an exchange attempt. The officer of the Water Protection Police immediately acquiesced to listen to the Partisan offer in order to save the lives of men belonging to the same service branch. He was even prepared to sign a written agreement on the matter, regardless of the fact that it would represent a flagrant breach of the no-negotiations order of 5 September. His counterpart from the army, not knowing the captured men, was not as strongly inclined to continue negotiations with the insurgents.

The Germans for their part were much less inclined to make the first step and ask for a prisoner exchange. The main reason for the lack of initiative in this matter was their self-confidence. It was based both on their strength on the ground and the string of victories they had hitherto enjoyed over the course of the war. In the Summer of 1941 they saw no reason to compromise with the enemy in general, and much less with the one they considered illegitimate. As time progressed, and as they saw themselves faced with an uprising en masse, situation became more complicated. Smaller units, spread across vast areas in a multitude of isolated outposts, were now facing a strong enemy who had both intimate knowledge of the terrain and the support of the population. In such conditions, conceit was slowly beginning to give ground to practicality. Only in such a way can the willingness of the company-sized

detachments in Krupanj and other places in Western and Central Serbia to negotiate with the guerrillas be explained. Further examples of this changing attitude are the successful exchange of prisoners around Gornji Milanovac and the preliminary acceptance of the Partisan offer to exchange the mayor of Valjevo. The same practical thinking was behind the decision to try to exchange the captive members of the *Landeschützen* Company for hostages from Gornji Milanovac in late September. Incidentally, this was the only instance when the Germans were prepared to make the first step. The initiative was, surprisingly, condoned by the higher authorities in Belgrade despite the existence of orders prohibiting any negotiating with the insurgents. The affair illustrates the proverbial gap between the wishes of high commands in faraway places (in this case Field Marshal List in Thessaloniki) and the dour realities on the ground. In this case, manpower shortage in Serbia at that time (apart from purely humanitarian reasons) compelled the Germans to try to get their men back via an exchange.

No analysis of the phenomenon of prisoner exchange would be complete without a brief overview of historiographical difficulties connected with it. The available Yugoslav sources, both primary and secondary, are surprisingly abundant with information concerning the various attempts at prisoner exchange made in Serbia in 1941. This has to do with the fact that these attempts had solely humanitarian objectives. As such they could be freely mentioned in post-war literature. These events, unlike some later exchanges which had ulterior agendas, were not perceived as a danger for the idealized portrayal of the “National Liberation War”. Unlike Yugoslav sources, the German ones are more problematic. None of the exchange attempts in Serbia are mentioned in the war diaries, daily reports or ten-day reports of the highest German commands in the country. These events were probably considered too insignificant to be included in the overview of the most important daily activities. In addition, it is obvious that the authors of these reports did not find it necessary to parade the fact that their units negotiated every now and then with the enemy. Therefore, words like “freed” or “let go” were sometimes used when a German soldier was released in a prisoner exchange (see the daily report from Gornji Milanovac from mid-August). The exchange offers were generally not mentioned in daily reports at all (see for instance the events around Čuprija in mid-September or Leskovac in mid-November). Judging by the case of Veliko Gradište, such occurrences were dealt with in special reports, most of which have not survived the war. Furthermore, historians have good fortune that both Partisan and German documents about this episode are still available today. This is remarkable not only for this early period, but for prisoner exchanges in general. The negotiations in Veliko Gradište

are characteristic in another respect. When comparing the contemporary reports of both sides to their superiors, it is impossible to say who made that vaunted first step. All parties involved were clearly afraid of being accused of contacting the enemy first. Also, the German report doesn't mention the issue of the security of the Partisan territory and the commitments made in this respect by the officer on the ground. The Partisan report, on the other hand, depicts this as the main issue. As we shall see, these inconsistencies are repeatedly encountered when researching the prisoner exchanges in Yugoslavia.

In the period from the fall of Užice until the end of the war in Serbia there exist no recorded prisoner exchanges or even attempts. This fact seems improbable in the face of the numerous prisoner exchanges in other parts of Yugoslavia beginning in the second half of 1942. It is clear that Serbia enjoyed a special position within wartime Yugoslavia in this respect as well. The reasons for the absence of prisoner exchange are manifold. The most important one was the correlation of forces in the country. The occupier was especially anxious to keep Serbia calm because of its extraordinary importance to the overall German position in the South-Eastern Europe. The general uprising from late Summer 1941 came dangerously close to overthrowing the occupation apparatus. In order to forestall a similar phenomenon from repeating itself, from 1942 onwards, the Germans based their occupation on two pillars; the strong quisling forces and the consistent use of mass-reprisals. The intent was clear: nip any, even the smallest sign of guerrilla activity in the bud. The need to keep such a tight grip on both the population and the guerrillas was indispensable, since Serbia was constantly drained of German forces which were increasingly needed in the neighboring NDH. Negotiating with the Partisans, even about a possible prisoner exchange, would be incompatible with this policy. It would merely be perceived as a sign of weakness, something the Germans could not allow themselves in Serbia.

The population opted either for the Nedić administration simply because it offered peace, or for Mihailović's Chetniks, whose doctrine was based in not provoking the enemy for fear of reprisals. This made it very difficult for the Partisans to gain wider support, which in turn made it impossible to form larger units and carry out more brazen actions against the occupier. Although they never departed from the policy of open confrontation with the occupier, sometimes they had to take into account the effect of the ruthless retaliations against the civilians. The result was that actions against the Germans were few and far between. Consequently, German prisoners were rare. Even when they were taken, they were not exchanged. There were several reasons for this. First, by making an exchange offer, the

Partisan unit in question would draw attention to itself and could be certain that swift countermeasures by a numerically superior enemy were to follow. Second, in Bosnia and Croatia, violence towards the captured enemy had been curbed to a certain extent thanks to repeated exchanges. The Serbian Partisans had no similar experiences and could not make them because of the unchanging nature of the German counter-insurgency effort, which basically remained unchanged throughout the period from 1941 until the end of the war. Therefore, the Partisan would shoot their prisoners, or in exceptional cases, release them, but would not put forth an exchange offer knowing it would be flatly refused.

Once the tide of war brought the Partisans to Serbia in strength in the Summer of 1944, the roles reversed. Supported by their Soviet allies, it was the Partisans who now enjoyed the position of strength and saw no reason to negotiate with the enemy. The treatment of enemy prisoners was decidedly influenced by the thirst for revenge and the headiness of victory which gave them a license to do whatever they pleased with the Germans. Furthermore, they could now either put the prisoners in prisoner camps or deliver them to the Soviets. The presence of the latter probably influenced the Partisans' decision not to pursue prisoner exchanges. It would be hard to explain negotiating with the Germans to the Red Army, irrespective of the humanitarian reasons involved.

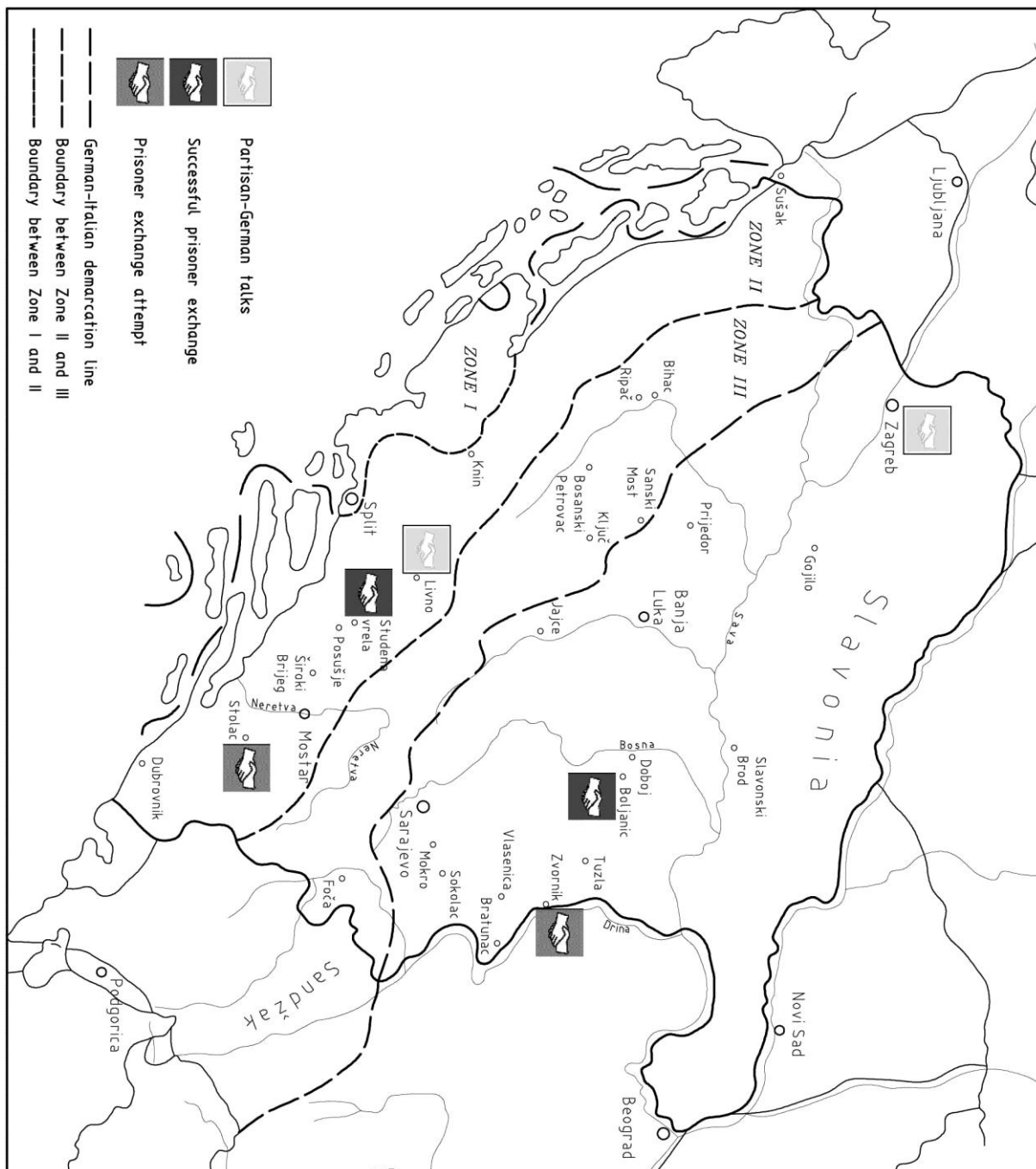


Figure 3: Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1942

Chapter 2: Political Talks Round 1 – 1942

1. Introduction: April 1941-June 1941

The April War had raged for only four days when German spearheads reached the Croatian capital of Zagreb. On the same day, 10 April 1941, a group of Croatian nationalists proclaimed the “Independent State of Croatia” (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska*, abbreviated to NDH). The new state was borne of Hitler’s plans for the geopolitical re-arrangement in the South-East of Europe. Formed as an Italian-German condominium, it would soon become a thorn in the relations between the two countries. Moreover, thanks to its internal policies, it would become a hotbed of insurgency which would decisively influence the course of the war in the Western Balkans as a whole.

The Croatian nationalists who proclaimed the NDH were members of the underground organization known as “Ustasha” (literally, the “insurgent”)²⁰⁵. It was formed in early 1929 by the Zagreb attorney and parliamentary representative, Dr. Ante Pavelić. The Ustashe movement formed as a result of the political tumult in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In June 1928, during a parliamentary session, a Serbian nationalist shot Stjepan Radić, the leader of the HSS, the strongest Croatian political party, and a number of his colleagues. In January 1929, King Aleksandar I Karađorđević abolished the parliament and all political parties and inaugurated a dictatorship with himself at the helm. This was seen by many in Croatia as the last straw in what was perceived to be a continuous campaign by the Serbs to bereave the Croats of their political and civil rights. Pavelić and his followers were already under suspicion for their nationalism, so they were forced to leave the country and go into exile in neighboring Italy. Mussolini welcomed them with open arms, since he could make good use of them for his own plans which were aimed at destabilizing the South Slav Kingdom. Apart from Italy, the Ustashe also found refuge in Hungary, which also had territorial designs on Yugoslavia.

The aim of the Ustashe Movement was to achieve Croatian independence from Yugoslavia by any means necessary, including violence. In 1932, the organization attempted to incite a general uprising in the Dalmatian hinterland. The attempt failed when the Yugoslav Gendarmerie and army intervened quickly and ruthlessly. In 1934, the Ustashe and

²⁰⁵ The introduction is based on Tomasevich, *Occupation*, pp. 233-398 and additional sources which will be quoted in separate footnotes.

Macedonian revolutionaries organized and successfully carried out the assassination of King Aleksandar in Marseilles. This act of terrorism met worldwide condemnation and Mussolini was forced to cut all aid to the Croatian exiles and detain most of them, including Pavelić. Thanks to the rapprochement between Yugoslavia and Italy beginning in 1937, the Ustashe were pushed further to the periphery. Some of them were allowed to return to Yugoslavia where they continued with their clandestine work. By 1941, the future of the organization looked bleak: it had only several hundred full-time members and practically no influence in Croatia. Yet the events of March-April 1941 would propel them to the forefront of political events in the Balkans.

In the lead-up to their Balkan campaign, the Germans counted primarily on Vladko Maček, Stjepan Radić's successor at the helm of the Croatian Peasant Party, to form a new, Axis-friendly government after the defeat of Yugoslavia. Maček, a pro-Allied proponent of a peaceful resolution of the Croatian problem within Yugoslavia, refused to take up the offer. Out of necessity, the Axis turned to Pavelić. He and several hundred of the so-called "Ustashe Returnees" entered Zagreb during the night of 15/16 April, where he was officially inaugurated as the "Poglavnik" (leader) of the new state. It included all of today's Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Syrmia and the town of Zemun, just across the Sava River from Belgrade. The Ustashe ideology, laid down in the so-called "Seventeen Principles", was a mixture of fascism, Croatian ultra-nationalism and clericalism. It envisaged the creation of an ethnically pure Croatian state, where all power would be wielded by a single political party, the Ustahse, with the Poglavnik as its absolute ruler.

As far as the foreign relations of the NDH were concerned, it could be hardly called "independent". It owed its birth to the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, and was maintained by the strength of German, and to a lesser extent, Italian bayonets. This support carried a heavy price. In order to secure the Ustashe hold on power, Pavelić had to make huge territorial concessions to his neighbors. In May 1941, he and Mussolini signed the so-called "Rome Agreements", whereby the new state surrendered a large part of Dalmatia to Italy. Likewise, the region known as Međimurje in the north-west of the country was ceded to Horthy's Hungary. Furthermore, the NDH was divided into two occupation zones, the demarcation line splitting the country in half. The Italian sphere of influence was to the south-west, the German to the north-east of it. The Italian sphere was further divided into two zones, the Second and

the Third.²⁰⁶ In the Second Zone, the Italian Army instituted military rule; NDH authorities, civilian or military, were not allowed to operate there. In the Third Zone, the organs of the NDH were responsible for civilian matters, but its armed forces were barred from entering the zone (this territory was therefore known as the “Demilitarized Zone”). The Germans for their part were not interested in territory but were very much interested in the country’s economic wealth. The aim of the German presence in the country was to more or less ensure that the export of important war materials remained unhindered and that communications stay intact. In a series of trade agreements, the NDH became a de facto economic colony of the Third Reich. It had to bear full cost for the presence of German troops, provide the necessary manual labor and deliver the largest portion of its mineral wealth and agricultural products at low prices to Germany.

The creation of the new Croatian state, independent from Belgrade, was initially greeted favorably by the majority of Croats. Soon, however, popular support for the Ustashe began to dwindle rapidly. The first blow came with the ceding of Dalmatia, the historical heartland of the state, to Italy, which was perceived as the traditional enemy of Croatia. Worse still, the internal policies of the new state promised nothing good. Thanks to Nazi influence, Jews and Gypsies found themselves outside of the rule of law. They became the target of a series of discriminatory directives; their property was confiscated and divided as spoils amongst the adherents of the new order. Furthermore, the Ustashe enacted laws which allowed them to dispose of anyone who was perceived as hostile. An atmosphere of lawlessness and fear set in in the urban areas, worsened by the rumors of what was taking place in the countryside.

Serbs, numbering some 1,820,000 by April 1941, comprised roughly a third of the population of the newly created NDH. The Ustashe movement, built on the hatred of Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia, saw them as the main obstacle to the creation of a Croatian nation-state. Beginning immediately after they had come to power, the Ustashe enacted anti-Serbian laws. Serbs lost their jobs and were pushed out of public life; those who had come as “colonists” after the unification with Serbia in 1918 lost their land and were forced to leave the country altogether. The last measure was a part of the plan to expel a large number of prominent people, including priests, intellectuals and other undesirables, thereby depriving the remainder of the Serbs of their elite. Spurred on by hate speech, which was often heard at

²⁰⁶ The First Zone was the territory which was ceded to Italy as the result of the May Treaty. It was therefore considered a part of Italy. See the accompanying map for this chapter.

public gatherings and printed in official newspapers, the anti-Serb measures became increasingly drastic. People began to be arrested, robbed and even murdered. First pogroms took place already in April, in which entire villages were burnt and their occupants brutally murdered. These became commonplace over the following months, being especially frequent in those regions with mixed Croat-Serb-Muslim populations, such as Lika, Eastern and Western Bosnia and Eastern Herzegovina.

The Serb population, faced with extermination, increasingly took to the woods and mountains. First, acts of spontaneous resistance were to be seen in East Herzegovina in late June, where insurgents effectively closed off Serb-populated areas to the security organs of the NDH.²⁰⁷ Across the country, Serb villages took up arms (largely available from the April War) and formed militias. This mass of armed men had no ideological denomination: they were simply trying to protect themselves and their villages. Their leaders were usually prominent men from their respective regions, such as former army officers, gendarmes and even priests. Beginning in early July, they were joined in ever-increasing numbers by Communists, who were leaving the urban centers in order to organize guerrilla units.

German strength in the NDH constituted only one weak division, the 718th, and some auxiliary units, an estimated 8, 600 men.²⁰⁸ Most of these units were deployed in Bosnia, where they were tasked with protecting the major urban centers (Sarajevo and Banja Luka), the main lines of communications and industrial sites of special interest to the Reich. Woefully underequipped and undermanned, these units found themselves fighting the kind of war they knew nothing about. Since, however, the Croatian regular forces (*Domobranstvo*, or Home Guard) could not cope with the insurgency on their own, the Germans had to assist them. On 27 July 1941, the 718th Infantry Division reported that unrest had broken out in the town of Drvar in Western Bosnia, and from there it spread to nearby areas. The Germans units from Banja Luka were already engaged in fighting and the first casualties were inflicted upon the Germans at this time.²⁰⁹ The division noted that what they had at their hands was a typical guerrilla war, during which prisoners were routinely shot, “even the heavily wounded

²⁰⁷ For more on this event see Davor Marijan, “Lipanski ustanak u istočnoj Hercegovini 1941. godine”, in: *ČSP*, 35, 2 (2003): 545-576. “The June Uprising” was first of its kind on the territory of the NDH, but was never officially recognized as such in socialist Yugoslavia. The reason for this decision was that the uprising was spontaneous, and not planned by the KPJ.

²⁰⁸ NAW, T-501, Roll 251, Memorandum on the visit to the 718th Infantry Division in Zagreb. This report is undated but was probably written either in June or July 1941.

²⁰⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2265, War diary entry for 27 July 1941. Drvar was an industrial town and consequently had a relatively strong KPJ branch. They organized the resistance against the Ustashe and thus placed themselves at the forefront of the local insurgents. Therefore, 27 July 1941 was celebrated as the beginning of the National Liberation War in the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

ones”.²¹⁰ The second observation made by the German troops on the ground was that the Ustashe was the main culprit for the worsening situation in the country. Edmund Glaise-Horstenau, the acting German General in Zagreb, summarized this sentiment in a report to the Armed Forces High Command in early August:

*“Contrary to the official communiques from Zagreb which lay the blame [for the unrest] squarely on the hostile Serbian influence, all German commands and upright Croatsians are unanimous in the opinion, that it was the Ustashe, and their blind and bloody rampages, which carry the lion’s share of responsibility for this state of affairs”.*²¹¹

2. First prisoner exchanges in the NDH, August 1941-June 1942

The Independent State of Croatia found itself in total chaos by the early Summer of 1941. Pogroms against Serbs had led the majority of them to flee their villages and arm themselves. Fighting began in earnest in August, as the KPJ raised Partisan detachments from these desperate men, and started an organized campaign against the garrisons, industrial objects and lines of communication in the NDH. The Home Guard and the Gendarmerie were utterly incapable of quelling the uprising, and thus the Wehrmacht had to become increasingly embroiled in combating the guerillas. As the vast majority of German assets were concentrated in today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of the casualties were incurred in these two provinces.

On 7 August 1941, near the town of Sokolac, some twenty kilometers east of Sarajevo, two (empty) German ambulances were shot at by the Partisans. Although both vehicles were destroyed, their crews managed to escape unharmed. It was the final straw for the German garrison in Sarajevo and they moved to take action against the guerrillas on the Romanija Mountain. This took place, on 9 August, when a task force consisting of one battalion of infantry and a battery of artillery left Sarajevo in motorized transport and headed east. The next days were spent in sporadic skirmishes with light casualties. However, on 19 August, one Partisan company ambushed a bus laden with German soldiers near the hamlet of Mokro. The

²¹⁰ NAW, T-315, Roll 2265, 000632, Situation report by medical NCO Hinrichs (31 July 1941).

²¹¹ NAW, T-312, Roll 460, Daily report for 9 August 1941. The post of “German General in Zagreb” (*Deutscher General in Agram*) was created on 14 April 1941 for the purpose of military liaison with the new Croatian government. Horstenau initially had a favorable impression on the Ustashe but began turning against them in the Summer of 1941. He was both genuinely shocked by the atrocities and worried that these would make the German position in the country untenable.

Germans suffered six killed, four wounded and one missing. The missing man was taken prisoner by the Partisans:

*“We took the wounded German and treated his wounds. We were thinking of keeping him until he recovered completely, but his wounds were too heavy. He was therefore sent to the hospital with the help of one peasant girl. Before he departed we told him who we are and what we do”.*²¹²

The German sources do not expressly confirm that the guerrillas returned the wounded man. However, in the after-action report on the fighting on Romanija, there are two references to a soldier who spent time in guerrilla captivity. He obviously managed to rejoin his compatriots by the time the report was compiled (22 August), as he gave both the estimate of the enemy strength at Mokro and the casualties sustained.²¹³

The treatment of the wounded German on Romanija is not surprising if we remember that the Partisans conducted themselves in a similar fashion at the same time in Serbia. Two orders issued by the Partisan headquarters in the Sarajevo area in early September also dealt with the question of prisoners. Enemy soldiers, as long as they did not commit crimes, were to be lectured on the aims of the Partisan movement and then released. In case an enemy unit did commit war crimes, its officers, NCOs and identifiable culprits were to be punished by death.²¹⁴ While these instructions were primarily concerned with the Home Guard soldiers, the treatment of the wounded man at Mokro shows they could apply to the members of the German occupation forces as well. As the war progressed and as the enemy showed no inclination to reciprocate in kind, it became clear that the plight of captured insurgents had to be alleviated by other means. In December 1941, the 2nd Krajina Detachment reported on two occasions that it released some captured Home Guard soldiers, but retained their officers for exchange.²¹⁵ A successful exchange of several Home Guard officers for imprisoned Communists on the outskirts of Sarajevo in the late Autumn of that same year shows that the

²¹² Zbornik/IV/1/75, Report by the headquarters of Sarajevo area to KPJ's regional committee for Bosnia-Herzegovina (22 August 1941). The hospital in question was situated in German-occupied Mokro; Momir Koprivnica, “Prva akcija u Mokrom i borba sa Nijemcima na Romaniji” in: *Sarajevo u revoluciji* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1977), Volume II, p. 412.

²¹³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2265, 000759, 761, After-action report by 2nd Battalion, 738th Infantry Regiment (22 August 1941).

²¹⁴ Zbornik/IV/1/197, 216, Instructions by HQ of Sarajevo District (4 September 1941) and Order of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Partisan Brigade (6 September 1941), respectively. The orders also stipulated that the members of the Ustashe organization, regardless of their conduct, could not expect mercy if captured.

²¹⁵ Zbornik/IV/1/209, 211, Activity report by 2nd Krajina detachment for the period 10-20 December 1941.

exchange of prisoners was perceived by Partisan commands throughout Bosnia as a legitimate way of protecting their fighters from reprisals.²¹⁶

The initial disposition of the insurgents towards the Germans was influenced by several factors. The power of the German war machine was obvious to all, and no one was keen at provoking it unnecessarily. In addition, the German anti-guerrilla sweeps lagged far behind those of the Ustashe in terms of brutality. Colloquially said, the insurgents still had no quarrel with the Germans, only with the Ustashe. Such an attitude was dominant during the early days of the uprising when it had no ideological background and Communists were only beginning to gain influence among the insurgents. For instance, while the armed Serbs in the area around Ključ in Western Bosnia refused to deliver their Croatian prisoners to the NDH, they were willing to do so to the German occupation forces. They also asked for German protection if they laid down their weapons.²¹⁷

The fact that the Germans in Ključ were prepared to accept the request of this particular group of insurgents should not be mistaken for clemency towards the guerrillas in general. Once a unit suffered casualties, retaliation was swift and ruthless. Just as in Serbia: all those suspected of hostile action (including women) were to be executed on the spot and their dwellings razed.²¹⁸ The humane treatment of the wounded German at Mokro did not elicit reciprocity: upon reaching the battlefield, his commanding officer immediately ordered a man suspected of being an insurgent shot.²¹⁹ There was, however, one major difference between the NDH and occupied Serbia. Since the former was a nominally independent country, its security organs, rather than the German occupation forces, were responsible for carrying out the reprisals. The Germans could collaborate and give advice, but the meting out of punishment was a matter handled by the Croatian authorities.²²⁰ The indiscriminate Ustashe terror, however, had undone any impact which calculated terror might have had on the insurgents. Unlike in Serbia, the Orthodox population would always remain armed because their existence was permanently threatened by the Ustashe. The guerrillas could thus always

²¹⁶ For details on the exchange from the perspective of one of the Communists, see Dr. Vjera Kušec, „Razmjenoj do slobode“ in: *Sarajevo u Revoluciji*, Vol. III, pp. 305-310. This is most likely the same exchange Dedijer mentioned happening in November 1941: Vladimir Dedijer, *Dnevnik* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1946), p. 421, entry for 17 April 1942.

²¹⁷ NAW, T-315, Roll 2265, 000711, Report No. 3 by 1st Battalion, 750th Infantry Regiment (12 August 1941).

²¹⁸ Ibid., 000788, Operational order No. 20 (20 August 1941).

²¹⁹ Ibid., 000760-1, After-action report by 2nd Battalion, 738th Infantry Regiment (22 August 1941).

²²⁰ The quota was not fixed until October 1941 and was much lower than in Serbia: ten hostages were to be executed for each German killed: NAW, T-501, Roll 266, 000263-5, Reprisals for German losses in Croatia (16 October 1941).

count on a certain level of popular support. This, in turn, made them strong, and less likely to back down under threat of force.

Captured Germans could not always expect humane treatment, especially if they did not belong to the armed forces. In mid-August, on the border between western Bosnia and Croatia at Ripač, the insurgents captured two German engineers from *Organization Todt*. The embassy in Zagreb requested the help of Italian military authorities for obtaining the release of the captives. Preliminary reports were promising and it seemed that some kind of arrangement with the insurgents could be made. The German authorities in Zagreb dispatched SS Major Beissner of the SD to Knin with the task of overseeing the talks. On 26 August 1941 he returned to Zagreb and reported that he had made contact with the guerrillas, but could not proceed with negotiations because of the ongoing operations of the NDH armed forces in the area. Embassy officials travelled to Knin three more times in September in order to spur the Italians into action, but to no avail. In the end, all these efforts proved to be in vain: the insurgents concluded the prisoners were spies and had them executed in Drvar.²²¹

The Serbs in Eastern Bosnia suffered particularly at the hands of the Ustashe in the months following the creation of the NDH. By early September 1941, the region had devolved into a chaotic and bloody struggle between hastily organized Serb militias who fought both the Ustashe and the local Muslim population.²²² The uprising had already pushed the NDH authority out from large parts of territory along the Drina River. This was especially worrying to the Germans, as they feared a possible link-up with the insurgents in Serbia. After Loznica and Banja Koviljača fell in early September, the focus of the fighting was transferred to the town of Zvornik, which possessed a strategic crossing over the Drina. Bosnian insurgents laid siege, but the German-NDH garrison managed to hold out. Inspired by the successful actions of their Serbian counterparts at Krupanj, the Bosnians sent a captured German officer, Lieutenant Lorenz, to Zvornik offering the garrison to surrender with honor.

²²¹ Hrvatski državni arhiv (Croatian State Archives), Fond HR HDA 1450, microfilm roll D-280, frame H312635, Missing OT-people (20 August 1941); *ibid.*, H312630, For Mr. Ambassador (26 August 1941); *ibid.*, H312631-4, Report on OT-people (28 September 1941); *ibid.*, H312628, Note (28 September 1941); (forthwith abbreviated to: fonds, designation of microfilm roll or sub-fond, frame or document number); Ervin Šinko, *Drvarski dnevnik* (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1987), p. 227.

²²² The Bosnian Muslims, numbering some 700,000 in 1941, were designated “Croats of Muslim faith” by the Ustashe who spared no effort in trying to win them over for the new state. In Eastern Bosnia, where very few ethnic Croats lived, Muslims made up the rank-and-file of the Ustashe organization. As revenge for the crimes they committed, the Serb insurgents began attacking Muslim villages, committing numerous atrocities in the process.

The ultimatum was turned down, and the envoy, contrary to the customs of war, did not return with the answer to his captors; he remained instead in Zvornik.²²³

The insurgents still lacked political orientation, but as in Serbia, monarchists and Communists were competing for control. The leader of the former, Gendarmerie Major Jezdimir Dangić, was overtly committed to a united front with the Partisans, but was at the same time covertly seeking contact with the Germans and the Nedić Government. One German report, compiled in early 1942 by General Bader, stated that three captured German soldiers with their weapons were at one point returned by Dangić.²²⁴ We find the same information in both post-war Yugoslav historiography and in the memoirs of the Chetnik leader Pero Đukanović published in the Nineties.²²⁵ On the other hand, Stevo Voinović, Dangić's officer, claimed in his memoirs that these men were not simply released, but exchanged for thirty Serbs from the Zvornik prison; the exchange taking place with the consent of Communist representatives.²²⁶ Both Đukanović and Voinović wrote that the prisoners were returned or exchanged in the second half of September; the German primary sources do not mention any MIA in this period. They do, however, mention that three men went missing on 2 October just outside of Zvornik. While the contemporary documents of the 718th Infantry Division are silent regarding a possible exchange, we find that one of these men returned as "an envoy of the insurgents" on 9 October.²²⁷ Had he brought yet another call

²²³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2265, 001012, Captain Strecker to Major Fröhlich (8 September 1941).

²²⁴ *Zbornik*/XII/2/114, Report by Plenipotentiary-General on the negotiations with Major Dangić in Belgrade (5 February 1942).

²²⁵ Dr. Zdravko Antonić (Ed.), *Zapisi Pere Đukanovića: Ustanak na Drini* (Belgrade: SANU, 1994), pp. 106, 115-6.

²²⁶ Stevo Voinović, *Na službi kod Dangića* (Kragujevac: Pogledi, 2001), p. 69. From Spring 1942 onward, the Chetniks in Bosnia and Herzegovina stood in tactical alliance with the Germans (see below). In October 1943, the Chetniks found a German colonel who was trying to escape from the Partisans who had just captured the Bosnian town of Tuzla. The Chetniks returned the officer to the 369th Infantry Division in exchange for a shipment of ammunition that was to be used against the Partisans: Franz Schraml, *Kriegsschauplatz Kroatien: die deutsch-kroatischen Legions-Divisionen: 369., 373., 392. Inf.-Div. (kroat.) ihre Ausbildungs- und Ersatzformationen* (Neckargemünd: Kurt Vowinkel Verlag, 1962), p. 72. In the late Summer and early Fall of 1944, some Chetnik units in Herzegovina turned their arms against the Germans in anticipation of Allied landings in Dalmatia. One Chetnik commander offered to release ten German soldiers if the other side would provide medical treatment for ten of his men and some additional medical supplies. The exchange was made and at least one of the wounded Chetniks was released from the hospital afterwards: Kurt Hildebrandt, "Gefangenenaustausch in Kroatien" in: *Deutscher Soldatenkalender*, 22 (1976): 286-8. In late September, the Germans negotiated the release of over 300 of their men from the Chetnik captivity in Serbia (NAW, T-311, Roll 193, 000887, Daily report for 22 September 1944). By early November 1944, it was clear that the Allies would not land, and Draža Mihailović sought to improve his relations with the Germans, who were the only ones who could provide him with ammunition and supplies. As a token of good will, the Chetniks promised to release some 320 German officers and men who had been captured in earlier battles (*Ibid.*, Roll 184, Conversation with Draža Mihailović's chief of staff Major Jevdjenijevic (3 November 1944). At least one group of 32 soldiers was released by the Chetniks in Sandžak in early December 1944 (NAW, T-314, Roll 1630, 000051, War diary entry for 11 December 1944).

²²⁷ NAW, T-315, Roll 2265, 001297, Report by 3rd Battalion, 738th Infantry Regiment (9 October 1941).

for surrender to the Zvornik garrison,²²⁸ this would have been mentioned in German reports. One of the members of the 718th Infantry Division remembered that this envoy came because of the “prisoner exchange with the Partisans”.²²⁹

Eastern Bosnia remained a troublesome spot for the Axis over the following months, despite the defeat of the guerrillas in Serbia and the ever-widening gap between the Partisans and the Chetniks. Insurgent activity in the region was now concentrated on the Ozren Mountain. The local Partisan detachment, several thousand strong, was causing headaches for the Germans by frequently raiding the important railway line between Doboj and Tuzla. In late March 1942, the commander of the detachment, Todor Vujasinović, had heard that the Ustashe authorities in Tuzla were preparing to try three captured Partisans from his unit. Knowing that the Ustashe would not accept Home Guards, not even their officers, in exchange, Vujasinović ordered his unit to capture some Germans from the trains using the above-mentioned rail line. In two ambushes on 29 March and 4 April, the Ozren Partisans managed to capture several Germans, Gendarmes and Muslim militiamen. While the militiamen were exchanged for sacks of salt (a rare commodity in large parts of the country), the Germans were kept in captivity. The letter of offer to the local Home Guard command failed to elicit a response and the Partisans suspected the Ustashe did not want to inform the Germans. Vujasinović thereupon ordered his technicians to tap into the telephone lines used by the authorities and repeat the offer several times. This seemed to have the desired effect, as several days later Čedo Popović, “who had come to us once already over a similar matter”,²³⁰ appeared in the Partisan camp. He had a written authorization to conduct the negotiations on behalf of the German command. The Partisans wanted three of their captured men, plus two of their sympathizers. After hearing their names, as well as the proposed place and time of the exchange, Popović left. Several days later, a Home Guard unit delivered an answer from the Germans. It was very forthcoming: since the requested sympathizers could not be found, they offered two other captives in their stead. The Germans also promised they would deliver the former as soon as they were found.

²²⁸ After Lieutenant Lorenz, the insurgents sent envoys with the same proposal again on 28 September 1941; the Germans declined: NAW, T-315, Roll 2265, 001171, Cable No. 73/304 (28 September 1941).

²²⁹ Otto Weingartner, *Erinnerungen an die 118. Jäger-Division* (frühere 718. Inf.Div.) (Klagenfurt: Eigenverlag, 1982), p. 21.

²³⁰ Popović first came to the Partisans in late August 1941 to arrange the exchange of several captured Ustashe from Tuzla. These were, however, shot before any agreement could be reached: Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, pp. 144-5.

The exchange took place around 10 April 1942 not far from the railway station Boljanić. Twenty Partisans, especially dressed and equipped for the occasion, lined themselves up near the railway tracks with German prisoners in front of them. An armored train appeared and stopped; while the guards were unloading the Partisan prisoners, a German major and Čedo Popović approached Todor Panić, the guerrilla envoy. “The major was very polite and spoke to me in Serbian”, recalled the latter. The German wanted to speak to him privately. Panić refused, but the major was adamant. He showed Panić a signed photo of a round-faced man with a fur hat. “It is a gift from Jezdimir Dangić”, the major said and added that “he’s a fine gentleman.” “Maybe to you, to us he’s a traitor!” responded the Partisan envoy. The major clearly wanted to feel the pulse of the local Partisans and to establish whether the split between the Communists and Nationalists was complete.²³¹ Probably in the same vain, he suggested that they meet again and talk, for “this would be beneficial to both sides”. Panić declined and urged the major to complete the exchange. Thereupon, the German signaled his men to release the captives. The Partisans did the same and the two sides parted.²³²

There is some controversy as to how many Germans were exchanged on this occasion. Vujasinović claims there were altogether five captives, four from the first and one from the second train. In his book, Vujasinović quotes official NDH reports regarding these events, which state that the Axis forces managed to free two Germans in the aftermath of the attack on the first train. This would leave the Partisans with two Germans. Both Partisan and NDH sources state there was only one additional prisoner from the second train. The German reports on the matter mention three MIA on 28 March and one on 4 April.²³³ Again, primary German sources are tantalizingly silent as to what happened next. Neither the papers of the 718th Infantry Division nor the archival sources pertaining to the Commanding General in Serbia mention the exchange. However, there is one document which might contain a hint

²³¹ At about that time, the so-called “Dangić Affair” was nearing its end. It began in earnest in late January 1942 when Dangić travelled to Belgrade and had a series of meetings with high German officials. They had reached an agreement according to which Eastern Bosnia would be administered by Dangić and his Chetniks, who in turn would be answerable directly to the office of the Commanding General in Serbia. The Germans in Belgrade were content with the agreement, as it would mean pacification of that troublesome corner of the country. Zagreb, however, got wind of these talks and protested vigorously to Berlin, which subsequently ordered General Bader to cut off all contacts with the Chetnik leader. Dangić, fighting against the Partisans since January, continued for the next two months, to try to reach a deal with the Germans and Italians. Nevertheless, he was arrested on 13 April in Serbia and sent to a prisoner camp four days later. He was extradited to Yugoslavia after the war, tried and executed in 1947 in Sarajevo: See Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 114-7, 124-5.

²³² Todor Vujasinović, *Ozrenski partizanski odred* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1978), pp. 332-6.

²³³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2266, 000669, War diary entry for 28 March 1942; NAW, T-501, Roll 247, Daily report for 9 April 1942.

regarding the meeting between the Partisans and the Germans at Boljanić. The daily report for 11 April 1942, prepared by Bader's staff at Belgrade for the Armed Forces Commander South-East in Salonika, contains the following:

*“718th Infantry Division:[...] one light machine-gun, three rifles and 22 hand-grenades captured during mopping-up at Bratunac; eleven enemy dead. Three missing German soldiers liberated [...]”*²³⁴

There are several reasons to assume that the last sentence referred to the exchange. First, it took place in the area of responsibility of the aforementioned division, or to be more precise, its 750th Infantry Regiment stationed in Tuzla. Second, the date corresponds to the timeframe Vujasinović mentioned in his memoirs. Third, usage of terms such as “liberated” or “returned” to denote a prisoner exchange was a fairly common practice in German reports. The placing of the sentence and its possible correlation to the lines immediately preceding it could be an argument against my reasoning. At a first glance, appears as though the three men were rescued in the Bratunac area. However, there is no mention whatsoever of German prisoners in that area in any of the available German documents. It would therefore be safe to assume that the daily report indeed refers to the men captured around Ozren. The real question is to why it mentions only three prisoners instead of four.²³⁵

The situation in the Italian occupation zone in the first months of the uprising was scarcely better than in the rest of the NDH. The parts of the 2nd Italian Army deployed in Croatian littoral had begun to withdraw from Second and Third zones already in May of 1941. This gradual drawback was stopped two months later as the whole area exploded in violence sparked by Ustashe atrocities. Rome saw this as a chance to destabilize the new state which had been steadily drifting into the German sphere of influence since the day of its inception. Consequently, the returning Italians suspended the NDH administration and disarmed both the Ustashe militias and Home Guard units in the Dalmatian hinterland, Herzegovina and South-Western Bosnia. Furthermore, the Italians advanced under the pretext of protecting the Serbs. This made a substantial number of insurgents adopt a neutral stance towards them. By no later than September, this had led to an open alliance between the Italians and Serbian Nationalists. The advantage of this alliance to Rome was twofold. First, the insurgency was split and the Communists isolated. The Second Army now also had a potent native auxiliary force to do the fighting against the Communists. Second, the regime in Zagreb was permanently weakened

²³⁴ NAW, T-501, Roll 247, Daily report for 11 April 1942.

²³⁵ I have been unable to discover what precisely happened to the fourth man.

by the loss of authority over large swaths of its territory. The Germans could do little more but defend the interests of the NDH in official meetings with their allies, and complain at the latter's conduct in internal correspondence. They had very few of their own troops and the Italian decision to take a more active role in putting down the insurgency could only be greeted from a strategic point of view.²³⁶

As mentioned earlier, the Germans had economic interests in the Italian zone, most importantly the bauxite reserves in Western Herzegovina. The exploitation of this resource was undertaken by a German company and controlled by the bureau of the Military Economic Officer (*Wehrwirtschaftsoffizier*) in Zagreb. One German motorized unit was stationed in Mostar and tasked with transporting the bauxite ore to the port of Ploče on the Adriatic. In early March 1942, the local German officers decided on their own to use the unit to transport tobacco from the factory at Ljubinje to Čapljina. The column, consisting of nine NCOs, 119 men (armed with light machineguns, sub-machineguns and rifles), 27 trucks and four motorcycles²³⁷ made two deliveries on 9 March. A day later, just as it began its journey back from Ljubinje for the third time, the column was shot at from point-blank range, first from the right and then from the left flank. The front section of the column, sustaining casualties, managed to make its way through the ambush. The remaining Germans, caught in a deadly crossfire, found what cover they could and fought back. The firefight lasted for five hours. The Partisans had by then also suffered casualties and were close to breaking off the engagement. At that moment, someone came up with the idea to call upon the Germans to surrender. The proposition was accepted, but the problem was how to convey the message, as apparently no one present spoke German. Luckily, one of the Partisans was a veteran of the Austro-Hungarian army and knew some basic phrases. The Partisans ceased fire but the Germans continued shooting for some time, and then stopped. An eerie silence which covered the battlefield was interrupted by calls in broken German mentioning surrender as the only way out for the survivors. Shortly afterwards, the soldiers of the transport column left cover and dropped their weapons.²³⁸

It was the first clash between the Partisans and the Germans in Herzegovina and a resounding victory for the Partisans: The immediate German losses were 27 killed, 7

²³⁶ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 91-3, 98.

²³⁷ NAW, T-77, Roll 895, 5646560, Plenipotentiary-General in Zagreb for Armed Forces High Command (17 March 1942).

²³⁸ Simo A. Radić, "Neprijatelj o porazu na Badrljačama" in: *Hercegovina u NOB-u* (Mostar: Istorijski arhiv Hercegovine, 1986), Vol. IV, p. 143; Petar Milidragović, "Pobjeda na Badrljačama" in: *ibid.*, p. 136.

wounded and no less than 45 captured; additionally, large quantities of small-arms, five trucks, and some of the precious tobacco were captured as well. Caring for such a large number of prisoners (some of them wounded), would represent an additional strain on the already acute supply situation of the Partisans. Furthermore, they feared that the Axis would seek to expiate their defeat by taking reprisals against the nearby villages. Consequently, the Partisan command decided to contact its nearest German counterpart. They wrote a letter in which they threatened shooting the prisoners should reprisals against civilians occur. The guerrillas also asked for medical supplies for the wounded, as well as coffee, tea, sugar and tobacco for other captives. The letter was given the same day to one of the Germans, Johann Schmidt, who was chosen to be a courier (apparently because of his working-class background). The day after, against all expectations, Schmidt returned with some of the material the Partisans had requested. He also brought the answer from the Germans in which they inquired if they could collect their dead and if the wounded might be returned for proper hospital treatment. They also asked if there were any possibility of a prisoner exchange. Whereas the Partisans readily agreed to the first point, they conditioned the return of the wounded on a delivery of 7.9 millimeter ammunition, gasoline and medical supplies. As for the proposed prisoner exchange, the Partisans replied that they had no authority on this issue, but that they would inform higher command of the German proposal. Schmidt hurried on one of the motorcycles captured in the ambush and brought the German reply the same day. Captain Heyss, the representative of the Military Economic Officer in Mostar, refused to give ammunition or gasoline, but agreed to exchange medical supplies for the wounded. At 1100 hours on 12 March, a German-Italian motorized column, adorned with a large white flag, approached the Partisan lines and left shortly thereafter, laden with corpses. Some of the trucks returned late in the afternoon to pick up some bodies which were overlooked during the first tour. They also brought the medical supplies in exchange for two heavily wounded soldiers, “who probably died before reaching Mostar”.²³⁹

The 10th of March 1942 was the costliest day for the German occupation forces in terms of personnel losses since the uprising in Serbia in the early Fall of 1941. As the attack took place in the Italian occupation zone, the Germans could not react militarily. What they could do was attempt to retrieve their missing men: their number was too large to be ignored. A German official, tasked with investigating the ambush, inquired with an Italian officer as to what would transpire with the German prisoners. The latter answered that guerrillas usually

²³⁹ Milidragović, “Pobjeda na Badrljačama” pp. 137-8.

requested their people, ammunition or supplies in exchange. The German then asked if negotiations on these matters bore fruit. “Sometimes, we did it already”, replied the Italian.²⁴⁰ Indeed, in two costly engagements in December 1941 and January 1942, nearly one hundred Italian prisoners had been taken by the local Partisans. The Italians had been attempting to exchange these men ever since. The commander of the Italian garrison in Stolac was, therefore, tasked with negotiating the exchange of both their and the German prisoners with the Partisans. Both the German embassy and the office of the German General in Zagreb were aware of the need to have their representative present. On 17 March they asked for permission to send one officer to Herzegovina “to guard the German interests in this matter”.²⁴¹ The Commander-in-Chief South-East gave his approval but stressed that the envoy would not be authorized to accept enemy terms on his own. He would merely relegate them to the higher commands which would then decide whether they would be accepted or not. Captain Vassary, who was chosen as the representative, received further instructions from General Horstenau: the Italian command was responsible for leading negotiations; Vassary was to engage personally only if the German interests dictated it. While this was primarily done out of a desire to not insult the Italians (it was their occupation zone after all), there was certainly an additional reason: the Germans did not desire to be seen negotiating with the guerrillas. Vassary, equipped with a wireless set, arrived at Mostar on 23 March and immediately contacted the Italian command. Two days later, he was informed that the first round of talks with the Partisan had been led by an Italian major and that the prospects for the release of prisoners looked good.²⁴²

This information was not entirely correct, for the Italian major could have been killed during the negotiations. The first meeting between the Partisans and the Italians came as a result of the letter from the “Operation Headquarters for Herzegovina” sent on 21 March 1942. It was an answer to Captain Heyss’ proposition made on 10 March. In the letter, the

²⁴⁰ Radić, “Neprijatelj o porazu na Badrljačama”, p. 141. The Italians nominally had a policy against exchanging prisoners. Like the Germans, they feared that the Partisans would acquire a degree of legitimacy through repeated negotiations. However, in the field, Italian commands had accepted prisoner exchanges since July 1941 and were overall much more flexible on this issue than their German counterparts. For a detailed study of prisoner exchanges between the Partisans and the Italians in Montenegro see Zoran Lakić, „Razmjena ratnih zarobljenika u Crnoj Gori u toku Narodnooslobodilačkog rata“ in: *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* 18,1 (1967): 69-117. In late March 1943, the Italian High Command officially sanctioned the pursuit of prisoner exchange with the Partisans; see the documents titled “Scambio prigionieri” [“Exchange of Prisoners”] (23 March 1943) and “Trattamento ribelli catturati in combattimento” [“Treatment of Rebels Captured in Combat”] (27 May 1943) in <http://www.criminidiguerra.it/DocumRob.shtml#segre> (last accessed on 6 July 2013).

²⁴¹ NAW, T-501, Roll 266, 000146, German General in Zagreb to Armed Forces High Command (17 March 1942).

²⁴² *Zbornik*/XII/2/238-9, Abwehr in Zagreb to Abwehr directorate with the Armed Forces High Command (26 March 1942). This is the only German document pertaining exclusively to prisoner exchanges which was printed in the “Zbornik” edition.

Partisan command proposed a meeting on either 25 or 26 March, on the spot some six kilometers outside of Stolac. Both sides could bring altogether six armed men; the Partisans would carry a red, the Italians a white flag (the intended pun is obvious).²⁴³ On 25 March, Major Bartelleo, the commander of the Stolac garrison, appeared on the designated spot with a small escort. As soon as he stepped out of the car, he was arrested. He, along with his translator, was taken away, while the rest of his entourage was set free.²⁴⁴ The reason for such a flagrant breach of the customs of war by the Partisans was the fact that the Italians rounded up between twenty and thirty people from a nearby village in the aftermath of the Ljubinje ambush. Before negotiating the exchange of the captured soldiers, the Partisans wanted to trade Bartelleo for these people. The major wrote a letter asking for a release of these hostages and gave it to a Partisan commissar who volunteered to take it to Stolac. The guerrillas underestimated the Italians: their envoy was seized as soon as he showed the letter. His release, as well as that of the other hostages, was now conditioned on the safe return of the major. This infuriated the Partisans: they threatened to shoot Bartelleo and all other prisoners if their compatriots were not released within 48 hours. The Italians finally backed down and freed thirteen female hostages and the commissar; the major and his translator were released on the same occasion.²⁴⁵

The “negotiations” at Stolac brought no agreement on the exchange of the rest of the Axis soldiers. In early April, the Germans and Italians had agreed on a joint handling of future negotiations. They decided to insist on exchanging prisoners on a one-to-one ratio. Another important provision was that Germans and Italians would be exchanged in equal numbers. “The exchange can commence as soon as the Partisans furnish the names of the persons they want. This has not happened yet. Not clear when will it happen. Once the names arrive it could take another two weeks. Negotiations rest for the time being. Captain Vassary is back in Sarajevo”.²⁴⁶ This report is undated, but it was probably compiled before 18 April. On that day, the NDH authorities in Dubrovnik sent a message to the Ministry of the Interior in Zagreb, informing it of another letter from the local Partisan command addressed to Major

²⁴³ *Zbornik*/XII/2/239, footnote no. 6.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 311, Entry for Stolac area, 25 March 1942.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317, Entry for Stolac area, 26 March 1942. The Italian document doesn't mention the commissar. The Yugoslav sources claim the Italians released him along with other eighteen men and women. The other ten hostages had already been taken away; the Italians promised they would retrieve them as soon as possible. The Yugoslav sources also differ as to the circumstances that led to Bartelleo's capture: while some claim he was arrested because of his uncompromising stance on the exchange issues, others say the arrest was premeditated. I am inclined to believe the second version. See Radić, “Neprijatelj o porazu na Badrljačama”, pp. 145-6, and *Sjećanja boraca stolačkog kraja* (Stolac : Opštinski odbor SUBNOR-a, 1984), pp. 593-5.

²⁴⁶ NAW, T-501, Roll 266, 000120, German General in Zagreb to Military Commander South-East (undated).

Bartelleo. In addition to the reaffirmation of their wish to exchange prisoners, the letter came with the names of altogether 131 persons which the Partisans wanted. They claimed they now had 43 German prisoners, and had executed ten Italian soldiers and one officer for the crimes they had allegedly committed. As there were now an estimated 116 Axis prisoners with the Partisans, the figures seem to confirm that the Partisans basically acquiesced to the one-to-one ratio proposed by their enemies.²⁴⁷

The contact was broken off after this letter. The reason for this lay in the intensification of fighting in this part of Herzegovina in late April-early May. The local Partisan units were ordered to step up their attacks on enemy communications and troops in order to alleviate the pressure on the main Partisan force under Tito in Eastern Bosnia. In this period, the Partisans reached the Neretva River and endangered the Mostar-Dubrovnik rail-line. The Italians reacted by shuffling additional troops to this area and by launching the so-called "Operation Stolac" in mid-May.²⁴⁸ The fighting continued throughout June, as the Italians, reinforced by the Chetniks, launched an all-out offensive against the Herzegovinian Partisans. Demoralization set in the guerrilla ranks, as whole units deserted to the Monarchists. In the end, only some six hundred Partisans joined the main Partisan force coming from Montenegro.

In late May, the advancing Italian and NDH units liberated fifty Italian prisoners whose exchange had been negotiated for during the preceding months. The German prisoners from Ljubinje were, on the contrary, "taken away in an unknown direction" by the Partisans.²⁴⁹ A partial explanation regarding what occurred to them came several months later, as a German envoy inquired after their fate with one of his Partisan counterparts. The answer was that they, along with some wounded Partisans, were shot and thrown in a ravine by the Chetniks. According to the same source, the Chetniks found the Italian prisoners at the same time and led them behind their lines. The Partisan commander added that he personally tried three times to contact the Germans in Mostar in order to have the prisoners exchanged. The

²⁴⁷ Radić, "Neprijatelj o porazu na Badrljačama", p. 146. In the Abwehr cable of 26 March we find that the Italians computed the number of their men in captivity at 84. Without eleven men who were shot, the number is reduced to 73. The original number of Germans (45) was reduced by two, for unknown reasons. The total is thus 116. The difference of fifteen persons between the figures the Partisans wanted and the one they offered may be accounted for by an unknown number of officers or specialists who would have been exchanged at a higher ratio.

²⁴⁸ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol.I, pp. 203, 208; *Zbornik*/XIII/2/363-4, Operational bulletin of the 2nd Army (3 May 1942).

²⁴⁹ NAW, T-501, Roll 265, 000912, Document pertaining to Partisan attack on bauxite column (30 September 1942).

Italians thwarted all these efforts and even threatened him with death if he tried to contact the Germans once more.²⁵⁰

This information, obtained in September, only seemed to confirm the unpleasant experiences made by the Germans who were in the area in March and April. The Germans in Mostar had been asked to furnish the bauxite column for transporting tobacco because the Italians refused to provide protection for civilian vehicles. The Italian authorities had not been informed in advance on the columns' itinerary. The reason was that "[since] the Italian troops were covertly in contact with the Serbs, Freemasons and Jews, they would not take kindly the co-operation of the bauxite column and Croatian state [tobacco] monopoly". Even worse, it appears as though the Italians in Stolac had known about the ambush, and had not done anything to either warn or protect the column.²⁵¹ The earlier complaints of German officials in Zagreb about the sustained Italian efforts to undermine the NDH and the German position there were additionally confirmed by these eyewitness reports from Herzegovina.

While the talks in Herzegovina dragged on, the Germans were able to gather interesting information about their enemies. The courier, Johann Schmidt, rode often between the Partisan headquarters and Mostar, and reported to his superiors what he had seen. The Partisans were full-time soldiers, he said, well-armed and well-disciplined; orders were obeyed instantly. Schmidt also related some political statements made by the guerrillas. They considered the Chetniks as their main enemies, then all fascists, but also "the capitalist Churchill". The last remark was illustrative of the Partisans' deep antagonism towards the British which was rooted in ideological differences and exacerbated by the latter's support of the Monarchists.²⁵² As the latter were openly acting as Italian allies, the Partisans must have assumed that they were doing so, if not on direct orders from London, then certainly with its

²⁵⁰ NAW, T-501, Roll 265, 001034, Report by German citizen Hans Ott from Livno (26 September 1942). The fate of these German prisoners was never sufficiently explained in the Yugoslav historiography. The depictions of this episode rarely venture beyond the exchange of Major Bartelleo. The 2nd part of the *Zbornik's* Volume XIII, making use of a selection of Italian documents for 1942, doesn't include any detailed reports from the area from late May. I assume that the Partisans clung on to the German prisoners as long as possible. Being constantly chased by the Italians and the Chetniks, their ability to guard and feed them grew more and more tenuous. Once the Partisans were faced with the choice of either letting the prisoners go or liquidating them, they chose the second option. Blaming the Chetniks can be discarded as propaganda aimed at deepening the German mistrust towards the Chetniks and their Italian mentors.

²⁵¹ Radić, "Neprijatelj o porazu na Badrljačama", pp. 142-3.

²⁵² While many Partisans shared this feeling, the British were rarely openly lambasted by Communist propaganda. The Herzegovinian Partisans were counted among the most radical in the whole country. This fact accounted for the extraordinarily bloody "Red Terror" in the eastern part of the province in late 1941 and early 1942. It also meant that the local Partisans were more zealous than others in explaining the war in terms of class struggle. The British, "the kulaks" and the Orthodox Church were therefore openly named as the main enemies of the revolution. A popular song in Herzegovina in those days had the lines, "Partisans, prepare your guns to meet the king and the Englishmen": Petranović, *Srbija*, pp. 307-8.

tacit approval. The Germans must have also noted that they were not explicitly mentioned as the enemy. Their column had been attacked, the Partisans said, “Because it was robbing the poor Herzegovinian people of their tobacco”.²⁵³ Judging by this statement, the motives behind the attack were of a social and not ideological nature; the column was not attacked simply because it was German. All this, combined with the decent treatment of their prisoners, must have made the impression on the Germans that not all the Partisan groups operating in the NDH are as hostile to the Third Reich as generally thought.

3. Political Talks, Round 1: August-September 1942

Ever since the defeats of November and December 1941, Tito was attempting to find a base from which the Partisans would be able to return to Serbia in the shortest time possible. Having left Sandžak in December, Tito moved to Eastern Bosnia. After being chased off from the Sarajevo area during the Axis Winter offensive in January 1942 (“Operation Eastern Bosnia”), the Partisans captured the town of Foča and made it their capital for more than three months. This much-needed respite was used to continue the regularization process within the army and further develop the concept of provisional administration in the liberated territories. The military reforms included the publication of the “Statute of Proletarian Brigades”, detailing the inner organization and tasks of this new type of Partisan unit. As the organization of large, mobile units made up of dedicated fighters had paid benefits during the fighting with the Bosnian Chetniks, Tito formed another proletarian brigade in early March 1942.²⁵⁴

Although the radical revolutionary line introduced in early Winter was replaced in April by the more moderate “popular front” line, serious damage had been done. Owing to the so-called “leftist deviations”, large parts of the population in East Bosnia, East Herzegovina and Montenegro were turning to the Chetniks. When the Germans, Italians and the armed formations of the NDH launched a new offensive in late April, the majority of the Partisan forces in Eastern Bosnia melted away. Many units were taken over by pro-Chetnik elements in a series of “coups”; other simply buckled under pressure and deserted. This was especially true of the so-called “Volunteer Army”. This was formed in January 1942 by Tito in order to attract those Serbian insurgents who still wanted to fight against the Ustashe (and,

²⁵³ Radić, “Neprijatelj o porazu na Badrljačama”, p. 144.

²⁵⁴ A.H. Pape et al., *Drugi svjetski rat*, Vol. II, pp. 102-3.

theoretically, the occupiers), but did not want to take sides in the conflict between the Communists and the Nationalists.²⁵⁵ The influence of the KPJ in the Volunteer Detachments was limited, discipline lax and the Partisan *esprit-de-corps* non-existent. After the spectacular failure of this concept in April-May, the Party would never again experiment with creating units whose political or military reliability could not be absolutely assured.

In early May 1942 the Partisans had to leave Foča because of the new Axis offensive, “Trio”. The escape of the main force under Tito coincided with the rapid disintegration of the liberated territories in Herzegovina and Montenegro. What was left of the local Partisans was ordered to break through to the Supreme HQ which had retreated to northern Montenegro. When these forces met in mid-June, their situation was desperate. Only about 4,000 fighters remained from the once numerous Partisan units. The choice for the new base was strategically convenient (Serbia was near), but was unfortunate from any other point of view: the terrain was among the most rugged in the whole of Yugoslavia, with barren mountain peaks above 2,000 meters high; it was under-populated and short of food. Tito convened the Politburo on 19 June to decide on what to do next. Returning to Serbia was considered, but not adopted: the local Partisans were too weak and the population too fearful from and of German reprisals. The second option was Eastern Bosnia, but this was also rejected. In the end, Tito’s proposition to move to Western Bosnia was adopted.²⁵⁶ On 24 June 1942, the small Partisan army, now made up of five Proletarian brigades, left its mountain hideout and commenced its long march to the west.

This maneuver could not have been undertaken at a better time for the Partisans. In mid-May the Italian High Command decided in to reduce its troop contingent in the Western Balkans. This would require the 2nd Army to withdraw from some of the territory in Croatia and concentrate the rest of its units closer to the coast. The decision was made for a number of reasons. First, the High Command needed more troops for its main theaters of operation. Second, Rome could now favorably answer to repeated requests made by Zagreb for the reduction of the costs of the occupation. In the official agreement reached in Zagreb on 19 June, the Italian side pledged to complete the first stage of the withdrawal by 10 July. It also

²⁵⁵ For this reason the Partisans decided not to introduce the red star insignia in the Volunteer units: Rudolf Primorac, *Operativno-taktička iskustva iz prve polovine narodnooslobodilačkog rata* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1986), p. 19.

²⁵⁶ Mišo Leković, *Ofanziva proleterskih brigada u leto 1942* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1965), pp. 23-5, 40. The additional reason for not returning to Serbia was that the Soviet defeat at Kharkov in May had finally convinced Tito that the war would last for a long time. Consequently, the take-over of power in Serbia would have to be postponed until the Red Army appeared on the Yugoslav borders: Petranović, *Srbija*, pp. 316.

promised it would inform the Croatian side about these moves in advance, so the latter could replace the Italian garrisons in timely fashion if it chose to do so. The Italians, however, did not honor the last condition. The withdrawal from the Third Zone was so precipitous that it had been largely completed by the beginning of July, nearly ten days before the agreed deadline. The NDH authorities pleaded several times for a more gradual drawdown, so that they could muster enough troops to secure a proper takeover. These invocations went largely unheeded; in some cases, the Italians even relinquished control of the evacuated areas to their Chetnik auxiliaries. This only deepened the mistrust of the Germans, who had suspected the withdrawal of being another Italian scheme to weaken the NDH.²⁵⁷ On the ground, the main consequence of the speedy Italian withdrawal was that a good part of Herzegovina and Western Bosnia was left without any military presence. The brigades under Tito began arriving from the east just in time to exploit the vacuum.

The town of Livno was the center of the so-called “Bauxite area” which spread from there up to Mostar. A German company, “Hansa-Leichtmetall”, held the concession for the exploitation of the valuable ore; a number of its engineers had been present in the region since the late Summer of 1941. On 5 August 1942, seven German technicians found themselves in Livno as the Partisan brigades began to encircle the town. In the next two days of fighting, the guerrillas managed to capture the whole town except for a solidly-built villa which had served as the German administrative center. The defenders (Germans and a company of Ustashe soldiers) put up a stout defense and repelled several attacks. After a call for surrender went unheeded, the Partisans brought forward a field-piece and began firing over open sights at the villa. After a few rounds, a white flag was raised; one after another, all hundred or so odd defenders came out with their hands raised.²⁵⁸

As soon as the garrison surrendered, the Partisans started with their standard procedure after capturing towns. They requisitioned all they needed, began a recruitment drive and held political rallies explaining their aims to the population. They also meted out justice according to their beliefs. The last point was especially sensitive, given the deep division caused by a vicious circle of violence between the ethnic and religious groups living in Bosnia. The Partisans had to tread carefully in order not to appear as favoring one group over the other. The process lasted a little over a week. The prisoners were treated as follows: The Home Guards and younger, recently drafted members of the Ustashe militia were let go

²⁵⁷ NAW, T-501, Roll 268, 000302, German general in Zagreb to Armed Forces High Command (18 June 1942).

²⁵⁸ Leković, *Ofanziva proleterskih brigade*, pp. 376-86.

immediately. The suspicious civilians were locked up and interrogated, with most of them being released later. Ranković, who was in charge of these matters, questioned some five hundred persons from Livno and the surroundings. Based on their testimonies and interrogations, he separated a number of civilians who were actively hostile to the Partisans or who had been accused of committing crimes. They, along with the captured Ustashe soldiers, were sentenced to death and shot (120 in all). “Eight Germans and five civilians [...] are still in custody and waiting to be exchanged”, Ranković concluded his report dated 15 August 1942.²⁵⁹

Only seven days earlier, the captured Germans were condemned men. “It was taken for granted that they would be shot” wrote Đilas in his reminiscences.²⁶⁰ As so many Germans had not been captured by the Partisans in the vicinity of Supreme HQ since the fighting in Serbia, they were naturally keen to interrogate them first. This job was entrusted to Vladimir Velebit, the chief of the “Judicial Department” of Tito's staff, who spoke excellent German. During the interrogations, he was approached by engineer Hans Ott, who said:

„I know you are going to shoot us. This will not bring you any advantage, and it will not be a great loss to Germany, either. Why do you not let me go to the nearest German command, so that I could arrange an exchange?“

Velebit immediately informed Tito and Ranković of the German's proposal. Tito's first reaction was that “he just probably wants to save his own skin”. Velebit, on the contrary, was convinced that the proposal was made in good faith and lobbied for its acceptance. In the end, the Partisan supreme commander agreed. Ott would be given a list of wanted persons, a car and an escort to the Axis lines; he was also given an ultimatum to return within several days.²⁶¹

Ott hurried to Mostar where he made contact with the local OT office. The office, in turn, provided for Ott's transportation to Sarajevo and then to Zagreb. The news he brought with him on 14 August 1942 caused a sensation in Zagreb. Both Ambassador Kasche and General Hortsenu agreed to facilitate the exchange. Their main problem was that all the eleven persons whose names were on the list had been arrested and detained by the NDH authorities. The next three days were spent in frantic efforts to find and secure the release of

²⁵⁹ *Zbornik*/II/5/307-10, Ranković to Tito: situation report for Livno area (15 August 1942). This document also contains candid details on the lack of discipline in some Partisan units, including plunder, „sectarianism“ and the settling of old scores.

²⁶⁰ Đilas, *Wartime*, p. 198.

²⁶¹ Vladimir Velebit, *Tajne i zamke drugog svjetskog rata*, (Zagreb: Prometej, 2002), pp. 197-8.

these individuals. This effort appeared to have been in vain as the Ustashe said they could not find any of the wanted persons in their prisons and concentration camps. This, however, was not true. For instance, Andrija Hebrang, the head of the Central Committee for Croatia whose name stood at the top of the list, was still alive.²⁶² Zagreb most likely did not want to lose such a valuable hostage in exchange for some German civilians. Nonetheless, with the deadline for the envoy's return approaching rapidly, the Germans had to accept their answer. On 17 August, Ott appeared in Livno bringing the message that, although German authorities agreed to the exchange, none of the people from the list could be found. He therefore proposed to the Partisans to compile another one.²⁶³

In the interim, Kasche and Horstenau were hard at work trying to secure any hostages the Partisans were likely to accept. Under their pressure, the NDH security organs had managed to “find” six of those named on the original list. They, together with eleven others were packed-off to Mostar, where they would be kept until the deal was negotiated. Additionally, 22 persons arrested in Livno as Communist sympathizers and held in Mostar could also be used in the exchange, either for the Germans or for the captured government officials. There were some complications concerning these captives, as the Ustashe was reluctant to give them in exchange for the “Hansa-Leichtmetall” employees; they wanted to use them to exchange their own people in Partisan captivity. The Germans, on the other hand, desired first to secure their own citizens. Kasche arranged with Zagreb that the exchange of the Croats would not take place before the exchange of the Germans.²⁶⁴ The Italian military and diplomatic authorities in Mostar, Zagreb and Sušak (the HQ of the 2nd Army) were also requested to place a number of Partisan suspects at the disposal of the Germans for the planned exchange.²⁶⁵

Tito was still hoping that Hebrang and a few others would be found, so he again included their names on the second list. As for the rest, the Partisans had to choose from whoever the enemy was prepared to offer. It was clear that the search for suitable candidates

²⁶² Andrija Hebrang (1899-1949) had been a member of the KPJ since the mid-20s. The fact that Tito was his close collaborator and personal friend helped facilitate his rise to the head of the Communist Party of Croatia in November 1941. From 1945 to 1948 he held a number of high state functions. His downfall came in 1948 as a result of his popularity and personal ambitions, both of which alarmed Tito. He committed suicide in 1949 in his prison cell under ambiguous circumstances.

²⁶³ Slavko Odić, *Neostvareni planovi* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1961), p. 72.

²⁶⁴ NAW, T-120, Roll 5799, H311311, Cable to War Economy Officer Zagreb (22 August 1942); NAW, T-120, Roll 5796, H308811-2, Memorandum for police attaché (27 August 1942).

²⁶⁵ NAW, T-120, Roll 5796, H308824, Cable to German liaison staff with the 2nd Army (13 August 1942); *ibid.*, H308819-20, Dear comrade Casertano (14 August 1942); Kasche also urged the German Foreign Ministry to intervene with Rome: *ibid.*, H308821, Cable to Foreign Ministry (13 August 1942).

would take too much time if it was left to the Germans. It had to be done by someone experienced who knew the Party cadres well. On 22 August, Marijan Stilinović, a veteran Communist from Croatia, was called to Supreme HQ in Glamoč and asked whether he would be willing to do the job. Furthermore, Stilinović had to find out what “other questions” were that the Germans desired to discuss. Stilinović had not been to Zagreb for nine years and it was questionable if anybody would recognize him. Nonetheless, he was furnished with a complete set of false documents identifying him as Srećko Šunjevarić, a Serb from Eastern Bosnia and a pre-war businessman. He was introduced as such to Ott on the evening before their departure.²⁶⁶

On 23 August, the two left Glamoč in a car accompanied by a civilian from Livno and headed south-east. On the advice of the commander of the Herzegovinian Brigade, Stilinović remained at Posušje, while Ott went ahead to Mostar to obtain clearance for the arrival of the Partisan envoy. The next day, a car picked Stilinović up. His escort was Captain Heyss of the Mostar branch of the Military Economic Office in Zagreb. Heyss treated his counterpart with cool correctness and they did not converse much during the first leg of their journey. The ice was broken to a certain degree when an Ustashe patrol near Široki Brijeg stopped the car and asked Heyss if he knew where the Partisans were. He angrily replied he did not and slammed the door. Stilinović remarked that Heyss could have given a positive answer by pointing at the Partisan envoy sitting next to him. Heyss agreed, probably sorry to have missed the opportunity of playing a practical joke on his allies.²⁶⁷

Stilinović and Heyss arrived in Mostar that evening and went for dinner. Heyss' initial arrogance had all but disappeared by now, and he engaged with Stilinović in a lengthy and seemingly honest discussion. Heyss spoke with much admiration of Hitler and predicted a favorable outcome of the war for Germany. Otherwise, he added, the German people would perish. He admitted that the German occupation policies in Yugoslavia were sometimes very harsh, but he blamed it on “Prussians” who did not understand the local mentality. He also openly admired the Serbs and the Partisans for their unrelenting struggle for freedom. For the Croats, on the other hand, he could not find any good words: “A Croat would murder his own brother over a bare bone.” Furthermore, he spoke with contempt about the Italians “who lost every war they fought in the last century and only got what they have through political scheming.” He went on to ask Stilinović if the Partisans had some sort of an agreement with

²⁶⁶ Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom 1941-1945*, p. 103. Marijan Stilinović, *Bune i otpori* (Zagreb: Zora, 1969), p. 217, entry for 22 August 1942.

²⁶⁷ Stilinović, *Bune*, p. 217-8, entries for 23 and 24 August 1942.

the Italians given the lack of vigor with which the latter carried out their anti-guerrilla operations in Herzegovina.²⁶⁸

In the early morning on 25 August 1942, Stilinović and Heyss left by car to Sarajevo, where a transport plane was standing by, ready to take them to Zagreb. There was some confusion when police agents tried to take away the pair of hand grenades the Partisan envoy was carrying around his waist. Stilinović saw this as an infringement of envoy's rights and refused the police demand. Heyss diffused the situation by proposing that he kept the grenades during the flight and return them to their owner once they had landed in the Croatian capital. All parties agreed, and the plane took off. In little over an hour, Stilinović and Heyss arrived safely at their destination. Two cars retrieved them at the airfield and drove them to an office building in which several German officers were waiting for them. Stilinović was told he would be quartered in the building of the local *Feldkommandatur*, which he was asked not to leave unaccompanied. The meeting with a German delegation was set for next day at 1800 hours. Once the Partisan envoy reached his new quarters, he was unpleasantly surprised: the room was dirty and full of old, barely usable furniture. It appeared as though the choice of the dwellings had been consciously made with the express purpose of reducing the status of the guerrilla negotiator. However, it was probably merely an oversight on the part of the German personnel: Captain Heyss was visibly angry as he confronted the soldiers responsible for setting up the "guest room". Stilinović, a professional revolutionary since 1920, was less interested in accommodation than in possible escape routes from the building. After having found one, he went to sleep with a pistol under his pillow.²⁶⁹

In the morning of 26 August, the Partisan envoy was awoken by soldiers bringing in new furniture. "In a matter of minutes, they transformed that filthy chamber into quite a pleasant drawing-room", remembered Stilinović. He also mentioned a strange event, one he never managed to explain completely. One German officer entered his room two times that morning and left messages scribbled on a piece of paper which said "Jastrebarsko is burning" and "5000 Italians broke into Samobor".²⁷⁰ In the afternoon, Stilinović was accompanied by Ott and Heyss to a villa in the Zagreb neighborhood of Tuškanac, an upper-class residential area where high Ustashe and Axis officials lived. Stilinović was met there by delegation

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 218-9, entry for 24 August 1942.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 219-20, entry for 25 August 1942.

²⁷⁰ On 26 August 1942, one Partisan brigade attacked Jastrebarsko (southern outskirts of Zagreb), disarming the Home Guards and destroying the rolling stock it found in the town: *Hronologija*, p. 326. The Italians reported sending motorized units to the scene: *Zbornik*/XIII/2/707, Entry for 27 August 1942.

consisting of one colonel, two lieutenant-colonels, a major and a representative of the German embassy.²⁷¹

*„We had a small-talk and old jokes over Turkish coffee and brandy. Schäffer, who speaks some of our language [i.e. Croatian/Serbian], is constantly prodding Kreiner to get on with it. Kreiner does not know how to begin. Finally, the talks on the exchange start and end quickly. They agree to all our demands, although they cannot guarantee they will get everybody we want because Croatia is 'independent' and they cannot interfere with its internal matters”.*²⁷²

Having thus agreed the details about the exchange, Stilinović and Ott returned to Glamoč. On 4 September, the Axis prisoners were led to Duvno and then further south-east to the vicinity of Posušje. On the following day, at a place called Studeno Vrelo, the Partisan and German delegations met. According to Vladimir Velebit, the exchange went smoothly, without formalities or complications: prisoner lists were read aloud by Velebit and his German counterpart, after which the prisoners of both sides rejoined their compatriots. The available sources differ on the exact number of Partisans exchanged on this occasion: the estimates vary between 38 and 49 persons. These were exchanged for ten German citizens and 22 Home Guard officers and government officials from Livno.²⁷³ One of the Partisans who provided the security at Studeno Vrelo recalled the psychological impact of the proceedings: “The exchange was not big, but it was very important in political terms and for [our] morale. In September 1942 there were still no visible signs of Hitler’s weakness on any front [...] [and yet] the Germans arrived under a white flag [to make an exchange]”.²⁷⁴

The German authorities in Zagreb had every reason to be content with the release of their compatriots; they regarded it as a diplomatic and humanitarian success.²⁷⁵ The

²⁷¹ These men were Colonel von Funk, Horstenau’s chief of staff; Lieutenant-Colonels Schäffer (Abwehr) and Schardt (Military Economic Officer); Major Eugen von Pott (Horstenau’s adjutant); and Dr. Emmerich Kreiner of the embassy’s economic department.

²⁷² Stilinović, *Bune*, pp. 220-1, entry for 26 August 1942.

²⁷³ In addition to the eight German citizens captured at Livno, there were two Ethnic Germans, Fritz and Emma Szedressy, who were captured in Prozor in late August 1942. Due to Ms. Szedressy’s acquaintance with Dr. Heinrich, the chief of the SD in Sarajevo, she and her husband were included into the arrangement (Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, pp. 225-230). For a detailed analysis of the controversy on the number of prisoners, see *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 209-11.

²⁷⁴ Sveto Kovačević, “Od Une do Neretve” in: *Neretva: proleTERSKE I udarne divizije u bici na Neretvi* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1965), Vol. III, pp. 312-3.

²⁷⁵ Kasche sent a telegram to the Foreign Ministry on 8 September: “Thanks to the energetic efforts of the embassy and the Military Economic Officer, eight German employees of the “Hansa-Leichtmetall” company, who had been captured by the Partisans in Livno, were liberated through a prisoner exchange. They are now in Mostar”: NAW, T-120, Roll 5796, H308806, Kache to Foreign Ministry (8 September 1942).

exchanged employees of the “Hansa-Leichtmetall” were celebrated as heroes when they returned to Zagreb. In April 1943 they received decorations for their gallantry at Livno: Engineer Ott received a clasp for the Iron Cross he had won in the First World War, while the others were awarded the War Merit Cross.²⁷⁶ The Partisans, on the other hand, were less than happy with the people they got from the Germans: “Apart from Beba [Bosiljka Krajačić], Zoga [Olga Kovačić-Kreačić], and one member of the SKOJ [Ivan Kranželić], we received only some treacherous and anti-Party elements”.²⁷⁷ Right after the exchange, the returnees were subjected to interrogation in order to establish the circumstances of their capture with particular attention being paid to their conduct whilst in police custody. Depending on the results, they were either retained with the Supreme staff or sent to various units and Party organizations based on their verdicts.²⁷⁸

The first prisoner exchange negotiated not on a local level, but by the highest commands of the Yugoslav Partisans and the German occupation authorities has thus been completed successfully. Initially, both sides were motivated by purely humanitarian reasons. These were soon overshadowed as both sides recognized that there were other dividends to be gained by maintaining contact with each other. The most important was the chance to sound out the political views of the enemy and to glean insight into his organization. The political aspect of the talks is, by far, the most controversial one.

As we have seen, Stilinović remembered that the Germans wanted to talk about “some other questions” apart from the prisoner exchange. Judging by the tone of his diary, the prisoner exchange itself was of secondary importance to the Germans when he met them on 26 August 1942. Indeed, their accommodating stance on this issue may have been a result of their wish to “soften” the Partisan envoy for what they had to say next:

²⁷⁶ Odić, *Neostvoreni planovi*, pp. 76, 254; NAW, T-120, Roll 5787, H301616, Cable to ambassador Kasche (18 May 1943).

²⁷⁷ *Zbornik*/II/6/183, Vladimir Popović to Edvard Kardelj (28 September 1942).

²⁷⁸ Here one example: “Nikola Cvitaš, a worker from Garešnica, thirty years old, joined the Party in May 1940 in Zagreb. He was brought into the Party by Ivan Burija, currently in a [concentration] camp. He was arrested on 27 July 1942 in his brother’s house, where one of our printing presses was preparing materials for the local and Central Committee. He came to that post as a district technician. Before being identified by Cincipinka, he had confessed to being a Party member and also identified Daskijević, Dolinčić and Anton Rihtner (previously expelled from the Party, now in a camp). By decision of the Central Committee of the KPJ, he was expelled from the Party because of his treacherous behavior during his police interrogation. He will be sent to you for further deployment”. Pero Damjanović (Ed.), *Josip Broz Tito: Sabrana djela* (Beograd: Izdavački centar „Komunist“, 1982), Volume XII, pp. 33-5, To the comradely Central Committee of Communist Party of Croatia (10 September 1942).

*“Kreiner then began talking in a prevaricating nature about the senselessness of killing, the need to bring order to the NDH, and that the whole of Europe would soon be brought to order. I expressed doubt that we could find a negotiating partner in this matter in the NDH. Kreiner and the other Germans answered that that their side would be willing to negotiate. After a while I agreed to hear their view in order to find out what they actually wanted to achieve through such negotiations. They said they wanted to secure the exploitation and transportation of Bosnian ore, especially bauxite. If we would be willing not to interfere with it, they would welcome our recommendations for the reorganization of the NDH, as well as for the solution of the Serbian question in it. Schäffer then said ‘For God’s sake, we are not occupiers’ adding they had absolutely no political or military interests in the Balkans, especially not in Yugoslavia, but only a limited economic one. I replied I had no authorization for negotiating on these matters. With that, our talks were brought to an end”.*²⁷⁹

The war between Nazism and Communism had been raging for fourteen months and had already claimed millions of lives. It was fought with great brutality and marked by an uncompromising win-or-die stance on the part of both sides. Bearing this in mind, the last passage from Stilinović’s diary reads almost incredibly. However, if we take a look at the specific circumstances in Yugoslavia and especially in the Croatian puppet state at the time, the words uttered in Zagreb begin to make sense.

By the summer of 1942, the German military authorities in the region were unanimous in the opinion that the difficulties in the present situation had their roots in the genocidal policies of the Ustashe regime. Unlike their own calculated reprisals, they regarded the wanton atrocities of the Croatian fascists as senseless and counter-productive.²⁸⁰ In order to curb the activities of Ustashe militias in the areas targeted for pacification, the German occupation forces had been declaring various part of the NDH as “Operational areas” since January 1942 with reluctant approval from Zagreb. In these areas, the civil administration was suspended and taken over by the German army for the duration of combat. German units also intervened locally on several occasions, disarming undisciplined Ustashe units and arresting

²⁷⁹ Stilinović, *Bune*, pp. 221-2, entry for 26 August 1942.

²⁸⁰ For more details see Jonathan E. Gumz, “Wehrmacht perceptions of mass violence in Croatia 1941–1942” in: *The Historical Journal* 44 (2001): 1015-1038. When a German company executed 257 civilians in Grgurevci, Syrmia in early June 1942 as revenge for the death of some its comrades, Ambassador Kasche wrote a letter to General Bader. Judging by the latter’s response Kasche equated this incident with similar acts perpetrated by the Ustashe. Bader responded that the shooting brought an end to guerrilla activity in the area around the village and added: “I find the comparison between the conduct of this German company and Ustashe atrocities insulting to the German troops”: NAW, T-501, Roll 248, Letter to the German ambassador in Zagreb (18 June 1942).

their members suspected of committing crimes.²⁸¹ The German military authorities rarely ventured beyond this. Only once were they bold enough to try their hand in high politics. The agreement which was almost signed in February 1942 in Belgrade between the Commanding General in Serbia and Chetnik Major Dangić practically bereaved the NDH of Eastern Bosnia. The deal was cancelled owing to strong opposition on the part of German political authorities with the Armed Forces High Command strongly reprimanding General Bader for making any arrangements on his own.²⁸² Although the outright removal of the Ustashe would undoubtedly be preferred by the higher commands in the Balkans, no-one had the courage to propose it.²⁸³ As the Third Reich's policy towards the NDH and its rulers was not likely to change fundamentally in the near future, the military began to push for at least a more active German approach to the country's internal affairs. The Home Guard was seen as utterly incapable of defeating the insurgency. The Germans therefore lobbied for the Wehrmacht to have more oversight over the NDH military establishment and to play a role in its thorough reorganization. Furthermore, the German army argued that the lack of the rule of law, uncontrollable behavior of the Ustashe and the total failure of the Croatian administration were responsible for the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the early Summer of that year.²⁸⁴ Even Ambassador Kasche, who was the staunchest supporter of Pavelić and the Ustashe,²⁸⁵ lobbied for some kind of internal reform. On 24 June 1942 he delivered a memorandum to Pavelić, proposing a number of measures for the pacification of the country. The accent was put on winning over the hearts and minds of the population by fair treatment and by establishing an efficient administration and judicial system.²⁸⁶ Military solutions were not mentioned: it was obvious that the insurgency could not be put down by sheer force alone.

When Engineer Ott returned to Zagreb for the first time, he had lengthy talks with both Horstenau and Kasche. There is no documentary evidence for it, but he was probably instructed at that point to convey the message that the German authorities would like to talk about the "other things" Stilinović mentioned in his diary. The first and most prominent

²⁸¹ See NAW, T-501, Roll 250, 001072, Commanding General in Serbia to Armed Forces High Command (9 June 1942); NAW, T-501, Roll 352, 001253, Situation report for the period 30 October-8 November 1942 (9 November 1942).

²⁸² Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 115.

²⁸³ Glaise-Horstenau touched upon this in one of his reports from February 1942, but estimating its radical nature, secured himself by implying that such a move would do more harm than good: Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 161.

²⁸⁴ NAW, T-501, Roll 351, Situation report for the period 21-30 June 1942 (1 July 1942) and *ibid*, Report of battle group "Western Bosnia" for the period 5 June-4 July 1942 (5 July 1942).

²⁸⁵ Kasche was mockingly nicknamed "bigger Croat than Pavelić" and "the envoy of the Poglavnik to the Reich": Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, p. 61.

²⁸⁶ NAW, T-501, Roll 268, 000262-7, German general in Zagreb to Armed Forces High Command (27 June 1942).

reason was undoubtedly to gather intelligence about the single strongest guerrilla formation in the country. The Germans were totally in the dark as to its intentions, both political and militarily, as they had very few contacts with it since Operation „Trio“. The situation had changed drastically in the meantime. In mid-May the Partisans around Tito appeared spent after it was compelled to evacuate Eastern Bosnia; by mid-August they were deep in the territory of the NDH, threatening to shatter its foundations. Furthermore, their movements shadowed German intentions to bring about some kind of internal reform in the Ustashe state. The arrival of the envoy of the Partisan leadership to Zagreb in late August gave the German authorities a good chance to sound out the opinion of their main enemy on pressing issues through informal, non-binding talks.

In the conversation with Stilinović on 26 August there was no mention of the removal of the Ustashe, only of a “reorganization” of the NDH. This was in part because such a move was not officially contemplated and partly because the Germans did not want to disclose just how troubled their relations with Pavelić were at that moment.²⁸⁷ As the Partisan movement was still very much recognized as a purely Serbian cause, the offer for them to partake in the solution of the Serbian question in the Croatian state was considered to be attractive. The problems the German had with the regime in Zagreb were, however, not as acute as the endangerment of their own economic interests by the Partisan operations around Livno. The output of the bauxite area in Herzegovina filled approximately ten percent of the Third Reich’s overall needs;²⁸⁸ any prolonged Partisan presence in the region could lead to serious disruptions in war production. Furthermore, the Germans were very worried about the recent surge in sabotage on the all-important Zagreb-Belgrade railway line which occurred despite the Wehrmacht’s growing presence north of the Sava River.²⁸⁹ They therefore made no secret

²⁸⁷ Although the talks were meant to be strictly informal, the size and composition of the German “delegation” meant that it acted in a semi-official manner. The Wehrmacht representatives could not openly criticize the Ustashe because of the presence of Kasche’s envoy, Krainer. Privately, the Germans usually did not hide their contempt for the Ustashe. Ott told his Partisan captors “that we [the Germans] would send them to hell and hang the whole bunch if only we could find suitable replacements. These fools and their bloodthirsty policies have caused the present discontent and have driven the people to arms.” *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XII, pp. 115-6, Tito to Comintern (14 October 1942).

²⁸⁸ The estimate is for February 1943: NAW, T-77, Roll 780, 5507223, War Diary of Armed Forces High Command, entry for 13 February 1943.

²⁸⁹ The Germans had three Landesschützen battalions deployed along the main railway line. They, along with a German armored train and all NDH security forces adjacent to the line, were commanded by a special German staff: NAW, T-501, Roll 351, Order for continuation of operations in Western Bosnia and for the securing of the railway line Zagreb-Belgrade (17 July 1942). A month later, the German general in Zagreb reported: “One could safely ride on a train from Zagreb to Belgrade until three weeks ago. Since then, however, the acts of sabotage have increased not only in number but also in intensity”: NAW, T-501, Roll 264, 000982, Cable to Armed Forces High Command (21 August 1942). In order to counter the guerrilla threat, the 714th Infantry Division had to shift one of its two regiments to the north of the Sava River. Five days later, General Horstenau requested that

that they would appreciate a de-escalation of the campaign pinned on this vital line of communication. The fact that Stilinović acquiesced to listen to their proposals and present them to his superiors was understood as a sign that the Partisan side was open for further discussion on these matters.

Stilinović and Ott brought a concrete offer from Glaise-Horstenau when they returned to Glamoč in the first days of September. If the Partisans would cease with their attacks on the German economic interests in the country, the offer went, then the German occupation forces would be willing to recognize a certain region as “Partisan territory” against which no offensive actions would be undertaken.²⁹⁰ On 3 September, Ott had a lengthy conversation with Tito over this and other political issues. Based on it and on the contacts he had with other Partisans, Ott reported on the great animosity of the Communist-led insurgents towards the nationalist Chetniks, whom the former considered their main enemies. The Partisans were no less bitter towards the mentors of Mihailović, the British and, to a lesser extent, the Italians. Tito remarked that the Soviet-German war had to end in a compromise otherwise Great Britain and the United States would end up victorious which would in turn mean the continuation of the oppression of the working class. As for the Germans, their achievements (presumably of a military nature) were “uniquely praised” by the Partisans. On the other hand, the German racial theory was “especially condemned”, as was the subjugation of the Slavs. When the Germans protested against the execution of the Ustashe commander in Livno saying he was merely doing his duty, this was repudiated as not all shared their notion of duty based on the “machine-like” fulfillment of orders. Tito also mentioned the atrocities committed by the Germans in Belgrade which included the use of poison gas: “he knew the Germans well and was astonished that they were actually capable of committing such crimes”. Ott replied that was the same kind of propaganda the English had used during the First World War.²⁹¹ While Tito did not make any comments which would lead Ott to question his Communist credentials, other high ranking Partisans did not as appear to be convinced Communists.

the area around Zagreb be included in the division's operational zone as attacks were already taking place on the city's outskirts: NAW, T-501, Roll 248, War diary entry for 26 August 1942.

²⁹⁰ Arhiv muzeja Bosne i Hercegovine (henceforth „AMBiH”), Fond UNS, 509-3, Report of county commissioner Marko Šakić on the negotiations between the Partisans and the Germans. The document is erroneously dated 14 October 1943, although it is clear from the content that it was written in 1942. Šakić was exchanged at Studeno Vrelo with the rest of the prisoners. While in hospital in Livno, he had a chance to talk with many Partisans who did not mask the fact that they were negotiating with the Germans. Rather, they boasted that „Sušnjarević” had a conversation with the German general who was flown from Germany to Zagreb just for this occasion. Horstenau was not present at the talks with Stilinović.

²⁹¹ The mass-murder of Belgrade Jews and other ‘undesirables’ using a gas-van was hardly a secret by early August 1942, as corroborated by a letter of Ivo-Lola Ribar in which he informed Tito that his wife and the whole of her family found their deaths in this way: *Zbornik*//II/5/205, Letter to Tito (3 August 1942).

“They are only against the current Croatian regime”, Ott said, “and are even seeking German support to a certain extent [...]. They remarked that if the Italians were negotiating with the Chetniks, why could the Germans not negotiate with the Partisans?” The excellent treatment the Germans received in captivity, which included a lavish dinner on one occasion, seemed to confirm this sentiment.²⁹²

While the conversation with Tito had only an informative character and no agreement was made on any of the issues, there was no doubt that the Partisan leader took a favorable view of continuing the contacts in the future. The first concrete proof came only three days after the prisoner exchange. On 8 September 1942, Koča Popović, the commander of the 1st Proletarian Brigade, signed a letter addressed to the German General in Zagreb, Glaise von Horstenau, concerning the future exchange of prisoners. The letter proposed an urgent establishment of preliminary contact between the representatives of both sides in order to agree the terms for the next round of talks. “We see no objection to holding the talks right away if your envoy would come with the proper authorization”.²⁹³ Another proof of Tito’s intentions came on 12 September 1942 as the Central Committee of KPJ announced the transfer of Marijan Stilinović from Supreme HQ to the Main HQ for Croatia. Geographically closer, he would presumably be in a much better position to maintain contact with Zagreb, than with Supreme HQ which was constantly on the move. Officially, Stilinović was sent to the Croatian Central Committee as an experienced Party functionary suited for both administrative matters and for political work in general; no mention was made about him being involved in contacts with the Germans.²⁹⁴

The news Ott and others brought seemed to offer new possibilities for some kind of political solution to the problems in Croatia. The fact that the Partisan leadership expressed the same views as the local Partisan command at Stolac several months earlier led to the conclusion that these views were not an isolated sentiment, but the official line of the Communist-led guerrillas. Theoretically speaking, the Partisans could be included in any future pacification process as their and the German interests seemed to converge on several points. Beside disaffection with the current state of affairs in Croatia, there was the mutual opposition to the Italian-Chetnik and Anglo-Chetnik alliance. The Chetniks, with their

²⁹² NAW, T-120, Roll 5787, H301696-7, Situation in Livno (15 August 1942); NAW, T-120, Roll 5799, H311302-3, 310, Partisan attack on Livno (21 September 1942); *ibid.*, H311312-3, Negotiations over a united front: Chetniks and Partisans in Italian occupation zone (24 September 1942).

²⁹³ *Jugoslavija 1918-1988*, p. 605.

²⁹⁴ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XII, p. 42, To the comradely Central Committee of Communist Party of Croatia (12 September 1942).

Greater-Serbian agenda, were regarded by the Germans as a permanent threat to the “new order” in South-East Europe which was based in part on keeping Serbia as weak as possible. Although the Chetniks had in many places found a *modus-vivendi* with the Germans and even with the NDH based on the mutual fear of the Partisans, there could be no doubt that they would turn their guns against the Axis as soon as the Allied forces landed in the Adriatic.²⁹⁵ This possibility notwithstanding, the Second Italian Army had formed them into a 30,000 strong auxiliary force (“*Milizia volontaria anticomunista*” or “Volunteer anti-communist militia”) and was supplying them lavishly with light weaponry and ammunition. Italophobe German officials in Yugoslavia (especially Kasche and Horstenau) suspected that such a close collaboration with the Chetniks had other purposes aside from the struggle against the Partisans. The first one of these, as already mentioned, was the Italian desire to destabilize the NDH and to penetrate deeper into the Balkan Peninsula. The second and much more dangerous facet of this to the Third Reich was the suspicion that the Italian Army was Anglophile and that it was maintaining a link with the Allies through the Chetniks. The Germans suspected the link would help facilitate the Italian Army’s smooth transfer into the Allied camp as soon as the latter landed in the Balkans.²⁹⁶

The talks concerning political topics, although informative, led to no concrete results. The real value of the contacts established in Livno and Zagreb lay in the sphere of intelligence. This was especially true for the Germans. Since the fall of Užice in late November 1941, very few of them, if indeed any, had the chance to report what they saw while in Partisan captivity. The trickle of information extracted from the few defectors or captured guerrillas prior to their execution had only limited value. The employees of “Hansa-Leichtmetall” spent almost a month with the main Partisan force and had the good luck to

²⁹⁵ Starting in late April 1942, most of the Chetniks in Bosnia had concluded non-aggression and cooperation agreements with the NDH authorities. The main motive for both sides was fear of the Partisans. A truce with Serbian nationalists was a part of the new policy of the Pavelić regime aimed at pacification of the country. It included the minimization of terror against the Serbs and the creation of the “Croatian Orthodox Church”. For more details see Tomasevich, *Occupation*, pp. 256-7, 544-5. The Germans not only condoned the truce between the NDH and the Chetniks, but began co-operating directly with some Royalist groups in Western Bosnia in the Summer of 1942. This directly contradicted the official policy from Berlin, but the situation facing the Wehrmacht on the ground forced Hitler to turn a blind eye. In November 1942, Horstenau summed up the German motives for tolerating the Chetniks in the NDH: “We cannot [...] afford ourselves the luxury of attacking the now tamed Bosnian Chetniks at the same time [as the Partisans], for it would mean the complete loss of what little security is left in our rear”: NAW, T-501, Roll 268, 000102, Letter to Alexander Löhr (16 November 1942).

²⁹⁶ For Hortsenau’s opinion on this issue see NAW, T-501, Roll 268, 000206, General survey of situation in Croatia (19 August 1942). Ott revealed the same suspicions to his Partisan captors: *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XII, pp. 115-6, Tito to Comintern (14 October 1942). Roughly a week before the fall of Livno, Tito informed Moscow of the rumors that the Slovenian reactionaries were maintaining a link to London “through Rome”: *Zbornik*/11/5/166, Tito to Edvard Kardelj (1 August 1942).

survive and share their experiences. The results of their de-briefing, conducted by the SD branch in Sarajevo, were used for preparing a special report for the 718th Infantry Division. This document gave a detailed description of the Partisan forces operating in Livno-Glamoč area.²⁹⁷ The overall strength of the Communist-led guerillas was estimated at 25,000 well-equipped men. The mainstay of their army was five brigades named after the regions where they were formed. Their battle complement was thought to be 2,500 fighters, with every tenth man equipped with a light machine-gun; infantry weapons were almost exclusively of Yugoslav or Italian origin.²⁹⁸ There also had fifteen field-pieces of various caliber, as well as fourteen motor vehicles. The prisoners also had the chance to notice that Tito's headquarters at Glamoč had good telephone communications with the rest of the Partisan-controlled territory. It also had a very active propaganda section tasked with disseminating news over radio and through leaflets and organizing rallies and speeches. Furthermore, there was a judicial branch "led by a court official from Zagreb" who was aided by a Yugoslav military judge and several lawyers. "English and Yugoslav general staff officers" were also reported as being present in the headquarters.²⁹⁹ The discipline was generally good and insubordination punished with utmost severity. The 1st Proletarian Brigade was considered to be the best disciplined unit as "over seventy per cent of its fighters were intellectuals [...] led by a university professor from Belgrade Koča Popović".³⁰⁰ The 5th Montenegrin Brigade, on the contrary, was "made up exclusively of criminals [...]. Their commander, who was of the same sort, made a comment that all of the Germans should be slaughtered and thrown to the pigs [...] which made the guards remove him from the prisoners". The report went on to mention that all Partisans wore the red star insignia, as well as rank markings modeled on the Soviet pattern.³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ NAW, T-120, Roll 5799, H311306-9, Partisan attack on Livno (21 September 1942);

²⁹⁸ Unlike this one, Ott's report of 15 August correctly put the strength of a brigade at 1,500. Likewise, Ott (again correctly) estimated the strength of the Partisan army at 7-8,000 men. The discrepancies may have arisen out of the fact that the September report, prepared for 718th Infantry Division but also for the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, included the new estimates of Partisan strength adjusted to reflect their latest successes. For the figures from Ott's original report see NAW, T-120, Roll 5787, H301693, Situation in Livno (15 August 1942).

²⁹⁹ There were no British officers with the Partisans in the summer of 1942. The Yugoslav staff officers the report mentions probably refer to Arso Jovanović and Velimir Terzić, former captains of the Royal Army, who were serving respectively as the chief of Tito's staff and his aide.

³⁰⁰ Koča Popović (1908-1992) never worked as a university professor. However, given his education at Sorbonne, flawless French and cultured manners, it is not surprising he was mistaken for one.

³⁰¹ Rank markings were introduced in Foča in March 1942 and their design was finalized by the beginning of October: *Zbornik*/II/1/172, Bulletin of the Supreme Staff no. 17-18-19 (July-August-September 1942). The introduction of rank insignia was yet another step towards the creation of the "regular" Partisan army.

Ever since the beginning of the Communist-led insurgency, the Germans had attempted to find out who was at its helm. This was a daunting task, however, since the leader's identity was unknown even to most Party members. This should come as no surprise as the KPJ had been operating underground practically since its inception: frequent police raids made secrecy an absolute must if the Party was to survive. Therefore, captured Communists could give no reliable information about the identity of the man at the top of their organization. In late November 1941, the intelligence section of the German 113th Infantry division identified "a person hiding behind the name 'Tito'" as one of the leaders of the guerrilla movement in Užice, but not as its commander.³⁰² In January 1942 "Tito" was named as one of the two Partisan commanders in Eastern Bosnia. His real name was still unknown and the rest of the intelligence on his person was only partially true: while he was indeed short and Croat by ethnicity, he was neither from Dalmatia, nor a high school teacher from Belgrade, nor was he a worker from a factory in Slavonski Brod.³⁰³ In April, one Ustashe source named "a certain Tito Popović" as the commander of the Montenegrin Proletarian brigade operating around Vlasenica, Eastern Bosnia.³⁰⁴ Another report, compiled exactly one month before the fall of Livno claimed that "Tito" was a pseudonym of either "Marko Curovic or Mrso Pijada". While the first name doesn't correspond to any of the guerrilla leaders, the second probably refers to Moša Pijade, a close colleague of Tito.³⁰⁵ After almost one year of fighting, the Germans evidently had not made any progress in identifying the elusive Partisan commander.

The employees of "Hansa-Leichtmetall" captured in Livno were probably the first Germans who were able not only to take a closer look at the Partisan supreme commander but also to have a conversation with him. We find details on Tito's person in two reports made after the exchange. The first is essentially a compilation of rumors the captives had heard while spending time in Livno and Glamoč. According to it, Tito was the chief Communist representative in Yugoslavia after the Party had been dissolved. He was also supposed to have commanded a unit larger than a brigade in the Spanish Civil War. After the war had ended, he left for Moscow and returned to the country by a British submarine in the Autumn of 1941.

³⁰² NAW, T-312, Roll 460, Daily report of the intelligence section (24 November 1941). Dragiša Vasić, the chief political advisor of Draža Mihailović recognized Tito during one of their meetings in the autumn of the same year. Mihailović, curiously, did not relate this information to the Germans at the meeting in Divci on 11 November. He told them instead that the Communists were led by group of non-Serbs and gave the Germans their names, all but one of which were false: Marjanović, *Draža*, p. 155

³⁰³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2266, 000985, Intelligence summary No. 4/42 (10 January 1942).

³⁰⁴ NAW, T-315, Roll 2268, 000666, Cable from Lt.-Col. Francetić (4 April 1942). The source had obviously combined the names of Tito and Koča Popović.

³⁰⁵ NAW, T-315, Roll 2268, 000891, Situation report for the period 1-8 July 1942 (7 July 1942).

Apart from one British and one Yugoslav general staff officer he also brought a wireless set with him in order to be able to communicate with the outside world.³⁰⁶ As nothing in this report was true save for the fact that Tito went to the Soviet Union for several months after the Spanish Civil War, it most likely did more harm than good to the German intelligence effort.³⁰⁷ The second report, containing the physical description of Tito among other things, was much more valuable. The information came from Engineer Ott who had had a lengthy discussion with Tito on 3 September. The Partisan leader was “between 42 and 45 years of age with energetic features and slightly protruding chin; one half of the finger-nail on his right index finger is missing”. In addition, Ott and Tito talked about the organization of the Austro-Hungarian army. Judging by the deep knowledge of the subject, as well by the fact that Tito spoke “impeccable German”, Ott assumed that he must have served as an Austrian officer during the First World War. Furthermore, the Partisan leader also showed he had a sense of humor; after asking Ott where he intended to go after his release, Tito advised him not to stay for too long south of the Sava River or the two of them might soon “celebrate a happy reunion”.³⁰⁸

Throughout this period, the Germans in Zagreb informed their superiors about the negotiations concerning the prisoner exchange with the Partisans. Despite the standing orders prohibiting any contact with the insurgents, the higher commands did not intervene. The reason for this lay in the fact that the dispatches sent from either Horstenau or Kasche prior to Ott’s final return to Zagreb failed to mention any details which went beyond the simple exchange of prisoners.³⁰⁹ Behind the scenes, Horstenau was seeking the approval of the higher military authorities for future contact with the Partisans. He had the luck that the new Commander-in-Chief South-East was his old friend and colleague from the Austrian army, Colonel-General Alexander Löhr. During his first visit to Zagreb in late August, Löhr was

³⁰⁶ NAW, T-120, Roll 5799, H311303, Partisan attack on Livno (21 September 1942).

³⁰⁷ Tito went to Paris in 1936 to facilitate the transfer of Yugoslav volunteers from France to Republican Spain without ever visiting the latter. The story about the submarine was probably based on the landing of the British Captain Terrence Atherton, along with a Yugoslav officer from Cairo, on the Montenegrin coast in April 1942.

³⁰⁸ NAW, T-120, Roll 5799, H311309-10, Partisan attack on Livno (21 September 1942). Ott’s description notwithstanding, Tito’s true identity would continue to elude the Germans until the end of the year. Only after they managed to obtain his photograph in December did the mystery begin to unravel. On 11 January 1943 German intelligence issued a biographical stub on the guerrilla leader named “Ivan Brozović” (NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000048, War diary entry for 23 December 1942; *Ibid.*, 001270, [No subject], 11 January 1943). Tito’s personal dossier compiled by the Zagreb Abwehr, reads that Brozović and Josip Broz showed such “striking similarity, that it is possible that they are one and the same. The issue is to be investigated and the results will be made known in a short while”: HR HDA 1521, Box 32, Communist and Partisan leaders in word and picture-prepared by Captain von Golinek of Abwehr Station Croatia (undated).

³⁰⁹ See for instance Horstenau’s report in NAW, T-501, Roll 268, 000205, Estimate of current situation in Croatia (19 August 1942).

decidedly against any negotiations with the guerrillas.³¹⁰ Horstenau, however, managed to convince him otherwise within a month. The two met in Sofia on 17 September 1942 to discuss the situation in the Balkans prior to their trip to Hitler's field headquarters in Vinica, Ukraine. Apart from agreeing to present the situation in the NDH without the slightest embellishment and request greater German participation in Croatia's internal affairs, they also discussed further contact with the Partisans:

*"The Partisan envoys [...] expressed the wish to arrange a meeting between the representative of the German General [in Zagreb] and the Partisan leader in Bosnia known as 'Tito'. Such a meeting could not possibly lead to an agreement, but it could offer an inside view of the enemy intentions and the conditions under which he would be ready to cease with his resistance".*³¹¹

"Request further instructions", which concludes the paragraph, referred in all probability to the upcoming conference in Ukraine. A document dated 22 September, compiled by either Horstenau or his chief of staff one day before the scheduled meeting with Hitler, carries a list of topics and requests to be brought to the dictator's attention. The list includes the personnel changes in the top circles of the Ustashe regime, the inclusion of the Croatian Peasant Party into the government, as well as the proposed reform of the Home Guard. The third point reads simply "Tito-Popović-Livno", referring almost certainly to the recently concluded talks with the Partisans.³¹² Neither the minutes of the conferences held in Vinnica 17 - 23 September 1942 nor any other document pertaining to it holds explicit evidence that the topic was mentioned in Hitler's presence. There are, however, indications that the Führer was informed about the subject. During the talks at Vinica, Hitler emphasized the need for brutal suppression of the insurgents and complained there were still "too few [guerilla] suspects shot while trying to escape"; his tirade was so ferocious that even Kasche feared Pavelić would use it as a pretext for stepping up the persecution of the Serbs. One can therefore safely assume that Hitler was signaling his displeasure at the fact that the German authorities were communicating with the Partisans. This confirmed the "Führer's opinion" (which had the validity of an order), expressed on 4 September and noted by the Commanding General in Serbia, that all "negotiations with the bandits are forbidden". Judging by the time of its release it is obvious that this order referred to the prisoner exchange which was then being negotiated

³¹⁰ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 162.

³¹¹ NAW, T-501, Roll 264, 000623, Meeting with the C-in-C Col.-General Löhr in Sofia (17 September 1942).

³¹² Ibid., 000618, Points for discussion (22 September 1942).

in Zagreb and Glamoč.³¹³ Hitler was displeased, but was not decidedly against Horstenau's actions. Indeed, there is evidence to the contrary that the latter obtained a tacit approval for the continuation of talks with the Communist-led guerrillas. Hans Ott recalled that Horstenau told him that he had had a conversation with Field Marshal Keitel, the chief of the Armed Forces High Command, and convinced him of the advantages of keeping this "back channel" open. Keitel's only condition was that Ott, a civilian, should continue serving as the middle man. In that way, the German army would "keep face" and remain formally uninvolved.³¹⁴ That this was the semi-official attitude of the Wehrmacht is confirmed in Löhr's statement to Horstenau in mid-December 1942, in which the former declared he had nothing against the continuation of contacts with Tito for "informational reasons only and through intermediaries", adding that the German side "should not stand out too much".³¹⁵

We do not know what arguments Horstenau used to sway Keitel. The general most likely stressed that maintaining contact with the Partisans could facilitate the gathering of intelligence. From a military point of view this seemed perfectly legitimate and therefore acceptable to Keitel. It is unlikely that Horstenau accentuated the possible political dividends negotiations with the guerrillas could yield; Keitel would most certainly have refused to give his blessing without Hitler's approval in this case. The additional reason for not mentioning this subject was that Horstenau himself still was not convinced that any dividends were to be drawn at all. Being as much a politician as a soldier, Horstenau was cautious enough not to draw any hasty conclusions. At the same time he wanted to keep his options open and, as the document from Sofia confirms, desired for the contacts to continue. Ironically, it was the convinced National-Socialist Kasche who was absolutely certain that some kind of accommodation with the Communist-led Partisans was possible. The cable to the Foreign Ministry which he sent on 21 September is bristling with optimism and stands in stark contrast to the cautious tone of both Horstenau's and Löhr's memorandum written four days prior:

³¹³ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 165-6. For the Hitler's opinion see NAW, T-501, Roll 352, 000049, Securing of Croatia (4 September 1942).

³¹⁴ Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, p. 87.

³¹⁵ NAW, T-501, Roll 267, 000437, Meeting between the Plenipotentiary-General and Colonel-General Löhr on 15 December 1942 (18 December 1942).

*“Tito wants Greater Yugoslavia, refuses [cooperation with] Mihailović and the English, and has his doubts about Moscow. He informed us recently of his wish for pacification”.*³¹⁶

Interestingly, some of this optimism found its way into the higher echelons of the German army in Yugoslavia, despite the misgivings of the supreme commander of the Wehrmacht in the South-East. More than a month after Kasche sent his telegram to Berlin, the intelligence section of the Commanding General in Serbia compiled a report on the Partisan movement in Yugoslavia a part of which read “Tito considers economic cooperation with Germany as her equal partner as by all means possible”.³¹⁷

In order to ascertain whether it was Horstenau or Kasche who correctly gauged the situation, one must take a look at the contemporary atmosphere in the Partisan Supreme Staff and its intentions. First of all, there can be no doubt that the Partisan political and military leadership, from top to bottom, was made up either of Communists or those who were aspiring to join the Party. The impression that these men were somehow less Communist by treating their German captives in a correct manner can be attributed to stereotypes built up over years of incessant anti-communist propaganda. Simply put, the Germans were convinced they could not expect humane treatment from a foe which was being represented as the embodiment of evil. Furthermore, the previously described events took place in a period when the Partisan movement was trying to shake its image as an ideological force, a party army. This image arose as the result of the hard line the KPJ maintained from the early Winter of 1941 through the late Spring of 1942. When the Partisan army reached Western Bosnia in August, it was accompanied by an altered propaganda program. It was still decidedly pro-Soviet in outlook, but the notions of class struggle and revolution gave way to patriotic slogans calling for a struggle against the Axis powers as a part of the international anti-fascist effort. The fact that Great Britain was one of the pillars of the anti-fascist coalition and that Anglo-Soviet relations were improving had to be taken into account as well. In the early Summer, the Politburo began dispatching instructions to its regional leadership on how to interpret these new trends in inter-allied relations and how to depict them in their propaganda: “The Anglo-Soviet pact”³¹⁸, read one letter of 5 July to the Serbian leadership, “represents a great victory for the Soviet foreign policy devised by Stalin [...] The British agreed to it

³¹⁶ NAW, T-501, Roll 265, 001024, Kasche to Foreign Ministry (21 September 1942).

³¹⁷ NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 001258, Communist insurgency in former Yugoslavia (31 October 1942).

³¹⁸ The Treaty of Alliance between the Soviet Union and Great Britain was signed in London on 26 May 1942 by the two foreign ministers Molotov and Eden, respectively: Churchill, *Second World War*, Vol. IV, p. 300.

because they begin to feel that not only their imperialistic but also national interests are at stake in this war". Almost two months later, the Politburo chastised the Syrmian Communists for failing to grasp the essence of the Soviet-British-American relations and their continued insistence on the notion that Great Britain is responsible for hostile policy towards the USSR and Communists in general:

*"The main issue today is not the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but that of Hitlerism and the freedom-loving peoples, i.e. the people's liberation struggle [...]. It is high time that we root out the sectarian and naïve suspicions that the English want to trick us, and so on [...]. It should be understood that not only the Soviet Union, but also England and America are conducting a righteous war of liberation".*³¹⁹

The last document also carried the warning that there was still a substantial number of "reactionary circles centered on big capital" in the USA and Great Britain who were sympathizing with Germany and her war against the Soviet Union. It was thought that these circles, although on the fringes, had a degree of influence in the forming of the official policies of the Western governments. To the Yugoslav Communists, their influence was best seen in the support Whitehall (and to lesser degree the White House) was extending to the Yugoslav émigré government in London and its Minister of War, Draža Mihailović. Whereas they could understand the motives of the Western powers, the Partisans were perplexed and increasingly frustrated by the *realpolitik* the Soviets had been practicing on this issue ever since the war began. By August 1942, however, Moscow finally acquiesced to lend the Partisans moral support by establishing a pro-Partisan radio station ("Free Yugoslavia") and bringing the issue of Chetnik collaboration before the émigré government. Besides this, little else changed.³²⁰ The Kremlin's policy toward Yugoslavia was still based on a wish to maintain good relations with the Great Britain. Consequently, the Soviet government agreed with its Royal Yugoslav counterpart to elevate their respective diplomatic missions to the rank of embassy. Tito reacted by sending an almost desperate message to the Comintern on 18 September 1942. In it, he reiterated that the armed formations of the Yugoslav government-in-exile (the Chetniks) were collaborating with the occupier and that the last Soviet move would make the "people's liberation struggle much more difficult":

³¹⁹ *Zbornik*/II/5/26 and 382-3, Politbureau instructions to Serbian (5 July 1942) and Syrmian (25 August 1942) regional committees, respectively.

³²⁰ Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Vol. II, p. 190.

“[...] Can nothing more be done to ensure that the Soviet government be better informed of the treacherous role of the government-in-exile and unparalleled sacrifice of our peoples in their struggle against the invader, the Chetniks, the Ustashe and the others? Do you not believe in what we are reporting to you daily? The questions [about this] come from every direction and we do not know what to say. Apathy has already set in in the ranks of our fighters. This could have disastrous consequences for our struggle. We repeat: the government-in-exile collaborates overtly with the Italians and covertly with the Germans. Its policy is treacherous to both our peoples and to the Soviet Union. We suspect that the [British] Intelligence Service is among the supporters of this course.”³²¹

The tone of the telegram corresponds roughly to what Kasche reported to the German Foreign Ministry. It shows that Great Britain was still treated with great suspicion by the highest Partisan leadership, despite the recently introduced change in the official line. The change itself was more a result of the obligations the KPJ had to Moscow than a matter of conviction: the widespread bitterness towards the British among the rank-and-file of the Communist-led resistance movement was hard to eradicate. Therefore, it should not have come as a surprise that the German captives in Livno and Glamoč felt it while communicating daily with their captors. The alleged „doubt“ in the Soviet Union would be much harder to perceive: the Partisan propaganda was constantly glorifying the „First Land of Socialism“ and its leader; no rally or proclamation ended without paroles like “Long live the glorious Red Army” and “Long live comrade Stalin”³²² It is highly unlikely that any of the Partisans would express their doubts in private. Not only because of the watchful eye of political commissars, but also because of the very nature of the force around the Supreme Headquarters in the Summer of 1942. The brigades were composed of those who chose to remain with the flag despite all the setbacks which befell the Partisan movement in the first half of the year. This meant that the majority of them were volunteers who strongly believed in the cause they were fighting for. Apart from patriotism, the cause was based on “internationalist duty”; let us remember that the KPJ launched the uprising after the Soviet Union had been attacked on 22 June 1941. The members of the Supreme Headquarters or Politburo were even less likely to show they had any doubts in the Soviet Union in the presence of the Germans. They were

³²¹ *Jugoslavija 1918-1988*, p. 576-7, Tito to Comintern (18 September 1942).

³²² The Stalin cult was built up in Partisan-controlled areas much in the way it was in the Soviet Union. One of the best examples, found in Dedijer's diary (entry from the late October 1942), was a popular song from Lika which included the following verses: “Oh, Stalin you're the people's god/the life without you is impossible”: Dedijer, *Dnevnik*, p. 246, entry for 30 October 1942. Interestingly, Tito is not mentioned in the song at all.

depressed, sometimes even exasperated, over the lack of Soviet support but they always kept it to themselves. There is no evidence that these feelings ever translated into disloyalty.³²³

If Kasche did not receive the information about the alleged doubt in Moscow from the Partisans, then from where did it come? The most likely explanation is that Kasche reached such a conclusion himself on the basis of the intelligence he was privy to and his own wishful thinking. The factors which must have played a prominent part in his reasoning were the already mentioned correct treatment of the prisoners and the relatively low number of card-carrying Communists in the Partisan ranks. Another important fact was that neither Soviet officers nor weapons were observed in Tito's headquarters. Furthermore, there was no evidence that any regular courier or radio link between the Partisans and Moscow existed.³²⁴ All of this led Kasche to conclude that the Yugoslav Partisans were only loosely connected to the Kremlin. Admittedly, their leaders were Communists but the great majority of common fighters joined the uprising not for ideological, but for reasons of survival and discontent with the present situation in the country. Without a firm ideological base, the guerrilla movement would be much easier to split from within without relying exclusively on military means.³²⁵

Tito was in fact communicating news to the Comintern whenever practicable, sometimes several times a day. The events from August and September, including details of the prisoner exchange, were reported as well. Fearing a backlash, however, Tito omitted those details which could be incriminating. On 14 October 1942, he informed Moscow about the content of his conversations with Ott in Glamoč. The event was portrayed as an interrogation, rather than a conversation, with a list of questions on political issues put to Ott and his answers. In this way, contact with the Germans appeared to be purely an intelligence operation which could produce valuable insights into the enemy's thinking. Apart from the issues pertaining exclusively to Yugoslavia, such as the relations between the Germans and the Ustashe and the German strategic interests in the country, a substantial part of the "questioning" was directed at the Third Reich's situation in general. The relations with Italy

³²³ Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 143-4, 188.

³²⁴ During the conference at Vinnica on 17 September 1942, Löhr reported to Hitler that the order had been intercepted (not mentioned whether it was a radio message or a courier) which revealed „that the guerrilla bands are directed by a central agency of the Comintern“: *Foreign military studies #C-065a: Greiner Diary Notes, 12 Aug 1942- 17 Mar 1943* (Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army Europe: 1946), p. 66. The already quoted report of the intelligence section of Bader's staff in Belgrade on the Communist insurgency in the country stated that the regular communication between Tito and Moscow could not be proven: NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 001258, Communist insurgency in former Yugoslavia (31 October 1942).

³²⁵ The other possible explanation for Kasche's optimism would be that the Partisan negotiators intentionally made derogatory remarks about the Soviet Union in order to trick the Germans into continuing the contacts. I have not been able to find any evidence to support this possibility.

were reported as especially troubled owing to the strong anglophile sentiment of the royal house of Savoy and the officer corps. Furthermore, Ott mentioned the existence of German resistance, such as the group of officers under Field Marshal von Rundstedt, “the Catholic center of Beuning [sic]”³²⁶ and the German Communists. The situation within Germany was presented as being very bad and discontent with Nazi rule widespread among the population.

The fourth “question” to Ott and his alleged answer are especially interesting: “Do the Germans believe in the victory over Soviet Union? – We believe that the war against the Soviet Union will soon end in a compromise, because Germany needs to finish off England”. The answer appears very similar to the one Tito allegedly gave Ott in Glamoč on 3 September according to the latter's report to his superiors. More importantly, we are confronted with the similar style of reporting in the all-important question of which side actually gave the initiative for the talks. On two occasions, 30 September and 14 October, Tito reported to Moscow that it was the Germans who had made the first step. For instance, the second cable reads “this German [Ott] brought a proposition for negotiations between one of the envoys from our headquarters and the German plenipotentiary general”. The wording is almost identical to the one Horstenau used in his Sofia memorandum of 17 September, only with reversed roles. And whereas Horstenau lobbied for an approval from his superiors for the continuation of the contacts, Tito finished his cable with an outright lie: “They repeated the proposition several times, but we declined any notion of negotiations”. He wrote this because he suspected how the Soviets might react to any talks with the Germans while the battle for Stalingrad raged. Still, Tito did ask for Moscow's opinion on the matter and requested that they not disclose the source of the information provided in the telegram in case they wanted to use it.³²⁷

What were Tito's motives for maintaining contact with the German authorities in Zagreb? The only way to save valuable Party cadres from the almost certain death which awaited them in Ustashe custody could come through prisoner exchange. The success of the first such exchange showed that one could “do business” with the Germans, and that they were as interested in saving their men as were the Partisans. As it turned out, the Germans were open for talks which went beyond the simple exchange of captives, Tito immediately agreed to listen. Like Horstenau, however, he did not make any hasty agreements, but acquiesced to “play the game” in order to find out more about the true intentions of the

³²⁶ Most likely a reference to Heinrich Brüning, Chancellor of Germany from 1930-1932.

³²⁷ For the full text of two cables see *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XII, p. 90 (Tito to Comintern, 30 September 1942) and *ibid.*, pp. 115-6 (Tito to Comintern, 14 October 1942).

enemy. Prisoner exchange opened a back channel to the highest German authorities in this part of Yugoslavia and Tito was intent on making the most out of it. This was especially important given the fact that the Partisans admittedly had an extensive network of agents and sympathizers within the military and administrative apparatus of the NDH³²⁸, but none within the Wehrmacht or other German services. There was another important reason to engage in the talks with the Germans. In the Summer of 1942, the Partisan movement was considered illegitimate both inside and outside of the country. No Allied power, including the Soviet Union, saw fit to send representatives to Tito's headquarters; ironically, only the Germans seemed willing to do so. If they could be made to recognize the Partisans as a major factor in Yugoslav affairs either openly or tacitly, then the Allies would be compelled to do so as well.

Irrespective of what both sides were reporting (or failing to report) to their superiors, there can be no doubt that there was a strong mutual wish to continue with the contacts established during the first large-scale prisoner exchange in September 1942. The course of events in the NDH during the last quarter of the year would give them ample opportunity to do precisely that.

4. The Failed Exchange and Talks in Livno: September 1942-January 1943

The first prisoner exchange and the establishing of contact between the Partisan Supreme HQ and the German authorities in Zagreb were not followed by a reduction in combat activities. On the contrary, the fighting in Western Bosnia and adjoining parts of Croatia became more ferocious by the day. In August and September, the Partisans managed to liberate numerous towns and villages in the area and inflict heavy casualties on the NDH forces. As a result, their units not only captured large quantities of arms and ammunition, but also won new recruits, experience and much-needed self-confidence. It was during this period that the Partisan brigades directly confronted German battalion-sized formations for the first time and even managed to push them back on several occasions.³²⁹ The crowning achievement of the

³²⁸ For instance, Popović once quoted Pavelić and members of his inner circle in front of Ott which led the latter to suspect the presence of a Partisan spy at the very top of the Ustashe state: NAW, T-120, Roll 5787, H301695-6, Situation in Livno (15 August 1942).

³²⁹ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. I, p. 275. The Germans did not fail to spot the metamorphosis their enemy was going through: „Enemy forces, organized along military lines, and coming across the Demarcation line from the south, were exerting strong pressure on Western Bosnia. These forces were made up of firmly organized units which

Partisan offensive up to that point came on 25 September 1942 with the fall of Jajce, a regional administrative center with developed communications and industries. Among the estimated 200 enemy prisoners, there were four German civilians. Three of them, engineer Othmar Siegelhuber, Franz Leinschütz and Otto Bayer were employees of the “Elektro-Bosna” company tasked with operating the local chlorine factory; the fourth captive was Theresa Mehr, the secretary of the local ethnic German organization. These captives were taken to Glamoč and put into custody.³³⁰

Still under the favorable impression of the exchange at Studeno Vrelo, the Partisan leadership decided to attempt another one, again using captured German civilians as bargaining chips. The preliminary list of wanted persons included Hebrang and the others which the Germans had failed to deliver at Posušje. However, just as the names were being agreed upon, the news reached Tito that Hebrang had been exchanged in Slavonia on 23 September 1942.³³¹ It was therefore decided to ask for the commander, the deputy political commissar and one battalion commander from the 3rd Sandžak Proletarian Brigade who went missing in early October. In addition, the Partisans were interested in Momir Tomić, a Communist functionary from Serbia, who was captured during the April War and was now a prisoner-of-war in Germany.³³² Several persons from Zagreb, known to be in the custody of the NDH police, were on the list as well. Once the list had been finalized, it was sent to the headquarters of the 1st Proletarian Brigade which was again tasked with taking up contact with the Axis authorities; one of the captured Germans, Franz Leinschütz, was chosen as courier. On 31 October 1942, he reached Banja Luka and delivered the offer to the headquarters of the 714th Infantry Division. The Partisan command proposed an exchange of four civilians from Jajce for altogether twelve Partisans. The recipients were also reminded of their obligation to deliver Vanda Novosel, whose release had been agreed as part of the first exchange but had not yet taken place. Setting the time and place of the exchange was left to

were well-led and armed; their operations were impaired only by the lack of food”: NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 000888, Activity report of the operations’ section for September 1942.

³³⁰ NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311695-6, Letter to German General in Zagreb (31 October 1942).

³³¹ Already on 10 September 1942 the Partisans offered the exchange of Hebrang for some Domobran officers directly to the NDH authorities; this offer went unanswered. Hebrang and some others from the original list made in Livno and Glamoč were exchanged for two Ustashe police officials in Slavonia on 23 September 1942. When Hebrang was arrested in 1948, allegedly because he had opted for Stalin during the Soviet-Yugoslav split, he was accused of being recruited by the Ustashe during his captivity in 1942. The exchange served to infiltrate him into the Partisan ranks. From there he allegedly worked as an agent for the Ustashe regime in Zagreb for the duration of the war. This official version of the events, devised to discredit Hebrang, was maintained throughout the lifespan of socialist Yugoslavia. There is, however, no conclusive evidence that Hebrang was ever an Ustashe agent.

³³² *Zbornik*/11/6/201, 210, Ranković to Tito (9 October 1942) and Tito to Ranković (dated “October ’42”).

the Germans; the letter, however, stipulated that the envoy must return within ten days with an answer.³³³

Leinschütz went from Banja Luka to Sarajevo, where he was debriefed by the intelligence officer of the 718th Infantry Division. The courier brought new information about the location of the Partisan Supreme HQ and the existence of Partisan agents in the NDH's military and political structures. Concerning the exchange, Leinschütz was told by "Vlado" (Vladimir Velebit) that the Partisans asked precisely for those people who they knew were still alive; no mention was made as to what was to be done in the case some of them died in the meantime.³³⁴ On 5 November 1942, the courier reached Zagreb and contacted both the embassy and the office of the German Plenipotentiary General³³⁵, who were already scouring Croatia for the wanted persons. Dr. Kreiner of the embassy in Zagreb (who was present at the talks with Stilinović in August) summed up the results of the search so far: from twelve persons wanted, only the four female Partisans were found (they were in custody of the 714th Infantry Division); three leaders of the Sandžak Brigade were captured and killed by the Chetniks³³⁶; four were supposed to be either in the Jasenovac concentration camp or in some other Ustashe prison. Momir Tomić, according to the Partisan letter of offer, was captured in April 1941 under a pseudonym. Given that his false name was unknown, the representatives of the German Army decided to strike him from the list, as there was no time for a comprehensive search of the prisoner camps: the courier had to return to the Partisans by 8 November at the latest.³³⁷ The courier brought disappointing news to his captors in regard to their demands. The Germans were only able to secure less than half of the desired individuals. Most likely fearful of a complete loss of credibility, the Germans decided to act in the case of Vanda Novosel. She was known to be in the Zagreb clinic for infectious diseases under police guard. The NDH security organs had postponed her extradition to the Germans ever since this had been requested through official channels in August. Without waiting any further, the

³³³ Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, pp. 275-6.

³³⁴ NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311680, Interrogation Protocol (31 October 1942).

³³⁵ Until the early Fall of 1942, the operational command of the German troops in the NDH was in the hands of General Bader who was also Commanding General in Serbia. Pavelić opposed the idea of a unified command structure for the Serbo-Croatian areas owing to political prestige. Hitler agreed to form separate military posts for these two countries, in part since it was becoming increasingly difficult to lead the operations in the NDH from Belgrade. Therefore, on 1 November 1942, General Lütters was made the „Commanding General of German Troops in Croatia“ (*Befehlshaber der deutschen Truppen in Kroatien*). While his area of responsibility was to the south of the River Sava, General Horstenau was tasked with securing the territory to the north of the river. His title was changed to "German Plenipotentiary General in Zagreb" and his rights and responsibilities now equaled those of a head of a military district (*Wehrkreis*).

³³⁶ Žarko Vidović, *Treća proleterska sandžačka brigada* (Vojnoizdavački zavod: Belgrade, 1972), p. 94.

³³⁷ NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311688-90, Memorandum on conversation with Mr. Leinschütz (4 november 1942).

Feldkommandant of Zagreb, Major Knehe, dispatched two military policemen to fetch her. On the same day, Novosel was taken from the hospital directly to the railway station and sent to Sarajevo.³³⁸ This action, it was hoped, would help prove to the Partisans that the Germans intended to keep their promises and were able to enforce their will on the Ustashe.

In the meantime, the “Long March of the Proletarian Brigades” that had begun in late June in Montenegro, ended successfully in the westernmost part of Bosnia. On 4 November, Bihać, the regional center with some 15,000 inhabitants, fell after two days of fighting in a coordinated attack by eight Partisan brigades. From a military point of view, it was the biggest victory yet for the Communist-led guerrillas: immense booty and over 800 Home Guard prisoners fell into their hands. The strategic and political dividends were even greater. The fall of Bihać made other garrisons in the area untenable and they either fell shortly thereafter or were evacuated. This in turn allowed the strike force under the direct command of the Supreme HQ to link up with the already numerous Croatian Partisans in Lika, Kordun, Banija and Dalmatia. Tito was now in command of a compact territory of almost 50,000 square kilometers in size, located in the midst of the Croatian puppet state. Her weakness was now becoming obvious even to ethnic Croats and Muslims who had participated only sporadically in the Partisan movement until then. With a steady influx of new fighters, who could now be armed and supplied thanks to the newly created rear-areas, the guerrilla army grew by the day.³³⁹

The recent fighting in Western Bosnia was far more complex than previous campaigns as it included frontal battles, maneuver operations and the storming of fortified urban centers, all involving several brigades consecutively. The brigade had shown its worth as the mainstay of the army, yet changing circumstances required the forming of bigger commands which could handle the growing number of fighters and more complicated operational tasks. Therefore, on 1 November 1942, Tito created the 1st and the 2nd Proletarian Divisions, followed by the 3rd Assault Division eight days later. On the same day, the 1st Bosnian Assault Corps, made up of the newly-created 4th and 5th Krajina Divisions, was created as well. Each division had three to four brigades; depending on the size of the latter, an average division had strength of between 2,800 and 4,000 fighters. The corps’ were devised as stationary commands, while the divisions were meant to execute mobile operations. The detachment was kept, both as a territorial unit and as a core of future brigades, but its secondary role was

³³⁸ Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, p. 280.

³³⁹ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. I, pp. 281-5.

cemented. In a way, brigades, divisions and corps represented the regular forces of the Communist-led resistance movement, while detachments continued to serve as purely irregular units. The division between “regular” and “irregular” units was fluid: brigades and divisions did not abandon guerrilla tactics but were expected to fight frontally if necessary and solve more complicated battlefield tasks. There were no practical differences in the status of a common fighter serving in a brigade and one serving in a detachment. To serve in a brigade was regarded as an honor (especially in the elite Proletarian units) and its members could expect stricter discipline, but improvement in food or clothing.³⁴⁰

The reforms applied not only to combat units. A number of directives issued in November regulated the functioning of the supply system, expanded technical and medical services, created an officer school and rear-area commands. The intelligence service was reorganized in two branches: “territorial service” with a number of so-called “Intelligence centers” spread out across the occupied territory and “troop service” attached to combat units. Apart from gathering information on the enemy, the service was also responsible for counter-espionage. In December, the Supreme Headquarters was expanded to eight sections and its “Escort Company” into a full battalion. The growth of the Partisan movement in Dalmatia warranted the creation of the “Partisan Navy” tasked with maintaining the link between the coast and the islands and interdicting Italian coastal shipping.³⁴¹

The new name of the Partisan forces (“People’s Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia”; *Narodnooslobodilačka vojska i partizanski odredi Jugoslavije*, or NOVJ) reflected the growing self-confidence of the Partisan movement and its wish to be recognized as a co-belligerent. Since only states have regular armies, the military reforms had to be followed by steps aimed at gaining political legitimacy as well. Therefore, on 26-27 November 1942, at a meeting held in Bihać, some seventy delegates from across the country proclaimed „The Anti-Fascist Council of the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia“ (*Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije*, or AVNOJ). The AVNOJ was formed as the political body of the National Liberation Movement as a whole. Non-Communists were not only allowed, but even invited to join it since their presence would help widen the popular basis of the movement. The AVNOJ’s Executive Council was envisaged as a transitional Yugoslav government, and a rival to the royal government-in-exile. However, on Moscow’s intervention, Tito (who was the chief architect of AVNOJ) had to scale down

³⁴⁰ Primorac, *Operativno-taktička iskustva*, pp. 103-6.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-11.

the envisaged scope of AVNOJ's activities: the Council had neither portfolio for defense, nor for foreign affairs; the planned proclamation forbidding the king to return to the country before the war had ended was left out as well.³⁴²

The military reforms within the Partisan army were at a full swing as the German and Partisan delegations met on the guerrilla-controlled territory just outside Livno on 17 November 1942. The German side was represented by the veteran negotiators Ott and Heyss and an army officer who introduced himself as Captain Kulich. Velebit's partner this time was Mihovil Tartaglia-Mišo, a Partisan commander from Dalmatia. The first topic of discussion was the exchange of prisoners. The Partisan delegates proposed including four NDH airmen, nineteen Home Guard officers and 860 men captured in Bihać, as well as a number of Ustashe functionaries. The latter came from Bihać and included the local deputy-governor, the head of the Ustashe organization, the chief of police and his aide. Given the high positions of the first three prisoners, the Partisans wanted them exchanged at a greater ratio: ten hostages for each of the first two and five for the chief of police. The Home Guard officers (excluding four or five who chose to join the Partisans) and NCOs were to be exchanged on a ratio 1:1. If the Axis side would agree to this arrangement, the Partisans declared they would release the common soldiers without any conditions. Captain Heyss proposed that they discuss only the exchange of the German prisoners and the NDH airmen.³⁴³ In this regard, Heyss said that the Partisan demand for an exchange of the captured Germans at a ratio 1:3 could not be accepted, for they were civilians and not soldiers. Velebit saw no point in arguing and acquiesced but insisted that the Germans deliver precisely the persons who the Partisans desired. For the airmen, the Partisans requested a number of female hostages, some of whom allegedly went voluntarily to Germany as workers. „The opposing [Partisan] side led the negotiations in a most forthcoming manner and the written protocol was ready within half-an-hour“, wrote Captain Kulich. The business-like atmosphere notwithstanding, Velebit used the opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Partisan intelligence service by providing original NDH documents concerning the current whereabouts of certain persons. He also hinted at the lack of sincerity with which the Ustashe treated the Germans. “Eight days ago I spoke with a person you had told me during our last meeting was dead. The Ustashe

³⁴² A.H. Pape et al., *Drugi svjetski rat*, Vol. II, pp. 120-1. Already in the Spring of 1942 Tito had toyed with the idea of forming a provisional government. He asked the Comintern for its opinion on the matter on 7 April 1942, but the cable remained unanswered: *Jugoslavija 1918-1988*, p. 571. For Tito's telegram of 12 November 1942 pertaining to the forming of AVNOJ and Moscow's response, see *ibid.*, pp. 579-81.

³⁴³ The four airmen were the crew of a NDH bomber shot down over Kupres in late August 1942. The 718th Infantry Division insisted on their exchange because they were experienced flyers who were flying ground-support missions for the division: Odić, *Neostvoreni planovi*, p. 77.

themselves offered him for exchange several weeks ago”.³⁴⁴ The Partisan delegate concluded this part of the talks with the wish that the prisoner exchange take place somewhere near Zagreb, since the guerrillas would soon be operating extensively in that direction.

The delegations then moved on to the second point of discussion, which revolved around the Partisan request that the NOVJ be acknowledged by the German occupation forces as a regular army. The Partisans’ wish for recognition was as old as the insurgency itself and they expressed it on numerous occasions at the local level, be it indirectly (in their propaganda directed at German prisoners), or directly (in an ultimatum to the German garrison in Kraljevo in October 1941). On Velebit’s initiative, the wish was made into a formal request and made at “top level” during this round of negotiations.³⁴⁵ As expected, the German envoys said that they had no authority on this matter but that they would pass on the request, as a part of the written protocol, to their superiors.

Once the formal part of the negotiations was concluded, Velebit engaged his German counterparts in a lengthy conversation on political issues. According to Kulich, “Dr. Petrović [Velebit’s false name] speaks perfect German and gives away the impression of anything else but a fanatical Communist [...] His views concerning the current state of affairs in Croatia, the country’s leadership and lesser authorities are completely correct”. Velebit then went on to explain the political program of the Partisan movement. It was centered on uniting all ethnic groups in the country and the creation of new Yugoslavia (abolition of the monarchy was not mentioned). Velebit added that the Partisans would not repeat the mistake of having one ethnic group dominating the others, as was the case in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and especially in the NDH. The conversation then moved to the war situation in general. The Partisan envoy said that Germany faced a well-equipped and brave enemy in Soviet Russia, and that the failure of capturing the oil reserves in the Caucasus would have grave consequences for the Wehrmacht’s ability to wage war in the future. The American intervention in North Africa would eventually lead to the Axis withdrawal from the continent, which would in turn expose their positions in the Mediterranean. Once Italy is invaded by the Anglo-Americans, the Axis downfall would soon follow. Germany would simply have no available reserves to hold all of her positions, whether in the East, or in Italy or in the Balkans. Velebit added that there were vast differences between the Italian fascists and the Italian army. Furthermore, Italy was cooperating with the Chetniks of Draža Mihailović, who

³⁴⁴ Velebit was in all probability referring to Andrija Hebrang.

³⁴⁵ Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 199.

was at the same time Minister of War in the government-in-exile in London; Velebit asked how Germany could tolerate this.

As the conversation reverted to the Yugoslav matters, Ott said that at his last meeting with “Šunjevarić” (Marijan Stilinović), the latter “offered [Partisan] co-operation with the German troops similar to that which the Italians enjoyed with the so-called ‘Anti-Communists’ [Chetniks] in Herzegovina”. Velebit replied that, in general, co-operation was possible on certain questions, but that he would have to inform himself before giving any definitive answers. “One way or the other”, the Partisan envoy said, “[the Partisans] were and are still the enemies of the Chetniks and the Anglo-American plutocrats”. Ott then mentioned the “neutral zone”, General Horstenau’s idea which involved granting the Partisans a certain territory from which they could carry out the civil war against the Chetniks unmolested by the German occupation forces; the Partisans, for their part, would have to abstain from attacking the German interests in the country. Velebit countered with a question of whether the Germans would be willing to furnish weapons to the Partisans as the Italians were doing with the Chetniks. Ott and Kulich denied this possibility, pointing out to the fact that, by withdrawing from other areas, the Partisans would be able to achieve numerical preponderance in the neutral zone and supply themselves with arms on the spot, ostensibly by taking it away from the Chetniks. Velebit replied that, if the proposition was to be accepted, the Partisans would have to be granted a sizeable piece of territory. He added that he would convey the details of the conversation to his superiors and ask for their opinion on the matter, conveying their response to the Partisans at their next meeting.³⁴⁶

While these talks were being held, the German military and civilian authorities were trying to obtain the release of those individuals from the Partisan list from their Croatian allies. This proved, as had previously been the case, to be an up-hill struggle as the Ustashe did everything they could to avoid relinquishing the captured Partisans. SS-Sergeant Stüwe, the liaison officer of the German police attaché to the “Ustashe Surveillance Service” (*Ustaška nadzorna služba*, UNS), had to wait for four days before being admitted to the chief of the UNS, Drago Jilek on 9 November. Two days later, the UNS reported its findings on the four persons whom the Germans wanted: Ozren Novosel and Stjepan Kokot had been transferred from Jasenovac and were now in the UNS prison in Zagreb; Zvonko Bilan was in

³⁴⁶ Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, pp. 294-300. Four days later in the same area, the Ustashe and Partisans had conducted a prisoner exchange: 27 citizens of Livno were exchanged for an unknown number of captured Partisans: AMBiH, Fond UNS, 615-3, Subject: exchange of Partisans for our people (20 December 1942). There is no evidence that this exchange was a subject of the talks between Velebit and Ott; it was a purely local affair.

the same camp and his transfer to Zagreb had already been approved; Jelka Šutić was not to be found in any of the camps or prisons. If the good news had raised the Germans' spirits, they were sorely disappointed on the following day. Dr Benak, the chief of the 3rd (anti-Communist) Directorate of the UNS called Stüwe and told him that Bilan had actually died in Jasenovac on 26 October. This meant that only two out of the four persons from the Partisan list were secured. Benak offered three other Jasenovac inmates instead; they would be made ready for the exchange and sent to Zagreb as soon as possible. On the same day, the SS-liaison officer went to the UNS prison to collect Novosel and Kokot. To his dismay, he was told that Novosel was never transferred out of Jasenovac and that Kokot had been released and went to his native village on parole; UNS officials whom he met there even showed him a written order to release all four of the people from the original list as soon as they came into their custody. Stüwe immediately tried to reach Jilek and Benak but to no avail. He tried again on the 13th with the same result: he was told that neither of them was available as they had been summoned to see Pavelić; Benak merely left him a message that he had issued an order for Kokot's arrest. Resigned, Stüwe reported the state of affairs to Helm and Kasche, implying that without applying further pressure, the Ustashe would not cooperate. The ambassador said he would intervene with the chief of Zagreb police when he met him on Saturday, 14 November.³⁴⁷

On Monday, 16 November 1942, Stüwe went to another meeting with Jilek and Benak and protested about the handling of the case of Novosel and Kokot. The UNS officials assured him of their good will by making a telephone call to Jasenovac camp in his presence ordering the immediate transfer of Novosel to Zagreb. Furthermore, Jilek officially made Benak responsible for the matters of prisoner-exchange. The situation appeared to finally be moving in the right direction that Monday as the news came in the early evening that Kokot had been arrested and put into the *Feldkommandatur*'s prison. The next two days proved to be bitterly disappointing to the Germans, however. On the 17th, Benak informed Stüwe that Novosel had been killed while trying to escape. The following day, it came to light that two of the three "replacement" hostages from Jasenovac promised on 11 November had died in the previous week. Benak candidly added that, since one can assume that the third had died as well, the UNS had made three other Partisan suspects available for the exchange. The Germans had no choice but to accept and on 20 November, all four hostages were finally in German custody in

³⁴⁷ NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311674-8, Memorandum (12-13 November 1942).

Zagreb. Their departure for Sarajevo could take place as soon as the date and place of the exchange was negotiated.³⁴⁸

The Germans were enraged over the barely concealed attempts by the Ustashe to hamper the exchange. Stüwe was told by NDH officials that they took a dim view of the exchanges, especially of high-ranking Communists whose capture came only as a result of months, sometimes even years of painstaking detective efforts. One police official said that the agents were at one point on the verge of mutiny as they heard these precious captives were to be exchanged. Stüwe wrote that this attitude was understandable given the current situation in the country, but that the conduct of the NDH police was nevertheless “shameful”.³⁴⁹ The Plenipotentiary-General had by then received Ott’s report from Livno that included Velebit’s statement concerning Ustashe double-dealing. Horstenau intended to bring up the topic on his meeting with Pavelić scheduled for 12 December 1942. The subject was, however, not discussed for unknown reasons.³⁵⁰ Yet, on the same day, the NDH Ministry of Foreign Affairs delivered a note to the German embassy protesting the way the Germans had snatched Vanda Novosel from the police custody. The note also stated that “the arrangement between the German military and the Croatian authorities must be honored at all times” and requested that the embassy intervene at “appropriate places” to this effect. Kasche’s response was mild (as they usually were when dealing with complaints from the officials in Zagreb), merely stating that the release of Novosel was agreed with the police authorities beforehand and that the Germans had no intention of acting without the knowledge of the NDH government. The only hint that the ambassador gave regarding his displeasure at the tone of Zagreb’s note was that he waited for almost a month-and-a-half before delivering his answer.³⁵¹

It was clear to all that the success of future exchanges would be jeopardized if the NDH authorities remained solely responsible for furnishing the needed prisoners. On 1 December 1942, the embassy councilor Herbert von Troll-Obergfell wrote a letter to

³⁴⁸ NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311661-4, Sequel to memorandum of 12 November (25 November 1942); *ibid.*, H311665, Transfer of prisoner Stefan Kokot (17 November 1942); *ibid.*, H311666, Death of Ozren Novosel (17 November 1942). The other four exchange prisoners (female Partisans of the 3rd Sandžak Brigade) arrived from Banja Luka to Sarajevo several days earlier: NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000036, War diary of the intelligence section (entry for 16 November 1942).

³⁴⁹ NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311664, Sequel to memorandum of 12 November (25 November 1942). On 13 November Consul Gördes reported to Kasche that on 23 October, the 718th infantry Division had made a written request to UNS in Sarajevo not to move Bilan without the division’s explicit approval. The Ustashe, however, transferred him to Jasenovac on the very same day: *ibid.*, H311672, Cable to embassy in Zagreb (13 November 1942).

³⁵⁰ NAW, T-501, Roll 267, 000352, Notice for conference with Poglavnik on 12 December 1942 (undated); *ibid.*, 000349, Conclusions of conference with Poglavnik on 12 December 1942.

³⁵¹ Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, p. 281.

Horstenau in which he suggested that the German army keep some of the prisoners captured during anti-guerrilla operations for exchange. As a concession, the NDH police would be given the opportunity to question them and the release of higher KPJ functionaries would require an approval of the German police attaché.³⁵² The idea that the occupation forces should have their own pool of exchange prisoners was taken up by the German military authorities. On 16 January 1943, representatives of Horstenau's and Lütters' staff met to discuss the handling of prisoners in the upcoming winter operations. The plan was to set up special commissions, partly staffed with SD-personnel, with each German division. Their task would be to filter captives according to how suspicious they appeared. Whereas Lütters opposed NDH officials taking part in the selection proceedings, Horstenau lobbied for it to ensure that the troops unfamiliar with circumstances in their operating areas do not act "radically" in friendly villages. Those suspicious of helping the guerrillas would be sent to the camp at Zemun, from where they would be shipped to Norway; unsuspicious ones were to be kept at the transit camp at Osijek prior to being sent to Germany for labor; those who needed further observation were destined for the "Special Camp I" at Sisak. The fourth group (actually, the first one on the list) were the "exchange prisoners, including some 150 prominent figures and 300 reprisal hostages who are to be kept at the disposal of the Commanding General".³⁵³

One important aspect of the negotiations in Livno and the concurrent events in Zagreb should be mentioned here, namely the involvement of the SS and the German police authorities. The captain of the Wehrmacht, Kulich, who took part in the talks in Livno was in fact none other than SS Major Dr. Alfred Heinrich, the chief of the SD expository in Sarajevo. His presence at the talks concerning prisoner exchange surprised his superior in Belgrade, SS Colonel Emanuel Schäffer, who added the word "impossible" with red pencil on the margin of Heinrich's report.³⁵⁴ Schäffer's reaction was due more by the fact that his subordinate acted independently, rather than by the news that the Germans in the NDH were negotiating with the Communists over a prisoner exchange. The SD in Belgrade was informed of the exchange proceedings in August 1942 and was even requested by the German authorities in Zagreb to secure at least one of its hostages for that exchange, which it did.³⁵⁵ Anyway, Heinrich's

³⁵² NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311659-60, Letter to Plenipotentiary General (1 December 1942).

³⁵³ NAW, T-501, Roll 267, 000428-30, Memorandum for conference on treatment of expected prisoners (16 January 1943).

³⁵⁴ Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, p. 81.

³⁵⁵ Vladimir Dedijer's wife Olga was arrested in Belgrade in early 1942. Ranković included her name on the list of the persons wanted in exchange for the Germans from Livno. She was therefore transferred from Belgrade

involvement in the negotiations was reported to the Reich's Main Security Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA) at the beginning of December. The reply came on 25 January 1943:

*"[...] The chief of the IV Directorate [Gestapo] considers [Heinrich's involvement] inappropriate. The police attaché in Zagreb has also been instructed not to take part in these negotiations, unless requested by the German Embassy".*³⁵⁶

In his reply, which was sent the next day, Schäffer stated that Heinrich's presence during the talks was expressly requested by the 718th Infantry Division in Sarajevo. Furthermore, he added that he had prohibited Heinrich from taking further actions of this kind the moment he received his report. The SS clearly did not want to get involved in a delicate issue such as negotiating with Communist guerrillas and wished for the army to take the blame in case Berlin intervened decisively against it. The military and diplomatic instances in Zagreb had by then already divided responsibilities pertaining to prisoner exchange. Kasche's letter to Horstenau on 20 January 1943 reaffirmed that the treatment of exchange prisoners and their exchange was under the aegis of the army. "Because of the political repercussions", the task of the German embassy (and consequently of the chief SS representative in the country, Helm) would be merely to secure the needed prisoners from the NDH authorities.³⁵⁷ As a consequence of this arrangement and of the unwillingness of the top circles of the SS to get directly involved with the prisoner exchanges, Helm kept himself out of the negotiations for the duration of the war. This, off course, did not mean that the police and security apparatus were not informed of prisoner exchanges and contacts with the Partisans. Apart from the intelligence received through official channels from Kasche and Horstenau and his own net of agents, Helm could count on Ott to provide him with first-hand details about the proceedings.³⁵⁸

Heinrich's report about the talks in Livno is important in one additional respect. Being an internal document written exclusively for his superior in Belgrade, Heinrich saw nothing problematic in openly explaining the negotiating tactics employed by the German side:

"The German ambassador suggested to Mr. Ott to broach the following possibility in his private conversations with Partisan negotiators: to avoid conflict that was in neither

to the NDH and subsequently rejoined her husband on 5 September: Dedijer, *Dnevnik*, pp. 206-7, entries for 2 and 7 September 1942.

³⁵⁶ Facsimile of the telegram printed in Odić, *Neostvoreni planovi*, p. 85.

³⁵⁷ NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311656, Subject: Jajce prisoner-exchange (20 January 1943).

³⁵⁸ *Nemačka obaveštajna služba*, Vol. VI, p. 481; Odić, *Neostvoreni planovi*, p. 253.

party's interest, the Partisans should approach the Germans about establishing a neutral zone".³⁵⁹

This is one of the rare pieces of written evidence which illustrates just how the German authorities were keen to make the Partisans appear as the party which gave the initiative for talks on sensitive issues. Consequently, the reader should treat with caution those reports made to Berlin.³⁶⁰

Did the contacts between the two sides in the second half of 1942 have a mitigating effect on the brutal guerrilla war raging in Yugoslavia? In order to get an answer to this question we must briefly analyze the conduct of the warring parties towards prisoners at the time. On 22 October 1942, shortly before Bader's intelligence officer gave an optimistic view of Tito as Germany's future trading partner, the 718th Infantry Division released a set of instructions concerning the treatment of captives. The provisions in the document weren't any milder from those which had been valid since March; actually, their wording was even harsher. Anyone caught with a weapon, including "invalids, sick, pregnant women and persons over 60 years of age", was to be shot after a short interrogation. Enemy non-combatants (medical personnel, rear-services) and all those caught without weapons but suspected of helping the enemy were to be taken to the division's prison in the Alexander Barracks in Sarajevo.³⁶¹ Judging by the casualty returns, the order remained a mere formality and the war continued to be conducted without any restraints. In the period from 16 to 25 October 1942, the German occupation forces reported 2,156 guerrilla casualties in the NDH, capturing at the same time only 383 rifles, 14 machine-guns, 48 pistols and 1 cannon.³⁶² The next report, for the period from 26 October to 5 November, contained even greater discrepancies: 1,895 guerrilla losses compared to 158 rifles and 29 machine-guns captured.³⁶³ These returns hardly differed from the ones from late August and early September when the negotiations for the first prisoner exchange were being successfully concluded.³⁶⁴ In short, these had next to no impact on the German counter-insurgency doctrine, which remained centered on the indiscriminate application of violence.

³⁵⁹ Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, p. 301.

³⁶⁰ In his post-war interrogation, Hans Ott confirmed that he brought up the sensitive subject on orders of General Horstenau: HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 561 Tartaglia, Statement of Hans Ott.

³⁶¹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000126, Subject: prisoners (22 October 1942).

³⁶² NAW, T-501, Roll 352, 000431, Situation report for the period 16-25 October 1942 (26 October 1942).

³⁶³ Ibid., 000525, Situation report for the period 1-10 November 1942 (11 November 1942).

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 000097, Situation report for the period 1-10 September 1942 (11 September 1942).

The conduct of the fighting units remained very much the same in part because they had no opportunity to exchange their own members: they had so far acted merely as go-betweens for the exchange of German civilians. By late December, even such limited participation in the contacts with the Partisans was beginning to change the attitude towards the enemy. The 714th Infantry Division received at least two letters from the Partisans in late October and late November concerning the planned exchange of the Germans from Jajce. The intelligence on the increasing regularization within the guerrilla army, which included the forming of divisions and corps and the adopting of regular battlefield tactics, was confirmed in the second letter which was signed by the "1st Assault Corps".³⁶⁵ The German division decided to play on this newly-found self-esteem of the Partisans by asking for a courtesy common among regular armies. The second week of December 1942 was marked by heavy fighting in the Sanski Most-Prijedor area, which had cost the German occupation forces several dozen dead and over a hundred wounded.³⁶⁶ Several days after the fighting had subsided, the German garrison in Prijedor made a "kind request" to the nearest Partisan unit to deliver the bodies of the German soldiers which remained on their side of the front line. The garrison also asked for the release of any wounded soldiers in order to provide them with medical help. The Yugoslav sources differ as to whether the Germans extended their request to include six of their missing soldiers. It is highly unlikely that the Germans would ask for the prisoners without offering something (or somebody) in return; the offer of prisoner exchange is, however, not mentioned in any of the sources. One way or another, the Partisan battalion commander replied sternly that his battalion had no enemy wounded in their custody and that the Germans would have to look for the corpses of their men in the Sana River. Although unsuccessful, this was the first time a German unit in the field showed initiative and approached the Partisans with such a request. To be sure, the Germans who made the request took pains to make it look as informal as possible: it was delivered verbally by two civilians from Prijedor.³⁶⁷ Despite the fact that the highest commands were communicating through letters and authorized envoys, the atmosphere was not yet ripe for direct, official communication with the guerrillas on a local level.

The attitude of the Partisans towards the taking of German prisoners continued to vary throughout this period. Here we must differentiate between the units around the Supreme HQ

³⁶⁵ NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 001181, Situation report (26 November 1942).

³⁶⁶ NAW, T-314, Roll 554, 000287, Situation estimate for the period 7-16 December 1942; *ibid.*, 000292, Situation estimate for the period 17-26 December 1942.

³⁶⁷ Borko Arsenić, "Bitka završena u virovima Sane" in *Prva krajiška udarna proleterska brigada - sjećanja boraca* (Skupština opštine Prijedor: 1981), p. 398; Ljubomir Zastavniković, "Mrtvački sanduci ostali su na obali Sane" in: *ibid.*, pp. 404-5.

and Partisan units in other parts of the NDH. The former were being instructed to spare enemy prisoners in order to exchange them, as corroborated by a written order drafted during the attack on Bihać dated 1 November 1942.³⁶⁸ As with similar orders which had appeared in Bosnia before, this one does not specify if this provision was applicable to the Germans as it was to the Croatian Home Guards. Evidence that it was is present in the fact that by the early 1943 the main body of the NOVJ had some twenty German prisoners from battles around Sitnica and Prijedor in November and December 1942.³⁶⁹ At that same time, the exchange of prisoners became an officially recognized proceeding with the units around the Supreme HQ. Whether a prisoner was deemed worth exchanging or not could decide whether he lived or died. The order of the 1st Krajina Brigade for the attack on Bosanski Novi on 26 November 1942 read “all prisoners who deserve a death sentence or cannot be exchanged are to be liquidated on the spot”.³⁷⁰

Other units facing off against the Germans in this period included those in Slavonia. They were isolated from the main body of the Partisan army in Western Bosnia and adjoining parts of Croatia by large swaths of enemy-held territory. Communication with the headquarters was sporadic at best and was maintained exclusively through couriers. As a consequence, the local guerrillas more or less had a free hand in deciding how to treat their captives. On 6 September 1942, Croatian Partisans attacked the oil wells at Gojilo which were defended by a Home Guard garrison and a detachment of Germans. Whilst most of the latter were killed during the attack, the Communist-led guerrillas managed to capture at least three of them.³⁷¹ According to a statement of a captured Partisan, all captured Germans in Gojilo were executed on the spot.³⁷² Four days later, the same units which had made this attack, stormed the village of Velika Mlinska defended by some thirty ethnic Germans. Four of them were captured and released, a move “that had a tremendous [propaganda] effect”.³⁷³ These two actions illustrate how the treatment of enemy prisoners varied even on a daily basis with Germans being both executed and released (the latter course of action is especially worth mentioning given the advanced phase of the war and the hatred towards the ethnic Germans). There is no evidence that the local Partisans in Northern and North-Eastern Croatia attempted

³⁶⁸ *Zbornik/V/9/9*, Order of 8th Croatian Brigade for attack on Bihać (1 November 1942). Even more important than the shift in the official line was the realization on the part of lower-ranking Partisan officers that prisoners were now worth more alive than dead: Gajo Vojvodić, *Priča jednog proletera* (Cetinje: Obod, 1987), p. 301.

³⁶⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 001461, Group interrogation (23 March 1943). No Germans were in Bihać at the time of its capture.

³⁷⁰ *Zbornik/IV/35/359*, Order of the 1st Krajina Brigade for attack on Bosanski Novi (26 November 1942).

³⁷¹ *Zbornik/V/7/69*, Report of 1st Slavonian Detachment on attack on Gojilo (6 September 1942).

³⁷² NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 001386, Enemy intelligence report No. 3 (7 December 1942).

³⁷³ *Zbornik/V/7/211*, Report to Main Partisan HQ for Banija (22 September 1942).

to exchange prisoners with the Germans in 1942. The absence of such an initiative can be partly attributed to the fact that two sides had been facing each other in Croatia for only a short period and had no time, opportunity or need to change their ways. Therefore, the capture of a small number of German soldiers usually resulted in their immediate execution.³⁷⁴ Still, there are indications that by the late Fall of 1942 the local Partisan commands began taking measures aimed at curbing arbitrary violence towards the enemy prisoners: an order of the 1st Slavonian Assault Brigade from 21 November explicitly forbids its fighters to mete out justice on their own; this should be an exclusive prerogative of the brigade's HQ. Executing prisoners *per se* was hereby not abolished. The order, although primarily aimed at improving discipline, can still be viewed as a small step toward the bettering of the prisoners' lot.³⁷⁵

As far as the Partisans in Croatia were concerned, ideological reasons do not seem to have posed a major obstacle in seeking a prisoner exchange. As long as an agreement over the release of their fighters could be worked out, the Partisans had no qualms about negotiating with their foes, be they Italians,³⁷⁶ or even Ustashe.³⁷⁷ As they had positive experiences with both, the Partisans took pains to secure as many prisoners as could be exchanged. They had no similar experiences with the German occupation forces and were consequently less inclined to spare Germans.

The treatment of exchange prisoners varied, but their lot was on the whole much better than of those who were destined either for the firing squad, concentration camp or forced labor. Vanda Novosel, who was "kidnapped" by the Germans from the Ustashe from a Zagreb hospital, was transferred to Sarajevo at the beginning of November and placed in the local German prison. She spent two weeks there until her handover could be arranged. Novosel related her experiences while in captivity as follows:

³⁷⁴ *Zbornik/V/6/277*, Activity report of 3rd Operational Zone for the period March-August 1942 (Entry for 27 July 1942); *ibid.*, 370, Report of police district Nova Gradiška (27 August 1942).

³⁷⁵ *Zbornik/V/9/282*, Order of 1st Slavonian Assault Brigade for attack on Velika (21 November 1942).

³⁷⁶ According to the documents published in *Zbornik*, the Croatian Partisans were swapping prisoners with the Italians throughout 1942. See for instance *Zbornik/V/3/101-2*, 129, 221-2; *Zbornik/V/4/ 70-1,176*; *Zbornik/V/5/115*, 137; *Zbornik/V/6/ 13-14*, 316.

³⁷⁷ The success of the so-called "Slavonian Exchange", Hebrang and no less than 32 Partisans were traded for two high-ranking Ustashe policemen, enticed the local Partisans to try and negotiate the exchange of four government officials captured on 22 October 1942 near Nova Gradiška: *Zbornik/V/9/231*, Report of 3rd Operational Zone to Main HQ for Croatia (20 November 1942). There was also an attempt to exchange Ustashe prisoners in mid-December on the slopes of the Papuk Mountain: *Zbornik/V/10/207*, Report of 5th Operational Zone to Main HQ for Croatia (18 December 1942). An order of the 6th Division of the 1st Croatian Corps dated 27 December stipulated that captured officers, NCOs and „prominent Ustashe“ should be immediately brought to the division's HQ: *Zbornik/V/10/288*.

*“The Germans told me I would be treated very correctly and receive food from the officer’s mess. And whether you believe it or not, I had butter for breakfast every morning! I reckoned that before going to the Partisans, I’d better check my teeth. Therefore, I requested to be allowed to visit the dentist. [The request was granted] and I went to the dentist several times accompanied by a guard”.*³⁷⁸

Novosel, together with Franz Leinschütz (the “Elektro-Bosna” employee serving as a courier between the two sides), left Sarajevo on or about 20 November and after several days of journey by train and on foot reached the Partisan lines around Bosanski Petrovac.³⁷⁹ With her arrival, the exchange at Studeno Vrelo was finally concluded.

After roughly two months of absence, on 25 January 1943, Leinschütz appeared again in the headquarters of the 718th Infantry Division in Sarajevo. He was sent by the Partisans to hasten the long-overdue exchange of the “Elektro-Bosna” employees from Jajce and German soldiers captured in the meantime.³⁸⁰ The intelligence section of the aforementioned division proceeded immediately to interrogate the courier about the condition of these people. Whereas there were no lavish dinners this time, the treatment of the prisoners was still “correct according to Partisan standards”. They were quartered in a building in Bosanski Petrovac and could move freely between the (heated) rooms. The food was monotonous and consisted of a half-loaf of bread, meat and beans. The biggest problem was hygiene: the prisoners were infested with lice most of the time; they were first de-loused only in January. Likewise, they could bath only when the Partisans weren’t using the facilities of the Hygienic Institute located in the town. Leinschütz also made interesting observations concerning the differences in the treatment of prisoners of various Axis formations. Home Guard officers were left in possession of the money they had with them, while the Germans were initially not (this practice changed in the interim).³⁸¹ Both the Italians (some twenty Italian prisoners were in Bosanski Petrovac) and the Germans had to swap their clothes for whatever their captors

³⁷⁸ Interview with Vanda Novosel in: TV-documentary „Tito-posljednji svjedoci testamenta“ (Hrvatska radio-televizija: 2011), Episode 6.

³⁷⁹ Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, Vol. III, pp. 280-1.

³⁸⁰ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2222, 414, Prisoner exchange (undated); *ibid.*, 445, List of prisoners in Partisan captivity (undated). Jajce was retaken by the Wehrmacht in late October and then lost to the Partisans once more in late November. On this occasion, the latter captured five Croat chemical engineers and technicians of “Elektro-Bosna”. On 14 December 1942, the company made an official request to Glaise-Horstenau to include these men into the exchange proceedings: NAW, T-120, Roll 5800, H311657-8, Exchange of leading personalities in Partisan hands (14 December 1942).

³⁸¹ Preferential treatment of the captured Domobranci over Germans was not coincidental. The Germans learned from captured Partisan documents that the Home Guards should be treated exceptionally well in order to win them over for the Partisan cause. The Germans, on the contrary, should be treated with “hostility”: NAW, T-315, Roll 2258, 001342, Enemy intelligence report No. 4 (15 December 1942).

provided them with; the Italians, however, could move freely about the town whereas the Germans could not. All were employed as manual labor, but Leinschütz pointed out to the fact that the Germans and not the Italians had to do heavy jobs like woodcutting. He also added that the only officer among the Italians was employed in drawing propaganda posters for the guerrillas.³⁸²

Owing to severe winter weather and heavy fighting across western Bosnia, Leinschütz's speedy return to his captors was impossible. The Germans from Bosanski Petrovac would have to wait for another two months before they could rejoin their compatriots. The course of events would place them in the midst of one of the most controversial episodes of the Second World War in Yugoslavia.

5. Conclusion

After the downfall of "Užice Republic" in late November 1941, the focus of the war was transferred from occupied Serbia to the neighboring "Independent State of Croatia". Unlike in Serbia, there were comparatively few encounters between the Partisans and the Germans west of the Drina River for the better part of 1942. The crisis within the Communist-led guerrillas and their concentration on domestic enemies, as well as the weak German presence in the country were responsible for a negligible number of German prisoners taken by the Partisans. Notwithstanding the hostility towards the German prisoners as a consequence of the Wehrmacht's brutal counter-insurgency tactics employed in Serbia and, to a lesser extent, in Croatia as well, the Partisans in the NDH made several local attempts to exchange prisoners. After a group of German civilians was captured in Livno in August 1942, the exchange of prisoners was increasingly negotiated between the highest commands of both sides. These talks were perceived by all as a means to sound out the enemy's intentions and political aims. Consequently, both the Partisans and the Germans were keen on continuing them into 1943 as well.

During the first phase of the uprising in the NDH (July 1941-May 1942), the insurgents and the Germans negotiated several times over a prisoner exchange. As in Serbia, these were purely local affairs, motivated by the guerrillas' wish to save their comrades from Ustashe or German captivity. The exchange of prisoners was considered legitimate by the

³⁸² NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 001304-5, Interrogation of Franz Leinschütz (25 January 1943).

Bosnian Partisans, even if it involved contacts with the hated Croatian puppet state. Since the Ozren Partisan Detachment had some experience in these matters, it is no surprise they went purposefully on a prisoner hunt in early April 1942 in the hope that the Germans would agree to an exchange as well. The Partisans in east Herzegovina may have not entered such deals themselves prior to March 1942, but were aware of them because of the close ties with their Montenegrin comrades who often exchanged prisoners with the Italians. At first they hoped to receive badly needed supplies in exchange for the captured Germans of the bauxite column, but readily accepted the offer to receive their incarcerated fighters instead. Even the Herzegovinian Partisans, who were counted among the most fanatical in the whole country, were willing to sacrifice some of their ideological purity to the concrete, pressing needs of the war.

The Germans in the NDH were compelled to make similar compromises. Their force, consisting of one under-strength division and several security battalions, was thinly spread across the province and was struggling hard to both secure the important industrial objects and to quell the ever-growing flames of the uprising. Consequently, they acted just as their comrades in tiny, isolated garrisons in Serbia had the previous summer. They disregarded the orders which strictly prohibited any negotiations with the insurgents in order to save their men, each of whom was hard to replace. Given their own counter-insurgency practices, they could safely assume what fate awaited the prisoners if they were not exchanged. The concern of the Germans for the employees of their organizations tasked with the exploitation of natural resources in the NDH was especially great. Already in August 1941, the Germans intervened on behalf of the two members of the “Organization Todt” who were captured by insurgents in western Bosnia. The capture of 45 members of the bauxite column in March 1942 at Stolac set in motion a concerted effort by the German embassy, the Wehrmacht’s representatives in Zagreb and Commander-in-Chief South-East to try to exchange them with Italian mediation. Notwithstanding the relative flexibility in the matter of prisoner exchange itself, the Germans were wary about involving themselves openly in these matters. Their prime concern was not to grant legitimacy to the guerrillas by sitting at the negotiating table with them- which was exactly what the Partisans were trying to achieve through the exchange of prisoners. Therefore, they always sought to act through intermediaries, be it Croatian authorities, civilian couriers, or Italians commands.

Until August 1942, the attempts at prisoner exchange were local in nature; their only purpose being to save lives. The capture of “Hansa-Leichtmetall” mining experts at Livno and

the employees of the “Elektro-Bosna” company in Jajce brought a new dimension to the Partisan-German contacts. For the first time, the highest military and political authorities on both sides were involved in talks over far more important topics beyond the mere swapping of prisoners. It is also important to note that the Germans did not act through intermediaries this time, but that the negotiating was done directly by their military, political, SS and police representatives. Discontent with the Ustashe rule and Italian policy in the Balkans, as well as worry concerning Germany’s own economic interests was the main motive behind German dialogue with the Partisans about the possibility of some kind of political settlement. If the latter would cease attacking lines of communication and allow the exploitation of ores, then the Germans would be willing to grant them a territory from whence the Partisans would be able to wage war against the Chetniks unhindered by the German occupation forces. The curbing of Ustashe power, if not their outright removal, was also held to be a legitimate prospect. The Communist-led guerrillas for their part sought to gain privileged status for their captured and wounded which would win them recognition as a co-belligerent side in a political sense as well. Aware that negotiating with the enemy could produce a terrible backlash from Moscow and Berlin, both Tito and the Germans in Zagreb were careful about how they reported about the proceedings to their superiors. They all reported that the enemy was the one who gave the initiative for the talks and that their primary concern was to retrieve their men safely. Whereas Tito remained silent about the political dimension of the talks in his cables to the Comintern, Horstenau did (unofficially) inform his superiors about what was being discussed and managed to receive their reluctant approval for the continuation of the contacts. Hitler, who was known to be utterly against any sort of political compromise (especially with an enemy whom he considered to be “bandits”) voiced his displeasure at the talks held in Glamoč and Zagreb. Interestingly, however, he did not intervene decidedly against this flagrant breach of discipline on the part of the German army and diplomatic representatives in the NDH. This may have to do with the fact that Horstenau managed to persuade the chief of the Armed Forces High Command, Keitel, to allow him to continue the game with Tito’s representatives, ostensibly for reasons of intelligence gathering.

The gathering of intelligence was the prime motive for both sides, as no one (except maybe Kasche) really believed in a political settlement. The exchange of prisoners and the accompanying talks were a unique opportunity to sound out the enemy’s opinions, intentions and to spy on him in general. The Germans were in dire need of intelligence on their toughest enemy in the region: before engineer Ott and other Germans from Livno made their reports, they knew very little of the organization and inner workings of the main Partisan force.

Especially crucial was the intelligence the returnees brought concerning Tito, about whose person the German authorities knew next to nothing. The contacts were as valuable to the Partisans in this respect as they were to the Germans. Although they had a wide net of agents and sympathizers within the political and military establishment of the Ustashe state, they had none within the German occupation apparatus. The negotiations over prisoner exchange brought surprising intelligence on the troubled nature of the relations between the Germans and their allies. The Partisans consequently tried to exploit German suspicions regarding the Italians. They fed their negotiating partners with information on the alleged anti-German actions of the former, like the refusal to exchange the personnel of the bauxite column or maintaining a link to the Western Allies through the Chetniks. Better treatment of Italian prisoners by the guerrillas, although not staged for propaganda purposes, also served to deepen German suspicion towards their allies. In short, intelligence and propaganda dividends were great enough to warrant the continuing interests on both sides for the continuation of their contacts.

The successful exchange of prisoners near Livno in September 1942 helped alter the ruthless nature of guerrilla war on the territory of the NDH to a certain degree. This was especially true for the Partisan forces subordinated directly to Tito. Whereas the German engineers from Livno escaped execution only thanks to Ott's initiative, by early November the Partisan units were officially instructed to spare prisoners so that they could be exchanged. The guerrilla units not directly under the control of the Supreme HQ, on the contrary, still had a mixed record in the matter of prisoner-taking. The fate of the latter was decided by conditions on the ground and the reasoning of local commanders. As they had no experience in such deals with their German counterparts, they were less likely to spare Germans than Italians, or in some cases, even Ustashe. The German occupation forces, for their own part, largely continued applying their earlier policies towards the captured guerrillas, the majority of whom were still executed immediately after capture. Only after it became clear that the Ustashe were sabotaging the exchange process by deliberately holding back those persons the Partisans wanted did the Germans begin to realize the need of sparing and keeping at least a part of the arrested guerilla suspects in their own custody. The treatment of the few chosen individuals who were destined to be exchanged was relatively good on both sides: they were neither tortured, nor over-worked and they were reasonably well-fed and accommodated.

At the beginning of January 1943, the Partisans sent one of the German civilians captured in late September to the Axis-held territory to optimize the exchange which had been

negotiated both directly and indirectly ever since. His mission was doomed to failure because of the extraordinarily harsh winter and heavy fighting in western Bosnia. The two sides would find themselves sitting across from each other again at the negotiating table only in mid-March. The exchange of prisoners was the means rather than an end of this round of talks.

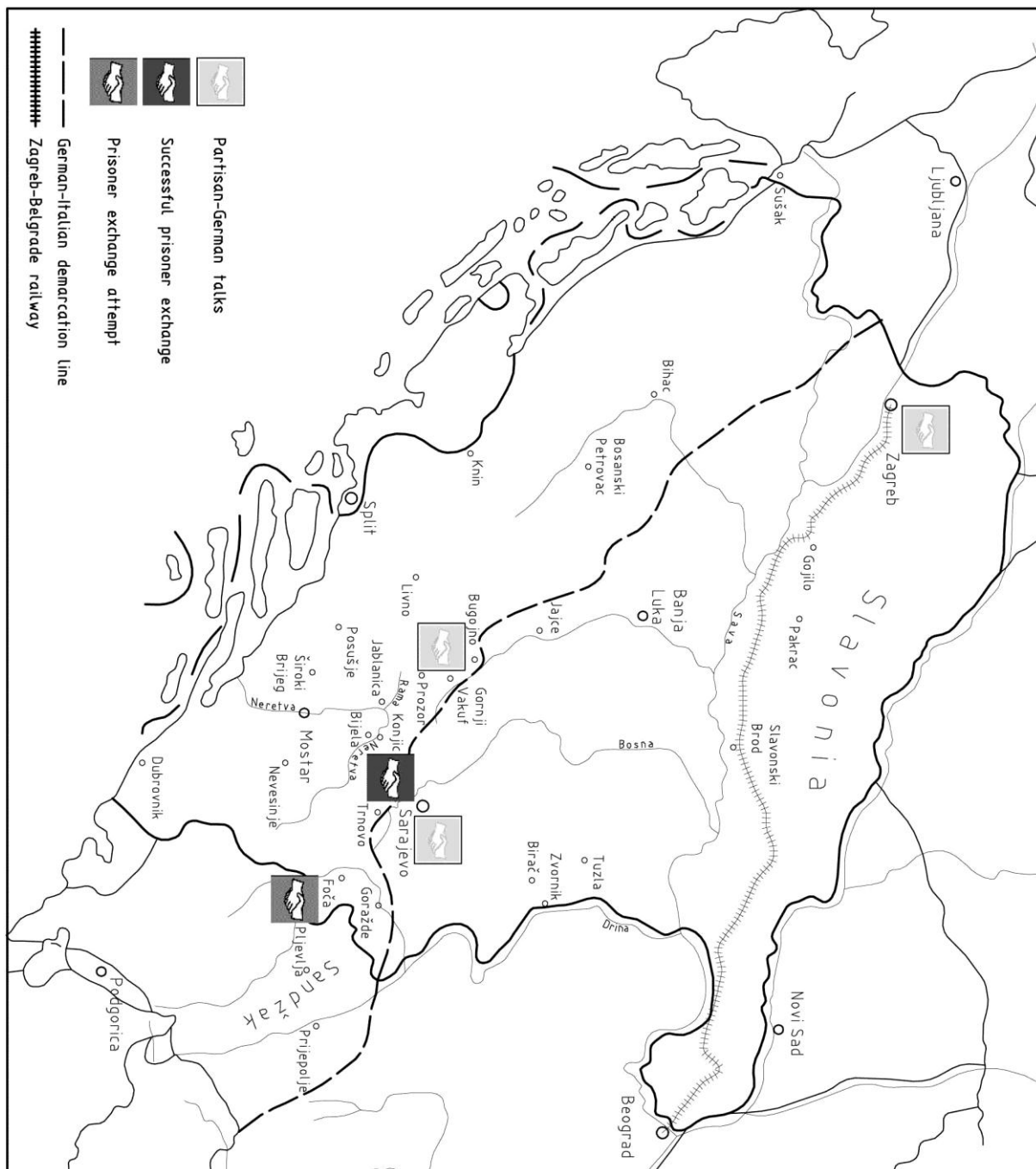


Figure 4: March Negotiations, 1943

Chapter 3: “March negotiations 1943”

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter will be to sketch the most controversial episode of the Partisan-German contacts, namely, the negotiations between the two sides which occurred throughout the early Spring of 1943. Few episodes from the war in Yugoslavia have received as much attention among scholars and from the general public, mainly owing to the alleged cease-fire which was brokered between the Communist-led guerrillas and the German occupation forces. I shall attempt here to provide an objective appraisal of these events using published works as well as new archival materials.

By November 1942, the Third Reich's position was far from satisfactory on all fronts. The brutal battle fought which had been raging amongst the ruins of Stalingrad since August took a decisive turn for worse when, on 19 November, the revitalized Red Army commenced its winter operations aimed at cutting off the German Sixth Army. Within a week, the worst fears of the German leadership materialized when the Soviets sealed a gigantic ring around the doomed army. The beginning of the month also brought a conclusion to the Battle of El Alamein which had been contested for almost two weeks. Its results were disastrous for Rommel's *Afrika Korps*, the remnants of which had to relinquish their foothold in Egypt and undertake a long retreat westwards to Libya. On 8 November, the Anglo-Americans landed in Morocco and Algeria, hoping to trap the Italian-German forces between themselves and Montgomery's armies approaching from the east. This turn of events cast a spotlight on the Mediterranean making it an object of concern for the highest German military leadership. Should the Axis positions in Africa fall, the Allies were sure to continue their offensive by attempting a landing somewhere in the Mediterranean. Aside from Italy, the Balkans were also considered a possible target.

Yugoslavia suddenly gained strategic significance, owing both to its long coast along the Adriatic and the fact that the main German lines of communication to Greece were located there. In any event, reinforcements and supplies which would have to be rushed to Dalmatia or Southern Greece were likely to suffer casualties or face delays owing to the widespread insurgency in the NDH. The main threat to the Axis in the country was the 50,000 square kilometers large territory controlled by the Yugoslav Partisans. It was comprised of parts of Western Bosnia and Herzegovina and the adjacent Croatian regions of Lika, Kordun and Banija. The Germans estimated the number of Partisans there at 63,000, a force to be

reckoned with in the event of an Allied invasion.³⁸³ The second flashpoint in the NDH was Slavonia where numerous Partisan units constituted a serious threat to the all-important Zagreb-Belgrade railway. The Germans were no less worried about the existence of Chetniks in the Italian occupation zone. At a series of meetings in Berlin from 18-20 December 1942, Hitler managed to obtain Italian support for a joint operation in Yugoslavia against “bandits of all kinds”, which also nominally entailed the disarming of the Chetniks serving in the Italian auxiliary militia, MVAC. On 28 December 1942, Hitler released “Instruction No. 47” (*Weisung Nr. 47*) which officially gave the green light for offensive operations in the Balkans.³⁸⁴

Colonel-General Löhr travelled to Rome and held a series of meetings with his Italian opposite members from 3-4 January 1943. After considering a large-scale winter campaign against Slavonian Partisans, Axis high command opted for an operation against the “Tito State” to the south of the Sava River. The operation was code-named “Weiss” and was originally intended to consist of three phases: “Weiss I” was aimed at the encirclement and destruction of the Partisans in the Bihać-Petrovac area; “Weiss II” would then be launched against the Communist guerrillas in the Petrovac-Livno sector and adjoining parts of Dalmatia. Once the Partisans were dealt with, “Weiss III” would target the Chetniks in Eastern Herzegovina. Before the former were liquidated, however, the Italians insisted that there could be no disarmament of the Chetniks: the Germans had to accept grudgingly that the Serbian Royalists would be their allies in the upcoming battle. The Wehrmacht amassed three full divisions as well as elements of two further divisions as well one hundred aircraft for the first phase of Operation “Weiss”. Supplementing this force were three Italian divisions and various NDH units; the grand total of Axis troops was an estimated 90,000 men.³⁸⁵

Although the German commands were aware of gross shortcomings in the operational plan, there was no time to make modifications and operations commenced on schedule on 20 January 1943. The main body of NOVJ, informed well in advance of the Axis preparations, began pulling out of the Bihać area and retreating in to the south-east.³⁸⁶ Harsh winter

³⁸³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000165, Situation report for the period 17-25 December 1942 (26 December 1942). Because of the size and internal organization of the Partisan-controlled territory, the Germans called it „Tito's State“ (*Titostaat*). The Partisan name for it was the „Bihać Republic“ (*Bihaćka republika*).

³⁸⁴ Gaj Trifković, *Schwarz auf Weiss: 1943-Das Jahr der deutschen Großoperationen in Jugoslawien* (unpublished Master thesis, Karl-Franzens University Graz, 2010), pp. 49-50.

³⁸⁵ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 210-1; Pape et al., *Drugi svjetski rat*, p. 244.

³⁸⁶ Supreme HQ had planned a strategic operation in Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo which would be launched from the „Bihać Republic“ as soon as units were rested and refitted. The preliminary moves had been already

weather, skillful rear-guard actions of the guerrillas and the wholesale sabotaging of roads slowed the pace of the Axis advance to a crawl. When the two German pincers met to the south of Bihać on 9 February, the ‘bag’ was by and large empty. “Our own casualties small”, concluded the Army Group E, “and those of the enemy not as high as hoped. Still, OKW pleased with results.”³⁸⁷

The Axis plans for the continuation of the offensive³⁸⁸ were seriously disrupted by the operations of the “Main Operational Group” of the NOVJ, the strike force consisting of five divisions under Tito’s personal command. While the Germans and the Italians were discussing their plans in Rome, the guerrilla leader issued directives for the next phase of withdrawal. In short, the Partisans were to continue their movement to the south-east, smash through the line of Italian garrisons along the Neretva between Mostar and Konjic and cross the river into Eastern Herzegovina. The advance of the Main Operational Group through Western Herzegovina alarmed Berlin, as the bauxite mines were located there. Overnight, the German commands in the NDH were forced to change their plans: the two strongest divisions, the 7th SS and the 369th Infantry, were ordered to secure this strategic area at the cost of allowing the guerrillas to slip away. It was hoped that these could be stopped on the Neretva by the Italians and destroyed by the operations of two weaker German divisions, the 717th and the 718th. The plan appeared to have gone awry by the third week of February: all Italian garrisons in the river valley north of Mostar had been successfully stormed by the Partisans. The only exception was the strategically important Konjic, whose garrison could be reinforced by a mixed German-NDH column at the last moment. Apart from the arrival of the Germans, the fall of the town seemed imminent; once this happened, the road to Eastern Herzegovina would be open to the NOVJ. At this point, Tito made a serious error in judgment: believing that Konjic would soon be taken, he ordered all bridges across the Neretva destroyed, so as to protect his flank against a large force of Chetniks arriving from the east. Much to his dismay, however, the tenacious resistance of the town’s garrison could not be broken. By the beginning of March, the Partisans found themselves in a desperate situation: their only line of retreat was blocked at Konjic; they could not cross the river

been made, with two proletarian and one assault division moved to outside of the Bihać area: Pape et al., *Drugi svjetski rat*, p. 245-6.

³⁸⁷ NAW, T-311, Roll 175,000428-31, Activity report of the operation's section for the period 1-28 February 1943 (1 March 1943).

³⁸⁸ The continuation of the operation was discussed at a conference in Rome in the first week of February. The Italians insisted that „Weiss III“and the disarmament of the Chetniks be cancelled. The Germans saw no alternative but to comply: NAW, T-77, Roll 780, 5507192, War Diary of Armed Forces High Command, entry for 7 February 1943.

elsewhere as all bridges were blown and the Chetniks held the eastern bank; the Italians and Chetniks were advancing along the Neretva from Mostar and the Germans were pressing from the west. The Main Operational Group, the flower of the National Liberation Movement appeared to be facing imminent destruction.³⁸⁹

Judging by the evidence, it would be safe to assume that a large part, if not all of the stranded Partisan army would indeed be physically destroyed if it surrendered to the German occupation forces. Operation “Weiss” had hitherto been conducted with great brutality towards both the captured Partisans and the civilian population in the area of operations. It was not merely the result of spontaneous violence undertaken by sadistic soldiers on the heels of counter-insurgency operations but, rather, premeditated and ordered by the highest echelons of the Third Reich. On 16 December 1942, Hitler issued his notorious “Order for the suppression of bands” which stipulated that women and children were legitimate targets in anti-partisan operations, and that no German soldier could be held accountable for his actions in the struggle against the guerrillas.³⁹⁰ Even if the shooting of women and children was rejected at the meeting of the top German military commanders in Belgrade on 30 December, all unarmed male civilians between the age of 15 and 60 caught on the territory of „Tito's State“ were destined for deportation.³⁹¹ For those caught with arms or aiding the guerrillas in any way, punishment was to be swift, either with a bullet, or the rope. “No one may be punished for taking drastic measures”; the soldiers and officers who “act energetically and assert themselves” could count on the full support of their superiors. The wording of the order practically meant that the troops were given *Carte Blanche* with respect to their conduct toward the guerrilla suspects.³⁹² Given this and similar earlier orders, it should come as no surprise that the troops executed prisoners out of hand. “Defectors who come over to us with our passes are shot after interrogation”, concluded an exasperated Lütters at a conference held on 16 February 1943, “sometimes only because they cannot be transported to the rear immediately. This attitude is impossible!”³⁹³ This also meant that one of the provisions of the “Combat instructions for Croatia”, which called for the sparing of guerrilla leaders for

³⁸⁹ Trifković, *Schwarz auf Weiss*, pp. 59-67.

³⁹⁰ Kerstin Freudiger, *Die juristische Aufarbeitung von NS-Verbrechen*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), p. 127.

³⁹¹ According to Horstenau's diary, he was the one who emphatically protested against the treatment of women and children along the lines of Hitler's instructions; thereupon, the other generals agreed not to employ such drastic measures: Vasa Kazimirović, *Nemački general u Zagrebu* (Kragujevac: Prizma, 1996), pp. 128-30.

³⁹² NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000407-9, Combat instructions for Croatia (12 January 1943). See also 718th Infantry Division's version released six days later in: *ibid.*, 000411, [No subject] (18 January 1943).

³⁹³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000770, Minutes of conference of divisional commanders held in Sanski Most (16 February 1943).

exchange, could hardly be fulfilled. Statistics confirm that Operation “Weiss” was carried out in the spirit of Hitler’s orders: over a period of two months, only 57 defectors were reported taken; all 616 prisoners who survived the immediate capture were executed thereafter; on the other hand, the German occupation forces reported 11, 915 enemy killed, but little evidence in terms of captured weapons to support such a high figure.³⁹⁴

The actions of the main Partisan force throughout this period were influenced to a considerable degree by the presence of a large number of wounded: 3,800 severe cases were being cared for at the so-called “Central Hospital” with an additional 700 lightly wounded fighters in divisional hospitals.³⁹⁵ During the zenith of Operation “Weiss” (late February-early March), the fate of the Main Operational Group was tied to the fate of the wounded. The Partisan leadership’s plans were centered on saving both; leaving the wounded, which would have increased mobility and opened new possibilities for the remainder of the army, was out of the question. Remembering how their enemies had treated the Partisan wounded in the past, Tito would not take the responsibility for leaving the Central Hospital at the mercy of the advancing Axis troops.³⁹⁶

After realizing his error in demolishing the bridges over the Neretva, Tito concocted a bold plan to extricate his army, together with the wounded, from the trap. The German 717th Infantry Division, advancing from the west, was perceived as the greatest danger to the Main Operational Group; its advance-guard was already dangerously close to the hospital column in the Rama River Valley. The Partisans would first subdue this threat and use the breathing space to make a 180 degree turn, ford the Neretva and confront the Chetniks. Utilizing interior lines, within three days the Partisans concentrated seven brigades on the sector opposite the German division. The attack began on 2 March, south of Gornji Vakuf with an unprecedented barrage of artillery, the backbone of which was ordnance captured from the Italian garrisons. The Germans, already weakened by constant fighting, buckled and started to give ground. By 7 March, they were pushed some fifteen kilometers to the northwest. On the same day, special assault details crossed the Neretva by improvised means and managed to form a bridgehead

³⁹⁴ NAW, T-314, Roll 554, 000377-8, Appendix to letter to minister of armed forces Begić (31 March 1943); NAW, T-78, Roll 331, 6290065, Situation estimate for March 1943 (1 April 1943).

³⁹⁵ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, p. 331.

³⁹⁶ On 2 March, Tito inquired frantically about the possibility of evacuating the Central Hospital either to Lika (*Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, p. 102, Tito to Bosnian Corps) or to the Biokovo mountain range in Dalmatia (*ibid.*, p. 103, Tito to 9th Dalmatian Division). One day later, he settled for the second option (*ibid.*, p. 112, Tito to Bosnian Corps) but changed his mind again on 5 March when it was decided that the wounded would go with the Main Operations Group into Eastern Herzegovina (*ibid.*, p. 122, Tito to 1st Proletarian Division).

on the eastern bank. Partisan engineers quickly constructed a pontoon bridge at Jablanica with the first units crossing that very day.³⁹⁷

2. Negotiations in Gornji Vakuf, 11-14 March 1943

*“Just as my runner and I wanted to leave the small, undergrowth-covered valley in the vicinity of Hill 952, we were suddenly showered with a hail of bullets, some coming from as close as fifteen to twenty meters distance. We heard calls in Serbian and realized we were surrounded. We immediately tried to make a fighting retreat through the thick undergrowth. This proved to be impossible, since the depression [where we were] was surrounded by forty to fifty Partisans. Therefore, we had to surrender ourselves”.*³⁹⁸

This is how Major Arthur Strecker, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 738th Grenadier Regiment of the 718th Infantry Division, described the circumstances of his capture not far from Gornji Vakuf on 4 March 1943. By that time, the Partisan counter-attack was proceeding well, and the greatest threat to the wounded was removed. Overall, however, the situation was far from satisfactory: The Neretva had not yet been forded and the Chetniks were known to be concentrating in strength on the eastern bank. Even if the crossing of the river did succeed, there was no guarantee that the Germans would not pursue; their reinforcements were already arriving from the rear. In short, the fate of the wounded still hung in balance.

As soon as the news about Strecker's capture reached Supreme HQ, Tito summoned Đilas, Ranković and Moša Pijade to a small water-mill in the Rama Valley. Once they arrived, Tito floated the idea of contacting the Germans, ostensibly in order to exchange Strecker and other Germans. The prime motive behind the offer, however, was the revival of talks on the recognition of the NOVJ as a belligerent force: if the Germans agreed, then the patients of the Central Hospital could hope, at least, for at least a modicum of protection in the event they were captured. In order to make sure the Germans would not reject the request out of hand, the Partisan leadership decided to make it more attractive by including the withdrawal of guerrilla forces to a mutually agreed territory as a provision. This had already been the topic of talks in Zagreb in August 1942 and Livno in November of the same year. Tito's overriding wish was to achieve a cease-fire, at least during the talks, in order to gain a

³⁹⁷ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. I, pp. 383-92.

³⁹⁸ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271,001448, Report on my capture on 4 March 1943 (21 March 1943).

free hand for the upcoming battle against the Chetniks. The offer was “worded in a way [...] that left room for negotiations” and signed by Velimir Terzić, Tito’s chief of staff.³⁹⁹

In order to lend credence to the offer, high-ranking Partisan officers engaged Strecker in conversation on the evening of his capture. They openly advocated the Communist cause and expressed belief in a swift victory of the Soviet Union over German and Italian capitalists led by Hitler and Mussolini, but added that world peace could only be achieved by the defeat of British and American capitalism as well. Once the Soviets were across the Polish border, they said, the Western Allies would open the Second Front (ostensibly in order to stem the Soviet advance and not to bring about the speedy victory over the Axis powers). At the same time they expressed regret over having to fight the German people, and asked Strecker why the Wehrmacht fought against the Partisans at all. Furthermore, they made it clear that they regarded the Chetniks their main enemies and wanted to know how the Germans felt about the Royalists. As the initiation of contact with German command was also a topic, Strecker was asked to draft a letter for his superiors. In it, would plead for a round of talks between the opposing commanders at the earliest convenience and for an “allocation of a territory” (a la Tito’s proposal). The letter was carried by a captured German soldier across the lines on the following day.⁴⁰⁰ As the German answer to Strecker’s letter was not forthcoming over the next two days, the NOVJ leadership prepared a similar offer on 8 March. This time it was addressed to Captain Heyss in Mostar, an old hand from the talks in August and November. There is no evidence that this letter was ever sent, but the fact that it was written at all underlines the urgency on the part of the Partisan leadership to begin the negotiations.⁴⁰¹

Immediately after the arrival of the courier to the positions of the 717th Infantry Division on 5 March, Strecker’s message was dispatched to the HQ of the Commander of German Troops in Croatia. It took several days to inform all relevant commands about the Partisan offer and to decide on a reply. On 9 March, Lüters instructed the 717th Infantry Division to inform the guerrillas that the German command would be willing to receive one plenipotentiary envoy in the town of Bugojno in three days’ time; “the safety of the envoy is guaranteed.”⁴⁰² Once the German answer reached the Partisan lines on the following day, Tito

³⁹⁹ Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 229. Djilas stated that the meeting was held „the day after the Chetniks were defeated on the Neretva“, which would mean 8 March; Leković established that the conference took place on the 4th: Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 50. For Tito’s motives see *ibid.*, pp. 50-1.

⁴⁰⁰ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271,001449-51, Report on my capture on 4 March 1943 (21 March 1943). It is not certain whether the original offer was attached to Strecker’s letter: Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 54.

⁴⁰¹ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 67.

⁴⁰² NAW, T-315, Roll 2264,000731, Lüters to 717th Infantry Division (9 March 1943).

summoned Đilas and Ranković in order to discuss the details. First, the Partisans would send more than one delegate in order to lend weight to the negotiations. As the matter was extremely delicate, Đilas, a member of the Politburo, would lead the delegation. Koča Popović, known to the Germans from earlier talks, would go as well. Velebit, likewise a veteran Partisan „diplomat“, was chosen for this mission mostly because of his linguistic skills. The delegates were provided only general guidelines; the details of the negotiation were left to their discretion. The aim of the Main Operational Group, the advance into Southern Serbia and Kosovo, was not to be disclosed: the Germans were known to be sensitive about Serbian security. The province of Sandžak would be delegated the territory the Partisans would be willing to withdraw to. From there, the delegates were to inform the Germans, the Communist-led guerrillas would wage their war against the Chetniks who were to be unequivocally designated the Partisans' main enemies. Đilas remembered that the cease-fire was not mentioned during the meeting, but “this too was understood.” Only the pseudonyms of the delegates were to be discussed: Velebit was already known to Germans as Vladimir Petrović, a lawyer from Zagreb; Đilas assumed the name of Miloš Marković, “a common name-one borne by a Montenegrin hero of long ago”. Only Popović used his real name.⁴⁰³

During the conversation, Đilas raised a sensitive issue: how will Moscow react to the negotiations? “Well, they also think first of their own people and the army!”, replied the Partisan commander in an angry voice. Đilas was astonished: „It was the first time that a Politburo member, let alone Tito, so vehemently expressed any difference with the Soviets“. The answer can be explained as a result of mounting frustration owing to the complete lack of Soviet aid. As the situation of the Main Operational Group grew ever more precarious, Tito sent increasingly desperate cables to Moscow. The one from 31 January contained, in part, the following:

„I have to ask you again: is it truly not possible to send us any help? Hundreds of thousands of refugees are in danger of starving to death. Cannot there be a way of providing us help after twenty months of our heroic, almost superhuman struggle? For twenty months we have been fighting without even the slightest help from the outside. [...]“

⁴⁰³ Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 230-1, 234. Velebit remembered that he was told at a meeting with Tito, Đilas and Popović that a possible cease-fire was to be one of the topics of the negotiations: Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 216.

On 25 and 27 February Tito informed the Comintern that the Chetniks had rushed to Italian aid around Mostar and accused the Yugoslav government-in-exile of sponsoring this move. As evidence, Tito provided Mihailović's order for the upcoming attack on the Partisans. He requested that Stalin be informed of this so that Moscow could intercede with London and demand a clarification. "This is urgent, for we are in a critical situation". On 4 March, at the height of the counter-attack at Gornji Vakuf, Tito sent yet another plea:

"Can we hope for any help from our allies? Please respond because it is uncertain for how much longer we can endure such pressure. Our casualties are immense and the wounded are limiting our operational freedom to the extreme."

The Comintern replied only to the January telegram—with ten days' delay. Apart from conveying the admiration and "deep brotherly sympathies" which the whole Soviet people and their leadership had for the National Liberation Struggle, the telegram failed to deliver any good news. It quoted insurmountable technical difficulties as the main reason for the lack of Soviet help and advised the Partisans to use their own devices to weather the current storm.⁴⁰⁴

On 11 March, Đilas, Popović and Velebit headed alone by foot over the main road to Prozor. The countryside was peaceful and not a living soul could be seen along the way. Only the scattered hulks of military equipment testified to the fact that this ground was the scene of heavy fighting in the preceding days. The eerie atmosphere only added to the tension the delegates must have felt. The prospect of running into Ustashe instead of Germans was particularly worrying. Đilas and Popović quipped that Velebit, being junior in rank to both, should carry the white flag which would make him the target of choice for the enemy. The three men reached the outskirts of Prozor, without either being encountered by patrols or fired upon. Just as they arrived among the first houses, a dozen Germans appeared before them. The former were asked if they had come to surrender, whereupon Velebit explained that they were envoys from Partisan headquarters, expected by the German command. The delegates

⁴⁰⁴ See Tito's cables to Comintern in *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, p. 28 (7 January 1943), pp. 95-6 (25 and 27 February 1943) and p. 121 (4 March 1943). The Comintern's response of 11 february can be found in *ibid.*, p. 298. For a short discussion on the lack of Soviet help in the first phase of the war see Othmar Nikola Haberl, *Die Emanzipation der KP Jugoslawiens von der Kontrolle der Komintern/KPdSU, 1941-1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1974), pp. 38-40.

were disarmed and kept under guard until transportation was ready. One hour later, they were blindfolded and taken to a car which started off immediately.⁴⁰⁵

After a short drive, the car stopped and the envoys' blindfolds were removed: they were in Gornji Vakuf, just as had been expected. They were taken to the headquarters of the 717th Infantry Division, where General Benignus Dippold awaited them. After courteously greeting the delegation, the general offered them a seat at a small table. The envoys then went on to expound on the three proposals listed in their letters of authorization:

1. Exchange of prisoners, including the employees of "Elektro-Bosna", Major Strecker and 25 other German soldiers, as well as some 120 *Home Guards* and over 600 Italians. Professor Ivo Marinković from Karlovac was demanded in exchange for Strecker. As Marinković was in Ustashe custody, the NOVJ delegates pointed to the habit of NDH authorities to liquidate those wanted by the Partisans and then tell the Germans they could not be found.
2. Recognition of the NOVJ as a belligerent force. The envoys explained that the Partisans were not "bandits" but an organized and disciplined force which has always obeyed the rules and customs of warfare. In this respect they reminded their counterparts of the humane treatment of the German prisoners in Užice in late 1941. Consequently, captured members and wounded of the NOVJ should enjoy the same the protection by international law. For their part, the envoys pledged that their side would reciprocate.
3. "Political questions [...] touched on in the letter of 17 November 1942 which was addressed to Glaise-Horstenau".⁴⁰⁶ In short, the envoys stated that their biggest enemies were the Chetniks and that they fought against the Wehrmacht only because they had to defend themselves. They were a completely independent resistance movement; their propaganda leaned on Moscow only because they wanted to have nothing to do with London. The Chetniks, agents of the Yugoslav government-in-exile, received weapons from the Italians, who

⁴⁰⁵ Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 232-3. The delegates' worst fears seemed to have come true when they came across a group of Ustashe on a street in Prozor. As they were under German protection, the latter let them pass. Interestingly, both Djilas and Popović remembered one Ustashe making a loud remark about the envoys' good boots: Popović, *Beleške uz ratovanje*, p. 90, entry for 27 March 1943.

⁴⁰⁶ There is some confusion in the historiography concerning a letter which was allegedly sent to Horstenau during the negotiations in Livno on 17 November 1942. Tomasevich (*The Chetniks*, p. 244) and Leković (*Martovski pregovori*, p. 83), to name a few, claim that this letter could not be found in the archives. Odić and Komarica offered a simple, yet plausible answer to this riddle: Horstenau was not sent a special letter, but a memorandum of the meeting held on the 17th which we know existed thanks to Dr. Heinrich's report. See Odić-Komarica, *Partizanska obavještajna služba*, pp. 294-9.

also did not protest the presence of British officers among the Royalists. “The NOVJ would fight the English as well if they tried to make a landing, the Chetniks would not.”

*“The delegation warned that “all this is not an offer of capitulation [...]; they only want to carry out their main thrust against the Chetniks and would therefore suggest that the two sides mutually agree on an interest zone [neutral zone, i.e. Sandžak]. The delegation requests that 3rd point remains confidential.”*⁴⁰⁷

Dippold listened attentively to the envoys, repeating “I do not know much about politics, but...” several times during the process. He, however, made it very clear that he had daily objectives to achieve and he intended to do so, negotiations notwithstanding.⁴⁰⁸ He also confessed that he had no authorization to either accept or decline the guerrilla terms; his task was merely to relegate them to higher commands. After the meeting concluded, the envoys were taken to a room where they would wait for the preliminary German answer. They were joined by a German officer who, together with Velebit, drafted an official document containing the list of Partisan demands.⁴⁰⁹

This document, signed by all three envoys, had altogether five points. The first two concerned the exchange of prisoners and mutual recognition of rights of prisoners and wounded, respectively. The third point read, in part, “that there was no reason for the German Wehrmacht to continue its combat operations against the NOVJ given the situation, enemies and the interests of the both sides.” If the Germans agreed to this, then the two sides should determine a zone that the Partisans could retreat to, taking into consideration economic and other interests. In the same context, the third point explicitly names the Chetniks as the main enemies of the Partisans. The fourth point formally requests a truce “for as long as negotiations on all these matters last.” The fifth point reads that the Partisan delegation is authorized to leading the preliminary talks, but that any final agreement would have to be confirmed by their higher commands. At the conclusion, the delegation re-emphasized its wish to conclude these negotiations at the earliest opportunity and requested the appointment

⁴⁰⁷ NAW, T-1119, Roll 16, 0068-70, Memorandum from a meeting at Gornji Vakuf (11 March 1943). The signature of this and other German documents from the same source about this particular round of talks is sometimes cited as „NOKW-1088“.

⁴⁰⁸ Velebit: „I remember well that, after hearing this, I said to myself: We failed in our main intention: we cannot count on a respite needed for the crossing over the Neretva“. Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 224.

⁴⁰⁹ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 82-9. During his exposition, Velebit stated that that German citizen, Hans Ott was well acquainted with the matter, and that his presence at the negotiations would be desirable. This had already been requested in the letter to Captain Heyss of 8 March: Ibid., p. 67.

of authorized representatives from the German side. It is important to note that the envoy's statement concerning a potential Allied landing was not included in this official document.⁴¹⁰

The HQ of the Commander of German Troops in Croatia was immediately informed of these proceedings. Lütters' chief of staff, Colonel Werner Pfaffenrott, made a phone call later that day to Horstenau's office and also informed Löhr, who was in Vienna at the time. The colonel reported that three Partisan envoys came to Gornji Vakuf that day to propose a prisoner exchange, demanding Professor Ivan "Uminković" (sic) from Karlovac for Major Strecker. The call had already been made to the Ustashe police authorities who, unsurprisingly, answered that they could not find the person in question.⁴¹¹ The guerrillas also hoped to achieve an agreement on "humane treatment" of prisoners on both sides. They also requested a truce and recognition of their army as a belligerent force. The first request was refused by Lütters out of hand. As an officer of the old school, he distanced himself from the second request, the one "which could have sweeping political consequences" and requested Horstenau's involvement. The fourth point of the stenograph of the conversation deserves to be quoted here:

*"They [the Partisan envoys] also stated that their struggle is not aimed against the Croatian state, and especially not against the Germans, but exclusively against the Chetniks. They would be willing to oppose with weapons anyone we point at, including the disembarking English. The envoys did not have the Soviet star on their caps, but a letter 'M', which purportedly stands for 'Maček'".*⁴¹²

The only explanation for the discrepancies between this passage and what has actually been said and written down in Gornji Vakuf is that Pfaffenrott's knowledge was based on verbal reports, rather than on the two official documents prepared during the negotiations. First, Marinković's name was evidently misspelled. Second, there was no mention of the NDH during the first round of talks. Third, the stenograph offers an exaggerated version of the Partisan envoys' statement about the possible British landing: while the delegates indeed said the NOVJ would oppose the British landing with arms, there was no mention of their doing so as German auxiliaries. Fourth, and most bizarre of all, is the notion that the guerrilla representatives were somehow connected to Vladko Maček, head of the pre-war Croatian Peasant Party. Even if Maček, a known Anglophile, had any armed formations under his

⁴¹⁰ NAW, T-1119, Roll 16, 0071, Gornji Vakuf, 11 March 1943.

⁴¹¹ Information of Ivo Markinković's ultimate fate would continue to elude the Germans for months after the March talks (see next chapter).

⁴¹² NAW, T-501, Roll 267, 000528-9, Stenograph of telephone call from Colonel Pfaffenrott on 11 March 1943.

command (which he did not) it is a mystery why his followers would have stated that they wanted to fight against the British.⁴¹³ This is not to say that Pfaffenrodt, or any of his high-ranking colleagues unreservedly believed in the information offered by this preliminary report. However, this example highlights just how little the bending or exaggeration of facts required. This in turn, could seriously influence the judgment of inexperienced people or of those prone to wishful thinking.

Given the fact that the inquiry about Marinković was made on the very same day the exchange offer came, it is evident the Germans were willing to talk to the Partisans. Indeed, interest for the exchange of the military economic experts from Jajce and soldiers captured in Bosnia was not waning despite Operation “Weiss”.⁴¹⁴ On 3 March, two days before Strecker’s letter reached its destination, Horstenau had a meeting with Pavelić. One of the points of discussion was the long-overdue exchange of these persons. The general had a list of eleven names which the Partisans wanted for their prisoners. Among them, there was at least one Partisan commander as well as several public figures, intellectuals mostly, arrested for their leftist leanings or for taking part in underground activities.⁴¹⁵ Some of them were currently in custody in Zagreb and Pavelić’s approval had to be obtained for their exchange. Judging by remarks added in pencil, the latter gave his permission and informed Horstenau that one of the candidates was already deceased.⁴¹⁶

In the interim, the Partisan envoys remained in Gornji Vakuf as guests of the German garrison. They were treated correctly for the duration of their stay. After the meeting with Dippold, they were served food and cigarettes and their pistol clips, taken away in Prozor,

⁴¹³ For an overview of the war-time activities of Maček and his party see Tomasevich, *Occupation*, pp. 356-68.

⁴¹⁴ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2222, 419, Report of Lieutenant-Colonel Severović on prisoner exchange (undated, probably from the second half of February 1943). The document reads that the Military Economic Officer is especially interested in the exchange of the engineers, so that production in Jajce could be resumed as soon as possible. Severović also added that the talks were on hold owing to the ongoing operations south of the Sava.

⁴¹⁵ The Partisan commander was Riko Žnidarić, whom his comrades wanted to exchange for some Ustashe already in December 1942: Veljko Kovačević, *Ratna sjećanja* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1989), p. 221. Interesting is the case of Dr. Vuk Vernić, professor at the Zagreb university’s faculty of law. He was arrested in January 1942 and sent to Jasenovac concentration camp in June. Glaise-Horstenau interceded with Pavelić on his behalf on 5 September 1942, saying that Vernić had a family to support, that two of his cousins were officers (presumably in the Home Guard) and that the rumors of his communist leanings were „totally false”: NAW, T-501, Roll 267,000367, Notice for a conversation with Poglavnik (5 September 1942). Pavelić obviously knew better: Vernić was in fact a candidate for a full-time membership in the KPJ: Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 133.

⁴¹⁶ NAW, T-501, Roll 267, 000320, Reception of of German Plenipotentiary General by Poglavnik (3 March 1943). The word „prisoner exchange” was underlined and „P[oglavnik]: yes” added on the margin. The prisoner who died (marked with a cross) was Mihovil Pavlek, a Croatian poet and member of the Croatian Peasant Party. He died in Jasenovac in June 1942: <http://povijest.net/v5/hrvatska/hrvatska-2-svjetski-rat/2008/ubojstvo-miskine/> (last accessed on 7 September 2012).

were returned to them. Their lodgings were, given the circumstances, good (“not even the general’s was much better”, Đilas wrote later), and one German soldier (conveniently of Croatian origin), was seconded as the delegates’ orderly. While waiting for the news, both sides had a unique chance to gain a different picture of their enemy, free of propaganda clichés. Đilas was surprised by the revelation that the usual stereotypes about the German army had little to do with reality: there was no mention of Nazi ideology, or of that famous un-thinking automatism with which the Germans were allegedly carrying out orders; officers and soldiers were informal to each other and even ate from the same kettle. In short, they resembled any other front line unit comprised of men who had had no wish to be in the war, but since fate had brought them there, were determined to prevail.⁴¹⁷

The Germans, living with actual Partisan commanders in their midst used every opportunity to size up their adversaries. According to the accounts of the Partisan negotiators, the questions they were posed were never phrased in an interrogator’s manner, but rather out of genuine curiosity. From general down, they were especially interested in the relations between the guerrillas and the Soviet Union. Two *Abwehr* officers, the most frequent visitors to the NOVJ delegates, also shared their experiences and thoughts on the war. They defended the Third Reich’s cause and spoke of ultimate victory but without ideological overtones: one had the impression that they “simply hoped for an outcome which would not bring ruin to Germany.” As far as Yugoslavia was concerned, the officers had the same attitudes as all of their colleagues the Partisans had met in the past: they spoke of the Ustashe with a mix of contempt and horror and quipped ironically about the incompetence of the Italians. The reconcilable tone in which the discussion was led thus far gave ground to propaganda as soon as the parties touched upon the German-Partisan conflict. The officers questioned the purpose of the insurgency, claiming it only brought immeasurable suffering to the country and its population. The Partisans retorted by saying that living was hard but manageable before the war and that they had no intention of laying down their arms. Furthermore, it was the Germans who should question the sense of combatting the insurgency since the guerrillas could not be destroyed: if one group was destroyed, another would take its place. Although they acknowledged the bravery and skill of the Partisans, the officers could not but make disparaging remarks about the irregular warfare. When Popović started to poke fun at them by saying that he could slip his whole division through German lines whenever he liked, one of the officers said: “Yes, it is easy to make war that way-a piece of bread and some bullets in a

⁴¹⁷ Đilas, *Wartime*, p. 234.

bag, and off you go into the mountains.” The Partisan commander, known for his sharp wit, retorted by offering the Germans an exchange: they could have the bread and the bullets, and the Partisans would get tanks and motorization. “You’ll never get your hands on that – never!” shouted the officer, thus effectively losing this skirmish with the guerrillas, curious since retorts and not guns were the weapons.⁴¹⁸

3. The first round of talks in Sarajevo

The delegates had been two days in Gornji Vakuf, waiting for a German answer. The commander of the 369th Infantry Division, (which in the meantime replaced the 717th as the envoys’ host), inquired with Lüters’ staff on 13 March as to what should be done with them. The answer was that the Plenipotentiary General would send a negotiator (presumably Ott) as soon as possible. If the Partisan negotiators could be “induced” to wait a while longer, then the German emissary could be flown to Gornji Vakuf in a courier plane. If not, then the date of a new meeting should be set. Probably as a sign of goodwill, Lüters ordered that “due to the ongoing negotiations, all executions of prisoners are to be stopped”.⁴¹⁹ This would prove to be one of the few concrete results of the whole episode: Đilas remembered that the Germans began sparing captured Partisans, even providing first aid to the wounded on several occasions and handing them chocolate and cigarettes.⁴²⁰

Deciding he would be more useful with his division, Koča Popović prepared himself for a return trip to the Partisan lines the next day. He was provided with a letter of safe conduct and a car to take him to the German lines on the outskirts of Jablanica. He covered the rest of the way by foot, joining Supreme HQ on the banks of Boračko Lake on the evening of the same day. He reported on the lack of progress to Tito and added that, in case no German reply came, Velebit and Đilas would rejoin them in two days’ time.⁴²¹ Several hours after Popović left, good news finally reached the NOVJ delegates: Hans Ott arrived and a car would be ready to take them to Sarajevo the same night. The trip was uneventful, and they reached their destination on schedule. They were billeted in a building overlooking the

⁴¹⁸ The *Abwehr* officers prepared a riposte for their next visit to the delegates on 14 March. Upon entering the room, they wished Popović a happy birthday with ironic cordiality: “Koča wasn’t at all taken aback”, remembered Đilas “He thanked them and added that this was ‘easy enough for you to find out: the Belgrade police have had a file on me for a long time.’” Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 235-6; Popović, *Beleške uz ratovanje*, p. 91, entry for 27 March 1943.

⁴¹⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2154, 000408-9, War diary entry for 13 March 1943 (15,00h; 16,00h; 17,20h).

⁴²⁰; Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 240.

⁴²¹ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 97-8.

Miljacka River, in a spacious flat owned by a woman of Slovenian origin. Her husband was purportedly a Yugoslav officer, a prisoner in Germany, and she was on good terms with the local officials of the OT. She was very hospitable to her strange guests, so hospitable in fact that it aroused their suspicion. After spending the night in what seemed to be unimaginable luxury, Velebit and Đilas were taken to the German command.⁴²² There, they were met by at least one intelligence officer and engineer Ott. The Germans expressed the wish of their side to exchange prisoners as soon as possible, but declined making any commitments on political questions. They also informed their counterparts that the pre-condition for the continuation of talks was the immediate cessation of sabotage on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line. The Partisan envoys tied this issue to the recognition of the NOVJ as a belligerent force. As neither side was ready (or authorized) to give in, the talks ended in a stalemate. In these circumstances, Đilas saw no alternative but to return to Supreme HQ where he would receive new instructions and gather the exchange prisoners. Velebit would stay behind and await the word of whether the negotiations would be continued or not.⁴²³

On the next day, 16 March 1943, Đilas left Sarajevo in a truck accompanied by a German sergeant. As the battle around Konjic was still raging, crossing over to the Partisan lines proved more difficult than imagined. One obstinate Partisan machine-gunner would not heed Đilas' calls and kept him and his German companion pinned down the whole day. Only when dusk set in could the two cross the no-man's land. There was some bewilderment amongst the Partisans by the fact that one of their top commanders was negotiating with the Germans while they were doing their best to kill them. Savo Kovačević, a veteran Montenegrin brigade commander, half-jokingly remarked to the high-ranking envoy: "Don't you go making peace between us and the Germans". Đilas was dumbfounded and could not think of a better answer except to reprimand the brigadier for his lack of faith in higher command. "I do trust them!" Kovačević replied, "But the army has just barely gotten started against the Germans. They're our worst enemies".⁴²⁴

The "higher commands" were eagerly excepting news about the course of negotiations. Thus, after Đilas had joined Supreme HQ, he spent considerable time relating his experiences from the enemy territory. "Ha, I knew that's where it hurts them!" was Tito's comment on the German demand for a halt to sabotage on the railway line Zagreb-Belgrade.

⁴²² While walking down a corridor, Đilas had a close encounter with a deserter from the 1st Proletarian Division, who, for unknown reasons, failed to disclose Đilas' real identity: Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 107.

⁴²³ Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 217; Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 107-8.

⁴²⁴ Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 237-9.

He added that the Germans would have to cease their own attacks first, before he sent corresponding orders to Slavonian units. Although the last Partisan crossed over from the west bank of Neretva on 15 March, the fighting had not yet concluded. The German offensive in the vicinity of Konjic indicated that they were still bent on pursuing the withdrawing Main Operational Group deeper into East Herzegovina. It was therefore decided not to refuse the enemy conditions out of hand, but to keep negotiating in order to buy more time. As a gesture of good will, Tito ordered that the German captives be sent to their compatriots as soon as they could be assembled without waiting for a formal prisoner exchange. Đilas would accompany them to the village of Bijela (south of Konjic), where he would also wait for news from Velebit. As for the people the Partisans wanted back, Tito repeatedly mentioned the name of Herta Haas, KPJ member and – his common-law wife. She was known to have been arrested in Zagreb, but her fate was uncertain.⁴²⁵

4. Velebit's trip to Zagreb and the release of German prisoners

On the same day Đilas went back to the Partisans, Velebit was invited to visit the German High Command in Zagreb. As there was no time to request instructions from Supreme HQ, he decided to accept the invitation on his own. Accompanied by Ott, he boarded a transport plane to Zagreb and was received by Horstenau on the same day. No notes were taken, but according to Velebit's postwar memoirs, it was merely another informal conversation on the topics listed in the memorandum from Gornji Vakuf. Velebit inquired again about the possibility of a cease-fire, while Horstenau was interested in how the Partisans would react to an Allied landing in the Balkans. The Partisan envoy replied "in the spirit of the received directives": the NOVJ would oppose any foreign operation which had not been sanctioned by the AVNOJ, with force if necessary. "There was never any mention of us doing this together with the Germans".⁴²⁶

The following day, the Partisan envoy held a meeting with the Italian military attaché in Zagreb, Brigadier Giancarlo Re. They discussed a possible exchange of more than 600 officers and men of the Italian Army who had been captured during the fighting in the Neretva Valley for a similar number of Partisans and their sympathizers in Italian captivity. Both sides agreed to exchange accurate lists of these persons as soon as possible. The Italian

⁴²⁵ Ibid., p. 240.

⁴²⁶ Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, pp. 219-20.

general requested that *Supersloda* send a special envoy to Zagreb with the names of available prisoners and an authorization to further negotiate the exchange. The next opportunity to do so was not long coming: on 18th March, Velebit and Ott left for Sarajevo by plane; the guerrilla envoy was expected to return to Zagreb in four to five days with new instructions from his superiors.⁴²⁷

The German authorities used the respite to gather instructions from their own commanders. Kasche sent a lengthy cable to Ribbentrop on the evening of the 17 March in which he summarized the results of the talks thus far and offered his own views and suggestions on the matter. The information was provided by engineer Ott, “who had already worked” for the ambassador as a liaison with the guerrillas:

*“There is a possibility that Tito and his followers might cease hostilities towards Germany, Italy and Croatia and withdraw to Sandžak in order to settle the score with Mihailović's Chetniks. It is, under circumstances, possible that he makes a demonstrative renouncement of Moscow and London which have abandoned him. The Partisans request the following: to fight it out with the Chetniks in Sandžak and to return to their villages thereafter, thereby bringing about the pacification of Croatian and Serbian territories; return of their followers to their villages after surrendering arms; pledge from our side that there would be no executions of leading personalities. My opinion is that we must exploit this chance, since the defection of this group, which is respected by the public around the world, from the camp of our enemies would be very important”.*⁴²⁸

To further strengthen his case, Kasche added that only a minority of Partisans were Communists, and that their movement did not commit “excessive” crimes against prisoners or the local population. The ambassador concluded the cable by pointing to the fact that Germany’s partners (Minister Mladen Lorković of NDH and Ambassador Raffaele Casertano of Italy) also shared his opinion on Tito’s offer.

⁴²⁷ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 265-6. The Italians lost altogether 2,300 men during the battles in the Neretva Valley (Zbornik/IV/11/368-72, Supersloda to 6th Corps, 5 March 1943). The Prozor garrison (some 640 men) met with an especially grim fate. After declining a surrender ultimatum and repulsing the first two Partisan attacks, its defenses finally crumbled on 17 February. The Partisans took their revenge by executing most of the prisoners after the battle (Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 220; Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p.229; NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 001395, Interrogation of Fortunato Zavaglia, 4 March 1943). The rest of the Italians, captured in Jablanica and other strong-points in the Neretva valley, were spared and the Partisans demanded and got food for these prisoners from the Italian command in Mostar. A prisoner exchange was also discussed, but it did not materialize (Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, pp. 129-34). The prisoners were subsequently used as porters and specialists (truck and tank drivers, etc.). A large (though unspecified) number of them died of typhus, hunger and exposure over the following months.

⁴²⁸ ADAP/E/V/416-7, Kasche to Foreign Ministry (17 March 1943).

Based on what Kasche concluded that the Partisans were, in effect, offering to capitulate is hard to say. One possible answer is that his main source, Hans Ott, was either a victim of a misunderstanding or was exaggerating about what he heard from his Partisan counterparts.⁴²⁹ Ott, according to the Yugoslav historiography, was not a person likely to do either: his “objective and realistic” reports about the NOVJ as well as the good contacts he maintained with insurgents’ representatives would eventually earn him the nickname “*Partisanenhecht*” (roughly, “Partisan Daredevil”).⁴³⁰ Even if Ott misunderstood what Velebit in particular has been telling him, the memorandum from the preliminary talks in Gornji Vakuf unequivocally quoted the Partisan envoys stating that their offers should not be mistaken for one of capitulation. Naturally, they would not flaunt this sentiment too often if they wanted to appear flexible and open-minded to their German counterparts; after all, it was they who gave the initiative for the talks and were hoping to obtain concessions. The need to maneuver notwithstanding, the envoys could not have strayed too far from their written statement, not even in private conversations. Furthermore, it was demonstrated in the Pfaffenrott’s telephone call just how quickly rumors spread and how long it took until they found their way into official documents. It should not be a surprise that Kasche chose to believe some of them, especially given his well-known habit to adapt facts to his own wishes. His latest cable to the Foreign Ministry was similar to the one sent on 21 September 1942 in the aftermath of the first exchange, only even more exaggerated.

As the period from late September 1942 to early March 1943 was, contrary to Kasche’s estimate of Tito’s intentions, marked by ever-increasing Partisan activity, it was little wonder that Berlin received his latest report with a grain of salt. Ribbentrop’s answer came on 19 March. To begin with, the Reich’s foreign minister thought that any contact between the ambassador and the Partisans would be “inappropriate”. Secondly, and more importantly, he did not seem to share Kasche’s enthusiasm about the negotiations. It was feared that the Partisans, once allowed to rest and replenish in Sandžak, would simply recommence hostilities against the Axis powers at a later date; even worse, they could do this in alliance with the Chetniks. In light of this possibility, Ribbentrop wanted to know the opinion of the generals on the ground. He also wanted to know what guarantees Tito’s envoys offered that they would honor their part of the agreement.⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 245.

⁴³⁰ In addition, Odić wrote that Ott was „an intelligence operative of high caliber [...] almost without equal in the German intelligence service”: Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, pp. 249, 253.

⁴³¹ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 115.

After he landed safely in Sarajevo, Velebit dispatched a message for Đilas through German couriers, inviting him back to continue the talks. On the same night (18 March 1943), the high-ranking Politburo member proceeded to Konjic and then to Sarajevo. There he was briefed by Velebit about his activities in Zagreb, as well as the details of the upcoming journey to Zagreb. It was also decided not to leave for the NDH capital until the German prisoners arrived safely from the Partisan territory. On 19 March 1943, the six “Elektro-Bosna” engineers captured months ago in Jajce were finally again on the German side of the lines. A day later they were followed by Major Strecker and twenty soldiers, who arrived at Konjic around 0700 hours.⁴³²

All former prisoners were brought to Sarajevo where they were questioned by the intelligence section of the 718th Infantry Division on their experiences while in Partisan captivity. As could be expected, most answers revolved around the conditions within the guerrilla army. The returnees reported on the Partisan order of battle, the identity of several high-ranking commanders, on food, clothing and the arsenal of the units. Their strength after the crossing of Neretva was estimated at 35,000.⁴³³ In addition, the guerrillas managed to bring a substantial number of Italian mountain guns and heavy mortars with them, while the rest of their heavy equipment was destroyed on the west bank of the river. All agreed that discipline was strict and that cases of desertion or drunkenness were punished by firing squad. German propaganda had next to no effect: the airborne leaflets which invited them to surrender were openly ridiculed. Air strikes, on the contrary, had a far greater psychological impact, as the Partisans had no means of defending themselves. However, casualties were low: the guerrillas marched only in the dark and were very apt at the arts of dispersion and camouflage. Unsurprisingly, the returnees were also questioned about the appearance and whereabouts of the supreme Partisan commander. They confirmed that the photograph of Tito obtained in late 1942 was authentic, adding that he “did not look like a Jew at all.” The civilians from Jajce concluded their statements with the following:

⁴³² NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000840, After-action report on operation „Konjic“ (entry for 19 March 1943). Between December 1942 and March 1943, four German soldiers died in captivity of exhaustion, exposure or untreated wounds. Three soldiers, sick and wounded, remained in Livno: *ibid.*, 001461-2, Group interrogation of German soldiers released from Partisan captivity (23 March 1943). Theresa Mehr, one of the original prisoners from Jajce, was not among the returnees. I have not been able to determine her ultimate fate.

⁴³³ This figure was highly inflated: On 7 March, Tito reported to Comintern that he had some 20,000 able-bodied men and 5,000 sick and wounded. As heavy weapons could not be taken across the Neretva, they were destroyed. The Main Operational group retained eighty mortars and twenty mountain guns: Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 64.

*“[...] The growth of the Communist movement is generally underestimated. They cling to their ideals so firmly, that they would never cease with their subversive activities, not even if they were scattered into small groups, or even if they had to continue as individuals”.*⁴³⁴

In addition to the written report he made right after his release, Strecker attended a number of high-level meetings in Sarajevo from 23-25 March. Present were the new commander of the 718th Infantry Division, General Josef Kübler, German consul Erich Gördes, SA-Colonel Willi Requard of the embassy staff, as well as NDH plenipotentiary-minister Pavao Canki and General Mihajlo Lukić, commander of the 2nd Corps of the Home Guard. Strecker repeated what he saw while in captivity, emphasizing the organization of the Partisan army and the fact that they left none of their wounded behind. The major also pointed out that their strength was still considerable: the column with which he marched had an estimated 10,000 fighters alone. After the meetings, SA-Colonel Requard concluded that the “informal talks with the Partisans should be continued, in order to achieve not a lasting agreement, but rather a temporary pacification”.⁴³⁵

Judging by these first-hand accounts, the main guerrilla force had successfully weathered the last storm. The partisans took heavy casualties, but inner cohesion remained intact. This fact was reluctantly acknowledged by the higher German commands. In his after-action report on Operation “Weiss”, which was officially concluded on 17 March 1943, General Lütters wrote merely that it was a “nice success”. Reinhard Gehlen, head of the Ground Forces High Command’s “Foreign Armies East” intelligence section, concluded that “Weiss” was only partially successful, shifting a portion of the blame on the poor performance of the Italian army. General Dippold was much more honest, saying that the enemy in Operations “Weiss I” and “Weiss II” “could be described as poorly-equipped troops but not as bandits”.⁴³⁶ This particular wording with which he described the increasing professionalism of the NOVJ undoubtedly had its origins in the “regular” nature of the Partisans’ counter-attack south of Gornji Vakuf. Consequently, this may have also been a way for Dippold to express his personal opinion of the Partisan request to be recognized as an equal adversary.

⁴³⁴ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 001458-60, Group interrogation of Othmar Siegelhuber et al. (21 March 1943); *ibid.*, 001461-5, Group interrogation of German soldiers released from Partisan captivity (23 March 1943).

⁴³⁵ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 129-30.

⁴³⁶ NAW, T-314, Roll 554, 000375, Letter to Minister of Armed Forces Begić (31 March 1943); NAW, T-78, Roll 332, 6290089, Short summary for Operation “Weiss” (10 April 1943); NAW, T-315, Roll 1299, 000306, For Commander of German troops in Croatia (8 April 1943).

One other event should be mentioned here. While waiting in a local inn in Konjic for a truck which would take him to Sarajevo, Đilas encountered some Chetniks. Although the event passed without incident, Đilas' presence was duly noted, and the Germans disclosed to the Royalists his pseudonym, rank and itinerary, but not the subject of the negotiations. Chetnik commands were aware of the propaganda potential of this information and took steps to inform the government-in-exile and the British. On 22 and 25 March, Mihailović sent two telegrams to London. One went through Colonel William Bailey, chief of the British mission at his HQ, and the other one directly to Prime-minister Slobodan Jovanović, in which Mihailović reported of "continued negotiations between the Communists and the Germans, which the latter use to destroy us separately, primarily by pitting the Communists against us".⁴³⁷ Bailey's cable remained was not deciphered for some time, so it was only in mid-April that London had an inkling of what was transpiring. The ULTRA intercepts may have also provided more evidence of the negotiations. This, combined with the success the Partisans enjoyed against the Chetniks even led some SOE officials to suspect that the Germans were arming both groups so that they can fight each other more effectively. Even so, the news did not provide a solid enough argument to warrant the cancellation of military missions planning to be sent to the Partisans, which were being discussed at that time. On the contrary, the rumors only served to hasten the sending of observers in the hope that they might be able to shed more light on the true aims of the Communist-led guerrillas.⁴³⁸

5. Velebit and Đilas visit Zagreb

The NOVJ delegates, accompanied by the ubiquitous Ott, left Sarajevo on the same day Major Strecker and his men were released (20 March 1943). They traveled the first leg of their journey to Slavonski Brod by car, from where they took a train to Zagreb. During their journey, representatives of the two sides discussed the current war situation. While Velebit took pains not to insult Ott, Đilas admitted that he was „quite tactless“ in accusing the Germans of being brainwashed by 'Goebbels-ian' propaganda into thinking that the war could still be won. The German engineer strove to deny the accusation, but apparently without much vigor, even calling Hitler "a maniac" at one point. On the whole, Ott seemed to be speaking for those circles in Germany which held an increasingly dim view of the war's possible outcome. When not talking about high politics, the delegates spoke about the prisoner

⁴³⁷ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 122.

⁴³⁸ Mark C. Wheeler, *Britain and the war for Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 227-9.

exchange. The name of Herta Haas was mentioned so often, that at one point Ott asked openly why she was so important. “She is the girlfriend of one of our commanders”, admitted Đilas finally, and the answer seemed to have satisfied Ott’s curiosity.⁴³⁹

After arriving in Zagreb, Đilas and Velebit were billeted in a “hotel-like” room in the building of the local *Feldkommandatur*. There were two meetings over the next few days. One was held in the aforementioned institution and the second in the German embassy. Đilas was disappointed by the fact that the other side still had not appointed an authorized delegation and that the talks were being held in a semi-official manner. Horstenau, who was expected, did not materialize: German representatives were officers of mid-rank, most probably from the army’s intelligence branch. As the German prisoners had been already released, it remained only to choose a number of Partisan suspects which would accompany the NOVJ envoys on their return trip. In addition to the four Partisans which the Germans managed to secure from NDH authorities in mid-November 1942, eight other names were added to the list. Herta Haas was not among them; the Germans assured their opposite numbers that they had done everything to find her, but to no avail. They pledged to continue the search and to keep their adversaries informed on its progress.⁴⁴⁰ As for the political questions, the NOVJ delegates repeated their earlier statements: they considered the Chetniks their main enemies and wanted to engage them from a certain territory without German interference; if the Italians suffered in the process, that was regrettable, but it was, as Velebit put it, “the fate of the allies”. The Germans seemed to have accepted this explanation and remained silent when the Italians were mentioned. The cessation of hostilities between the Ustashe and the Partisans was not discussed: like the Chetniks, they were the Partisans’ internal enemies and the latter would deal with them as they saw fit. If the Germans insisted on including the Ustashe in the deal, the envoys would answer them that the struggle against the Ustashe would continue as they remained bent on exterminating the Serbs. However, the NOVJ delegates avoided emphasizing their hostility towards the Croatian puppet state, for this would compel the Germans to defend the interests of their fiefs. In addition, the Partisan delegates

⁴³⁹ Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 242.

⁴⁴⁰ On 24 March 1943, Colonel Mičić of the NDH’s Ministry of Defense had a conversation with Dr. Benak of the Ustashe security service. The latter told him that the whereabouts of Ivo Marinković were not known to the service and added that the Germans still preferred to take the exchange candidates from the NDH’s prisons and camps, although they had enough prominent Communists in their own custody: HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2222, 469, Report to chief of information section (24 March 1943).

*“[...] did not shrink from declarations that [they] would fight the British if they landed. Such declarations did not commit us, since the British hadn’t yet landed, and we really believed that we would have to fight them if — as could still be concluded from their propaganda and official announcements — they subverted our power, that is, if they supported the Chetnik establishment”.*⁴⁴¹

The Partisan request for a truce remained the main topic of the talks. The NOVJ delegates repeated that there was no real reason for the continuation of fighting and that their side had already shown its goodwill by releasing the German prisoners without waiting for a formal exchange. Their counterparts were adamant: the sabotage on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line would have to stop if the Partisan proposals were to even be considered. Đilas and Velebit could do nothing else but convey the terms to Supreme HQ and await its decision.⁴⁴²

It took several days to collect all exchange prisoners and send them to Sarajevo. On 25 March, the envoys and Ott returned by train to the Bosnian capital. Before setting out for the Partisan-controlled territory, they made a visit to the German prison to pick up the four female Partisans from the 3rd Sandžak brigade who had been waiting since late November 1942 to be exchanged. On 26 March, sixteen prisoners, accompanied by the envoys and several Germans left in two trucks and headed south-east. On the same day they successfully crossed into Partisan territory, thereby practically concluding the prisoner exchange: altogether 27 Germans were swapped for sixteen Partisans. Formally, the Germans owed the Partisans additional prisoners, and they promised to deliver them as soon as possible. In the evening, Đilas and Velebit made a report to Tito. Although “not as interested as before” for the progress of the talks, the Partisan leader immediately decided to prolong them by sending Velebit back to Zagreb. Velebit was to inform the Germans that their demand would be fulfilled: the main German transport artery in Yugoslavia would be off limits, for the time being. They would also be told that the envoy had to convey a similar order to the Partisan units in Eastern Bosnia.⁴⁴³ Whereas the former instruction had no motive other than to spur the Germans to further negotiations, the order dispatched to those partisans in Eastern Bosnia had a double nature. Velebit’s real task would be to locate the Bosnian KPJ leadership and deliver a letter which, in part, read:

⁴⁴¹ Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 243.

⁴⁴² Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 242-3; NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 001475-6, Conversation with Dr. Vladimir Petrović from Partisan HQ (31 March 1943); Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p.133. This description is based on the memoirs of and one contemporary statement made by the NOVJ envoys. Kasche’s account of the talks is somewhat different and will be dealt with separately (see below).

⁴⁴³ Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 244; Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 152.

“[...] Head immediately with your 6th [East Bosnian] Brigade, reinforced either by elements of the Majevica or Fruška Mountain Detachment, to the area between Goražde and Medeđa and cross from there into Sandžak. [Your task] is to cleanse the terrain from Chetniks by moving towards Zaborak and Čajniče. Once there, you'll link up with the left flank of our 1st Division and receive new instructions. During your advance, neither engage the Germans, nor undertake any sabotage on the railway lines because this would not be advantageous in light of our current operations. Our main task now is to destroy Draža Mihailović's Chetniks and his administrative apparatus which represents the main threat to our National Liberation Struggle [...]”

The order was signed by three members of the Politburo, including Tito. Assuming that the content of the letter would confuse the recipients regardless of the signatures, Ranković added in his own handwriting: “Receive the courier and this letter without reservation”. He also mentioned some persons known both to him and Iso Jovanović, the secretary of the Bosnian regional committee, thus hoping to dispel any suspicions about the veracity of the directive.⁴⁴⁴ On 30 March 1943, Koča Popović issued a similar order to the 1st Proletarian Brigade, cautioning it to avoid any clashes with the Germans in the Goražde sector at all costs. As the instruction was written for one of his colleagues from the Spanish Republican Army, Popović wrote the closing line in Spanish language: “It is very important that there are no [hostile] activities from our side”.⁴⁴⁵ Interestingly, and probably as an additional gesture of good will towards the Germans, Tito extended the “truce” to central and western parts of Bosnia and included the local Ustashe units in the bargain. In the instructions for the 1st Bosnian Corps written on the same day as Popović's letter, Tito informed the Corps commander, Kosta Nađ that the Supreme HQ managed to

“neutralize the Germans by using the negotiations on prisoner exchange, [thereby isolating them] from the Italians and the Chetniks. You have to take account of this and concentrate all your [offensive] efforts on the Chetniks[...] Engage the Ustashe defensively, [for example] if they attack you or support the Chetniks. This is only temporarily-until further orders”.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, p. 188, Tito to Iso Jovanović (29 March 1943).

⁴⁴⁵ Popović, *Beleške uz ratovanje*, p. 114, entry for 30 March 1943.

⁴⁴⁶ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, p. 190, Tito to Bosnian Corps (30 March 1943). This order did not bring calm to the territory controlled by the Corps. On 1 April, Germans and NDH forces launched mop-up operations in Western Bosnia while the Partisans continued storming towns in Central Bosnia: *ibid.*, p. 226, Tito to Comintern (7 April 1943); NAW, T-314, Roll 554, 000395-6, Situation estimate for the period 1-15 April 1943 (14 April 1943).

6. Berlin forbids further talks; Moscow protests

Ribbentrop's cable of 19 March remained unanswered for a whole week, mostly owing to the ongoing contacts with the Partisan envoys in Zagreb. Once the results of the talks were known, Kasche prepared a three-page summary for his superior along with his views and recommendations. In the document, he informed his superior that two envoys from Tito had talks with "German, Italian and Croatian representatives".⁴⁴⁷ The Germans insisted on the cessation of Partisan activities north of the Sava in order for the talks to be continued at all. Tito's envoys were told that their terms could be discussed in the long term only if they publicly renounced the alliance with USSR and Great Britain. The second condition was that the Partisans had to acknowledge the current political landscape of the region which would mean recognition of the NDH. Kasche pleaded for permission to continue the talks, citing several reasons. First, the proposed renunciation of the Western Allies should not be problematic: the antagonism of the Partisans towards London seemed to have reached a zenith, and they had no connections to Washington in the first place. Conditions were ripe for defection from the Communist camp as well: the absence of Soviet help had destroyed the Partisans' belief in the USSR. The ambassador continued that, since Operation "Weiss" was successful, the German side could negotiate from a position of strength. Last but not the least, the Italian and NDH officials expressed their support for an arrangement along the above-mentioned lines, which would enable the Axis to present a united front. Kasche warned that, if the Partisans should continue their activity, it would take months or even years of extensive efforts to quell the uprising. The latter was not fueled by Communist agitation as much as it was by "the combative attitude and political psychosis amongst the frightened population". If Tito would break ties with Moscow and London, then the wholesale pacification of the region could be achieved by political means: "I see here a possibility to spare our resources and blood and to quickly achieve the success which would have more than merely regional importance". Kasche added that the matter was sensitive and should be handled with care; "My confident [Engineer Ott] has so far proven himself in this regard".⁴⁴⁸

Three days later, the Reich's foreign minister responded. He demanded unequivocal answers to his inquiries made in the cable of 19 March which Kasche had failed to provide.

⁴⁴⁷ Dilas doesn't mention conducting talks with either the Italians or NDH authorities; Velebit expressly denies the presence of the latter during for the duration of the talks: Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 220. In his post-war statement, Hans Ott mentioned that one military and two political representatives of the NDH took part in the negotiations: HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File Velebit, Statement of Hans Ott. The statement of Major Eugen von Pott does not contain a similar reference: *ibid.*, Statement of Eugen von Pott.

⁴⁴⁸ NAW, T-501, Roll 265, 001281-3, Kasche to Foreign Ministry (26 March 1943).

Ribbentrop also proceeded to instruct the ambassador on the official stand of the German government in regard to the negotiations with the Communist-led guerrillas:

*“[I would herewith ask you] to abstain from all official or unofficial contacts or negotiations with Tito in the future [...]. This is not only because Tito’s or promises of his envoys cannot be trusted, but primarily because of the fear that we would totally compromise ourselves before the Italians in light of the similar negotiations they lead with the Chetniks. If we would now negotiate or make arrangements with Tito, I fear the Italians would use this as a pretext to renounce the German-Italian agreement made in Rome, which clearly foresaw a decisive action against the Chetniks and Mihailović. [...] If Tito tries to contact you through intermediaries again, please make it clear to him that we would only negotiate concerning his surrender. [...] Please, press this point most energetically in your dealings with Lorković and Cassertano. There can be no negotiations with Tito under any circumstances”.*⁴⁴⁹

Kasche perceived Ribbentrop’s cable as a criticism of his diplomatic activities towards the guerrillas in general and took considerable time to explain himself. First, he emphasized that neither he nor any of the embassy’s employees dealt directly with the Partisans, for this was the responsibility of German military authorities. He defended his efforts connected with prisoner exchanges by saying that the industrial experts captured by the guerrillas could not be replaced. Without them, production of important war materials in mines and factories would grind to a halt. As these installations could not be properly protected owing to the lack of resources, the embassy had to provide the employees with some protection by not refusing the prospect of exchange. The exchange of prisoners also provided an opportunity to gather intelligence on the inner workings of the insurgent army, its mentality and intentions as well as its leadership “on a scale previously unimaginable”. Kasche also took pains to answer Ribbentrop’s two questions as clearly as possible: while General Lütters still considered himself “unauthorized to make decisions over political questions”, Horstenau said that he “would greet any solution which would bring about a speedy end to the Partisan resistance.” As for Tito’s guarantees, the ambassador wrote that he had honored all his commitments in the past, and that additional assurance of his future compliance could be provided by “taking his close associates hostage”. Kasche concluded the telegram with a remarkably sober situation estimate:

“I believe that the Partisan question is generally misunderstood by our side. Struggle against them failed to produce results everywhere. The root of the problem is political and not

⁴⁴⁹ ADAP/E/V/501-2, Ribbentrop to Kasche (29 March 1943).

*military in nature. Total destruction of the Partisans until the last man through military and police efforts is completely out of the question. Military measures can only succeed in breaking compact insurgent territories; police measures can break up insurgents' connections and help liquidate Partisans and their helpers. The success of either of the two depends on available time and troops. Since both are in short supply, we at least should not reject out of hand all possibilities of political solution. [Your] cable No. 396 denies me the opportunity to explore these possibilities".*⁴⁵⁰

Kasche's enthusiasm for a deal with Tito can be explained by the fact that he truly believed the Partisans were on the verge of making a volte-face in their "foreign policy". This would not only strengthen the position of his beloved NDH, but also improve his own standing with the Nazi hierarchy. If the arrangement was made, it would be a major diplomatic coup reminiscent of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 and Kasche would be hailed as its chief architect.⁴⁵¹

Ribbentrop's cable of 29 March spelled the end of the "March negotiations". With it, the already limited maneuvering space of the military and diplomatic circles in Zagreb all but disappeared. The talks went far beyond local prisoner exchange and the reported willingness of the Communist-led guerrillas to discuss whole-sale pacification now became a matter of high politics. Under these circumstances, it should come as no surprise that Berlin declined to play along. The decision was perfectly in line with the Third Reich's foreign policy which "intentionally denied itself all diplomatic options regardless of the hopeless war situation".⁴⁵² There is evidence that the outcome of the talks was decided already on 11 March 1943 after the Partisan envoys signed the original offer. After receiving the document, Horstenau called his friend at the RSHA, Willhelm Höttl, and informed him of the news. The information travelled through the chain of command and found its way to Ribbentrop, who informed Hitler that very day. His immediate (and much quoted) reaction was: "Rebels are not being negotiated with, rebels are being shot!"⁴⁵³ This statement, more than any else, sums up Hitler's well-known antagonism towards any notion of a negotiated settlement. Kasche informed Lütters and Horstenau of the Ribbentrop's cables when they met in Zagreb on 1 April 1943. Lütters, always the aloof soldier, repeated that the talks with the Tito's representatives were not his responsibility. Horstenau was still "for any solution which would

⁴⁵⁰ KAW, B/67: 141, Kache to Foreign ministry (30 March 1943). The quoted part of the cable was published in ADAP/E/V/502.

⁴⁵¹ Kazimirović, *Nemački general*, p. 173-4; Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 248.

⁴⁵² Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 248.

⁴⁵³ Kazimirović, *Nemački general*, p. 171.

bring about a quick pacification of the country”.⁴⁵⁴ Despite the orders from above, the Germans would continue maintaining contact with the Partisans, even if these were to be more informal than before.

The German ambassador in Zagreb was not the only one encountering difficulties with his superiors regarding the negotiations. As we have seen at the beginning of the chapter, the sheer gravity of the situation in the Neretva Valley in early March 1943 made Tito angrily dismiss any possible recriminations from Moscow at the outset. Even so, he omitted all details of the contact with the Germans in his dispatches to the Comintern, stating only that Major Strecker was captured in the fighting around Gornji Vakuf. The silence lasted until after Đilas and Velebit returned from Zagreb. On 29 March, Tito briefly mentioned the prisoner exchange, adding that his delegates witnessed heavy troop movements in easterly directions on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line. They were informed that these transports were a part of an upcoming “German invasion of Syria, with a [possible] connection to the Caucasus”.⁴⁵⁵

One day later, on 30 March 1943, Tito dictated a telegram to Moscow in which he for the first time elaborated on the contacts with the Germans. In “various talks” the NOVJ envoys had with German officers in Zagreb, the former were (again) presented with a wealth of information which hinted at the double-dealing of the British. The Partisan delegates were told that “authoritative German circles” did not believe that the British would invade Europe. Their lack of aggressiveness was illustrated by the fact that they had 250,000 men in North Africa and the Germans only 50,000, yet no bigger offensive operations had been launched. The Germans believed in a victorious conclusion of the war in 1943 (presumably against the Soviets), which would then pave the way for a settlement between Germany and Great Britain. The Germans were less optimistic about their alliance with Italy. They suspected that the Italians, especially the circles around Prince Umberto, were secretly maintaining contact with the British, purportedly with the help of the Vatican; links between Mihailović and the British were maintained partly through Vatican channels as well. The dispatch to the Comintern also read:

“[...] German military circles are full of contempt for the Italian army and do not hide malicious pleasure over our victories against Italian divisions [...] The Germans openly told

⁴⁵⁴ Leković, Martovski pregovori, p. 149-50; the first page of the Kasche's memorandum from this meeting was printed in Vasa Kazimirović, *NDH u svetlu nemačkih dokumenata i dnevnika Gleza fon Horstenau 1941.-1944.* (Belgrade: Nova knjiga, 1987), unpaginated.

⁴⁵⁵ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, p. 132, Tito to Comintern (7 March 1943) and *ibid.*, p. 189, Tito to Comintern (29 March 1943).

our delegates that they considered our people's Partisan movement as their most dangerous enemy in the Balkans. They know they cannot destroy us, but they hope to break up our army in smaller groups and eradicate our bases [...] The German ambassador in Zagreb conveyed a message through a major [who was serving as an intermediary] that he wanted to meet me".

Tito ended the cable by adding that the hatred towards the British among both the population and the Partisans was steadily rising, mainly because of the delay in the opening of a Second Front in Europe. "[The delay] is perceived as a premeditated act on the part of the English, who want to see the Soviet Union weakened by a prolonged struggle against the Germans".⁴⁵⁶

As in the earlier reports concerning prisoner exchanges, much was made of the supposedly valuable intelligence gained through such actions. The reconcilable attitude of the German sources towards the British could be explained in two ways. First, the Germans deliberately planted such information in order to play on Moscow's fears about a separate peace between the Great Britain and Germany. The second explanation would be that the information came from those Germans who had by then lost faith in Hitler and were genuinely hoping for an arrangement with the Western Allies. Judging by the reports of the Partisan envoys, such an attitude was not rare among the Germans they met and spoke with. The allegations concerning British inactivity, although far from true⁴⁵⁷, fell on fertile soil. Anglophobia in the Partisan leadership had by then reached an all-time high and such information were readily accepted at face-value. The opening of the Second Front would generally be greeted since it meant the shifting of German reserves from the Soviet Union, however, should Yugoslavia be the stage, the story was quite different. The information concerning Italian peace feelers to the Western Allies through the Vatican was genuine.⁴⁵⁸ However, the possibility of a separate peace between Italy and Britain was primarily seen not as a major blow to the Axis, but rather as a step in the forming of a united reactionary front in

⁴⁵⁶ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, pp. 201-2, Tito to Comintern (30 March 1943).

⁴⁵⁷ On 6 March 1943, Rommel launched his ill-fated assault at Medenine which he had cancelled that very day. The lull in the fighting lasted for two weeks until the 20th when Montgomery started his own offensive against the Mareth Line: Pape et al., *Drugi svjetski rat*, Vol. II, p. 225. Theoretically it would be possible that the envoys were informed of British "inactivity" on the preliminary talks in Gornji Vakuf and the first visits to Sarajevo and Zagreb, all of which took place precisely during this period. The two-week pause between the two rounds of ferocious fighting could hardly give rise to these claims, however. By the time Tito sent this dispatch, it must have been obvious to all that the allegations of inactivity of the 8th Army in North Africa were unfounded. The intelligence on the strength of the German contingent in Africa was also false: by the time it capitulated in May 1943, it had anywhere between 102-160,000 men: Steven D. Mercatante, *Why Germany nearly won: a new history of Second World War in Europe* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2012), p. 203.

⁴⁵⁸ Princess Maria José, the spouse of Prince Umberto of Italy, was involved in peace initiatives with the assistance of the Vatican in late 1942. For more on this and other attempts at reaching a separate peace see William S. Linsenmeyer, "Italian Peace Feelers before the Fall of Mussolini", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16,4 (1981): 649-662.

which the Chetniks would play a prominent part. The *schadenfreude* of the Germans with regards to their Italian comrades-in-arms was also genuine: the unwillingness of the latter to disarm the Chetniks and to engage more actively in military operations, as well as their continuing efforts to undermine the NDH meant that early 1943 witnessed an absolute valley in German-Italian relations.⁴⁵⁹

Unlike the similar cable from mid-October 1942 which reported the results of Tito's conversation with Ott in Glamoč, the latest dispatch caused a speedy and – very sharp – reaction. The exact date of Moscow's response is unclear – either on 31 March or 3 April – in any case unusually prompt by Comintern standards. Despite the fact that the message was only partially received, that segment which was transcribed left no doubt as to Moscow's reaction to the talks:

*“We are confused by the fact that you are exchanging prisoners with the Germans. Your envoys are leading all kinds of talks with the Germans and the German ambassador wants to meet you [Tito] in person. What is this all about? [missing part in the original] fierce war is raging against the invaders, and all of the sudden [missing part in the original] to contacts between you and the Germans. Could not all this be a part of the German ploy to use our people to incite in-fighting between [missing part in the original] and in this way achieve the destruction [missing part in the original]. Furthermore, the resentment of the people towards the English is understandable, but do you not think that the interests of the People's Liberation Struggle are now [missing part in the original] discontent with the English [missing part in the original] firing up the hatred of the people towards the occupier, foremost against the Germans [missing part in the original] could undoubtedly weaken [missing part in the original] the necessary hatred of the people. I await your answer. Grandfather [codename of the Comintern's Executive Committee]”.*⁴⁶⁰

Tito's telegram from October 1942 was similar to that of March 1943, yet only the latter provoked such a harsh response. The situation on the Eastern Front might have been the reason behind this. In mid-October, the Germans were on the cusp of taking Stalingrad and were nearing the oil-fields in the Caucasus: the outcome of the war was hanging in the balance. In these circumstances, the Soviets probably paid scant attention to the first telegram. Even if they did, they probably thought it wiser not to make an affair out of it given that they needed every ally they could get. The situation on the front changed dramatically between

⁴⁵⁹ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 248.

⁴⁶⁰ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, pp. 349-50, Comintern to Tito (31 March/3 April 1943).

October and March. The Sixth Army was destroyed at Stalingrad and the German lines were pushed hundreds of kilometers to the west. Having regained its confidence, Moscow could now pay more attention to the activities of the Communist parties abroad and take action, if needed.

There was probably also a second, deeper reason behind the chastisement of the Yugoslav Communists. Circumstantial evidence shows that Stalin contemplated to use the morale and material momentum of the victory at Stalingrad to sound out the possibility of an arrangement with the Third Reich. Already in November 1942, Soviet propaganda aimed at the Germans increasingly began to stress peace. At the same time it ceased making mention of the Allies and their contribution to the war effort. Stalin's speech on 28 February 1943 presented the war as a purely Soviet-German one; the call for unconditional surrender of Germany, formulated recently at the Casablanca Conference, was not echoed. All this was sufficient for the British ambassador to the USSR to openly ask the Kremlin at the behest of his government, what its war aims really were; the reply he received was "not very friendly".⁴⁶¹ After the Red Army's westward advance had been stopped by a successful German counteroffensive at Kharkov in mid-March, an unprecedented lull set in on the Eastern Front. This sudden reversal reinforced Stalin in his belief that the Wehrmacht was far from being a spent force and that years would pass before the Germans could be expelled from the Soviet Union altogether. If the Kremlin wanted to explore the possibility of a separate peace, establishing contact with Berlin would not be difficult: the Italians and especially the Japanese were known to be keen on some kind of Soviet-German rapprochement.⁴⁶²

It is questionable as to whether Stalin believed in an arrangement with Hitler which would be based on a return to the pre-1941 borders: for Stalin, this condition was the absolute minimum for any further peace talks. Even if the outcome of the negotiations was highly dubious, mere rumors about them still served a purpose. By spreading the fear of a Soviet-German separate peace, Stalin hoped to hasten the Western Allies' opening of the Second front in Europe.⁴⁶³ It was a risky game, one which required well-calculated moves and careful

⁴⁶¹ Vojtech Mastny, „Stalin and the Prospects of a Separate Peace in World War II“ in: *The American Historical Review*, 77, 5 (1972): 1369-1374.

⁴⁶² Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 609; Rolf-Dieter Müller, Gerd R. Ueberschär, *Hitler's War in the East, 1941-1945: A Critical Assessment* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), p. 39.

⁴⁶³ Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, p. 610.

timing: if Great Britain and the United States learned of the peace-feelers⁴⁶⁴ and believed they were leading to an arrangement, they might seek one for themselves. This would leave the Soviet Union facing Germany alone with only a dim possibility of a negotiated settlement. Tito's telegram about the recent round of talks with the Germans came at precisely this moment. Prior to that, according to Russian historian Leonid J. Gibiansky,

*“Moscow had absolutely no knowledge about the [March] negotiations [...] Moscow was very frightened at the prospect of Allied intelligence services finding out about these negotiations. The Allies always thought that the KPJ, as well as all other Communist parties, were mere exponents of Moscow. Consequently, they would think that the negotiations were led on Moscow's behest. It was feared that this, in turn, could cause a rift in the anti-Hitler coalition [...]. This is why the Soviet leadership reacted so sharply on ‘March Negotiations’”.*⁴⁶⁵

Although Gibiansky did not mention then Kremlin's own diplomatic maneuvering (which should not come as surprise given that his statement was recorded in 1991), it is evident that the Soviet reaction was motivated by political rather than by ideological concerns. In short, Tito's independent decision to contact the Germans threatened to narrow the options open to the Soviet leadership and disrupt its timetable.⁴⁶⁶ In the worst-case scenario, the alliance with the Western powers would be endangered before a viable alternative could be found. At best, the Soviet Union would find itself in an embarrassing situation, being made to explain the actions of its protégés to London and Washington. Either way, the incident provided additional reason for reigning Communist parties abroad in.

After receiving Moscow's cable, Tito sent a lengthy response on the very same day, defending his actions with surprising tenacity:

“Your dispatch of 3 March [should read: 31 March or 1 April] affected us deeply. The confusion and doubts caused by the information I sent you speak of a certain amount of distrust and doubts about our actions. The fact that this became evident after two years of

⁴⁶⁴ For instance, on 26 March 1943, Allen Dulles of the American intelligence agency OSS reported from Switzerland about „the danger of a separate Soviet peace with the Axis“: Neal H. Petersen, Allen W. Dulles, *From Hitler's Doorstep: The Wartime Intelligence Reports of Allen Dulles, 1942-1945* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 55.

⁴⁶⁵ Interview with Dr. Leonid J. Gibiansky in TV-documentary „Jugoslavija u ratu 1941.-1945.“ (RTV Beograd, 1991/2), Episode 6.

⁴⁶⁶ The Spring and Summer of 1943 saw repeated contacts between the Soviets and the Germans through intermediaries in Stockholm. Given Hitler's deep resentment of political compromise, it comes as little wonder that no progress was made: Mastny, „Stalin and the Prospects of a Separate Peace“, pp. 1375-1388.

superhuman efforts in this struggle is not least encouraging in our present difficult situation, but quite the opposite”.

In the rest of the cable, Tito emphasized the fact that the mortality rate under the Party cadres was especially high, and that the Partisans could therefore ill-afford to let their activists rot in prisons and concentration camps. Prisoner exchanges were important for reasons of morale too, for it made clear to both the fighters and the population that the Partisan leadership looked after its men. The exchange also solved the major problem of feeding and guarding prisoners. Liquidating them would not be “politically opportune”, especially those Home Guard officers, whose exchange was “the main issue here”:

*“There were only 27 Germans in our captivity; they are mostly civilians, since our fighters liquidate almost every German prisoner. These Germans were with us since the liberation of Jajce, and the negotiations on their exchange have been held since [the fall of] Livno, when we exchanged eight Germans, who were also civilians”.*⁴⁶⁷

The Partisans would not set their captives free, since in 1941, they had lost over “a thousand German and Italian prisoners” in 1941 without getting anything in return. The delegates who travelled to the enemy territory also brought back much needed vaccines against typhus, which was just beginning to take its toll amongst the army. Given the fact that the Soviet Union could not help the Communist-led guerrillas “because of the technical difficulties” and that the English directed their help to the Chetniks “who collaborated with the occupier”, the Partisans had to obtain medical supplies in this fashion. As for the contacts with the Germans, Tito repeated that he had turned down their offer of negotiations after the first exchange. “That the German ambassador wants to talk to me despite all the dirt the German and Croatian newspapers are publishing on me, is nobody’s fault – I have absolutely no intention of meeting him“. The Secretary-General of the KPJ concluded the telegram by saying that the Partisan struggle would remain unblemished, but that they were responsible for the lives of the millions who supported them. Consequently, the Partisans had to do everything to keep

⁴⁶⁷ Unlike the rest of the cable, I quote this passage from the collection of documents pertaining to the history of Yugoslavia, published in 1988 (*Jugoslavija 1918-1988*, p. 607, Tito to Comintern, 31 March 1943). The version of the same cable printed in the official collection of documents signed or written by Tito (which appeared in the early Eighties) does not contain the excerpt regarding the liquidation of prisoners. The difference appears, at first, to be hard to explain, as both collections used the same original from the Archives of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (A-CK SKJ, Fond KPJ-KI, reg.br. 1943/76). The most likely answer to the riddle lies in the fact that the official collection was published immediately after Tito’s death and that the incriminating section was simply left out so as not to blemish the image of the deceased President. The “Jugoslavija” collection was published in the last days of Socialism, which enabled the editors to quote the document in full.

that trust. After repeating that the reproaches from Moscow were groundless and left a bitter taste, Tito indirectly criticized the fact that the Soviet-sponsored radio station, “Free Yugoslavia” stopped mentioning Mihailović’s Chetniks.⁴⁶⁸

Although Tito wanted to appear as though he had laid bare all, this was not so. Just as in previous cables, so too did this one present a heavily sanitized version of recent events. First, Tito was not informing Moscow about his “diplomatic” maneuvers on a daily basis primarily out of fear of interference. He preferred to wait until the results of the talks were known and then to present the Comintern with a *fait accompli*. As before, Tito named humanitarian and intelligence reasons as his main motives for sending the NOVJ envoys to enemy territory and supported his statement with a number of half-truths. For instance, the delegates were not tasked with procuring typhus vaccines on their trips in March; Velebit received such an order just prior to the transmission of the latest dispatch.⁴⁶⁹ Half-truths gave way to outright falsehoods whenever contact with the enemy was touched upon: neither were the Home Guard prisoners “the main issue” of the latest talks nor did Tito turn down German offers of negotiations. However, regarding the Chetniks, the leader of the Partisans did not miss the opportunity to chastise them.

The tone of Tito’s answer was unprecedented for his correspondence with the Comintern. This was not only because of how he drafted his defense, but more because of what he failed to write. In short, the Secretary-General of the KPJ failed to repent and pledge an immediate cessation of all contacts with the Germans, as per Moscow’s wishes. That he decided himself on such a bold move can be attributed to a mounting frustration with the combination of neglect and cynicism with which Kremlin had been treating the Yugoslav Communists since the beginning of the war. Their revolutionary zeal was constantly dampened and their political aims either thwarted or re-directed, all to best serve the immediate interests of the “First Land of Socialism”. Tito’s answer was also a product of his newly-won self-confidence. In the first three months of 1943, the Partisans made a fighting retreat of several hundred kilometers in the midst of Winter, avoided encirclement on several occasions tackling no less than five different enemies in the process. Even when they were hemmed in the narrow Neretva valley and their destruction seemed imminent, they still managed to find enough strength, morale as well as physical, to pull off a daring escape. The key was that all this was done without any help from outside. This self-sufficiency reinforced

⁴⁶⁸ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, pp. 204-5, Tito to Comintern (31 March 1943).

⁴⁶⁹ Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 221.

the growing sense of independence and the belief that the methods used to wage war in their own country were right. One of these methods included swapping prisoners with the enemy and even negotiating with him if it served the immediate needs of the war. All members of the Politburo as well as non-members who took part in the talks with the Germans—needless to say, all convinced Communists—had no pangs of conscience. “The history of Bolshevism,” Đilas wrote, “even without the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and the Hitler-Stalin pact offered us an abundance of precedents.” The main point here is that Yugoslav Communists felt secure enough to assume the responsibilities of running a fully independent state, and to conduct foreign policy accordingly. The “March negotiations” were the first time the KPJ placed its own interest ahead of the interests of the Soviet Union and can therefore rightly be described as the “[first] venture of the KPJ into the domain of *Realpolitik*”.⁴⁷⁰

Moscow decided not to press the matter any further. This was in part due to the resolute tone of Tito’s dispatch and that the silent criticism he leveled at the USSR’s policies towards the KPJ was not groundless. Even if they wanted to discipline the Yugoslav leadership and its secretary-general, this was neither politically opportune nor technically possible at the present juncture. Besides, the discontent of the Yugoslav Communists was not motivated by seditious intentions; they had been fulfilling their “Internationalist Duty” with great ardor and self-sacrifice ever since the beginning of Operation “Barbarossa”. Nevertheless, despite the “March Negotiations” never being mentioned in official correspondence again, they cast long shadows. One year later, in March 1944, Đilas was chosen to lead the first Partisan mission to the USSR. Ranković, possibly at Tito’s behest, asked Đilas what he would reply should someone in Moscow inquire about the talks. The latter responded that it was all about the exchange of wounded which made Ranković “laugh roguishly”. Dimitrov, the head of the Comintern, mentioned the March episode in a meeting with Đilas, though not in a reproaching manner: “We were afraid for you at the time” said Dimitrov, “but luckily everything turned out well”. Đilas did not reply but took this as a warning that old sins were not forgotten.⁴⁷¹ The controversial topic resurfaced during a private conversation between Stalin and Tito in the same year. The Soviet ruler reproached him at

⁴⁷⁰ Haberl, *Die Emanzipation der KP Jugoslawiens*, pp. 52-3.

⁴⁷¹ Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 380, 383. Dimitrov, who famously stood trial in Leipzig in 1934, was allegedly himself exchanged for a number of German engineers arrested in the Soviet Union: Marietta Stankova, *Georgi Dimitrov: A Biography* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p. 113.

one point for the sharp cable of 31 March/3 April 1943, to which the latter responded: “Comrade Stalin, if you had been in my place, you would have written it even sharper”.⁴⁷²

7. Velebit's trip to Slavonia and events in Eastern Bosnia

On 30 March, Velebit headed to German-held territory once more. He was accompanied by a courier, Grujo Soknić, who knew the terrain in Eastern Bosnia, and two Germans. One day later they arrived in Sarajevo, where Velebit had a conversation with intelligence officers of the 718th Infantry Division. In his statement he provided the details of his itinerary, which included stops in Eastern Bosnia and Slavonia. He was to convey the orders of the Supreme HQ to the 6th Brigade to “commence the withdrawal to Sandžak” and to the 3rd Operational Zone to cease sabotage on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line. Velebit also recounted the details of the previous round of talks in Zagreb and repeated the Partisan stand on political issues. He gave a short description of the fighting against the Chetniks in Eastern Herzegovina and offered to provide documentary evidence of the Italian-Chetnik alliance.⁴⁷³ On 1 April, Soknić, carrying the letter written by Tito and Ranković, headed on a German motorcycle towards Birač, a Partisan stronghold in Eastern Bosnia, where the Main HQ for Bosnia and its operative units were thought to be located. Velebit was preparing for a trip to Zagreb when German officers approached him with the news that their troops had been attacked by a Partisan unit north of Sarajevo. They asked Velebit to contact them and inform them of Tito's

⁴⁷² Josip Broz Tito: *autobiografska kazivanja* (Belgrade: IRO Narodna knjiga, 1983), Vol. I, p. 353. This episode seemed to have been forgotten for good in the light of the very cordial relations between the Soviets and the Yugoslav Communists in the immediate post-war period. It was not until the Tito-Stalin split of 1948 that the “March negotiations” were mentioned publicly for the first time. During the show-trial of László Rajk and his group in Budapest in 1949, one of the accused, Lazar Brankov, spoke of the negotiations with the Germans in 1941, 1942 and early 1943. According to his testimony, Tito offered to discontinue the fight, “provided that Germans would consent that he set up the government in Yugoslavia. [...] In 1943, towards the middle of the year, when the Soviet Union was gaining great victories over the German army, Tito discontinued these negotiations [...]” The topic was taken up by the propaganda campaign in the Eastern Bloc countries against “Tito's fascist clique”. *László Rajk and his accomplices before the people's court* (Budapest: Budapest printing press, 1949), pp. 142-3 (Freely downloadable at <http://mek.oszk.hu/10900/10919/10919.pdf>; last accessed on 17 September 2012); Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 223.

⁴⁷³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 001475-9, Conversation with Dr. Vladimir Petrović from Partisan HQ (31 March 1943). The Germans for their part also offered documents on the Chetniks, but not in such a straightforward way. As Velebit and Đilas came to Sarajevo on their return trip from the main talks in Zagreb, they had a conversation with a German intelligence officer in his office. The latter excused himself at one point, thus allowing the delegates to catch a glimpse of a document which detailed the Chetnik dispositions and strength in various parts of Bosnia; Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 220. We should remember that Stilić obtained intelligence on the Italian movements to the south of Zagreb in late August 1942 in a similar way. Consequently, there can be no doubt that the Germans chose to serve selected information to the Partisan envoys in this way.

orders. It was a test of sincerity of Partisan promises, and Velebit readily accepted. Accompanied by a German escort, he immediately headed north.⁴⁷⁴

The Partisan units in question were the 6th East Bosnian and Majevisa brigades. Unknown to the Partisan delegates, they had left Birač on the 29th and headed south in response to Tito's directive aired over the radio station "Free Yugoslavia". Therefore, Soknić could deliver Tito's letter only to the local Partisans in Birač. Velebit faced a difficult task: he had no proof of his identity and did not know anyone in the Bosnian regional leadership. Understandably, he was treated with suspicion when a Partisan patrol brought him to the brigade's staff in the late afternoon of 1 April. Velebit had to exert great effort to convince the Bosnians that he was indeed an envoy from the Supreme HQ. Even so, the order not to engage the Germans on their way to the main Partisan force around Foča was met with disbelief. "He told us things which we did not believe in at first", Uglješa Danilović, a member of the Main HQ for Bosnia and Herzegovina wrote in his diary; "It is about an important change of tactics".⁴⁷⁵ Either the disbelief held, or Tito's orders were not conveyed to all units, but the movement south did not occur without incident. On 8 April, near Goražde, a column of German *Feldgendarmarie* belonging to the 717th Infantry Division ran into an ambush laid by East Bosnian Partisans. This resulted in one dead, two wounded and eight captured Germans.⁴⁷⁶ One of the captives, Lieutenant Kühnle, decided to use his knowledge of the negotiations to affect the release of his men. He approached his captors and protested against the attack. He pointed out that Tito had ordered a cease-fire and added that he personally knew "Brigadier Popović" from the talks in Gornji Vakuf. Instead of releasing the prisoners, the Partisans took them along and delivered them to Supreme HQ the following day.⁴⁷⁷

Once they had rejoined the main Partisan force, the Bosnian leaders went to a meeting with Tito. Danilović related the details of the conversation in his diary:

„He gave us the proper explanation of Vlatko's [Velebit's nickname] words [...] The whole thing is not about a truce of any kind, but about ceasing an attack on one enemy while we deal with another. The Chetniks are our worst enemies now because of the possible Allied

⁴⁷⁴ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 186.

⁴⁷⁵ In a statement given to Tito's biographer, Vladimir Dedijer, almost thirty years after the event, Danilović said that he used the phrase "the important change of tactics" for reasons of conspiracy: he feared that his diary might be captured by the enemy. The second reason was that he did not believe in Velebit's explanations "which really hinted at a possibility of a truce": Dedijer, *Novi prilozi*, Vol. II, 809-10.

⁴⁷⁶ NAW, T-315, Roll 1299, 000248, War diary entry for 8 April 1943.

⁴⁷⁷ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 191; Andrija Blagojević, "Borbe 4. bataljona od formiranja do početka Pete neprijateljske ofanzive" in: *Petnaesta majevička brigada: sjećanja i članci* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1979), p. 173.

*landing in the Balkans which might happen tomorrow. In this case, the Yugoslav government in London will try to take advantage of the situation and reap the fruits of our struggle. We haven't used the tactic of playing one enemy against the other until now, but this should be done [...] He [also] fully approved our action at Hranjen [the attack on the Feldgendarmarie column]. We were especially worried about it and thought we had made a mistake“.*⁴⁷⁸

The German prisoners were billeted in a separate building in Kalinovik and received better food than the Home Guard and Italian prisoners. On 11 April, Ranković was handed over a letter written by Lt. Kühnle in which the latter requested his superiors facilitate an exchange. This would, however, prove unnecessary: Tito, under the impression that German inactivity in Eastern Bosnia was a result of contact with their commands in Sarajevo and Zagreb, ordered the prisoners released.⁴⁷⁹

The apparent lack of German interest in the happenings in this sector of the NDH must have seemed odd. The first two weeks of April were marked by a series of defeats inflicted by the Partisans on the Italians and their Chetnik allies in what Yugoslav historiography termed “The Battle of the Drina”. This began in late March as the 1st and 2nd Proletarian Divisions received orders to forge the Drina in the Foča-Goražde sector. The river had been crossed in strength by 10 April after encountering strong resistance from the Italian “Taurinense” division supported by Montenegrin Chetniks. The town of Foča was surrounded and its fall seemed imminent. The Italian calls for German intervention increased and the OKW finally acquiesced to send one German battalion to relieve the garrison, against the advice of the commands in the field. By 19 April, this modest force was augmented by another battalion creating a regimental-sized battle group.⁴⁸⁰ Only five days before, Tito had cautioned his commanders not to engage the Germans in Goražde; he feared that they would thereby be forced to take part in the fighting on the side of their hard-pressed allies. The beginning of the German intervention in East Bosnia in the last ten days of April made such orders superfluous.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁸ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 190-2.

⁴⁷⁹ *Zbornik*/11/9/85, Report of intelligence section of Supreme HQ to Ranković (11 April 1943); Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 201. The release of the prisoners is not explicitly mentioned in the surviving records of the 717th division or any other unit operating in the area at the time. However, the casualty return of the 717th Division for April, compiled at the end of the month, does not list any missing men: NAW, T-315, Roll 1299, 000268, Casualty figures for April 1943 (undated).

⁴⁸⁰ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. I, pp. 409-13; NAW, T-311, Roll 175, 000582, Memorandum from meeting with chief of staff (19 April 1943).

⁴⁸¹ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XIV, p. 270 (Tito to Velimir Terzić, 14 April 1943) and p. 274 (Tito to 1st Proletarian Division, 14 April 1943). On 26 April, the Partisans captured six German soldiers in a skirmish with elements of

While these events were taking place, Velebit was hard at work trying to fulfill his mission. Immediately after the meeting with the Bosnian leadership, he returned to Sarajevo proceeding to Zagreb a day later. This time, he was not a guest of the German *Feldkommandatur*, but was billeted in the Hotel “Central” near the railway station. He spent an entire week in the city, attempting to arrange the release of Herta Hass and the other Partisans whom the Germans still “owed” from the last exchange. His German counterparts (Ott and several other officers) repeated that they were doing all they could, but that the NDH police continued to inform them that she could not be found. Velebit’s main task was to reach the HQ of the 3rd Operational Zone in Slavonia and convey Tito’s temporary ban on railway sabotage. On 9 April, Velebit left Zagreb with a German escort for Pakrac. Upon reaching his objective, Velebit was informed that the Axis forces had been engaged by guerrillas not far from the town. Crossing into the Partisan territory proved to be a difficult task. A Home Guard major, whose unit had sustained heavy casualties the night before, angrily refused to help Velebit in his endeavors. Only after repeated demands from the Germans did the major agree to help: he chose one of the reprisal hostages to act as a courier between Velebit and the nearest Partisan command. However, the letter which the NOVJ envoy wrote failed to produce a response over the ensuing days (it turned out that it was never delivered for unknown reasons). As he could not wait in Pakrac indefinitely, Velebit decided to undertake a risky venture: he would go alone across the lines, unannounced. The driver dropped him outside the town from where he continued on foot, hoping to find some Partisans along the way. Not long after he stumbled onto a pair of fighters who directed him to the 3rd Operational Zone’s HQ. When he arrived, he requested to see Marijan Stilinović who knew him and could vouch for him. The latter, although recently wounded, could confirm Velebit’s identity and the envoy of the Supreme HQ could proceed to relate the details of his mission.⁴⁸²

On the same day, the 3rd Zone informed its subordinate units about Velebit’s arrival and “special directives” from Supreme HQ. On 14 April, the 4th Division of the NOVJ issued an order, in capital letters, that “all brigades should withdraw their demolition teams and order them to cease their activities against the railway lines, the Zagreb-Belgrade line in particular”; the units should limit their activities to foraging and training. Furthermore, the Slavonian units were expressly warned not to execute German army prisoners or the local *Ethnic Germans* because they could now be exchanged. The result was a marked drop in railway sabotage: in

the 369th Infantry Division south of Goražde: *ibid.*, Vol. XV, p. 56 (Tito to Comintern, 26 April 1943) and p. 58 (Tito to 1st Proletarian Division, 26 April 1943). Unlike their comrades who were captured at the beginning of April, there is no evidence that these men were either freed or exchanged.

⁴⁸² Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 193-4; Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, pp. 223-4.

January there were 124 incidents, in February 135, in March 156, and in April 99.⁴⁸³ Both the 3rd Operational Zone and the KPJ's regional committee reported Velebit's mission to the Main HQ for Croatia. As the latter was located in the opposite part of the country, in Lika, some time passed before the information reached its destination. Although the envoy's identity had been validated by the Slavonian leadership, the directives he carried continued to raise a considerable amount of suspicion. On 5 and 8 May, the Main HQ for Croatia sent cables to Tito, requesting a confirmation of both the delegate's particulars and his mission orders. On the 7th, Supreme HQ responded that it had indeed tasked Velebit with going to Slavonia and halting sabotage of railway communications. Tito added that the attacks must be resumed "on full scale" and that an appropriate order would soon be aired by "Free Yugoslavia".⁴⁸⁴

Before heading back to the Axis-held territory, Velebit visited one Slavonian brigade in order to pick up an ethnic German doctor and bring him across the lines. It was already dark as the two of them ventured into the imaginary "no-man's land". The first attempt to reach Pakrac failed: Velebit, who went ahead to scout the terrain, ran into the same hostile Home Guards he had met on his way to the Partisans. Deciding it was better not to take any risks, he and the doctor spent a night in a barn. The next morning, Velebit simply walked into the town without being stopped once. As soon as he contacted his German escort, a courier was sent to fetch the doctor from his hiding place.⁴⁸⁵

Velebit returned to Zagreb to complete his final remaining task: to find Herta Haas. After several days of waiting, the Germans brought the long-awaited news: Haas was alive and released to German custody. However, convincing her to go with Velebit took some effort. "I knew that the Fourth Offensive [Operation "Weiss"] has just passed and I thought Velebit had been captured", Haas told an interviewer almost seventy years after the event; "I

⁴⁸³ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 193-4. The figures pertain to Croatia proper (without Bosnia and Herzegovina), including the Italian occupation zone. One report of the commander of "Demolition group Slavonia-Syrmia" from early June is indicative of the decrease in activity in that region: the group undertook no attacks on rail lines between 18 April and 25 May 1943: Ljubomir Bošnjak, *Diverzantska dejstva u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941.-1945.* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1983), pp. 183-4. Unsurprisingly, the author did not explain the reasons for the reduced activity of the Croatian Partisans.

⁴⁸⁴ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 197-8; *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XV, p. 84, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (7 May 1943).

⁴⁸⁵ Ironically, Velebit came closer to death while in Partisan territory. Radojica Nenezić, his acquaintance from Supreme HQ and by that point, a brigade commander, tasked a patrol with escorting Velebit and the doctor to the front lines. He thereby inadvertently used the word "povesti" ("to conduct") which, in the local Partisan jargon, meant "execute". Fifteen minutes after Velebit had departed, Nenezić realized what he had said and sent a mounted courier after them. Luckily for Velebit, the courier reached them before the patrol could fulfill its "mission": Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, pp. 225-6.

therefore pretended that I did not know him". Only when the NOVJ envoy told him that Tito sent him to exchange her, did she acquiesce to go. "And then I realized why they [the Germans] kept asking me whom did I know in the Supreme HQ". Accompanied by Ott and one sergeant, two Partisans took a train to Sarajevo.⁴⁸⁶ It was planned that the rest of the exchange prisoners would be waiting for them there, ready to embark to the guerrilla-held territory. However, it turned out that the captives were stricken by typhoid and could not travel. Velebit used the three-day stay in Sarajevo to buy a supply of thermometers from a pharmacist he had known since before the war. Early on 23 April, the party left for Trnovo in a truck adorned with a white flag. The flag failed to produce the intended effect: the vehicle was fired upon by the Partisans although miraculously no one was hurt. Velebit had to use his diplomatic skills again to explain his mission and convince the attackers to take him and Haas to Supreme HQ. At this point, Velebit and Ott bade farewell after spending more than three weeks in close contact as tandem negotiators. Several hours of walking awaited Velebit and Haas before they could rejoin Tito at his command post in the village of Govza between Foča and Kalinovik.⁴⁸⁷

Ott did not return immediately to Zagreb. Before he and Velebit parted they agreed that the latter should send him a letter as soon as he arrived to Supreme HQ. The letter contained details on two open issues: the transfer of Chetnik documents Velebit promised to the 718th Division in late March and the date and place for a meeting between Ott and Tito. Two days later, on 25 April 1943 (Easter Sunday), the letter came across the lines to Trnovo. It read that Tito agreed to meet Ott on or about 10 May somewhere between Foča and Kalinovik. Furthermore, Velebit requested that the prisoners the Germans still had not delivered be brought over at the same time. There were two letters addressed to Ambassador Kasche and General Horstenau attached to the original message. They dealt with the long-overdue exchange of 104 Home Guard officers and civilians still being held in Partisan captivity; the guerrillas were anxious to exchange them as they were becoming increasingly

⁴⁸⁶ Interview with Herta Haas in TV-documentary „Tito: posljednji svjedoci testamenta“ (Hrvatska radio televizija, 2011), Episode 6. While traveling, Velebit observed troop movements and inquired with the German soldiers regarding their itinerary and unit numeration. Tito reported this to the Comintern, saying the intelligence was obtained by “a reliable comrade who travelled by train from Zagreb to Brod”. No further details on Velebit's mission were mentioned, ostensibly because of the recent heated exchange with Moscow: *Sabrana Djela*, Vol. XV, p. 54, Tito to Comintern (25 April 1943).

⁴⁸⁷ Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, pp. 199-200; Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, pp. 226-7.

hard to take care of.⁴⁸⁸ Ott attempted to make contact with the Partisans after the receipt of the letter, but this proved to be impossible owing to wandering Chetnik bands in the area.⁴⁸⁹

Contrary to what his cables to Moscow relayed, Tito was willing to meet a close associate of the German ambassador. Likewise, Kasche acted directly against his superior's (Ribbentrop) instructions, which had prohibited him explicitly from any contact with the Partisan leader. A possible meeting was discussed as early as August 1942, but the latest initiative most had its roots in Velebit's recent stays in Sarajevo and Zagreb. In mid-April, Kasche cautiously again began mentioning contacts with the Partisans in official correspondence with Berlin. There are two plausible reasons for this. The first was the increasing tension between Germany and Italy. The second was Kasche's strong belief in an accommodation with Tito, recently strengthened by the ban on sabotage against the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line. On 17 April, he sent a cable to the Foreign Ministry outlining the present military and political situation in the NDH. The root of the problems lay in the decision of the 2nd Italian army to stage a phased withdrawal from the interior and concentrate on the Adriatic coastline. The Italians had already begun pulling out of the province of Lika without attempting to coordinate with the Germans and the NDH. This caused fury in Zagreb as no reserves were available with which this gap could be plugged. Owing to the duplicitous Italian policy, the sole aim of which was to "foster unrest" in the country, Kasche advised against coming to Italian aid at Foča. Additionally, such a move would be detrimental to German interests. The bloody fighting between the Chetniks and the Partisans was welcomed as it took place in the area targeted by the German occupation forces for large-scale operations in the near future. If the German troops would intervene against Tito, this would only cause him to make peace with the Chetniks and unite with them against the new threat. "As we are continually well informed on the affairs in Tito's HQ", wrote Kasche "there is no possibility of deceit". Four days later, Ribbentrop replied that the aim of the German endeavors was not to play the Partisans against the Chetniks, but to destroy them both. The

⁴⁸⁸ The list of the people whom the Partisans wanted in exchange was updated throughout this period: *Zbornik*//II/9/134, Pijade to Ranković (18 April 1943). On 30 April, Ranković sent Velebit to check on the health of the NDH and Italian prisoners: each day, one or two died owing to exhaustion or typhus. Ranković concluded that "we should insist on an exchange because of the health condition of the prisoners, but in first line in order to free our comrades from prisons and camps": *ibid.*, p. 184, Ranković to Tito (30 April 1943). NDH authorities were also very interested in the exchange of the officers and requested Horstenau's assistance in this matter (HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2222, 466-7, To German Plenipotentiary-General, undated). It was planned to release 73 inmates from concentration camps and bring them to Trnovo, where Engineer Ott and the 369th Infantry Division stood ready to complete the exchange (*ibid.*, 520, Cable to Main Directorate for Public Order and Security and to Dr. Vjekoslav Vrančić, undated; *ibid.*, 526, Government to Ministry of Defense, 17 April 1943). The swap did probably not take place due to the intensification of fighting in the area in mid-May.

⁴⁸⁹ The first page of Ott's report was printed in Leković, *Martovski pregovori*, p. 299.

ambassador's proposal was not very different from the old Italian tactic of divide and conquer. Given that the Duce had been recently persuaded the Chetniks should be destroyed, appliance of such methods by the Germans would be inopportune.⁴⁹⁰

Like the German embassy, the office of the Plenipotentiary General in Zagreb was interested in cultivating contact with Partisan high command, despite Berlin's discontent. Upon his return from Slavonia, Velebit was invited to see General Horstenau. The details of this meeting are unknown, but it was apparently yet another informative conversation without spectacular conclusions. The general did not voice his opinion on the continuation of negotiations in the official correspondence, but confided to his diary that "we could have made politics here which would be agreeable even to Kasche. But what can one hope to achieve when everybody keeps meddling into one's affairs".⁴⁹¹ Unfortunately, we do not know just how much stock Horstenau placed in Tito's promises nor whether his thinking was influenced by the ban on sabotage and the lack of activity in Eastern Bosnia. On the other hand, Colonel Pfaffenrott, Lüters' chief of staff was convinced of the veracity of Partisan offers. In a telephone conversation on 21 April with his counterpart from the HQ of General Bader, Pfaffenrott "was of the opinion that the Communists in Montenegro do not plan to act against us, but only to establish new supply bases there".⁴⁹²

The previously-quoted lines from Horstenau's diary are the only ones in which he mentioned the "March Negotiations". He also gave a short description of the Partisan envoy who visited him twice over the past months:

*"Petrović [...] was 35-year old, in civilian life a lawyer from Zagreb [...] He was Orthodox, but spoke good Austrian-German and he turned out to be a son, a grandson and a great-grandson of Austrian officers [...] He disclosed his real name to me and Metzger [Horstenau's adjutant]."*⁴⁹³

The Plenipotentiary-General discovered Velebit's identity by accident. While walking down the streets of Zagreb, Velebit was greeted several times by pre-war acquaintances whom he pretended not to know. When he visited a pharmacy to purchase a tooth-brush, the cashier recognized him and said "You're here, doctor!? I heard that you were with the Partisans!" All

⁴⁹⁰ ADAP/E/V/616-9, Kasche to Foreign Ministry (17 April 1943) and *ibid.*, pp. 668-9, Ribbentrop to Kasche (21 April 1943).

⁴⁹¹ Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 226; Peter Broucek [Ed.], *Ein General im Zwielficht: Die Erinnerungen Edmund Glaises von Horstenau* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1988), Vol. III, pp. 220-1, entry for May 1943.

⁴⁹² NAW, T-501, Roll 249, 000179, War diary entry for 21 April 1943.

⁴⁹³ Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, Vol. III, p. 220, entry for May 1943.

this did not escape Velebit's German escort. Therefore, when Velebit met Horstenau, the general told him they knew he was Vladimir Velebit, the son of General Ljubomir Velebit. The Partisan envoy, realizing that the game was up, introduced himself with his real name. Thereupon, Velebit was allowed to visit his parents at their house in a Zagreb suburb where he had a chance to bathe and change clothes—an unimaginable luxury for a guerrilla fighter. Interestingly, Horstenau did not disclose Petrović's real identity to German intelligence or other authorities in Zagreb for the duration of his stay in the NDH capital. "What has made the Germans treat me with such correctness is hard to say", wrote Velebit in 1967. "I believe that General Glaise, as an Austrian, did so out of friendship for my late father. They were both officers in the Austro-Hungarian army which had a very developed *esprit de corps*".⁴⁹⁴

Đilas was treated equally correctly, although he was only a son of a Montenegrin officer. Having no family in Zagreb to visit, he went to cinema instead, discreetly followed by a German soldier. At the beginning of the contacts, it occurred to Đilas that their hosts might simply hand them over to the Gestapo for torture and execution. The Germans, however, "gave no reason for such misgivings, and eventually the misgivings vanished".⁴⁹⁵ During their stays in Sarajevo and Zagreb and long trips in the company of the Germans, the stereotyped picture of their enemies eroded further. Đilas, for instance, was taken aback by the tenderness with which one officer treated a wounded soldier outside of Konjic; in the Partisans' mindset, care for the wounded was a trait they considered uniquely theirs. Velebit remembered that during his last visit to Sarajevo in mid-April he was not billeted in the comfortable apartment on the Miljacka prospect, but in the local *Feldgendarmarie* barracks. He did not get much rest that night because curious military policemen wanted to talk to him. Velebit was surprised by their pessimism about the outcome of the war: while they did not agree with him that the Third Reich had already lost the war, not one of them expressed unshakable belief in the ultimate German victory.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁴ Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 219.

⁴⁹⁵ Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 244. After hearing of the correct treatment of the envoys, Tito remarked: "Yes, it seems that the German army has kept something of the spirit of chivalry": *ibid.*, p. 240.

⁴⁹⁶ Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 240, 242, 244; Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, pp. 226-7.

8. The final act: “Operation Schwarz”

Velebit’s return to Supreme HQ and the German incursion into Eastern Bosnia in late April marked the end of the “March Negotiations”. However, what transpired over the ensuing month and a half is closely related to the events from January until April, and it seems appropriate that it be covered in the same chapter.

On 31 March 1943, Hitler approved the sequence of “Operation “Weiss” which would target the Chetniks in the Italian occupation zone. This plan was codenamed “*Unternehmen Schwarz*” (Operation Black) and it would take place in Eastern Bosnia, Eastern Herzegovina and in Montenegro. Preparations began immediately. On 1 April, all four infantry divisions of the 15th Mobilization Wave were re-designated “Jäger” (light infantry) and began receiving young recruits, which replaced the middle aged soldiers. Additionally, mountain warfare training was implemented.⁴⁹⁷ The Armed Forces High Command also finally saw fit to transfer one of the German army’s elite units, the 1st Mountain Division, to the region and keep it there for as long as the operation lasted. All in all, by early May 1943 the Commander of German Troops in Croatia had at his disposal up to 70,000 German troops in four reinforced divisions. The Luftwaffe contingent was also reinforced to 100 aircraft, including a large number of Ju-87 “Stuka” dive-bombers. This was the largest anti-Partisan force the German occupation forces had mustered in Yugoslavia this far. The number of Chetniks in Herzegovina and Montenegro was estimated at approximately 20,000. Also facing them was the Main Operations Group of the NOVJ with four divisions, altogether 16,000 able-bodied fighters and some 3,500 wounded and sick.⁴⁹⁸

The secrecy of the operation was maintained, especially against the Italians. Judging by their policy in the past, they were not likely to allow the Germans to disarm their Serbian charges, the Chetniks. Therefore, Hitler ordered that they be kept out of the preparations – “Schwarz” was to be a “one-man-show”. The German commands in the field were content to have their troublesome allies out of the way. As we have seen, they obeyed the politically motivated orders to advance on Foča with great reluctance. However, as April gave way to May and as the fighting moved into the northern Montenegro their attitude began to change. As their efforts against the NOVJ main force ended in a series of disasters, the Italians were

⁴⁹⁷ The reorganization of the divisions of the 15th Mobilization Wave was primarily motivated by the possibility of Allied landing in the Balkans: NAW, T-315, Roll 1301, 001154, Subject: training (22 March 1943).

⁴⁹⁸ Trifković, *Schwarz auf Weiss*, pp. 94, 96-99; NAW, T-314, Roll 566, 000778, Chetnik forces in Croatia, Slovenia and Montenegro on 1 May 1943 (5 May 1943).

forced to step up their requests for help.⁴⁹⁹ The Germans found out that they could use their ally's predicament to their advantage. By moving troops deeper into Sandžak, East Bosnia and Montenegro under the guise of helping their hard-pressed allies, the Germans managed to “sneak up” on the main Partisan force and form a wide operational encirclement made up entirely of their own troops. Both friend and foe were therefore stunned by the sudden begin of Operation “Schwarz” on 15 May 1943. 4,000 Chetniks were disarmed while the rest scattered, sometimes with Italian help. The Italians protested and even tried to stop the German advance at some points but buckled under the well-balanced combination of diplomacy and threat of force. By 19 May, the Chetniks, as a potential threat, were largely eliminated and the Germans could now concentrate solely on the NOVJ. By 22 May the Italians joined the operation and provided elements of three divisions to support the encirclement, thereby freeing up more German troops for offensive actions against the Communist-led guerrillas.⁵⁰⁰

The Partisans were in the dark concerning enemy intentions until it was too late. The trickle of intelligence at the beginning of May admittedly registered German troop movements into Sandžak, but their strength gave no ground for concern: Tito could therefore inform the Central hospital on 6 May that „there is no reason to fear an enemy offensive at this moment“.⁵⁰¹ Furthermore, the German objectives were reported as largely defensive in nature: securing the Lim valley and building an airstrip around Pljevlja.⁵⁰² Interestingly, several accounts mentioned that the Germans praised the Partisans in conversations with the local population and treated those who had been captured with dignity. The Chetniks, on the other hand, were either arrested or shot.⁵⁰³ The inter-Axis relations were reported as tense: there was “hatred” between the Germans and Italians which often resulted in arguments in Prijepolje's taverns. The first intelligence on the upcoming attack came as late as 10 May from a German who defected to the 1st Bosnian Corps.⁵⁰⁴ On 14 May, one day before the launching of “Schwarz”, the 2nd Proletarian Division reported that there were “unconfirmed” rumors

⁴⁹⁹ The Italians lost two battalions in the fighting around Nikšić (2 May) and Podgorica (14-18 May): Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 272.

⁵⁰⁰ Gaj Trifković, “A Case of Failed Counter-Insurgency: Anti-Partisan Operations in Yugoslavia 1943”, in: *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 24, 2 (2011): 319-20.

⁵⁰¹ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XV, p.83, Tito to Commissar of Central hospital (6 May 1943).

⁵⁰² *Zbornik*//IV/13/91-2, Order of 1st Proletarian Division (7 May 1943).

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 146, 148-9, Intelligence bulletin of the 1st Proletarian Division (13 May 1943); *ibid.*, p. 185, 2nd Proletarian Division to Supreme HQ (15 May 1943).

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129, 1st Bosnian Corps to Supreme HQ (10 May 1943).

about three German divisions moving into Montenegro and Eastern Herzegovina. Needless to say, by then it was too late to adjust plans and troop dispositions accordingly.⁵⁰⁵

It remains to be determined whether the lack of Partisan unpreparedness was caused by Tito's ill-placed belief in the success of his diplomatic maneuvering, or whether there were other, more concrete reasons. "The Germans are lying! We have never been in greater danger!" exclaimed Tito after reports confirmed the massive German presence around the Main Operational Group. "So much about our negotiations" commented Đilas, feeling that the Supreme HQ was lulled into false sense of security which now threatened to have disastrous consequences.⁵⁰⁶ Tito's ego might have stood behind the surprise. Self-confident and aware of his own charisma, it is possible he believed that his diplomacy, which included the expedient prisoner exchange, ban on sabotage on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line and exclusive concentration of the activities of the Main Operational Group against the Chetniks from late March onwards, could have produced the desired effect. Although he announced an immediate lifting of the ban in his cable to the Croatian leadership on 7 May, he waited for another two weeks until he actually confirmed it. The delay can only be explained by the fact that Tito waited until it became unequivocally clear that the period of German inactivity in this area was over.⁵⁰⁷

Unlike Đilas, Velebit denied that Tito lowered his guard in Montenegro because of the „March Negotiations“. ⁵⁰⁸ Tito was a cautious person: he spent the better part of his life as a professional revolutionary, evading both police raids and Stalin's purges. It is hard to believe that he would have held the Germans to their word that they would not attack him, even if one had been given. Instead, there is evidence that Tito's misplaced sense of safety was caused mainly by the failure of the Partisan intelligence service. After their main force was chased out of Montenegro and Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Summer of 1942, the Partisan presence there was reduced to a small number of resistance fighters primarily concerned with their own survival. The local intelligence network was therefore practically non-existent when the Partisans returned in the early Spring of 1943. Because of the unprecedented security, Partisan sympathizers within the Home Guard—otherwise an important source of information—

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 154, 2nd Proletarian Division to Supreme HQ (14 May 1943).

⁵⁰⁶ Djilas, *Wartime*, p. 248.

⁵⁰⁷ On 21 May, in a message aired on „Free Yugoslavia“, Tito ordered all Partisan units in the country to step up their attacks on Axis garrisons and lines of communication. "This order pertains especially to our units in Slavonia, where the most important railway line is situated": *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XV, p.141, Tito to radio-station „Free Yugoslavia“ (21 May 1943).

⁵⁰⁸ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 278.

also had no knowledge of the impending attack. Furthermore, the geographic position of the Main Operations group at the beginning of May additionally aggravated any intelligence-gathering. Northern Montenegro and the bordering parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina are extremely rugged, home to Europe's only rain forest (Perućica) and mountain peaks reaching 2,500 meters above the sea-level. Couriers from outside would encounter enormous difficulty, even if there were no heavy concentrations of enemy troops around the perimeter of the area. Needless to say, maintaining a reliable radio-link in such conditions entailed immense technical difficulties. All said, it would appear that the surprise the Germans managed to achieve was the result of both Tito's wishful thinking and the failure of Partisan intelligence. Whereas the first factor certainly played its role, it is doubtful that Supreme HQ would not have adjusted its plans and dispositions had the news of enemy movements and preparations come earlier.

Some of the spirit of the "March Negotiations" was noticeable even among the troops on the battlefield. On 11 May 1943, the 369th Infantry Division reported one NCO and three men missing in the fighting just south of Foča.⁵⁰⁹ Several days later, the deputy commander of the 2nd Proletarian Brigade sent a letter across the lines offering an exchange. The Germans responded affirmatively on the 17th, demanding that two unarmed Partisans bring the captives over the lines. The guerrillas replied they would agree only to no-man's land. This proposition was ultimately accepted; on the next day, the Germans used the lull in the fighting to deliver three Partisans in the sector of the Majevisa Brigade. They, however, did not get their men in return. The three 'German' prisoners were in fact Croats from Zagreb and Sarajevo and they did not want to be exchanged: it turned out that they surrendered on their own free will. It appears that the Partisans obliged them, for the surviving records of the German units in the area fail to mention their release.⁵¹⁰ On the same day, however, another German soldier of the 369th went missing but "came back from Partisan captivity" on May 20. It is possible that the Partisans let him go in an attempt to at least partially fulfill their obligations.⁵¹¹

This was the last time the NOVJ and the German occupation forces extended such courtesies to one another in the late Spring of 1943. Over the next four weeks, some of the bloodiest fighting in the Second World War in Yugoslavia would occur. The Germans had their guerrilla opponents exactly where they wanted them: tightly surrounded and with no

⁵⁰⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2154, 000973, War diary entry for 11 May 1943 (23,30h);

⁵¹⁰ Miodrag Milovanović-Lune, *Dnevnik* (Titovo Užice: Vesti, 1989), pp. 111-2, entries for 17 and 19 May 1943; *Zbornik*//IV/15/243-5, War diary of the commander of the 2nd Proletarian Brigade, entries for 17 and 18 May 1943. I was unable to determine the fate of the fourth German prisoner.

⁵¹¹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2154, 000973, War diary entry for 20 May 1943 (23,40h).

possibility of bloodless withdrawal. This would to be a battle of annihilation. General Lütters did not mince words in his operational directive released on 6 May 1943: all captured Partisans, with or without weapons, were to be executed; unlike the order for Operation “Weiss”, no mention was made for exchange prisoners.⁵¹² As the battle neared its climax, Lütters released the notorious order of 10 June stipulating that “no able-bodied male must leave the cauldron alive”. Statistics show that the German units carried out this order to a large degree: out of altogether 1,022 prisoners the 1st Mountain, 118th Jäger and 369th divisions reported between them, 716 were shot.⁵¹³ That the “March Negotiations” failed to make any lasting mark on German counter-insurgency practice is best demonstrated in the fate of the Partisan wounded: they were routinely shot both during and after the fighting. An especially macabre episode took place in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the 3rd Assault Division of the NOVJ on the banks of Sutjeska River. Starting on 13 June, German units, most notably the 7th SS Mountain Division, carried out mop-up operations in the northernmost part of the cauldron. A substantial part of the “Central Hospital”, estimated at 1,000 wounded and medical personnel, perished at the hands of their captors.⁵¹⁴

The Partisans responded in kind: out of 425 Germans reported as missing during Operation “Schwarz”, only a small number were found alive after the battle.⁵¹⁵ Even if a large number of missing could be attributed to the fact that the fighting took place in inaccessible terrain, there is enough evidence in post-war literature to assume that German prisoners were

⁵¹² The same order stipulated that the Chetniks, unlike the Partisans, were to be treated as prisoners of war: NAW, T-315, Roll 2154, 001415, Operational order for “Schwarz” (6 May 1943). There were several motives behind this provision: it was in line with preferential treatment of the captured Royalists in general, it served to undermine their will to resist, and it was deemed acceptable to the Italians.

⁵¹³ Lütters' directive was not always carried out: some 1,500 captives, both Partisans and civilian suspects, survived the battle: Trifković, *A Case of Failed Counter-Insurgency*, pp. 335-6.

⁵¹⁴ According to the testimony of one German soldier, Major Strecker, (who was exchanged just in time to command his 3rd Battalion of the 738th Jäger Regiment in Operation „Schwarz“) personally ordered one of his subordinates to shoot all Partisan wounded who could not walk: Obrad Egić, “Brigada u bici na Sutjesci” in: *Druga dalmatinska proleterska brigada* (Split: Institut za historiju radničkog pokreta Dalmacije, 1982), p. 172; Viktor Kučan, *Borci Sutjeske* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 1996), p. 29. Judging by the available sources, all heavily wounded were executed, while individual units decided whether to take lightly wounded Partisans prisoner or not. Dr. Safet Latifić left an account of the circumstances of his capture in June 1943. What is remarkable about it are the details regarding the treatment that he and some lightly wounded Partisans received at the hands of their captors. The doctor was promptly fed and his wounds were dressed; two „young German doctors“ also provided him with some bandages for the other wounded Partisans. „Some German soldiers had even furtively thrown us food and cigarettes. We were very surprised at this, because we thought all soldiers of Hitlerite Germany were the same“. Two days after their capture, Latifić and the others were ordered to march to nearby Foča. An officer approached him and told him that he must exhort the wounded to make the trip at all costs, „crawling if need be, for another German unit was scheduled to move in, and they would not have much mercy for the prisoners“. Dr. Safet Latifić, „Bilo nas je petorica“ in: *Sutjeska—Zbornik radova* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod „Vojno delo“, 1959), Vol. III, pp. 259-68.

⁵¹⁵ NAW, T-315, Roll 1302, 000554, Daily report for 25 June 1943; NAW, T-314, Roll 560, 000750, After-action report for Operation “Schwarz” (20 June 1943).

shot out of hand.⁵¹⁶ Such treatment was not reserved for all Axis prisoners, however: the Germans had found 371 live Italians inside the cauldron by 20 June; by mid-July the number rose to 650.⁵¹⁷ Evidently, there is a vast gap between the number of Germans and Italians who survived captivity. The discrepancy is closely linked to the varying attitudes of the Partisans towards each of them. Italian soldiers were perceived as being conscripted peasants and workers who were unwilling to die for fascism. In general, they were much less ferocious in battle and more willing to serve the Partisans as porters and specialists than the Germans. Consequently, the guerrillas developed a curious fondness for such captives, one that made them unwilling to dispose of Italians once they became an unbearable burden.⁵¹⁸ There is no evidence that there was an ulterior motive for the release of the prisoners. If the Partisans had hoped that by sparing them they would make the Italians reciprocate, they were sorely disappointed: the Italian mop-up actions in June 1943 were as brutal as their German counterparts.⁵¹⁹

The bitter fighting in Montenegro lasted an entire month. Only thanks to the enormous self-sacrifice of the fighters, initiative of field commanders and a fair helping of luck did the main force of the NOVJ manage to break out of the encirclement. Its losses were horrendous: out of 19,500 Partisans some 7,500 lost their lives in the encirclement. Although the Germans included a large number of civilians into their estimate of enemy casualties, the number of captured arms shows that the NOVJ suffered a heavy defeat on the operational level.⁵²⁰ The

⁵¹⁶ Zora Ćulibrk, a female fighter in the 3rd Krajina Brigade remembered how a German captured by her unit "had to be liquidated, because we could not exchange him": *Treća krajiška proleterska brigade: Zbornik/sjećanja* (Belgrade: Odbor sekcije boraca Treće proleterske krajiške brigade u Beogradu, 1985), Vol. III, p.541. See also Lazar Savičević, "Pokošeno polje" in *Treći kragujevački bataljon Prve proleterske brigade: sećanja boraca* (Kragujevac: Svetlost, 1974), Vol. II, p. 145; Luka Božović, "Omladinci na Balinovcu" in: *ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵¹⁷ NAW, T-315, Roll 1302, 000554, Daily report for 25 June 1943; NAW, T-314, Roll 560, 000750, After-action report for Operation "Schwarz" (20 June 1943). The latter figure comes from an Italian report and represents the grand total of prisoners freed by all Axis formations which took part in the fighting: *Zbornik/XIII/3/366*, Report on offensive operations in Montenegro in Spring and Summer of 1943 (16 July 1943). Most of the prisoners came from the two battalions destroyed at Nikšić and Podgorica. Just prior to the beginning of Operation "Schwarz", the Italians received 7 officers and 154 men in exchange for a similar number of Partisan sympathizers: *ibid.*, p. 377. Partisan sources speak of around 300 exchanged Italians: Lakić, „Razmjena ratnih zarobljenika u Crnoj Gori, p. 97.

⁵¹⁸ Đilas recalled that the Supreme HQ ordered all Italian prisoners killed on or about 10 June. Thereupon, fighters of the 3rd Assault division under his command reluctantly carried out the executions: Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 268-9. The fact that such a large number of Italians survived captivity demonstrates that either there was no such order from Supreme HQ in the first place, that it was rescinded, or that the NOVJ units declined to execute it en masse.

⁵¹⁹ For instance, the "Ferrara" division executed 150 Partisan wounded on 16 June 1943: Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 280.

⁵²⁰ Kučan, *Borci Sutjeske*, p. 30; Axis forces captured 6 guns, 23 mortars, 146 machine guns and 6388 rifles in Montenegro in May and June 1943: NAW, T-311, Roll 175,001306, Daily report of Armed Forces Command South-East (13 June); *Zbornik/XIII/3/378*, Report on offensive operations in Montenegro in spring and summer of 1943 (16 July 1943).

main guerrilla force was cut by one third and forced to escape to Eastern Bosnia; the Adriatic hinterland was secured, as was the all-important Serbia. On a strategic level, however, no breakthrough had been achieved: one flashpoint was merely succeeded by another one. The fact that Tito's group broke through in an organized manner and retained inner cohesion under immense pressure confirmed that the Partisan problem in the NDH could not be solved by military means alone.

9. Effect of "March Negotiations" on German operations in Herzegovina and East Bosnia

The "March Negotiations" remain the single most controversial episode of the Second World War in Yugoslavia, mostly because of the alleged effect they had on the military and political landscape of the country. The negotiations were held at the same time as the Partisans dealt a decisive blow to the Chetniks who thereafter ceased to be a major military factor in the country. To summarize the time-tested version, the Partisan victory was enabled by a truce with the Germans who deliberately stopped on the Neretva's right bank in mid-March. The argument that Tito was successful in his endeavors to obtain a cease-fire is found not only in older works written by Serbian authors sympathetic to Draža Mihailović and in post-Yugoslav literature, but also in some works published recently in the West.⁵²¹ This part of the chapter will therefore be devoted to the deeper analysis of the German actions in March and April. Apart from the possible impact the talks had on German operations, it will also try to establish other possible consequences of this episode.

In order to reconstruct the events properly, we must return to the period immediately preceding the beginning of Operation "Weiss". The arrival of Partisan brigades in the bauxite belt between Livno and Mostar in mid-February 1943 had thrown German operational planning into disarray. In light of the shortages of the precious ore which the Partisan occupation of the area was likely to cause, the encirclement and destruction of Tito's forces now became a matter of secondary importance. As the Italian 6th Corps could not provide the needed protection for the mining facilities (allegedly because of its low strength) Hitler was determined to secure them with German troops. The imminent incursion of German divisions

⁵²¹ Ivan Avakumović, *Mihailović prema nemačkim dokumentima* (London: Oslobođenje, 1969), pp. 112-3; Aleksandar Bajt, *Bermanov dosije* (Belgrade: Srpska reč, 2006), pp. 481-2; Heather Williams, *Parchutes, Patriots and Partisans: The Special Operations Executive and Yugoslavia, 1941-1945* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2003), pp. 106-7.

into Herzegovina was greeted with considerable suspicion by the Italian 2nd Army for two reasons. First, the Italians feared that what was announced as a temporary measure would lead to a permanent German occupation of these areas. Second, any German move in this direction would certainly bring them into contact with Italian Chetnik auxiliaries. Given Hitler's burning wish to see them disarmed, violent conflict could not be ruled out. The Italians therefore tried to curb German operational freedom by requesting that all Axis troops in the area be subordinated to the 6th Corps. In order to keep the Germans and the Chetniks apart, the Comando Supremo further requested on 26 February that the former limit their actions to the area north of the line Prozor – Rama Valley – Neretva Valley – Konjic. The Germans declined both requests and declared they would continue their drive towards Mostar on their own terms. In order to avoid confrontation with the Chetniks, the Italians were requested to withdraw their Serbian auxiliaries "from the area north of Mostar to a line running roughly 5 kilometers east of the Neretva Valley."⁵²² As the Partisans were still on the right bank of the Neretva in first days of March, the two German divisions operating against them had no orders to cross the river.⁵²³ The Italian 6th Army Corps requested on 4 March that the 718th Infantry Division not cross the line running from Konjic to Rama. The division responded that it could not oblige, as its actions were determined solely by instructions from German commands. However, the reply continued that the division was already under orders "not to cross the Neretva to the south in Konjic-Rama sector".⁵²⁴ On 5 March, Colonel-General Löhr reiterated that there were no plans to cross the line over the next several days because of the course of fighting in the area (Partisan counter-attack at Gornji Vakuf); "The objective of the operations is occupation of the bauxite area around Mostar".⁵²⁵ On that same day, the courier carrying Strecker's letter arrived at German lines.

By the time the Germans agreed to receive NOVJ's envoys, the situation at the front had changed dramatically. After having pushed back the 717th Division, the Partisans turned and began crossing the Neretva on 7 March. Four days later, when Đilas, Popović and Velebit formally requested a truce, a substantial part of the Partisan army was still on the right bank. Consequently, the Germans saw no reason to alter the plans for their two divisions operating in the area. Regarding the Partisan request, we have corresponding statements of Partisan negotiators that Dippold refused to stop the advance of his division; the division's war diary

⁵²² Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 227-31; NAW, T-311, Roll 175, 000444, War diary entry for 1 March 1943.

⁵²³ See operational orders dated 2 March 1943 of the 717th (NAW, T-315, Roll 2264, 000622-3) and 718th Division (NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000958-9).

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, 000283, War diary entry for 4 March 1943 and *ibid.*, 000980, Cable from major Poche on 4 March 1943 (22,30h).

⁵²⁵ NAW, T-311, Roll 175, 000445-6, War diary entry for 5 March 1943.

provides unambiguous confirmation of their claims.⁵²⁶ Furthermore, General Lütters explicitly rejected any notion of truce on the same day, as related in Pfaffenrott's telephone call to Hortsenau's staff. The surviving German records show no reduction in German activities on the right bank of the river in the following days. Only after the last Partisan was across the river on the 15th and the 717th and 718th divisions joined hands, did Lütters proclaim Operation "Weiss" to be concluded: "The pursuit of the insurgents to the south and east of the Neretva is not possible owing to the political commitments to the Italians".⁵²⁷

The three German divisions there were now tasked with mop-up actions on the right bank of the Neretva and securing communications from Konjic to Mostar. Tactical necessity required them to cross over to the opposite bank in order to fulfill the second task.⁵²⁸ Once the main operations were over, however, the Italians sought to curb further German encroachment in Northern Herzegovina. Consequently, when the 369th division tried to cross the river south of Jablanica on 17 March, the Italians prevented them from doing so. Still, the division managed to smooth out the problems with its allies and camped on the eastern bank that same day.⁵²⁹ To the northeast, around Konjic, the Italians were too weak to interfere in German actions. The 718th Infantry Division had crossed the river at several places downstream from the town in order to take possession of the heights overlooking the Konjic-Ostrožac section of the road. The retreating Partisan columns were arriving from the west, perpendicular to the division's front, and were headed for the area south of Konjic. On 17 March, while Velebit was requesting a cease-fire in the name of Supreme HQ in Zagreb, the division had a fierce battle with guerrilla rear guards west of the town. Despite the use of Stuka aircraft and artillery, the 718th suffered six dead and fourteen wounded.⁵³⁰ The fighting here would continue for the next several days.

The arrival of the new divisional commander, Josef Kübler, to Konjic on 18 March only added to the intensity of fighting in this sector. After learning that the Partisan rear-guard elements passing through the hamlet of Bijela (immediately south of the town) were not interdicted with sufficient vigor, the general ordered the battle group "Annacker" to attack "as soon as Major Strecker and 21 German soldiers in Partisan captivity were exchanged." Later

⁵²⁶ The war diary for 11 March reads: „Intentions for 12 March: continuation of pursuit [of the Partisans] to the line Majan-Kučani-Studenica“: NAW, T-315, Roll 2264, 000543, War diary entry for 11 March 1943.

⁵²⁷ NAW, T-314, Roll 554,000368, Situation estimate for the period 1-15 March 1943 (16 March 1943).

⁵²⁸ For an overview of German positions on the left bank of the river on 16 March 1943 see the map in NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 001074-6.

⁵²⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 2154, 000431-2, War diary entry for 17 March (16,40h and 18,20h).

⁵³⁰ NAW, T-315, Roll 2271, 000301, War diary entry for 17 March (13,40h).

on the same day, one German arrived from the Partisan lines. He conveyed a message from the guerrillas in which they requested the Germans to pick up their negotiator “Professor Marković” (Đilas) and one wounded soldier from Bijela. The division readily obliged and sent one Lieutenant and nine men. The officer had the task to memorize the terrain features for the upcoming attack. The plan was ready by 19 March, but the attack could not be carried out “because of the delayed prisoner exchange”.⁵³¹ Still, the day was not completely lost to the Germans. They were given another chance to scout the terrain and enemy forward positions when the same group of soldiers went back to Partisan lines once more to pick up Major Strecker and the rest of the captives. By the mid-morning of 20 March, the returnees arrived safely in Konjic. At 1700 hours battle group “Annacker” was ordered to attack that evening. The fighting around Bijela lasted two days. The Partisans mounted one counter-attack, killed a Lieutenant and destroyed one tank before withdrawing to the south.⁵³² Judging by the available German Army documents from battalion-level upwards, the one day delay of Kübler’s attack on Bijela was the sole instance of the “March Negotiations” influencing German operations in the field.

Over the course of research, this author has been able to find only one near-contemporary document that supports the truce theory. This document, not quoted by any of the proponents of the aforementioned hypothesis, is an extract from the post-war interrogation of Hans Ott by the Yugoslav secret police. Ott claimed that General Neidholdt, commander of the 369th Infantry Division, had a meeting with the Partisan envoys in Gornji Vakuf and promised to “keep his troops in peace while the negotiations lasted as per the wish of General Lueders [sic]”. Thus, “the Partisans’ wish for several days of truce to facilitate the extrication of their wounded was fulfilled”.⁵³³ First of all, there is no evidence that Neidholdt had ever met with Velebit and Đilas in Gornji Vakuf; both primary sources and the memoirs of all three Partisan envoys state that General Dippold of the 717th Infantry Division was the only high-ranking German officer whom the envoys met in this town. Second, Ott’s statement about Lütters’ alleged involvement is refuted by contemporary German documents, such as the stenograph of Pfaffenrott’s telephone call on 11 March and the memorandum for the meeting in Zagreb on 1 April 1943. Third, Neidholdt could not have allowed the Partisans to escape even if he had wanted to: the 717th and 718th Infantry Divisions were the units that were directly opposing the majority of the retreating Partisans; the 369th being more or less

⁵³¹ It should be noted that in other sectors (e.g. north-west of Bijela), Germans continued with their operations throughout that day: *ibid.*, 000840, After-action report on operation „Konjic“ (entry for 19 March 1943).

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 000840-2, After-action report on operation „Konjic“, entries for 18-23 March 1943.

⁵³³ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File Neidholdt, Statement of Hans Ott.

relegated to a support role. The division could not cross the Neretva around Jablanica owing to Italian opposition and its own operational orders which called for a halt at the river. The claim that Neidholdt kept his troops “in peace” is most likely a reference to his order from 13 March not to shoot captured Partisans while the talks lasted. All said, it is difficult to explain the heavy discrepancies between Ott’s statement and contemporary documents and the reminiscences of other participants. It may have been a case of a surprisingly bad memory for a person of his abilities, or – more likely – an attempt to ingratiate himself with his captors and portray his mediation between the two sides as instrumental in the fulfilment of Partisan aims.

If the German halt on the left bank of Neretva in the immediate aftermath of Operation “Weiss” is easily explainable, the next event for consideration is not so straightforward. On 22 March, the commander of the 2nd Italian Army, General Vittorio Ambrosio, made a 180-degree turn in his policy towards the Germans. In light of the heavy blows the advancing Partisans dealt his Chetnik auxiliaries and Italian units around Nevesinje, the general was compelled to request that the Germans intervene in Eastern Herzegovina with five battalions. The latter refused, citing the fatigue of their own units.⁵³⁴ It would be theoretically possible that the refusal was in fact based on some kind of secret deal Velebit and Horstenau agreed to during their meeting on 17 March. The German answer could have also been based on the positive outcome of the “main talks” in Zagreb, which were taking place precisely at this time. This theory is flawed for several reasons. First, even if Horstenau had negotiated to a truce, it is highly unlikely that the aloof Lütters, in whose hands rested operative command, would have agreed to play along. Second, there is no evidence whatsoever for such a theory in the surviving German documents.⁵³⁵ Third, proponents of this theory have chosen to disregard the practical reasons behind the refusal which are abundantly supported by the archival sources.

The German decision to not help the Italians in Eastern Herzegovina was not motivated by their barely-concealed *schadenfreude* towards their incompetent allies or by secret rapprochement with the Communist-led guerrillas, but by calculated self-interest and operational concerns. In short, the German occupation forces were not yet ready for the continuation of anti-guerrilla operations in this part of the country. Even if the requested five battalions could have been scraped together, this does not mean that the units did not need

⁵³⁴ NAW, T-311, Roll 175, 000563, Memorandum from a conference with the chief of staff (22 March 1943).

⁵³⁵ For similar conclusions see Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 252.

some badly needed rest and refitting. The divisions of the 15th Mobilization Wave were hard-hit during the recent fighting and generally seen as unfit for this particular kind of warfare. Precisely for this reasons, the German high command decided to reorganize them so as to bolster their capacity for mountain warfare. The reorganization would be arranged in a manner which, it was hoped, would allow them to remain involved in the continuation of “Weiss” which would target the Chetniks in the area to the east of the Neretva. This fact leads us to the underlying motive for the refusal to intervene in this area in late March. German intelligence was always on the lookout for signs of rapprochement between the two largely Serbian guerrilla movements. There was a widespread fear among the German occupation authorities – in reality unsubstantiated – that the two might “bury the hatchet” and unite again in a common struggle against the occupier. It is safe to assume that the fear was especially great in the Spring of 1943 because both guerrilla movements had their main forces concentrated along the coast. If the Allies landed on the southern Adriatic, they would be in a prime position to broker a truce between the two and thus secure the combined strength of Partisans and Chetniks for their own purposes. “Any advance by our side with stronger forces across the Neretva”, it was concluded in the HQ of the Supreme Commander South-East in Thessaloniki, “would be taken as an act of war by Mihailović. Consequently, we would have to start the struggle against him before we want to.”⁵³⁶ The blood-letting the Chetniks and the Partisans were administering to each other east of Neretva in late March and throughout April was playing perfectly into German plans: “This development can only be seen as advantageous to us in light of the upcoming Operation ‘Schwarz’”.⁵³⁷ Much to their dismay, Berlin ordered the relief of Foča in the second half of April and the short role of the German occupation forces as “the laughing third” was over.

10. Conclusion

As 1942 came to a close, the Partisan problem in the Balkans could no longer be ignored by the German High Command. With unfavorable developments in North Africa, the threat of an Allied invasion of Southern Europe became real. The Axis therefore embarked on a series of large-scale, anti-guerrilla operations whose objective was to destroy the Communist-led Partisan movement and thus bring about the pacification of the region as well as secure the lines of communication leading to the Adriatic coast. By late February 1943, the plan seemed

⁵³⁶ NAW, T-311, Roll 175, 000563, Memorandum from a conference with the chief of staff (22 March 1943).

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 000586, Memorandum from a conference with the chief of staff (12 April 1943).

to be working: the bulk of the NOVJ, including thousands of wounded, was surrounded in the Neretva River Valley by a heterogeneous coalition of Germans, Italians, NDH forces and Chetniks. With the choice of possible escape routes rapidly dwindling, Tito decided to use diplomacy. Under the guise of prisoner exchange, Partisan envoys sought to obtain recognition of the NOVJ as a regular army from the Germans in which case the wounded would be protected from reprisals. This request, although important, was not the main reason for starting negotiations at the top-level for the first time since November 1942: Tito actually wanted a cease-fire with the Germans. The Partisans were preparing to cross the Neretva and face the main Chetnik force on the river's eastern bank. Not knowing whether the Germans would continue its operations in Eastern Herzegovina or not, Tito wanted to buy some time for the withdrawal of his army across the Nereva. In return, his high-ranking delegation would downplay the importance of the struggle against the Germans for the Partisan movement and emphasize their hatred towards the Chetniks. They were also authorized to reveal the genuine animosity against the main sponsors of their Royalist enemies, the British, and to state that their landing would be opposed, with arms if necessary, by the NOVJ.

Although the Germans did not stop their operations in the Neretva Valley after the Partisan delegates arrived in the small town of Gornji Vakuf, they also did not refuse to hear out their enemy's proposals. Ambassador Kasche and General Horstenau were in favor of maintaining contacts with the Partisans ever since the first two rounds of talks were held in August and November of the previous year. The Partisan envoys travelled several times to Sarajevo and Zagreb under German protection. While they could not complain about the way in which their hosts treated them, the German style of "negotiating" caused much frustration. The latter kept the talks as informal as possible and never appointed an officially authorized delegation. As for the substance of the talks, little was achieved. The Germans rejected both the offer of truce and request for recognition of the NOVJ as a belligerent force. Discussion on these points was tied to the cessation of sabotage on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line. The Germans, however, did halt the executions of captured Partisans during the talks and acquiesced to the prisoner exchange. Although the NOVJ managed to push deeply into Italian-occupied Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina by late March 1943, Tito still feared a German intervention in this area. Therefore, he gave a green light for the continuation of the talks in the hope they would buy his troops more time. He was under the impression that his diplomacy was working, for the German occupation forces were still showing no intention of following the Partisans across the demarcation line. In order to keep the negotiations going, Tito ordered a temporary ban on sabotage on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line in mid-April.

At the same time, the German army crossed into the Italian occupation zone in order to help its hard-pressed allies, and the fighting against Tito's force erupted again.

Much ink has been spilled over Tito's real motives for entering the talks. His detractors maintain that in order to defeat his domestic enemies, he was quite prepared to arrange a *modus vivendi* with Nazi Germany. As a result of the alleged truce reached through secret negotiations in Zagreb and Sarajevo, the Partisans were able to deal the Chetniks a crushing defeat in Eastern Herzegovina. In the same vein, the declaration of the NOVJ envoys that their side would fight the British landing in the Adriatic is taken as proof that Tito was far more willing to collaborate with the Germans than his adversary Mihailović. Judging by the available primary sources, memoirs of key participants (who were not necessarily Tito apologists) and serious scholarly research, these claims cannot be taken as true. Tito's offer was in all likelihood born out of the desperate situation he and his army found themselves in in late February 1943. It was a last-ditch attempt to stave off an imminent military disaster and improve the chances of survival for Partisan wounded should they be captured. Through the talks held in late 1942, the highest German political and military authorities signaled that they were sympathetic to the idea of some sort of political solution to the chaos reigning in the NDH. Tito decided to pluck that string and offered the Germans a truce and a withdrawal of his forces to Sandžak which would become a neutral zone where the Germans would not intervene militarily. By professing that the NOVJ fought the German occupation forces only while it had to, stressing that the Chetniks were his main enemies, and that the British would be opposed by force if they attempted a landing on the coast, Tito tried to leave the impression that his offer could lead to a more permanent pacification. In fact, the offer was tactical in nature, devised to allow the main Partisan force to cross the Neretva and extricate its wounded to safety; it would also enable the Partisans to concentrate squarely on the large Chetnik army waiting for them on the opposite bank.

There is no evidence that the Partisan leadership contemplated a long-term arrangement with the Germans between March-April 1943. The claim that the Royalists were the main enemies of the Partisan movement can be taken at face value. However, to the Yugoslav Communists, the struggles against the domestic reactionaries and against the Axis were inseparable and complementary. Had they not been, there is little doubt that Tito would have sought a *modus vivendi* with the Germans earlier in the war, in the way Mihailović had with the Italians. As for the declaration concerning the British, the consensus of the participants is that the Partisans would indeed have to fight them in case they supported the

Chetniks once they landed. As with so many times before and after, good fortune smiled upon the Yugoslav Communists and the course of events never provided them the opportunity to make good on their statement given to the Germans.

The “March negotiations” also precipitated the first open rift in the relations between the KPJ and the Soviet Union. Although Tito carefully camouflaged the information on the talks in his cables to the Comintern, the latter discerned that more was afoot than a simple prisoner exchange. Perhaps fearing that the independent policy-making of the KPJ would betray their own clandestine diplomatic approaches to Germany to the Western Allies, the Soviets sent a vindictive telegram to Tito. The critique leveled at Tito was made to appear ideological in nature, mentioning nothing of the other, more practical and realistic reasons. Much to Moscow’s shock, the latter replied in an equally stern tone, defending his actions and failing to pledge that he would break off the talks. This unusual exchange ended in victory for the Partisan leadership because Moscow decided not to press the issue any further, for the time being. Tito’s decision to defend what has been termed as his first venture into the world of *realpolitik* came after a long period of frustration regarding Soviet foreign policy. The USSR’s prime concern was to maintain good relations with Great Britain, who was the main protector of the Yugoslav government-in-exile and its armed formation, the Chetniks. In order to achieve this goal, the Kremlin was perfectly willing to disregard its “internationalist” obligation to support the KPJ by all means available. Even if the Partisans had to accept the fact that the Soviets could not provide material help because of the technical difficulties, they could not understand that their mentor would not openly take sides in the civil war between the Communists and the Royalists. Although the “March Negotiations” were not mentioned any more in official correspondence, the bitter taste remained. And when the final split between Tito and Stalin came in 1948, the memories of the talks Yugoslav Communists had with the Germans at the height of the war were revived and exploited propagandistically by the Eastern Bloc countries.

As stated before, some of the highest-ranking German dignitaries in the NDH were interested in the revival of top level contacts with the Partisans. The Third Reich’s ambassador, Siegfried Kasche (ironically, an ardent Nazi) was undoubtedly the most vociferous proponent of a possible deal with Tito. The original Partisan propositions from March and April left much to be desired but from Kasche’s point of view they represented a valid starting point for further discussion. If the arrangement could be made, it would strengthen the foundations of the NDH and raise his own standing within the diplomatic and

political hierarchy of the Third Reich. The Plenipotentiary-General in Zagreb, Glaise-Horstenau, was much more cautious regarding the sincerity of the Partisan offers, yet extended his support to the continuation of talks; if nothing else, frequent contact with guerrilla emissaries provided an insight into the intentions and mindset of their leadership. Yet, any hopes Horstenau and especially Kasche might have had about the offer were shattered following intervention from Berlin. In line with Hitler's known antagonism towards both negotiated solutions and guerrillas in general, Ribbentrop ordered the ambassador to break off all contacts with the Partisans; Horstenau, sensing where the wind was blowing, also backed down. However, like their opposite members in the Partisan camp, the Germans in Zagreb did not always heed their superiors' instructions. Having to tackle the insurgency and troublesome allies, as well as Berlin's lack of understanding and interest for Balkan affairs, they often found ways to circumvent those orders emanating from Berlin. Consequently, although no Partisan "delegations" were received in Zagreb after Ribbentrop's intervention, both Horstenau and Kasche maintained contact with Tito's representative, Velebit, the former even meeting him for an informal conversation, Kasche preferring to act through a trusted intermediary, Ott, even after Ribbentrop had expressly cautioned him against doing so. These instances of "insubordination" were illustrative of the fact that neither the general, nor the ambassador considered a total break-off of contacts to Tito's HQ.

The German occupation forces halted on the Neretva not because of Tito's diplomatic maneuver but owing to other, far-less glamorous reasons. The attack into Eastern Herzegovina was at first inopportune because of the tense relations with the Italians who were largely unwilling to facilitate the expansion of German authority in their occupation zone. After the Italians requested German help in the final week of March, the latter declined. They would intervene in Herzegovina and Montenegro only after their troops were rested and reorganized, in mid-May at the earliest. In the meantime, bloody fighting between the Chetniks and the Partisans to the east of the river could only be greeted from the German standpoint. Besides, there was widespread fear was that the two guerrilla movements would make a deal and turn on the Germans if the latter were to engage them both at the same time. The local commands would not cross into the Italian zone even in late April, but were ordered to do so. Tito's illusions about the success of his diplomatic ploy were laid to rest for good with the beginning of Operation "Schwarz" in mid-May.

In the end, the results of the "March Negotiations" were modest at best. A local German attack south of Konjic was delayed for one day until the exchange of seventeen

Partisans for twenty-seven Germans was completed. Tito's ban on sabotage on the Zagreb-Belgrade railway line, which lasted for a little over a month, was lifted in late May. Although the Germans ceased executing Partisan prisoners during the talks, the NOVJ was not recognized as a legitimate belligerent. The fact that the measure was only tactical in nature is confirmed by events during Operation "Schwarz" in which the Germans reverted to their old policies regarding the treatment of guerrilla captives, wounded or otherwise. The NOVJ responded in kind and the brief improvement of the prisoners' lot achieved in March and April would be undone by a period in which the fighting was conducted with customary brutality.

Chapter 4: The Neutral Zone at Pisarovina 1943-1945

1. Introduction

What transpired in the small village of Pisarovina located on the outskirts of Zagreb is unique not only to Yugoslavia, but to the Second World War in general. Pisarovina functioned as the center of the prisoner exchange cartel which was officially agreed upon by the German occupation authorities and the Yugoslav Partisans at the end of 1943. In order to facilitate this, the village and its immediate surroundings were declared a neutral zone, quite possibly the only such place in war-torn Europe. How surprisingly well the system functioned is attested to by the fact that the last swap was made at the time when the Red Army was mopping-up the last pockets of resistance in Berlin in late April 1945. The system saved hundreds, if not thousands of prisoners who faced an uncertain fate until the end of the war. Furthermore, the success of the cartel was instrumental in raising the willingness of troop commanders across the country to seek out their nearest counterpart in order to make an exchange. Frequent contacts between the envoys provided both the Germans and the Partisans with a “back-channel” for talks on political issues and trade as well as with the opportunity to spy on each other.

2. Setting up the neutral zone: First contacts, July–November 1943

The late Spring and early Summer of 1943 were marked by the struggle between the German forces and the core of the NOVJ under Supreme HQ in Bosnia and Montenegro in which quarter was neither asked nor given. In eastern Croatia, the Partisans continued sabotaging lines of communication and attacking Home Guard units whenever the opportunity presented itself. Unlike with the Germans, they maintained prisoner exchange contacts with NDH authorities throughout this period. The latter proved to be much more practical in this respect than their allies. Already in mid-January 1943 the NDH Ministry of Defense officially legalized the exchange of especially valuable officers from Partisan captivity and issued guidelines for such exchanges. Although the instructions emphasized that a general swap of all captured officers was not envisaged “for morale and political reasons”, in reality it meant

that any officer who did not decide to stay with the Partisans on his own free will was eligible for exchange.⁵³⁸

The exchange contacts in Croatia were especially intensified in late May and early June 1943 after the Partisans captured Colonel Vjekoslav Klišanić, chief of staff of the 1st Home Guard Corps, Colonel Lalić, commander of the 5th Mountain Brigade and a 1st lieutenant with the same name just outside of Glina. The first attempt to negotiate their release with the local Partisan unit failed. The reason being that the NOVJ's Main HQ for Croatia insisted on having the last word in every case of exchange; this was to become a hallmark of the entire exchange business in this part of the country.⁵³⁹ The exchange of the Home Guard officers was approved shortly afterwards by the Main HQ but then another problem arose. The Partisans would swap these men only for Ivo Marinković, a university professor from Zagreb. He was the same individual who the Supreme HQ wanted in exchange for German specialists from Jajce in late 1942 and for Major Strecker in March and April 1943. The Ustashe security services continued to deny any knowledge of his whereabouts, claiming that Partisan envoys were "misinformed".⁵⁴⁰ The guerrillas would continue to demand Marinković over the following months, this time having more valuable captives to offer in return.

The event that triggered the renewal of contacts between high Partisan commands and the office of General Glaise-Horstenau was the capture of Lieutenant-Colonel Pokay on 12 July 1943. He was the head of the commission for the purchasing of horses and was touring the countryside around Zagreb accompanied by a Home Guard officer and a party of German soldiers. In an ambush, the Partisans managed to capture both officers along with one NCO and one private.⁵⁴¹ Pokay was the highest-ranking German to be taken captive up to that point and it was only a question of time until his exchange would be asked for. In late July, the seasoned Partisan envoy, Marijan Stilinović sent a letter to Horstenau proposing a new round of talks. The general promptly agreed, summoning Hans Ott to Zagreb for this purpose. The latter picked up Stilinović in the guerrilla-held village of Pisarovina from whence they drove to the Croatian capital. There were two rounds of talks in Horstenau's HQ, roughly at the beginning and at the end of August, interrupted by a two-week pause used by the Partisan envoy to receive new instructions. In short, Stilinović demanded the recognition of the NOVJ

⁵³⁸ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2222, 374-6, Guidelines for exchange of captured officers (16 January 1943). Rolls D-2222 through 2224 contain numerous requests for exchange made by both family members of the captured officers as well as by their units.

⁵³⁹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2223, 55, 30th Ustashe Battalion to Ministry of Defense (4 June 1943).

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 229, Letter to command of Banija district (11 July 1943).

⁵⁴¹ *Zbornik/V/17/429*, Main HQ of Home Guard, daily report no. 194 (13 July 1943).

as a lawful belligerent and the establishment of a permanent exchange system; he even floated the idea of including captured Chetniks and collaborationist troops of Nedić in the deal. The purpose of this suggestion was obvious: not only would it give the Partisans more prisoners to bargain with, but it would also lead to the de-facto recognition of Chetniks as German auxiliaries. Horstenau was generally in favor of accepting the first two points, while he declined the third. He said that he had no authority in Serbia and that any attempt to include members of the aforementioned formations would only be a waste of time.⁵⁴²

After Stilinović had left Zagreb for consultations, the first steps were taken to exchange Pokay: on 10 August, the Home Guard's Main HQ instructed the 1st Corps to offer the Partisans a swap. An underlined passage read that the guerrillas would receive “mostly” their fighters in return, which in effect meant that no political prisoners would be exchanged.⁵⁴³ The 1st Mountain Division subsequently arranged a meeting with the Moslavina Detachment outside of Kutina for the 22nd. The Partisans put forth their demands: Pokay was worth twenty men, each of his two German companions five.⁵⁴⁴ Even more problematic than this extraordinarily high ratio of exchange was the fact that the guerrillas continued demanding prominent Party members instead of common Partisans. It was reported on 31 August that the talks were on hold; fighting around Glina became so heavy that the local command was afraid to send envoys to the Partisans and the Germans could likewise not guarantee the safety of guerrilla delegates if they arrived in town. The biggest obstacle was, however, that the latter kept insisting on Marinković and hinged any exchange on his release.⁵⁴⁵

The Germans decided to intervene at the highest level. During a meeting with Pavelić on 1 September, Horstenau personally requested the transfer of Marinković – now hiding under the false name of Franjo Šulentić⁵⁴⁶ – to the *Feldkommandatur* in Zagreb. Eight days later, Pavelić's military office sent a letter to Horstenau which repeated that these names were unknown to the NDH authorities. The photo which the German general provided at the meeting with Pavelić corresponded to one Franjo Golik, born on 13 December 1905 on the

⁵⁴² HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁵⁴³ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2223, 328, Main HQ of Home Guard to 1st Corps Area (10 August 1943).

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 333, Town command in Kutina to 1st Mountain Division (23 August 1943).

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 352, 1st Mountain Division to Main HQ of Home Guard (31 August 1943).

⁵⁴⁶ NDH authorities were provided with Marinković's false name in late August: Vojni arhiv Srbije (Serbian Military Archive), Box 82, Folder 5, Document no. 5-4, Cable from Main HQ for Croatia (20 August 1943); (Forthwith abbreviated to: VA, number of the box, number of the folder, number of the document).

island of Brač, who had been executed as a hostage already on 14 April 1943.⁵⁴⁷ The general could have easily checked with Stilinović if the date of birth provided in the letter corresponded with the data in the Party's archives. Why he chose not to is unclear. Most likely he feared that the news of Marinković's death would cause reprisals, or even worse, disruption of the negotiations in general.⁵⁴⁸

The Marinković episode had an all-too familiar end: as in the past, the Ustashe refused to deliver the prisoners to the Germans and thus received nothing in return. On the whole, they had little interest in the exchange business as the Partisans showed little inclination to spare captured Ustashe. The Home Guard, on the other hand, had its officers captured practically on a daily basis and was very keen to see them exchanged. In order to facilitate this, the NDH's regular army often sought the help of its ally. Already in June 1943, Horstenau had officially been requested to do everything in his power to free Klišanić and Lalić if the Partisans offered their exchange to German units in the area around Bihać.⁵⁴⁹ One month later, a similar request was put forth to the 7th SS Mountain Division regarding some officers captured in eastern Bosnia.⁵⁵⁰ There is no evidence that the Germans made any attempts to contact the Partisans during this period, probably because of the fierce fighting they were engaged in at the time. By September, however, German units on the ground began taking a more active role in local exchanges. Towards the end of the month, the Ustashe acquiesced to release one female Communist from the concentration camp Stara Gradiška in return for 1st Lieutenant Lalić from Klišanić's group. The swap itself was made in Glina on 27 September 1943 by a special envoy of the NDH's Ministry of Defense who was helped by the newly arrived SS division "Nordland". Two of the division's officers travelled to the guerrilla-held territory under a white flag to retrieve their Lieutenant. One Partisan officer accompanied them on the return trip and claimed his comrade from the town's prison.⁵⁵¹ In mid-November, four Partisans were transported to nearby Petrinja "with German consent" so

⁵⁴⁷ NAW, T-501, Roll 267, 000252, Conversation with Poglavnik (1 September) and 000262, Poglavnik's military office to Plenipotentiary-General (9 September 1943).

⁵⁴⁸ The birth date provided in the letter corresponded to the real one: *Vojna enciklopedija*, Vol. V, pp. 286-7. Although proclaimed "People's Hero" in 1945, the details on Marinković death eluded historians until the mid-Seventies, when it was discovered that he died in April 1943: *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Mladost, 1975),.

⁵⁴⁹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2222, 608, General Prpić to Plenipotentiary-General (undated).

⁵⁵⁰ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2223, 189, General Lukić to Main HQ and 7th SS Division (20 July 1943).

⁵⁵¹ Oluf Krabbe, *Danske soldater i kamp på Østfronten 1941-1945* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1976), p. 148; HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2223, 483, To HQ of 1st Corps area (undated). The Partisan envoy said during the meeting that his side continued to insist on obtaining Marinković in exchange for Klišanić and Colonel Lalić. In the end, the Partisans succeeded in persuading the two to stay with the NOVJ: the former was appointed to staff duties in the Main HQ for Croatia and in the Supreme HQ, while the latter became Chief of Staff of the elite 1st Proletarian Corps.

that they could be exchanged for two Home Guard officers; civilian authorities were instructed to make the swap “in the presence of the German representative”.⁵⁵²

Both the German willingness to discuss the recognition of the NOVJ as a belligerent side and their increasing involvement in the exchange activities on the ground were rooted in Hitler’s directive concerning the treatment of captured guerrillas issued in late July 1943. It represented a radical departure from the way the counter-insurgency had been hitherto conducted. According to the new regulation, captured Partisans or their helpers were not to be shot any longer; all those “belonging to the bandits” aged sixteen to 55 were to be shipped off to prisoner camps instead. The reasons behind the order were practical in nature. First and foremost, the German war industry was badly in need of labor. Second, it was hoped that the order would incite the Partisans to defect; and third, it would counter enemy propaganda which put forth the message that the Germans killed everyone in their path. Reprisals were not revoked, however, and captured Partisans could still be used as hostages.⁵⁵³

Horstenau wrote in his diary that by issuing this order, Hitler turned the nature of warfare in Yugoslavia “upside-down”.⁵⁵⁴ His, and the dealings of other German officials with the Partisans have now acquired a degree of legitimacy. The order, however, did not explicitly award the status of “prisoners-of-war” to the Partisans, nor was there any mention of recognizing the NOVJ as a belligerent force. The NDH authorities were again a step ahead of the Germans in clarifying matters. At a conference held on 14 September 1943, representatives of the Ministry of Defense met with the envoys of the International Red Cross Committee to discuss the establishment of the Bureau of POW affairs. The question of the legal status of captured Partisans was also discussed. Mr. Schmidlin of the IRCC argued that it would be reasonable to treat Croatian citizens belonging to the guerrillas in the same way as foreign nationals (British), especially if the former were forcibly recruited into Partisan ranks. The NDH officials agreed that these persons, in line with Hitler’s directive, could be granted POW status “on the grounds of expediency” without formally recognizing the NOVJ as a belligerent side.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵² HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2224, 155, Security directorate to 1st Corps area (undated) and 156, 1st Corps area to district head of Glina (15 November 1943).

⁵⁵³ NAW, T-315, Roll 2155, 000044, Treatment of bandits (29 July 1943). The original draft of the order was lost; some other documents provide 18 August 1943 as the date of its issue: Schmider, *Partisankrieg*, p. 283.

⁵⁵⁴ Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielicht*, p. 287 (entry for October 1943).

⁵⁵⁵ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2233, 135-7, Preliminary meeting pertaining to establishment of the office of POW affairs (14 September 1943).

The interpretation of Hitler's order by German commands on the ground was not as straightforward and was subject to many alternations over the following months. The main reason for this lay in the heavy-handed policies introduced by General Lothar Rendulic, commander of the 2nd Panzer Army. Nicknamed "The Bloodhound" by Horstenau, Rendulic was of the opinion that the insurgency could only be fought with sheer violence. In order to curb sabotage on the rail-lines in Croatia, Rendulic instituted a harsh reprisal system, not unlike the one in Serbia. Furthermore, he increased the quota of hostages which were to be executed for each German soldier killed or wounded (50 and 25, respectively). As a result of these measures, the closing months of 1943 were marked by mass executions and the torching of villages throughout the region.⁵⁵⁶ The toughening of the stance towards the guerrillas is best illustrated in the order of the 369th Infantry Division from 25 October 1943 which was based on instructions issued by the 2nd Panzer Army in mid-September. The order in part read that bringing in prisoners could be prohibited by senior officers if it posed a risk for a German unit. If there were no such orders, junior officers were to act at their own discretion. Able-bodied guerrillas could be treated as POWs but could also be used as hostages. This, however, only applied to prisoners not caught in German uniform, or in a uniform of any German allies; such "bandits" were to be shot after careful interrogation.⁵⁵⁷ One month later, the commander of the 369th wrote to the 5th SS Mountain Corps that although these instructions "satisfied the troops' needs for security" they were detrimental to the efforts to increase the number of defectors and laborers. He therefore requested that matters be clarified and priorities set.⁵⁵⁸ On 2nd December 1943, the issue was resolved once and for all: "As of immediately, all bandits who are captured alive [...] are to be treated as prisoners-of-war. [...] Prisoners or defectors are under no circumstances to be shot." Knowing that the troops on the ground would find it hard to comprehend such a drastic shift and would continue practicing "old ways", the 187th Reserve Division prepared a special leaflet for its soldiers which in part read:

⁵⁵⁶ Rendulic had no illusions regarding the conduct of the Germans: "We are terrorists and that's it!" he exclaimed once. On another occasion he wrote to Horstenau that "if I only had twenty divisions at my disposal, I would kill everybody in this country": Kazimirović, *Nemački general*, pp. 132-5. Admittedly, the second outburst can be seen more as a sign of frustration than of bloodthirstiness.

⁵⁵⁷ NAW, T-315, Roll 2155, 000090-1, Combatting the bandits, reprisal- and evacuation measures (25 October 1943).

⁵⁵⁸ NAW, T-315, Roll 2155, 000129-30, Propaganda directed at enemy-treatment of defectors and prisoners (24 November 1943).

*“Naturally, the fight goes on until the enemy is destroyed. But those bandits who are captured during the fighting are POWs and must be treated as POWs of our other enemies are on regular fronts”.*⁵⁵⁹

The episode involving Luftwaffe Captain Joachim Kirschner is endemic of these changes in German counter-insurgency policies. Kirschner was only 23, yet he already had downed 188 enemy planes, making him one of the most successful fighter pilots of the German air force; for his exploits, he was awarded the Knight's Cross with Oak leaves, one of the Third Reich's highest military decorations.⁵⁶⁰ On 17 December, his “Messerschmitt” was shot down over Herzegovina south of Stolac, but the captain managed to save himself by parachute. Once he was on the ground, however, he was taken prisoner by the South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment. When news that Kirschner had gone missing reached the German troops on the ground, they prepared a search and rescue operation. On 20 December, the Partisans routed one searching party and captured all of its 28 officers and men. Undeterred, the Germans continued raiding the villages south of Stolac over the period from 22-24 December, killing altogether 23 civilians in the process according to the NDH gendarmerie (whether these atrocities came before or after it had become known that the Partisans had Kirschner and all other German prisoners shot, is unclear).⁵⁶¹ By 30 December at the latest, Field-Marshal von Weichs informed the Supreme Command of the incident. He proposed a massive reprisal which would involve the shooting or hanging of some 220 Partisans captured in the recent fighting on the island of Korčula; Hitler personally approved this proposal.⁵⁶²

By the time the order reached the troops, it was altered in one significant way. On 2 January 1944, the 2nd Panzer Army issued instructions for carrying out the reprisal. Instead of executing Partisans from Korčula, who were in no way responsible for Kirschner's death, the Germans decided to punish the 29th Herzegovina Division only. The 5th SS Mountain Corps was ordered to organize an operation in eastern Herzegovina, the objective of which was to

⁵⁵⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 1553, 001092, To German soldiers in Croatia (undated, probably the end of December 1943). General Dehner, the commander of the 69th Reserve Corps, continued to complain in a letter dated 19 December 1943 that his units were shooting defectors and even German agents trying to come over: Klaus Schmider, 'Auf Umwegen zum Vernichtungskrieg? Der Partisanenkrieg in Jugoslawien, 1941-1944' in: Rolf-Dieter Müller and Hans-Erich Volkmann (Ed.), *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999), p. 913.

⁵⁶⁰ <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/K/KirschnerJ.htm> (last accessed on 1 November 2012).

⁵⁶¹ *Zbornik*/IV/20/475-6, 656, Activity report of the 3rd Brigade for the period 15-31 December 1943 (31 December 1943) and 29th Division to 10th Herzegovina Brigade and to South and North Herzegovina Detachments (26 December 1943)

⁵⁶² NAW, T-77, Roll 1426, 000270, War Diary of Armed Forces High Command, entry for 30 December 1943.

capture around 200 Partisans from the aforementioned division.⁵⁶³ Although vastly disproportionate, Weichs' order was a far cry from the indiscriminate policies of the first two-and-a-half years of war for three reasons. First, this reprisal order was meant to deter further executions of German prisoners in this particular area rather than to simply reduce the number of guerrillas. Second, the Führer's HQ had to be consulted beforehand as the reprisals were aimed at the enemy which was *de facto*, if not *de jure*, recognized as a belligerent. Third, moderation on the part of Army Group F was a result of the knowledge that the Partisan leadership strived for de-escalation as well; one indiscriminate act of violence could reverse this trend.⁵⁶⁴

The change in the policy towards the Partisan prisoners in general is attributable to several factors. First, the events on the ground had proven once more that the guerrillas were insensitive to reprisals (against both civilians and their own comrades) and that sabotage continued on the same level as before.⁵⁶⁵ Second, the Germans put much weight on their new program aimed at increasing the number of defectors from the Partisan ranks.⁵⁶⁶ And third,

⁵⁶³ *Zbornik*/XII/4/18-9, 2nd Panzer Army to 15th Mountain Corps (2 January 1944).

⁵⁶⁴ As is evident from the war diary of the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces, the Germans found out about Kirschner's fate through signals intelligence. Rendulic remembered being shown an intercepted cable from Tito pertaining to this incident. In it, the Partisan supreme commander demanded an immediate report on "why the captured German pilot was killed contrary to the orders". In their reply, the Herzegovinian Partisans cited transportation difficulties and misunderstanding, respectively, as the reason for Kirschner's execution. Evidently, the negotiations on the creation of a neutral exchange zone had a positive effect on the Partisan leadership as well: "We did not have the impression that Tito encouraged the brutality of the Partisans. On the contrary, we knew for certain that he strived to take prisoners in order to have them exchanged for the captured Partisans through negotiations": Lothar Rendulic, *Gekämpft, gesiegt, geschlagen* (Wels — Heidelberg: Verlag Weisermühl, 1952), p. 221.

⁵⁶⁵ For more information on railway sabotage in Croatia for the second half of 1943 see ten-day reports submitted by General of Transportation to Army Group F in NAW, T-311, Roll 285, 000001-000592. The best example of how the threat of death failed to deter sabotage can be found in the daily report of the Inspector of Railway Security for 3 December 1943. The report reads that the NDH commissioner for railways contemplated introducing pecuniary fines instead of hanging, because the former "would have a much greater effect": NAW, T-313, Roll 486, 000296.

⁵⁶⁶ Judging by the available sources, the program moved into full swing in November. In early November, a large-scale action was planned in northern and central Croatia, where ten agents ("spiritual leaders of the new movement") were supposed to distribute 10,000 "defector passes" among the guerrillas. Reception camps were prepared in the nearby towns and a permanent camp for 1,000 people in Graz, Styria (NAW, T-313, Roll 484, 001068-9, 3rd SS Panzer Corps to 2nd Panzer Army, 9 November 1943). A steady, methodical approach by the 15th Mountain Corps had more success than this grandiose plan. The Corps had established its own camp in Banja Luka by mid-November and tried to increase the number of defectors by providing them shelter, food and the opportunity to communicate with their families (NAW, T-314, Roll 560, 000395-7, Defectors, 19 November 1943). This approach seemed to be working: whereas there were only 102 defectors in November, there were 994 in December and first days of January 1944, a ten-fold increase (*ibid.*, 000488, Intelligence report for the period 1 December 1943-10 January 1944, 12 January 1944). By early April 1944, the 15th Mountain Corps reported altogether 2589 defectors in its sector in the past six months (NAW, T-314, Roll 564, 000749, Monthly refugee report-defectors, 4 April 1944). There were a further 99 defectors in May, almost twice as few as in April (NAW, T-314, Roll 565, 000946, Monthly refugee report, 2 June 1944). Intelligence

the negotiations with Tito's representatives concerning a cartel on prisoner exchange were making good progress. Further rounds of talks were held in Zagreb and Pisarovina in late September and late October. On the 26th, the Main HQ for Croatia informed Tito of the proceedings and requested the names of the prisoners worth exchanging. The Partisan leader responded in two telegrams over the next five days, naming several prominent Party members, some of whom were in camps in Italy and Slovenia and others in Sarajevo or Zagreb.⁵⁶⁷ These people would have to wait for the second exchange, however, because the first one had already been made in Pisarovina. On 30 October 1943 at noon, sixteen German soldiers and NCOs and eleven Home Guard officers were swapped for sixty members of the People's Liberation Movement.⁵⁶⁸ The 3rd SS Panzer Corps reported that "further exchange, at a 1:1 ratio, is being prepared".⁵⁶⁹

The first exchange was a sort of a "test": neither side committed its most valuable prisoners yet. Since the swap was conducted successfully and in good will, Stilinović could devote his next visit to Zagreb to discussing their exchange as a part of a wider agreement. By 4 November, he reported on the progress of the talks up to that point. The Germans proposed an establishment of prisoner-exchange commissions on both sides and a permanent place for the exchanges. Stilinović was informed of Hitler's latest order concerning the treatment of captured Partisans and was even offered to inspect the premises of the newly-created prisoner camps.⁵⁷⁰ Aware of the Partisans' sensitivity to their wounded, the Germans pledged to treat them in their military hospitals. In exchange, they demanded that their own men be treated humanely and officers freed from manual labor in guerrilla captivity, as per provisions of the Geneva Convention. Knowing that Partisans could not take care of their prisoners for long,

reports for the following months are not available, but it would be safe to assume that the numbers continued to drop due to the Third Reich's increasingly unfavorable war situation.

⁵⁶⁷ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVII, pp. 138, 160, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (27 and 31 October 1943). See also accompanying footnotes on page 341.

⁵⁶⁸ Fifty of these persons (22 men and 28 women) came from the concentration camp at Stara Gradiška. The camp's Party organization wrote several months later that the majority of female exchangees were "negative", i.e. conducted themselves poorly while in Ustashe custody: VA, CK KPH, Roll 42, 340, Letter from the Party organization in Stara Gradiška (April 1944).

⁵⁶⁹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2224, 96, Statement of Vladimir Novaković (9 November 1943); NAW, T-313, Roll 484, 001097, Daily report of 3rd SS Panzer Corps for 1 November 1943.

⁵⁷⁰ On 14 October 1943, the NDH's Ministry of Defense informed the IRCC that the organization of POW camps was being worked on (HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2233, 134). One Partisan intelligence report from October confirmed that one such camp had been established on the outskirts of Zagreb. According to the author, the captured Partisans were at first placed under a light regime and could even visit their acquaintances in the town. That changed after some captives used an air-raid alarm to escape. The report also confirmed that Partisans were not to be shot any longer but sent in batches of 200 to Germany. The order was, however, not heeded by some individual commanders: "The order is there as a rule, but exceptions are tolerated": HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1083, Report on conditions in Zagreb, p. 17 (undated, probably October 1943).

the Germans proposed that they be delivered to the nearest Axis unit; the commission in Zagreb would then make up the difference by delivering exactly the same number of men to their Partisan colleagues in Pisarovina.⁵⁷¹ Concerning the individual prisoners, the Germans were especially interested in the exchange of some captured airmen and Lieutenant-Colonel Pokay: he was reported to be in a Partisan prisoner camp where he had to perform menial tasks the same as captured Home Guard officers; the only difference in treatment was that he was not hounded to join the Partisans.⁵⁷²

Tito sent his answer to the German proposals on 5 November. He felt that they were not offering enough prisoners for Pokay and also ordered the Main HQ for Croatia to postpone the exchange of the airmen. As for the negotiations on the cartel, Tito agreed they should be continued. He insisted that the members of the National Liberation Movement who were not members of the armed units be treated just as Partisans caught on the battlefield. This was an attempt to protect the Party members and sympathizers engaged in underground activities in occupied territories who, in the event of capture, faced deportation to NDH concentration camps or execution as hostages. On a top of all that, he demanded that the agreement be made in writing and that the Germans pledge they would obey the rules and customs of war “which they had already broken by shooting our wounded in Montenegro”.⁵⁷³ The last request was bound to come up sooner or later, knowing Tito’s desire to be recognized as an equal. As for the Germans in Zagreb, the negotiations on the establishment of a full-fledged prisoner exchange cartel could not be carried out “under the table” indefinitely. The ever-cautious Horstenau therefore wrote a letter to his old Austrian acquaintance, Neubacher:

*“On this occasion, I would like to ask you for a favor: we have been negotiating with Tito’s people concerning prisoner exchange for a long time. Counter-proposals made by the other side are being discussed as we speak and will be submitted for your approval. I would be grateful if you could legalize these contacts by granting me the [needed] authorization as per the latest directives from the Führer”.*⁵⁷⁴

Before the answer could arrive, Stilinović had made another trip to Zagreb returning to his base on 16 November. The Main HQ for Croatia informed Tito that very day of the news he had brought back with him: the Germans agreed “in principle” to the agreement along the lines proposed by Supreme HQ but the last word still had to come from Belgrade (i.e.

⁵⁷¹ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVII, p. 352-3.

⁵⁷² HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2223, 513, Statement of Ivan Lalić (undated, probably early October 1943).

⁵⁷³ *Zbornik*/II/11/33, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (5 November 1943).

⁵⁷⁴ NAW, T-501, Roll 264, 000468, Horstenau to Neubacher (9 November 1943).

Neubacher). Once it arrived, they would propose a final draft of the agreement. The Partisans were requested not to mention the deal in their propaganda before it was finalized. In addition, the Germans re-affirmed their pledge not to shoot prisoners and to have assumed responsibility for the behavior of all directly subordinated native troops including Nedić's forces in Serbia. The arrangement was also valid for ordinary Ustashe formations, but not for the Pavelić's elite bodyguard formation operating from Zagreb. The Main HQ for Croatia concluded its cable with the request to Tito to clarify who, and on whose authority, could agree to the final draft of the agreement. The supreme Partisan leader was also requested to issue orders regarding reciprocal treatment of German prisoners.⁵⁷⁵

On 18 November, Tito replied that the document could be signed by someone from the Main HQ for Croatia in the name of the Supreme HQ. Instead of confirmation that the order on the humane treatment of captured Germans had been issued, however, the cable brought radically different news:

*"The Germans have been hanging innocent peasants along the railroad lately; inform them that we shall do likewise with them if they do not stop".*⁵⁷⁶

This was not only an immediate reaction to Rendulic's policy of terror, but also a message that the NOVJ would reciprocate only when Horstenau's promises began to be matched with deeds. Although reprisals against German soldiers were not carried out (at least not systematically), no steps aimed at regulating their status were taken either. The main reason for this lay in the policy of expedience the Partisans practiced concerning prisoners. The Home Guards and Chetnik rank-and-file often put up only token resistance and surrendered in droves knowing that they would receive fair treatment or even be released after capture.⁵⁷⁷ The Supreme HQ regulated the treatment of Italian prisoners as soon as it was realized that this could bring practical advantages to the National Liberation Movement. On 29 July 1943, five days after a vote of no confidence was made in Mussolini by the Fascist Grand Council, the Main HQ of Croatia ordered the immediate release of all Italian enlisted men in

⁵⁷⁵ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVII, p. 362-3.

⁵⁷⁶ *Zbornik*/II/11/90, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (18 November 1943).

⁵⁷⁷ This policy was practiced throughout the war, but could be remanded by local commands according to circumstances. For instance, the capitulation of Italy and the increased possibility of Allied landings in Dalmatia caused the Main HQ for Croatia to escalate violence against captured Chetniks; it was feared that they would welcome British troops with open arms and thus gain the upper hand in the civil war. Consequently, the high command of the Croatian Partisans issued an order on 16 September 1943 according to which captured Chetniks "are to be shot because of the danger [their movement] represents at this time": VA, 110, 7, 13, Order of the Main HQ for Croatia (16 September 1943).

anticipation of Italy's change of camp.⁵⁷⁸ Fair treatment of Italians played a crucial role in the plan to win them over for a joint struggle against the Germans in Montenegro after 8 September 1943:

*“Beware of the recurrence of sectarianism in Montenegro and treat the Italians who lay down their weapons and come over to us in the best possible manner. Do not take any vengeance against them or you will bear full responsibility”.*⁵⁷⁹

On 9 October, Tito repeated this order with the addition that the Italian Fascists who committed crimes were to be brought before courts and tried.⁵⁸⁰ This in effect meant that the old rules concerning captured Blackshirts were still in force. They, as all other ideological enemies could hope for little mercy. On 11 September 1943, Georgi Dimitrov sent a short cable to Tito from Moscow:

*“We agree with your proposal concerning the captured Russian soldiers of General Vlasov—death by firing squad”.*⁵⁸¹

The fact that Russian emigrants serving in various army, SS and police formations in Yugoslavia had the same legal status as their German colleagues⁵⁸² did not play any part in these considerations: they were seen not only as ideological foes but also as traitors to Russia. In addition, their case provided Tito a good opportunity to improve his standing with the Kremlin, which had already suffered as the result of his independent policies on the ground.

Unlike the NDH, Home Guard, Chetnik or Italian prisoners, the Supreme HQ had no use for captured Germans, at least not in the months following Operation “Schwarz”. The

⁵⁷⁸ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1081, 166, Main HQ for Croatia to Military-judicial branch of the Main HQ for Croatia (29 July 1943). Only two days prior, these prisoners were supposed to be exchanged for some Partisans in Italian prisons: *ibid.*, 98, Military-judicial branch of the Main HQ for Croatia to Main HQ for Croatia (27 July 1943).

⁵⁷⁹ *Zbornik*/II/10/315, Tito to 2nd Corps (22 September 1943). The „sectarianism“ Tito was referring to was the “Red Terror” from late 1941 and early 1942.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 368, Tito to 2nd Corps (9 October 1943).

⁵⁸¹ *Komintern i Vtoraja mirovaja vojna*, Vol. II, p. 339, Dimitrov to Tito (11 September 1943). Soviet general Andrei Vlasov (1901-1946) surrendered to the Germans in July 1942 and then strove to build an anti-communist army composed of Russians who were dissatisfied with Soviet rule for various reasons. Soon the term “Vlasovite” was used to denote all Soviet citizens who served the Germans.

⁵⁸² At the time, White Russian émigrés and ex-Soviet POWs were serving in two German formations in Yugoslavia: the Russian Protective Corps (Wehrmacht) and 3rd Auxiliary Battalion of the 2nd Volunteer Police Regiment (Police): Timofejev, *Rusi*, pp. 46-9. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that Tito's proposal was aimed at the members of these formations. Judging by the number of references to Soviet citizens who had defected to the Partisans from various German units, the order was enforced only haphazardly. In March 1945, the Main HQ for Croatia was ordered to transfer all 420 Soviet citizens from the ranks of Croatian units to Belgrade, where they would be handed over to the Red Army: VA, 119/4, 2-5/2, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (13 March 1945).

hope that the contacts from late 1942 and early 1943 would curb the worst excesses towards Partisan wounded and prisoners disappeared amidst the exemplary brutality with which the German occupation forces carried out their late Spring offensive. It appeared that sparing Germans could neither weaken their morale, nor cause reciprocity, nor induce their superiors to request their exchange. Attempts to “convert” captive Germans to the Partisan cause were all but completely abandoned.⁵⁸³ One intelligence report of the 369th Infantry division from October 1943 claimed that, according to the statements of several prisoners, Tito had ordered “everything in German uniform killed”.⁵⁸⁴ Although it is unlikely that such order had ever been issued in writing, this rumor is illustrative of the attitude of the Supreme HQ on the issue of German prisoners at the time.

The lack of prisoners meant, however, that the Partisans were in the dark as to German dispositions and intentions. Consequently, the Intelligence branch of the Supreme HQ issued an order in mid-September 1943 that commanders, political officers and common fighters should strive to take at least one prisoner for the purpose of questioning.⁵⁸⁵ The last provision was at least in part attributable to the arrival of Allied military missions whose primary task was to gather intelligence on the German order-of-battle in the Balkans. In the words of U.S. Major Richard Weil, the Partisans “*up to and including Tito were realists and horse-traders*” who would facilitate the acquisition of intelligence in return for material help.⁵⁸⁶ Although the need for information and Allied supplies probably saved some prisoners from being shot out of hand, there was no guarantee that a local commander would not dispose of them once he got what he wanted.⁵⁸⁷

One of the best examples of how even important prisoners mattered little to the Supreme HQ at the time can be found in the recollections of Captain F.W.D. Deakin, member of the British mission to Tito. In November 1943, Deakin was in Jajce, the new seat of the

⁵⁸³ For one such attempt from late Summer 1943 see NAW, T-313, Roll 488, 001282, Interrogation of Alois Nogly (26 September 1943).

⁵⁸⁴ NAW, T-315, Roll 2155, 000063, Enemy intelligence report (15 October 1943).

⁵⁸⁵ *Zbornik*/I/10/295, Intelligence branch of Supreme HQ, instructions to 2nd Bosnian Corps (13 September 1943).

⁵⁸⁶ Report of Major Weil on this experience with the Partisans in Yugoslavia (undated, probably May 1944), p. 20; available at <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/psf/box4/folo55.html> (last accessed on 17 February 2013). 2nd Assault Corps wrote to the Main HQ for Sandžak on 15 December 1943 (*Zbornik*/I/16/279): “Marshal Tito has demanded that we capture at least one German prisoner. Allied missions request the same. Instruct all units to do so at all costs”.

⁵⁸⁷ “20 October [1943]: two German NCOs of the 664th Artillery Regiment of the 114th Jäger Division captured; booty: one small automobile ‘Škoda’, one machine gun and two pistols. Both prisoners shot after interrogation”: *Zbornik*/V/21/72, 20th Dalmatian Division, Activity report for the period 20-31 October 1943 (2 November 1943).

Supreme HQ. One day he was visited by three senior Partisan officers. While chatting over a glass of brandy, they disclosed that a German officer had been captured and that he would be shot. Upon his request, Deakin was shown the major's *Soldbuch* (identification and service book), which clearly indicated he was serving with the Abwehr in Belgrade. Realizing the captive's value, the British captain requested that the prisoner's fate be decided by the Supreme HQ. Heated discussion followed, in which the Partisans pointed out that Deakin's "*consistent disapproval of the execution of German prisoners had been causing a rift between the two sides ever since the first British mission arrived.*" Seeing no point in discussing the matter further with his guests, Deakin appealed to Arso Jovanović, chief of staff of the Supreme HQ. The latter sided with his officers and flatly refused the request that the prisoner be released into British custody and flown to Bari for interrogation. In a last-ditch attempt to spare the prisoner, Deakin requested a formal audience with Tito. During the conversation, Deakin explained "in a most tactful manner" that the Allied interrogators were much more experienced in handling these things and that the intelligence provided by this German could be of great benefit to both the Allies and the NOVJ. The British captain gave his officer's word that a copy of the interrogation report would be sent to the Supreme HQ.

*"Tito approved my proposal without objections but with one condition: the German major must be extradited to Yugoslavia after the war in order to stand trial. Perhaps this was only Tito's characteristic sense of humor and his way of teaching me a lesson for my stand on the whole issue of prisoners, which I have taken as my own responsibility".*⁵⁸⁸

The wounded prisoner—"Captain Meyr", as Deakin recollected—was handed over to the British and flown to Bari at the beginning of December. His branch of service, and thus his potential value, had been known to the Partisans from the beginning and it is unknown why they insisted on his liquidation. Still, he was spared the moment Tito concluded that by doing so his relations with the Allies could be furthered.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁸ F.W.D. Deakin, *Bojovna planina* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1973), pp. 284-6.

⁵⁸⁹ The 20th Dalmatian Division reported that one of its detachments captured "a German Captain, member of the Gestapo and functionary of the German intelligence service on the Balkans" northeast of Trogir: *Zbornik/V/21/571*, 20th Division to 8th Corps (30 November 1943). On at least two occasions in January 1944, the German envoys in Pisarovina inquired regarding the fate of a certain "pilot, Captain Brandelmeyr [...] captured near Trogir and taken to the Supreme HQ where he lies sick at the moment [...] The Germans are willing to do anything [to exchange him]": HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 515, Main Intelligence Center Croatia to Main HQ for Croatia (8 January 1944) and *ibid.*, 667, Report on state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944). "Meyr" and "Brandelmeyr" is the same person. German envoys, fearful of disclosing Brandelmeyr's real duties, presented him as a pilot. In this way they hoped to avoid drawing unnecessary attention as members of the Luftwaffe always topped German exchange requests.

3. Drafting the agreement, November 1943 – January 1944

In the interim, the Partisan envoy returned to Zagreb on 19 November 1943 for a new round of talks. It was agreed that prisoner exchanges would be made exclusively in Pisarovina. In order to facilitate them, the village would be declared a “neutral zone”, off-limits to Axis troops. General modalities of the cartel were also discussed⁵⁹⁰ and the results included into the draft. The agreement would have seven articles. The first four dealt with the treatment of prisoners, wounded and deceased along the lines of the Geneva Convention of 1929. The fifth point contained guidelines on prisoner exchange: the captives were to be swapped on a ratio one-to-one and that both sides would act “generously”, i.e. deliver prisoners as soon as they captured them, without waiting for immediate compensation. The sixth point dealt with two categories of prisoners for whom the rules would not apply: deserters from the German army and Partisans caught in Axis uniform, but without proper NOVJ markings. The seventh point read that the agreement would become valid “upon signing” for the whole territory of the Independent State of Croatia, but that it should be widened “as much as possible to other parts of the South-East Europe, especially the whole Adriatic region and Serbian territory”. On 29 November, Horstenau sent the document to the NDH Ministry of Defense, advising its representatives to draw up a similar agreement as well as to Tito’s envoys. He also requested that the prisoners taken by the NDH’s armed formations be sent to German POW camps and that all exchange business be conducted centrally through the office of the plenipotentiary-general. On 1 December 1943, the Croatian draft was submitted after it had been approved by the Minister of Defense.⁵⁹¹ One day later, the Main HQ for Croatia reported that Stilinović was back with the draft and that the signing of the agreement should take place in two weeks’ time.⁵⁹²

Further prisoner exchanges were made parallel to the talks concerning the cartel. One Partisan intelligence report from Zagreb (undated but made almost certainly after the first exchange in late October) reads that both Horstenau's office and the German embassy „with Kasche personally“ were working engaged in preparations for the next swap.⁵⁹³ “The

⁵⁹⁰ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁵⁹¹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2223, 102-4, Plenipotentiary-General to Ministry of Defense (29 November 1943); For Croatian text see *ibid.*, 117-8.

⁵⁹² VA, 119/1, 1, 1, 89, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (2 December 1943).

⁵⁹³ It was rumored in certain German and Ustasha circles that the Germans gave five lorries and a large amount of medical supplies in exchange for some of their men: “Hitler allegedly commented that he could replace lorries but not good officers”. Interestingly, this report mentions that the lorries and supplies were picked up by a certain “Dr. Petrović”, which was the pseudonym Vladimir Velebit used during the March Negotiations.

exchange of captured Germans is being conducted in an organized manner through the office of the Plenipotentiary-General which maintains regular contacts with the insurgents"; the 15th Mountain Corps therefore ordered its units to report German soldiers who were known to be in captivity and to spare "appropriate exchange prisoners (active Communists)".⁵⁹⁴ Units on the ground were discouraged from leading direct exchange negotiations themselves or through NDH civilian or military authorities. For instance, in early November, a locally exchanged Croatian lieutenant smuggled a note from three Germans in captivity who pleaded to be swapped. The request went up the chain of command and was ultimately granted by the 2nd Panzer Army and at the same time relayed to Horstenau's staff.⁵⁹⁵ The exchange of Home Guard officers was increasingly handled through this office as well, with Stilinović providing up-to-date lists during his frequent visits.⁵⁹⁶

The success of the first prisoner exchange and contacts in Zagreb and Pisarovina began to influence the attitudes of Croatian Partisans. On the eve of the first attack on Virovitica in early November, the 12th Slavonian Division ordered that all captured Germans, Ustashe and gendarmes "who seemed important enough to be exchanged" had to be brought to the divisional HQ.⁵⁹⁷ It turned out that the majority of the Ustashe and "Gestapo people" (referring most likely to German-Croatian Gendarmerie) who were taken prisoner during the fighting in the area over the next twelve days were not deemed important enough to be spared; "most" of the 55 captured were executed.⁵⁹⁸ On 18 November, the Main HQ for Croatia ordered that "captured Germans are, in principle, not to be shot": information concerning their number and personal data should be sent to the aforementioned command which would use it for compiling the exchange lists. The same was to be done for captured

Despite the fact that most of these rumors were not true (Velebit's presence in the Zagreb area in the late 1943, swapping of military equipment for prisoners) and that Hitler probably did not even know about the event, they illustrate that the exchange business had already acquired an air of legitimacy as far as the Germans were concerned: HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1083, 63, [untitled] (undated).

⁵⁹⁴ NAW, T-314, Roll 560, 000303, Activity report of intelligence section for November 1943 (December 1944).

⁵⁹⁵ NAW, T-313, Roll 488, 000443, German training battalion with the 4th Croatian Mountain Brigade to 187 Reserve Division (1 November 1943); *ibid.*, 000442, 187 Reserve Division to 69th Reserve Corps (12 November 1943); *ibid.*, 000441, 69th Reserve Corps to 2nd Panzer Army (17 November 1943); *ibid.*, 000440, 2nd Panzer Army to Plenipotentiary-General (24 November 1943).

⁵⁹⁶ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-2222, 147, Plenipotentiary-General to Ministry of armed forces (12 November 1943).

⁵⁹⁷ *Zbornik/V/21/138*, Order of 12th Slavonian Division for attack on Virovitica (4 November 1943). Capturing enough prisoners for exchange was a high-priority task of the division's 18th Brigade. Its intelligence officer had a list of important persons in the town and was ordered to round them up with the help of a special detachment.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 330, Activity report of 12th Slavonian Division for the period 1-15 November 1943 (16 November 1943). The German 69th Corps reported 39 missing Ustashe and 20 Germans from Virovitica: NAW, T-313, Roll 485, 000317, Daily Report of 69th Reserve Corps for 16 November (17 November 1943). It is worthy of note that there were no Wehrmacht units in the town during the fighting.

Home Guardsmen and Ustashe as well as for all missing Partisans or persons connected to the People's Liberation Movement. Furthermore, the units were forbidden from conducting exchanges on their own:⁵⁹⁹ all prisoners were to be brought to the Main HQ for Croatia which would then swap them in Pisarovina.⁶⁰⁰

Two exchanges were completed during this period: one in late November and one on 12 December 1943. The Partisans received altogether 79 of their sympathizers and Party members from the NDH's prisons and concentration camps (47 on the first, and 32 on the second occasion).⁶⁰¹ Ivo Marinković was not among them. Although Stilinović reported on 16 November a rumor that he was alive and would probably be exchanged for Pokay, nothing came of it. Realizing it was futile to insist on his release any longer, the Partisans acquiesced to swap their long-time high-ranking captive for other prisoners. The number and composition of the Axis prisoners from these two swaps is unknown, but it is certain that Pokay was among them.⁶⁰²

As the year drew to a close, so too did the negotiations. Stilinović arrived in Zagreb on 22 December 1943 and did not leave before 7 January 1944. Although some Germans remembered that this prolonged visit was "private in nature"⁶⁰³ (i.e. not connected to the talks), it is clear that the Partisan delegate spent most of his time preparing for the next prisoner exchange and the signing of the agreement. On 26 December, Stilinović was issued a pass signed by Horstenau himself, probably after a meeting they had in the general's HQ.⁶⁰⁴ One day later, they met with the representative of the NDH's Ministry of Defense, Colonel Verić. On this occasion, Stilinović stated that the Supreme HQ accepted the text of the draft from 29 November "in full", whereupon "the German side expressed the wish that the agreement be signed and its implementation begin with as soon as possible". Verić then submitted the Croatian version to Pavelić for approval.⁶⁰⁵

⁵⁹⁹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1154, 177, Order concerning the proper conducting of prisoner exchanges (18 November 1943).

⁶⁰⁰ See for instance HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1082, 201-2, 1st Croatian Corps to Main HQ for Croatia (25 October 1943); *ibid.*, 594, 2nd Assault Brigade of 8th Division to Main HQ for Croatia (9 December 1943).

⁶⁰¹ HR HDA 1491, 2.241.,203, Summary of prisoner exchanges made hitherto (5 January 1945). The second batch was comprised almost entirely of female inmates from Stara Gradiška (25 out of 32). Some of them were apparently not keen on being exchanged: one even begged the chief Ustashe overseer not to let her go: VA, CK KPH, Roll 42, 340, Letter from the Party organization in Stara Gradiška (April 1944).

⁶⁰² HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 666, Report on state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944).

⁶⁰³ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. Ott remembered that Stilinović stayed in Zagreb even longer, from 20 December to 15 January: *ibid.*, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁶⁰⁴ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Eugen von Pott.

⁶⁰⁵ NDH Ministry of Defense to Military office of Poglavnik (28 December 1943): facsimile printed in Odić, *Neostvoreni planovi*, p. 192.

While waiting for the next move from the Axis side, Stilinović worked out the details for the coming swap. He was given the names of several missing men in whose exchange the Germans were interested in and was also requested to intervene with the Kalnik Detachment which still had not delivered some soldiers the Partisan side owed from the previous swap. On the last day of 1943, he visited 24 Partisan wounded, who—in a marked contrast to the standard German practice hitherto— had been taken prisoner several days before and brought to one of Zagreb’s hospitals. It was agreed that they would be exchanged as soon as their wounds were healed.⁶⁰⁶

According to the German envoys, their wounded in Banja Luka were not as lucky: it was brought to Stilinović’s attention that the Partisan units massacred inmates of a military hospital during the attack on that city on New Year’s Day 1944.⁶⁰⁷ Upon receiving this protest, the Main HQ for Croatia requested a clarification from the Supreme HQ. On 16 January, Tito sent a cable in which he denied the massacre and pledged that the NOVJ would abide by international law. He also threatened reprisals for the killings of Partisan wounded by the Germans, Ustashe or any other Axis formation: “We therefore demand that they fulfill their obligations in this respect”. Andrija Hebrang, the Secretary-General of the Croatian Communist Party, deemed it wiser to drop the threat of reprisals; he instructed the Partisan envoys to simply deny the accusations and convey assurances that the Partisan units were under orders to obey the rules and customs of war.⁶⁰⁸ The Germans did not press this issue any further. They did, however, insist on acquiring passes of safe conduct similar to the one issued to Stilinović. On 10 January 1944, their wish was granted and four German envoys received appropriate documents. The passes read that they were authorized to approach the Partisan forward lines “regardless of their location” in order to conduct prisoner exchange. After that they were to be brought to the nearest command which would validate their passes

⁶⁰⁶ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 515, Main Intelligence Center Croatia to Main HQ for Croatia (8 January 1944); HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. Admittedly, these wounded were captured by the 371st Infantry Division which had been stationed in France and Italy prior to its transfer to Croatia in early December 1943. Therefore, the division’s troops were not as jaded as the units which had been serving in Yugoslavia for a longer period.

⁶⁰⁷ Banja Luka was the second-largest city in the NDH and the seat of several state ministries. The attack by the NOVJ’s 5th Corps started on 31 December 1943 and was broken off on 1 January 1944. Most of the city was overrun but the Germans managed to hold out in the old Turkish fortress and several other strongpoints. According to the report made by Dr. Byloff, there were nine patients in the hospital when the Partisans captured it. Out of these, two were shot dead, one was wounded and one went missing: NAW, T-314, Roll 558, 000954, Losses according to the inquiries made so far (1 January 1944).

⁶⁰⁸ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVIII, p. 192, Tito to Hebrang (16 January 1944). See also accompanying footnote on pp. 329-30.

and provide them with escort: *“All units of the People’s Liberation Army are herewith ordered to assist the bearer of this document in all matters pertaining to the exchange”*.⁶⁰⁹

The final prisoner exchange made before the cartel officially came into effect was made in Pisarovina on 18 January 1944. According to the detailed six-page report to the Main HQ for Croatia, 44 Germans, including two officers and eighteen NCOs, were swapped for the same number of Partisans from the German prisoner camps. Among the exchanged Partisans, were two lieutenants one political commissar of a battalion; seven were NCOs or junior political officers. In addition, sixteen Ustashe officials, policemen and Home Guard officers were exchanged for sixteen inmates of the concentration camps at Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška. All in all, the Germans owed the Partisans one wounded man and one functionary who still had not been flown from Sarajevo as planned. There were at least 34 German soldiers (some of them captured in Dalmatia)⁶¹⁰ who were available for the next swap. This did not represent the grand total of prisoners since many units in the field were slow in conveying exact figures. The envoys from Horstenau’s staff inquired regarding the fate of seventeen persons who went missing between May and December 1943. The Partisan delegates could not provide any information, “and for most of them we have not even tried, as the chances are slight”. The author of the report therefore proposed regulating this matter by concentrating all prisoners in several designated spots. For their part, the Partisans demanded a complete list of their people in German custody and also protested the allegedly poor conditions in German prisoner camps. There were also eleven persons to be offered to the NDH authorities on the next occasion. The Partisans intended to organize their exchange in such a way as to receive fifteen to twenty of their own: “We can count on the support of the German officers in charge of the exchange, who could make this offer acceptable [to the Ustashe].” On the whole, the Ustashe were interested in swapping only those persons who stood in friendly relations with or had family ties to Pavelić and his entourage. The Germans on the contrary, showed great interest in the exchange, whether of officers or foot soldiers. To this effect, they promised to include the following provision in the arrangement: if a Partisan patrol escorting the prisoners destined for exchange was to be ambushed by a German unit,

⁶⁰⁹ HR HDA, Roll D-1090, 149, Main HQ for Croatia to German Plenipotentiary-General (8 January 1944); HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. The text is quoted from the pass issued to Hans Ott in October 1944 (HR HDA, Roll D-1090, 162, 14 October 1944). There is no reason to suppose that the one from January was any different.

⁶¹⁰ See next chapter.

the escorts would be freed, prisoners retained and the Partisan side compensated with the same number of their fighters who would be delivered to Pisarovina.⁶¹¹

According to the same report, the Germans stated again that they would accept all prisoners delivered by local Partisan units outside of Pisarovina. Knowing that prisoners became a liability to the Partisans once surrounded or hard-pressed, the Germans devised a method which would preclude the worst from occurring. This modality was known as “delivering prisoners on receipt” or “exchange on receipt”. The idea was that a Partisan unit, if in danger, could deliver its prisoners to the nearest German unit, receiving a receipt in return. With this receipt, the Partisans could claim the same number of prisoners from the Germans in Pisarovina. The proposal must have sounded practical to the Main HQ for Croatia for it had ordered all units under its command to undertake this course of action already in mid-November 1943.⁶¹² The Supreme HQ was, however, not consulted beforehand and once Tito had learned of it in late January 1944, immediately countermanded the order. This was most likely owing to the fact that he remained apprehensive of the Germans—the neutral zone had just been set up and there was no guarantee that they would honor their promises. The Main HQ for Croatia responded that this modality was not a part of the agreement and that the NOVJ had the right to deliver prisoners on receipt, but was not obliged to do so; it was the Germans who were actually obliged to even the balance in the event they received any of their men in this way.⁶¹³ Despite Tito’s objections to this concept in general, the Main HQ of the Croatian Partisans managed to find a compromise. On 6 February 1944, it released an order according to which prisoners could be delivered with receipt to the enemy provided the unit in question had the express permission to do so. Such an arrangement admittedly still did not allow units to act independently and with the needed speed, but it did spare them of the trouble of having to send prisoners on a long and arduous journey to Pisarovina.⁶¹⁴ This modality of exchange was open mainly to the units under the command of the Main HQ for Croatia. Of the units operating outside Croatia, only 5th Corps (located in Western Bosnia) was included. In time, delivering captives on receipt would prove to be very practical and it would become an integral aspect of the prisoner exchange cartel.

⁶¹¹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 664-70, Report on state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944).

⁶¹² HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1082, 386, Order concerning the proper handling of prisoner exchange (18 November 1943).

⁶¹³ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVIII, p. 228, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (29 January 1944); VA, 119/1, 2, 4, 51, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (30 January 1944).

⁶¹⁴ *Zbornik/V/24/503*, Main HQ for Croatia to 6th and 10th Corps (6 February 1944).

The first such exchange happened in January 1944 and involved some 120 Ethnic Germans from Slavonia. Before being drafted into village militias, police, the Wehrmacht or the Waffen-SS, able-bodied Ethnic Germans were required to serve in the Labor Service (*Reichsarbeitsdienst*) for a certain period of time. One of the labor camps was situated at the village of Josipovac, outside of Osijek. In the last week of October 1943, the Partisans attacked the site and captured 184 workers who were then taken to guerrilla-held territory. On 4 November, the German police and security service command in Osijek rounded up 664 hostages from two villages and offered in exchange for the captured laborers.⁶¹⁵ The Partisans would not accept civilians and demanded the same number of their fighters instead. A deal was reached: the Ethnic Germans would be released in Slavonia as soon as possible and the same number of men would be delivered to NOVJ envoys in Pisarovina as they became available. The first batch of thirty Partisans was received on 21 January and the remaining ninety arrived over the following months;⁶¹⁶ the last group of laborers plus eight other prisoners was released by the 6th Corps several days later.⁶¹⁷

The already quoted six-page report, dated 30 January 1944, also contained the following request to the Main HQ for Croatia:

“The exact copy of the agreement, as made by Comrade Marijan [Stilinović], should be demanded from the Germans. The draft we possess has so many corrections and additions that it is not completely readable. [...] The agreement was sent for approval to the Germans in Belgrade and it should be returned any day now”.

Only a day earlier, Tito also requested a copy of the agreement.⁶¹⁸ The Croatian leadership responded that the document would be sent through courier and added:

“The text of the agreement which is based on your instructions has been handed over to the Germans. [...] The text does not contain any commitments which would be detrimental to us. [...] We have informed you of this in our cables from 16 November and 2 December and asked for your opinion, but received no answer. The negotiations on prisoner exchange

⁶¹⁵ NAW, T-311, Roll 484, 001186, Daily report of 69th Reserve Corps (5 November 1943).

⁶¹⁶ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 664, Report on the state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944). According to one police report from the same month, the Partisans freed altogether 147 of their prisoners. 23 Ethnic Germans (“mostly those from mixed marriages or coming from culturally and linguistically de-Germanized settlements”) chose to stay with the guerrillas, five of whom eventually came to “Thälmann” Partisan Company. Redžić, *Telmanovci*, p. 15; Thomas Casagrande, *Die Volksdeutsche SS-Division „Prinz Eugen“: die Banater Schwaben und die nationalsozialistischen Kriegsverbrechen* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2003), pp. 283-4;

⁶¹⁷ VA, 119/1, 2, 4, 52-3, Main HQ for Croatia to 6th Corps (30 January 1944) and VA, 119/1, 2, 1, 75, 6th Corps to Main HQ for Croatia (31 January 1944).

⁶¹⁸ VA, 119/1, 2, 1, 71, Supreme HQ to Main HQ for Croatia.

*with the Germans were conducted by the Central Committee with our help and cooperation”.*⁶¹⁹

These cables were exchanged exactly 45 days after the date which had originally been set for the signing of the agreement (15 December). As we have seen, Stilinović came to Zagreb on 22nd and had a productive two week stay in the city, during which the draft was accepted by both sides and safe-conduct passes issued to the envoys. We can assume that the commencement of the agreement was delayed over the issue of signing. It is unknown why the drafts included the provision regarding signing as this possibility had been rejected by Neubacher already on 19 November 1943:

*“Please inform the German Plenipotentiary General [...] that there are no objections to these negotiations from the political standpoint, but all demands that German authorities oblige themselves in writing to abide by international law in their conduct with prisoners and wounded must be refused, for this would represent the recognition of Tito [Partisans] as belligerent side”.*⁶²⁰

At the Teheran Conference, “The Big Three” decided to officially embrace the Partisan Movement as a member of the Anti-Hitler coalition.⁶²¹ Shortly after the news had reached occupied Yugoslavia, the Wehrmacht commanders began discussing whether they should do the same. On behalf of Colonel-General Löhr and Field Marshal von Weichs, General Hermann Förtsch (chief of staff of Army Group F) suggested to the Armed Forces High Command that the NOVJ be recognized as a belligerent. According to Förtsch, the request was based on expediency, rather than on the conviction that the Partisans fulfilled all requirements prescribed by international law. The recognition should serve two purposes: first and foremost, it should make the Partisans conduct themselves like regular armed forces where the treatment of prisoners was concerned. The second reason was that the German commands in the country hoped to get more men, supplies and medals from the Reich since they would be fighting a regular opponent. The request was turned down.⁶²² In the first days of 1944, the Commander-in-Chief South-East officially requested Armed Force High

⁶¹⁹ VA, 119/1, 2, 4, 51, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (30 January 1944). Tito’s silence during the last phase of negotiations caused frustration in the Croatian leadership. On 31 January, they sent a cable which read that they could not steer the war effort properly without clear and timely instructions from the top: *ibid.*, 53, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (31 January 1944).

⁶²⁰ Quoted in Odić, *Neostvoreni planovi*, p. 193.

⁶²¹ *Foreign relations of the United States-Diplomatic Papers: The Conferences at Cairo and Teheran 1943* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 652, Military conclusions of the Teheran Conference (1 December 1943).

⁶²² Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, Vol. I/1, pp. 82-3.

Command's approval for the organization of the exchange cartel. On 9 January, the answer from Berlin arrived:

*"Prisoner exchange with Tito is allowed, whereby it must be made clear that this in no way represents the recognition of Tito's bandits as a belligerent power".*⁶²³

Seeing that Horstenau's hands were tied and that the insistence on signing would only endanger the whole project, the Partisans backed down. Instead, both sides pledged verbally to honor the treaty without actually signing it.⁶²⁴

The final text of the treaty had altogether twelve articles, and the Partisans received a copy in the first days of February 1944. Technical details were agreed upon as follows: the village of Pisarovina and its environs in a 5-kilometer radius was declared a neutral zone; Axis troops would not attempt to occupy the village and the Partisans were obliged to hold it with no more than fifteen to twenty men⁶²⁵; in case Axis troops had to move through the zone, no harm would be wrought upon either civilians or the Partisan guard detail; the NOVJ agreed to refrain from using the zone for staging offensive actions; the Luftwaffe and the NDH air-force would not undertake reconnaissance flights over the zone or bomb the village, and the Partisans would not interdict traffic on the Zagreb–Klinča selo–Pisarovina road which would be used for prisoner transport. These provisions would stay in force until the end of the war, although there were some attempts to change them at their onset. In late February 1944, the Germans demanded the right to post their own guard detail in Pisarovina. The Main HQ for Croatia replied on 3 March with the following:

*"The county of Pisarovina is our liberated territory. In order to facilitate the prisoner exchange, we have chosen to refrain from undertaking operations in one of its parts and convert it into a neutral zone. [Consequently] the presence of a foreign army there is out of the question".*⁶²⁶

⁶²³ Quoted in NAW, T-77, Roll 1419, 001100, IRCC's care for German prisoners in Tito bandits' captivity (9 November 1944).

⁶²⁴ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statements of Hans Ott and Eugen von Pott. Yugoslav historiography confirms that the deal was not signed: Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, p. 193; *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVII, p. 355.

⁶²⁵ One Partisan order from early March 1944 reads: „No unit is allowed to remain at Pisarovina [for a longer period of time]" (*Zbornik/V/25/53*, Daily order of 2nd Brigade of 8th Division for 3 March 1944).

⁶²⁶ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. Dragutin Kabalini-Veljko, a Partisan intelligence operative from Zagreb, reported on the terms in a report written shortly after 5 February 1944: Boris Bakrač, "Razmjena ratnih zarobljenika i uhapšenika na području Pisarovine", in: *Treća godina narodno-oslobodilačkog rata na području Karlovca, Korduna, Like, Pokuplja i Žumberka* (Karlovac: Historijski arhiv u Karlovcu, 1977), Zbornik 8, p. 846.

After almost six months of talks, the delegates of the Main Partisan HQ for Croatia and the office of the German Plenipotentiary-General in Croatia had finally reached an agreement on the permanent exchange of prisoners. It was hoped that the cartel would provide a modicum of protection to prisoners of both sides and facilitate their speedy exchange. It remained to be seen whether the system would continue to work in practice and if the German occupation forces and the NOVJ would be willing to honor their commitments from the treaty which, legally speaking amounted merely to a “gentlemen’s agreement”.

4. Functioning of the Neutral zone, February – December 1944

Before we go into detail concerning the functioning of the cartel, some space should be devoted to the people on both sides who negotiated the deal and made the first exchanges in Pisarovina. Stilinović was originally chosen to lead the talks since he had proven his diplomatic skills already in the Summer of 1942 and was on good terms with his German counterparts. The treatment of the Partisan envoy during his visits in Zagreb was always correct. He could move freely around the city (albeit escorted by a German NCO) and visit friends and relatives. During one of his early stays in Zagreb, Stilinović was accommodated in the city’s best hotel, the “Esplanade”. Soon, however, he moved into the flat where his mother and sister were living. Although Ott remembered that he, unlike Velebit, never requested special protection for his family, Stilinović did ask for and obtain special passes which placed his closest relatives under German protection and enabled them to visit the Partisan territory outside of Zagreb.⁶²⁷ The Partisan-German “friendship” reached its height when Stilinović invited two of his German colleagues to a family dinner at his home on Christmas 1943.⁶²⁸

It turned out that his long visit to Zagreb at that time was to be the last in his capacity as chief delegate for the prisoner exchange. With the agreement reached, the Main HQ for Croatia deemed that Stilinović should return to other duties. While he would continue to appear at the meetings in Pisarovina to discuss delicate issues, running the day-to-day business of exchange was entrusted to someone else. In December, Stilinović presented his successor to the Germans. On 8 January 1944, the Main HQ issued a letter of authorization to “Stanko Perović”, the new Partisan envoy. Two days later, Horstenau’s office issued him with a German safe-conduct pass. Perović was in fact the pseudonym of Josip Brnčić, a high

⁶²⁷ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statements of Hans Ott and Willibald Nemetschek.

⁶²⁸ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek.

Communist official from Zagreb and an officer of the “Main Intelligence Center” of the Main HQ of Croatia.⁶²⁹ As we shall see later, he had strong personal reasons for participating in the exchange process.

All the German envoys were either members of Horstenau’s staff or his confidants. The most important among them remained Hans Ott. After his contract with the “Hansa Leichtmetal” company had expired in March 1943, Horstenau found him a job as an associate of the Abwehr’s branch in Zagreb. When the Partisans in Croatia signaled their willingness to negotiate, Ott was in Herzegovina, helping to establish an Abwehr network there.⁶³⁰ Thanks to his long involvement in the contacts with the Partisans, Ott’s main task in the Summer of 1943 was to “break the ice” and facilitate the conduct of the talks: for instance, he was the one who introduced new members of the German team to the Partisan envoys. In autumn of that year, Horstenau deemed that Ott, as a civilian, should not be involved with the exchange of the Army personnel. Consequently, he took an active part the exchange talks only if they involved captured members of “Organization Todt”.⁶³¹ The second reason for this decision was that Horstenau felt that Ott should not waste his time and energy on technicalities of the everyday exchange business. He, just as his veteran counterpart Stilinović, would continue to return to Pisarovina only when there were more important matters to discuss.

The man in charge of the German commission (*Deutsches Sonderkommando für den Gefangenenaustausch*, or “German Special Commando for Prisoner Exchange”) was Major Eugen Von Pott, who acted as both Horstenau’s first intelligence and first operational officer. He and Stilinović had negotiated the details of the cartel agreement in Zagreb and had over time developed very good relations.⁶³² The rest of the German team consisted of several officers and clerks whose main task was to put the exchange agreement into practice. This included the search for prisoners, updating the exchange lists and making trips to Pisarovina to make the swaps. Lieutenant Model was O3 (second intelligence officer) in the office of the Plenipotentiary-General and took an active part in the dialogue from the second half of 1943, playing “the leading role on the German side” during the rounds of talks held in Pisarovina.

⁶²⁹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 148, Authorization for Stanko Perović (8 January 1943); HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 65 Brnčić, Statement of Eugen von Pott; HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1083, 48, Composition of Main Intelligence Center (undated, probably late 1943).

⁶³⁰ Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, pp. 249-50. Odić claims Ott received a General’s pay on a monthly basis for his services. Kasche, on the contrary, claimed that Ott’s job was honorary and that he only received grants to cover his expenses (HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 164 Ott, Statement of Siegfried Kasche). One way or the other, Ott was known in Zagreb for his “jovial” lifestyle “and obviously had enough money to spend”: *ibid.*, Statement of Albrecht von Brauchitsch.

⁶³¹ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 164 Ott, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek.

⁶³² HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statements of Eugen von Pott and Willibald Nemetschek.

At the end of the year, he was transferred to the 1st Cossack Division and met his tragic end shortly afterwards: Model was prone to drinking and was shot dead by a German sentry on the New Year's Eve 1943 after failing to respond to calls to halt.⁶³³ Two further members of the exchange commission who should be mentioned here were ethnic Germans from Croatia. One was Eduard Peternell, an NCO with "Organization Todt" and an associate of Ott since at least September 1943. Like the latter, he was chiefly responsible for the exchange of this organization's members. The other was Willibald Nemetschek, a 27 year-old native of Zagreb and a "Sonderführer Z"⁶³⁴ with Horstenau's staff. He had been serving as an interpreter until the summer of 1943 when he was transferred to the exchange detail. He was introduced to the Partisans in Pisarovina in September of that year and was soon to become a leading member of the German team.⁶³⁵

Non-commissioned officer Othmar Unger became Nemetschek's aid in early 1944, just in time to witness the functioning of the exchange system at its height. He described the mechanism in some detail:

"A prisoner exchange was set up in the following way: the Partisans informed us, usually through a courier, that they would like to send envoys to the office [of the Plenipotentiary-General] for a meeting. They would then be picked up by a German car and brought to Zagreb. The lists of wanted persons⁶³⁶ [were exchanged] and [...] the next meeting scheduled, usually in one to two weeks' time. A copy of the list would then be sent to various German and Croatian establishments tasked with keeping Partisan prisoners. [...] Getting the prisoners from the Wehrmacht's military camp was the easiest. The Supreme Commander in the South-East would order their release as soon as he received the request from [Horstenau's] chief of staff. [...] If necessary, Nemetschek would visit camps and prisons in person in order to affect the transfer of those people wanted for exchange. He obtained the prisoners from the camps in Slavonski Brod and Zenica, the Ustashe prison at Savska cesta,

⁶³³ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File Model, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. Model managed to combine business with pleasure during his visits to Pisarovina. He made a number of female acquaintances there and courted the cousin of a local tavern-keeper, whom he subsequently took to Zagreb.

⁶³⁴ *Sonderführer*, or "special leaders" were the persons drafted into Wehrmacht, who, because of their special skills and lack of military training, were not deemed suitable for frontline service. „Sonderführer Z" corresponded to the rank of Lieutenant.

⁶³⁵ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek.

⁶³⁶ The persons who were chosen for exchange by higher commands always stood on the top of every list. Others were chosen on the basis of interventions made on their behalf by their immediate superiors or family members. For two such examples, see two letters written to the Partisan envoy in Pisarovina in early 1945 in HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 32 (Dear Lieutenant-Colonel, 20 February 1945) and 33 (Editorial board of "Naprijed" to the comradesly 3rd Section of OZNA, 23 March 1945).

*the SS [prison] at the former Kulin Ban Square and the SS camp "Jankomir" in Stenjevac.*⁶³⁷ [The prisoners would also come] from Dachau, Buchenwald and Ravensbrück camps in Germany. According to Nemetschek, particular persons could often not be found, so other prisoners were simply put in their stead [...]. If the wanted persons were in the custody of the Ustashe or the SS, the former would make the exchange difficult. Horstenau himself had to intervene every now and then.⁶³⁸ [...] In the end, [we] usually succeeded in finding the wanted prisoners. Apart from [these problems], it was not always easy to make contact with the Partisans [...] [especially] if the Partisan units unfamiliar with the exchange were moving around Rakov Potok, or in case we did not know if higher commissars Stilinović or Bakrač were in Pisarovina at that moment. In this case, Nemetschek would go to the Wehrmacht's prisoner camp or the Ustashe prison at Savska cesta and find a Partisan who would volunteer to go to Pisarovina and return [with a reply]. [...] As soon as there were ten to thirty Partisans available, trucks would take them to Pisarovina where a similar number of German prisoners would be waiting".⁶³⁹

The first weeks of January 1944 were marked by several Ustashe-related incidents. On 12 January, Horstenau received a letter from his old friend and subordinate Captain Arthur Haeffner: "*I can happily inform you*", wrote the captain, "*that the exchange of my nephew, despite the sabotage of some Croatian 'friends of Germany', succeeded thanks to a lucky coincidence*". Metzger's nephew was supposed to be exchanged for Dr. Dančević, a native of Pisarovina, who was believed to be held in a NDH prison. On 8 January, after nine days of efforts and Horstenau's personal intervention, the Ustashe police finally promised to inform the Plenipotentiary-General about the doctor's whereabouts. Two days later, while driving to Pisarovina, Nemetschek encountered Dančević by coincidence, who was on his way home. Nemetschek quickly put him in the car and exchanged him for Metzger's nephew as planned. "*There can be no doubt*", the letter concluded, "*that Dr. Dančević was simply released so that [we] could be told that he hadn't been in custody of the Ustashe police in the first place. It is certainly not the last time that the Ustashe allow themselves such impudence*".⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁷ The latter three were all situated in Zagreb. The "SS camp Jankomir" was the main collection point for the Partisans captured by the Germans; its capacity was between 200 and 300 people: Slavko Odić-Slavko Komarica, *Noć i magla: Gestapo u Jugoslaviji* (Zagreb: Centar za informacije i publicitet, 1977), pp. 255-6.

⁶³⁸ The Plenipotentiary General intervened for prisoners of both sides: "Horstenau helped an incredible number of people. [Archbishop Alojzije] Stepinac also got several of his people out through him"; KAW, B/67: 145, Interview with Willibald Nemetschek conducted by Peter Broucek (10 September 1981).

⁶³⁹ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Othmar Unger.

⁶⁴⁰ NAW, T-501, Roll 265, 000026, Haffner to Horstenau (12 January 1944).

The second incident occurred on the night of 15 January 1944 when a group of Ustashe burst into Pisarovina and killed a local Communist Party official, wounded one Partisan and captured another. Some said that the motive for the incursion was a bet among the perpetrators; others suspected that it was done with the purpose of spoiling the relations between the Partisans and the Germans.⁶⁴¹ Brnčić's aid, Dušan Tepšić, informed Ott about the attack, whereupon the latter immediately telephoned NDH command and said "Hopefully, these things will not happen anymore". After the chief Partisan envoy filed a protest from the Main HQ for Croatia, the Germans promised to do everything they could to reign in the Ustashe, at the same time voicing their doubts about the ultimate success of these endeavors. As a sign of goodwill, it was promised that the captured Partisan from Pisarovina would be returned without compensation. The Germans were true to their word, and he was released from prison in Karlovac that same month.⁶⁴²

Because of these unpleasant events, it must have been difficult for Brnčić to negotiate with the Ustashe directly, but he had little choice: his brother was known to be in the Jasenovac concentration camp. During one of his two or three visits to Zagreb (the sources differ), he met with an official of the NDH's Ministry of Interior, Blažeković. They discussed the terms of the exchange of a number of inmates from Jasenovac, including Brnčić's brother. The rest of the time was spent actualizing the prisoner lists together with von Pott and persuading some of the captured Partisans to be exchanged—not an uncommon occurrence, as many prisoners suspected foul play. While off-duty, Peternell and Nemetschek hosted dinners for their Partisan guests. It seems that the delegates had developed very friendly relations in the short period they worked together: Brnčić revealed his real name to Nemetschek and promised him protection after the war.⁶⁴³ An unpleasant episode in the village of Zdenčina (some ten kilometers north-west of Pisarovina) may have served to forge these ties. On one of the trips to Zagreb, the envoys were forced to spend the night in the village due to heavy snow. Some drunken German officers did not like Brnčić's presence and resolved to kill him despite the fact that he stood under General Horstenau's protection. Only after Peternell and

⁶⁴¹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 772, Excerpts from various reports (9 February 1944).

⁶⁴² Ibid.; HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 668, Report on state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944); *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVIII, p. 330.

⁶⁴³ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 65 Brnčić, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. In 1947, Nemetschek pleaded with Brnčić on behalf of his arrested uncle. Fortunately, the uncle was released in the meantime, so Brnčić did not have to intervene.

Nemetschek had drawn their pistols and advised Brnčić to do likewise if need be, did the officers back down.⁶⁴⁴

During his tenure as the man in charge of prisoner exchanges, Brnčić organized four swaps in Pisarovina, the first one taking place on 21 January as previously mentioned. After that came a pause until 10 March when the Partisans received 57 people (one of them Brnčić's brother who would be killed only a month later) and an additional thirty on 15 March 1944.⁶⁴⁵ Twelve days later, the fourth and final exchange was made: five Party members from concentration camps and sixteen common Partisans were exchanged for a similar number of Axis captives.⁶⁴⁶ In his letters to the Main HQ for Croatia from this period, Brnčić reported on the current state of affairs, reported the names of the persons wanted by either the Germans or NDH authorities and gave recommendations. He concluded the letter from 27 March 1944 with the request that the Main Intelligence Center inform his successor of all details pertaining to the exchange business.⁶⁴⁷ The end of Brnčić's short career as the main Partisan negotiator coincided roughly with the release of his brother. This led many of his German colleagues to conclude that this highly personal reason stood behind his appointment to the job in the first place.⁶⁴⁸ Brnčić, of course, could not choose his job and had to go wherever he was sent. The reason for his withdrawal in late March was that the newly-created 10th "Zagreb" Corps of the NOVJ needed an experienced intelligence officer.⁶⁴⁹ Despite his transfer, he would continue to play a role in the contacts with the Germans throughout 1944.

Brnčić "initiated" his successor by taking him along during the last exchange. He was Boris Bakrač, a 32 year-old technical engineer from Zagreb. Unlike Stilinović, who had been a Communist since the early 1920s, Bakrač became a full Party member only in 1942. Despite this late appointment, Bakrač's reliability could not be doubted as he spent two years working underground in Zagreb. He left the city in September 1943 and became a political worker in the Partisan-held territory. In mid-March 1944, he was summoned to the Main HQ for

⁶⁴⁴ Brnčić told the story to his successor: Bakrač, *Razmjena ratnih zarobljenika*, pp. 845-6.

⁶⁴⁵ HR HDA 1491, 2.241.,203, Summary of prisoner exchanges made hitherto (5 January 1945). These prisoners included the Partisans owed for the release of the ethnic German laborers. It is not known whether any of these groups contained several people from the Muslim-populated Cazin Krajina in Western Bosnia, whose exchange had been requested for by the 5th Bosnian Corps with the explanation that these persons "could do more [for us] in Muslim Krajina than all other political workers combined" (HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 34, Exchange of our prisoners, 10 March 1944). At the time, all warring factions were striving hard to win over the Muslim population in the region.

⁶⁴⁶ The 6th Slavonian Corps delivered altogether 27 German prisoners on two occasions near Požega in late March 1944: *Zbornik/V/25/636*, Main HQ for Croatia for 6th Corps (21 March 1944).

⁶⁴⁷ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 59-60, Brnčić to Main HQ for Croatia (dated between 15 and 27 March 1944).

⁶⁴⁸ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 65 Brnčić, Statements of Willibald Nemetschek and Hans Ott.

⁶⁴⁹ *Zbornik/V/25/661*, Monthly organizational report of 10th Corps for March 1944 (31 March 1944).

Croatia. There he was met by Ivan Krajačić-Stevo, the head of what would soon become the Croatian branch of OZNA⁶⁵⁰, who told him simply that he would be in charge of prisoner exchange from then on.⁶⁵¹

According to Bakrač estimate, he visited Zagreb no less than 25 times during his tenure as the chief NOVJ envoy. On several occasions he was billeted in the Palace Hotel which was turned into a kind of auxiliary barracks for the Wehrmacht. Most of the time, however, he stayed at Nemetschek's apartment with whom he developed good relations (as he did most of his German colleagues). For instance, Bakrač's family and friends visited him frequently at Nemetschek's apartment and he was also introduced to his host's next of kin. The German envoy remembered how Bakrač obtained large quantities of cigarettes from one of his friends and some other commodities from Peternell's daughter, which Nemetschek then took to Pisarovina. He also carried private letters across the lines and on one occasion, even a supply of makeup for the famous Croatian actor August Cilić who was practicing his trade in the guerrilla army. More importantly, Nemetschek arranged the evacuation of some Partisan families from the occupied territory and the release of a number of Partisan sympathizers, all as a personal favor to Bakrač or other envoys.⁶⁵²

The NOVJ envoy's visits to Zagreb did not always pass without incident. Once, while he was staying at the Palace Hotel, a random check conducted by the German military police found his identification card suspicious and he was placed under arrest. Luckily, Nemetschek immediately found out and affected his release. The second incident was much more serious. As he was walking down a street with Peternell, Bakrač was recognized by an Ustashe policeman who threatened to kill them both. In the end, the persuasive prowess of the German envoy saved the day: Peternell managed to convince him to check with the NDH's ministry of interior before taking any action. After the ministry "told him not to touch them, he left them in peace".⁶⁵³

⁶⁵⁰ „Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda“ abbr. OZNA (“Department for the Protection of the People”) was formed on 13 May 1944 as an organization responsible for all questions of security and intelligence within the Partisan-held territories. It had altogether four directorates: I–foreign intelligence; II–counter-intelligence; III–internal security; IV–technical branch/statistics.

⁶⁵¹ Bakrač, *Razmjena ratnih zarobljenika*, p. 847. Bakrač's authorization bears the date 15 March 1944: HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 152, Letter of authorization for Ivan Žuljević (15 March 1944).

⁶⁵² Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, pp. 847, 850. HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 24 Bakrač, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek; HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek; *ibid.*, Entries for „Miletić or Miliković“ and „Žganjer“, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. Some Yugoslav sources claim Nemetschek was instructed by his superiors to be friendly to the Partisan envoys: *Nemačka obavještajna služba*, Vol. V, p. 587.

⁶⁵³ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 24 Bakrač, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek.

Bakrač's first month of duty was one of the busiest, with exchanges taking place on average, once every week:

- On 7 April, the Germans delivered 5 Partisans (one KPJ member)
- On 15 April, 32 Partisans, including one battalion and one company commander (six members of the KPJ)
- On 25 April, 32 prisoners including one company commander, one battalion and one company commissar (eleven Party and two SKOJ members)
- On 27 April, 23 persons including two company commanders (one SKOJ member).

In exchange for them, the Partisans freed twenty members of the Wehrmacht and 41 Home Guards. In order to “get out of the red”, the Partisans had to deliver another twenty Germans. The unusually large number of exchanged Home Guards was a novelty: “The Germans are in need of every man”, Bakrač wrote to his superiors; “they themselves offered to take the Home guards, something they have not done before”. The Germans also requested that their prisoners not be stripped as the Partisans now had enough new English uniforms. The Ustashe refused to deliver three prisoners as the Partisans still owed them two of their own. Bakrač spent two days in Zagreb in late April negotiating with the NDH authorities and could report that they would probably acquiesce to an exchange at the favorable ratio if the Partisans would settle the debt: “Something should be done about this, otherwise we won’t get our comrades from the [concentration] camps”.⁶⁵⁴ Still, Bakrač hoped the swap could be made the next occasion he met with his opposite members in Pisarovina on 10 May 1944.⁶⁵⁵

The planned exchange did not occur owing to a “tragic misunderstanding” (Bakrač’s words), which threatened to derail the whole cartel. On 2 May 1944, Peternell, along with another soldier, was en route to Pisarovina in a truck; according to several German sources, he undertook the trip on his own, without prior announcement.⁶⁵⁶ Although the vehicle was properly marked by white flags, the Partisans opened fire, killing both men instantly. Horstenau was enraged and had all contact with the guerrillas severed. Five days later, possibly as retribution, units of the 1st Cossack Division and NDH armed forces launched an

⁶⁵⁴ Two Ustashe were among six prisoners who were sent to the HQ of the Kordun area (responsible for exchange prisoners) on 11 April 1944 (HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 123). The sources do not provide an answer as to why they were not delivered with the other Axis captives.

⁶⁵⁵ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 138-42, Reports on prisoner exchange (16 and 27 April 1944).

⁶⁵⁶ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Johann Halbwindl. General Horstenau wrote a letter to the chief of the SD in Zagreb, Hermann in which he informed him that Peternell was killed while travelling to Pisarovina “without the knowledge or protection of our envoy”: KAW, B/67: 164, Živorad Mihailović-Šilja, *O razmeni zarobljenika*, p. 14.

incursion into the neutral zone and entered Pisarovina. Ever since the existence of the neutral zone had been officially sanctioned in late January 1944, German troops were under orders not to occupy the area nor harm the local population.⁶⁵⁷ Whereas the first clause was honored and Pisarovina was evacuated already on the 8th, the second clause was flagrantly breached and many instances of looting and rape were recorded.⁶⁵⁸ On 20 May, the 69th Reserve Corps issued orders for Operation “Schach”, which was designed to tie down the 4th Corps of the NOVJ in the Kordun region during Axis operations in Western Bosnia. Aware of the possibility that the repeated incursions into Pisarovina and acts of violence against the civilians living there might have long-lasting consequences, the order expressly stipulated that “the neutral zone of Pisarovina must not be violated at any cost”.⁶⁵⁹

Relative peace returned to the area in the last days of May and the Germans decided it was time to re-establish contact with the Partisans. It would be safe to assume that the rising number of casualties was the main reason for this decision. Nemetschek’s lists of German MIA reflected the ever-increasing intensity of fighting in western Yugoslavia: in early March, there were 101 names, a month or so later 258, and in early June already 306.⁶⁶⁰ If the cartel would continue to be suspended, these men would face a very uncertain fate. The contact with the Partisans was established through the personal driver of one of Zagreb’s businessmen who had ties to both the Germans and the Partisans.⁶⁶¹ The latter were also very interested in resuming the talks. This is evident from the fact that the Stilinović was dispatched to Zagreb in late May.⁶⁶² On 1 June 1944, the Supreme HQ for Croatia sent a reply to Major von Pott’s message regarding the renewal of prisoner exchange and suggested the delegates meet in Pisarovina on 10 June.⁶⁶³

Whether at this meeting or through a courier, Major von Pott wrote a letter to the Partisan command, dated 9 June 1944, and addressed it “dear doctor” whose name is not mentioned. Given that the letter makes reference to the “personal discussion” the two had in 1943, which in turn served as a basis for the agreement reached with the help of “Mr. Šunjevarić” (Stilinović), it is obvious that the addressee was in fact Vladimir Velebit, or “Dr.

⁶⁵⁷ NAW, T-314, Roll 563, 001288, 2nd Panzer Army to 15th Mountain Corps (28 January 1944).

⁶⁵⁸ *Zbornik/V/27/201*, Turopolje-Posavina Detachment to 34th Division (9 May 1944) and *ibid.*, p. 277, Rear area of 4th Corps to Corps’ HQ (14 May 1944).

⁶⁵⁹ *Zbornik/XII/4/287*, 69th Reserve Corps, Orders for Operation „Schach“ (20 May 1944).

⁶⁶⁰ The lists can be found in HR HDA 1491, 2.41., 113-5, 120-4, 132-7.

⁶⁶¹ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek. The same man served as a courier whenever the envoys could not meet in person.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁶⁶³ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 277, Supreme HQ for Croatia to German Plenipotentiary General (1 June 1944).

Petrović”, as he was known to the Germans. The fact that Pott was writing to Tito’s personal emissary and a member of the Supreme HQ underlined the importance the Germans attached to the issues contained in the letter. In the opening lines, the major briefly recounted how the prisoner exchange had been agreed in order to better the lot of prisoners on both sides, and that the system had functioned well despite occasional incidents. The “monstrous” murder of Eduard Peternell (and the alleged mutilation of his corpse) now made any further exchanges impossible. In addition, reports of widespread abuse and executions of German prisoners were mounting.⁶⁶⁴ This represented a flagrant breach not only of the agreement’s provisions, but also of “those principles [...] which you claimed your movement made its own”. For “purely humanitarian reasons”, Pott offered the Partisans one last chance to save the agreement before he informed his superiors that the whole matter could be viewed as failed. His conditions were that the Peternell’s case be thoroughly investigated and the guilty parties punished. Furthermore, the NOVJ leadership was called upon to issue clear and unequivocal orders concerning the humane treatment of German prisoners. The letter also contained an indirect threat in case of non-compliance:

“The troop commanders have informed me that, in case the shootings of German prisoners should continue, they would take the sharpest possible reprisals against the members of those [NOVJ] divisions which perpetrated the shootings”.

At the end of the letter, Pott expressed his hope that the Partisan side would reject the path of escalation and inform him of the decision either through an envoy or in writing.⁶⁶⁵ The Main HQ for Croatia replied on the same day:

*“We have already been informed of the death of Mr. Paternell [sic] and regret this unfortunate event. Our investigation has shown that none of our units or individual fighters committed this act. The Ustashe have attacked the envoys several times already, all with the intention of making the exchange impossible. They must have done it again for the same purpose. We are willing to continue the prisoner exchange and request that you send your plenipotentiary to Pizarovina for consultations. Please inform us of his arrival beforehand so that we can secure him a safe trip”.*⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶⁴ For instance, the 892nd Grenadier Regiment reported that three German sailors were found gruesomely murdered on the island of Šolta: NAW, T-314, Roll 562, 000666, Combat report Šolta (12 May 1944).

⁶⁶⁵ HR HDA 1689, Document no. 78, Dear doctor (9 June 1944).

⁶⁶⁶ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 324, Supreme HQ for Croatia to German Plenipotentiary General (9 June 1944).

Although the Croatian Partisan leadership knew very well that the attack was carried out by their own Žumberak Detachment⁶⁶⁷, they chose to deny responsibility and blame the Ustashe instead. Given their long record of covert or open attempts to sabotage the German-Partisan contacts, the Ustashe made perfect scapegoats. Horstenau could do little else but accept the Partisan version and the cartel became functional again.⁶⁶⁸

On 1 June 1944, the Main HQ requested information from its subordinate units on the exact number of prisoners they had. The Corps on the mainland (4th, 6th and 10th) reported fifteen Germans and sixteen Home Guards, men and officers; the 8th Dalmatian corps reported it had “plenty” of captured Germans and requested further instructions.⁶⁶⁹ Due to problems with the British (see below), the prisoners from Dalmatia could not be brought to Pisarovina and the exchange had to be conducted with the captives at hand. After a pause lasting longer than two months, the swap was made on 6 July 1944, with the Partisans receiving 37 of their men back, most of them Party and SKOJ members.⁶⁷⁰ Captain Gerhard-Oskar Merrem of the Abwehr could therefore report to his superiors in Army Group F that the prisoner exchange negotiations were proceeding “constantly and smoothly”.⁶⁷¹

Colonel Hans Harald von Selchow, Horstenau’s chief of staff, remembered that Nemetschek approached him in the days following the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler’s life (20 July 1944) and conveyed a new proposition from the Partisans. They were in dire need of medical supplies and were inquiring about the possibility of receiving them from the Germans. Von Selchow met with Bakrač twice and the latter told him that Partisan hospitals could not provide aid to captured Germans unless supplied with the needed material. As there was no way to guarantee that the supplies would in fact be used for treating the prisoners, Selchow suggested a direct trade instead. Bakrač agreed and ten German soldiers were exchanged in Pisarovina for several crates of bandages and medication.⁶⁷² The deal was

⁶⁶⁷ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 204, Summary of prisoner exchanges made hitherto (5 January 1945).

⁶⁶⁸ According to Nemetschek, Stilinović wrote him a letter in which he blamed the incident on the “White” or “Wild” partisans, referring presumably to either independent bands not connected to the NOVJ or to some sort of anti-communist militias. As Horstenau “knew that such groups existed”, he accepted the explanation: HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek.

⁶⁶⁹ See *Zbornik/V/28/539*, Main HQ for Croatia to 4th Corps (1 June 1944) and the accompanying footnotes.

⁶⁷⁰ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 204, Summary of prisoner exchanges made hitherto (5 January 1945).

⁶⁷¹ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000785, Experiences made on duty travel through Serbia and Croatia from 20 June to 4 July 1944 (5 July 1944).

⁶⁷² Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, Vol. I/1, p. 84. Bakrač’s overview of the exchange activities in 1944 does not mention any swap being made between 6 July and 14 August. One document of the 264th Infantry Division states, however, that six of its members were exchanged on 8 August 1944 (NAW, T-314, Roll 565, 001195-7, Interrogation of NCO Walter Weber, 12 August 1944). Given the proximity of the dates, these were probably the same men that von Selchow mentioned in his statement.

shrouded in secrecy: Selchow did not inform the Armed Forces High Command or Army Group F, fearing they would not give their blessing in the aftermath of the failed assassination attempt in East Prussia. It is possible that he had an unlikely ally in the person of the German ambassador who had just undertaken a new diplomatic initiative directed at the Partisan leadership. It would not be unreasonable to assume that he procured the needed medical supplies as a gesture of goodwill.⁶⁷³

Several days after this unusual swap, on 14 August, the Germans secured the release of another ten Communists, members of the KPJ's Zagreb organization, from an Ustasha concentration camp. The exchanges intensified over the next three months. In this period, the Partisan movement received the following:⁶⁷⁴

- 30 September: 82 prisoners
- 12 October: 24 Partisans
- 15 November: 184 Partisans given in advance, as the Germans could not feed them.
- 30 November: 79 Partisans
- 4 December: 32 Partisans, including two SKOJ functionaries
- 20 December: 39 prisoners, including two KPJ and two SKOJ members and one delegate of the ZAVNOH⁶⁷⁵

A segment of the Partisans or their sympathizers exchanged in the last quarter of 1944 came from German camps in Serbia. German officers would “often” visit the prisoners at the camp located in the Zvezadara suburb of Belgrade, inquiring about their rank and asking who would like to be exchanged. Many feared for their lives if they said yes, and refused. In August 1944, a large group of 180 people were herded into freight cars in Belgrade and taken for a roundabout, eight day-journey across Hungary and Austria to Zagreb. Once there, the prisoners were brought to the Ustashe prison at Savska cesta. Every once in a while, a

⁶⁷³ Kasche stated several times to his Yugoslav interrogators that he had supplied Partisans with a substantial quantity of medication and vaccine through Ott without specifying the date (See Kasche's statements in HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 164 Ott, and *ibid.*, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović). Selchow's initiative coincided with Kasche's back-channel maneuvering and Ott's return to the negotiating table, both of which occurred in the second half of July 1944 (see below).

⁶⁷⁴ HR HDA 1491, 2.241.,204, Summary of prisoner exchanges made hitherto (5 January 1945); *ibid.*, 49-50, List of persons exchanged on 30 September 1944 (undated). In mid-October, Kasche reported that altogether 164 Germans were exchanged “in the recent period”, probably referring to the time between July and October: NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000440, Memorandum on duty travel to Zagreb on 13 October 1944 (14 October 1944).

⁶⁷⁵ ZAVNOH stands for „*Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Hrvatske*“ (National Anti-Fascist Council of the People's Liberation of Croatia). It was a wartime precursor to the future Croatian parliament and the highest legislative and executive body of the Partisan movement in Croatia.

German officer would come to the prison, select a group of inmates and take them to Pisarovina for exchange.⁶⁷⁶

The last third of 1944 also saw several cases of prisoners being delivered on “receipt”. These handovers were usually negotiated in Pisarovina and completed between units on the ground, but it could also happen vice versa. The youngest of the German “legionnaire” divisions, the 392nd, was deployed in the northern Croatian littoral since early 1944. The Germans knew from captured documents that the Partisans in this region applied different standards to the treatment of Croatian soldiers and their German officers and NCOs. In 1943, the former were still to be disarmed and sent home; however, in sharp contrast to earlier instructions, the latter were not to be executed but exchanged. The legionnaire divisions were not comprised exclusively of Croats and Germans, however. By late September 1944, the Partisan reports spoke of “all possible nationalities imaginable” present in the German units in the region. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the guerrillas had thirty Polish prisoners from the 392nd by early October.⁶⁷⁷

The German command in Ogulin proposed an exchange of these men for the same number of Partisan sympathizers. After having exchanged several letters, both sides agreed to conduct the swap at St. Jacob’s church outside Ogulin. Zvonko Barac, an officer of the OZNA and the Partisan representative, was surprised to find two agents of Ustashe Surveillance Service waiting for him instead of the Germans. Barac refused to talk to them and insisted that the Germans send their own envoys. Shortly thereafter, several officers wearing the field-gray uniform of the Wehrmacht appeared in front of the church; the captured Partisans were not in toe. The officers explained that all of the individuals wanted by the Partisans were in the Karlovac prison. Barac protested, but was finally persuaded to free the Poles in exchange for an officer’s word and official document securing the immediate transfer of thirty Partisans to Pisarovina, where they would be handed over to the NOVJ’s exchange commission. The Germans kept their word and the prisoners were delivered as promised.⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁶ Radivoje Kovačević, *Sjeveroistočna Bosna 1944-1945: prilog istoriografiji* (Brčko: Savez udruženja boraca NOR-a Brčko Distrikta BiH, 2002), p. 68.

⁶⁷⁷ NAW, T-314, Roll 566, 000204, 392nd Infantry Division, Prisoner interrogation no. 136 (14 March 1944); *Zbornik/V/33/373*, Order of 13th Division of the NOVJ (23 September 1944). Poles with German ancestry, or those considered viable for Germanisation, were registered in the “German People’s List” (*Deutsche Volksliste*) and were subjected to conscription; an estimated 250,000 were recruited into German armed forces: <http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/kochan.htm>, last accessed on 4 November 2012.

⁶⁷⁸ Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, pp. 230-1. One document confirms that the 11th Corps which operated around Ogulin delivered on receipt at least one group of “captured legionnaires” prior to October: *Zbornik/V/31/497*, Main HQ for Croatia to 11th Corps (11 August 1944). The 392nd Division was no

On 21 October 1944, the Moslavina Detachment wrote a letter to the nearby German command, offering to deliver on receipt 23 Home Guardsmen and one officer in return for the same number of Partisans which had already been freed in Pisarovina. The proposed date of the hand-over was 25 October. The Detachment's command promised it would not carry out any action in the area on this day if the other side would do the same. The German command responded on the 27th, agreeing to complete the hand-over on the following day and pledging to strictly abide by the terms laid down in the letter. It also inquired about the exchange of a wounded German soldier known to be held in captivity in the area.⁶⁷⁹

One battalion of the Detachment was tasked with providing security to the Partisan delegation in the village of Katoličko Selišče, where the negotiations were to take place. The German delegation, consisting of two captains, an NCO and a young female interpreter, appeared in a black "Mercedes" on time and was met by the Partisan delegation in a secluded house at the end of the village chosen to host the conference. While the negotiations were underway, the Partisans noticed enemy movements in the vicinity of the village, a flagrant violation of the agreed provisions. Their suspicions of foul play were confirmed when a search of the staff car revealed three hidden sub-machine guns. The security detail, fearing that the Germans wanted to capture the Partisan delegation, burst into the house, interrupting the negotiations. The misunderstanding was soon cleared, but the incident provided the Germans reason to fear for their safety. Weary of an ambush, they refused to drive back to their lines unescorted. Consequently, the Partisan battalion commander had to ride with the Germans to the "front line" and see them safely through the heavily armed guerrilla pickets.⁶⁸⁰

This episode is particularly interesting, as it illustrates the inherently fragmented nature of the war in the country, which made any possibility of a universally binding agreement regarding prisoner exchange virtually impossible. Katoličko Selišče was only sixty kilometers from Pisarovina, yet judging by the tense atmosphere it could have been hundreds of miles away. The fear and suspicion which surrounded the October hand-over in Moslavina

stranger to non-violent contacts with the Partisans, as witnessed by one of its officers, Major Hübner: "Telephone line from Fužine to Delnice ran parallel to the power line, and we sometimes could not hear each other because of the jamming caused by electric induction. Consequently, we had to shut down the power line every now and then. The Partisans repeatedly complained about this and threatened to cut the supply of electric power to our territory. There was a silent agreement that nothing would happen to the power plant which was situated in Partisan territory, as it supplied both us and the Partisans with electricity. We, however, had to furnish the oil needed to run it": Schraml, *Kriegsschauplatz Kroatien*, p. 269.

⁶⁷⁹ HR HDA 1491, 4.7.7.,9-10, Command of Moslavina sector to the German command in Popovača (21 October 1944); *ibid.*,18, German command in Popovača to the command of Moslavina sector of the 10th Zagreb Corps (27 October 1944).

⁶⁸⁰ Vukašin Karanović, *Moslavački partizanski odred 1941.-1945.* (Kutina: Skupština općine Kutina i Općinski odbor SUBNOR-Kutina, 1981), pp. 407-9.

stands in stark contrast to the relaxed, even friendly relations between the envoys in the neutral zone.

In one of its letters to the 5th Bosnian Corps, the Main HQ for Croatia wrote that the majority of the exchangees were enlisted men or officers from the Partisan units. Political prisoners from the NDH's prisons and camps could be retrieved only in return for Ustashe or prominent German prisoners.⁶⁸¹ The Main HQ therefore advised the Corps to spare as many Ustashe as possible ("cutthroats excluded") and submit their names for exchange. The other side, the letter continued, delivered 239 prisoners in advance and the Partisans now owed it the same number of German nationals, legionnaires or Home Guards. The Germans were willing to release prisoners without immediate compensation in the future as well, but the NOVJ had to show goodwill by occasionally releasing captives in batches of no more than fifty: "In this way, the balance will always be at around 200 Germans". The 5th Corps was asked to release its nine prisoners to the nearest German unit and gather the receipt in return which would then be shown to the German parliamentaries in Pisarovina who would adjust the balance.⁶⁸²

1944 ended with an incident which involved an incursion of German and Ustashe forces into the neutral zone. The incursion came as a reaction to the number of attacks carried out by the NOVJ's 34th Division on the Axis strongpoints along the vital Zagreb-Karlovac line, including the one on the village of Horvati, where an entire Home Guard battalion was routed.⁶⁸³ The Axis strike force, consisting of one battalion of the 1st Jäger Reserve Regiment and a company of Ustashe gathered at Zdenčina on 12 December and began their advance south-east early the next day. The Žumberak Partisan Brigade was deployed in the village of Bratina and to the east of it, along the edge of the neutral zone. Since the brigade's command had information that a prisoner exchange was set for that day, the forward units were instructed to let the Germans pass without interference. At 1100 hours, patrols warned that the enemy was approaching from the north, but the brigade took no action presuming it was the prisoner transport headed for Pisarovina. By the time the Partisans realized the Germans had

⁶⁸¹ Gabrijel Cvitan, a Croatian writer and functionary of the NDH Ministry of Education won fame (or notoriety) for writing a poem about Pavelić in 1941. In September 1944, he was captured and recruited into the 2nd Brigade of the 7th NOVJ Division as a war correspondent. According to his OZNA personal file, he saw combat and proved to be a good fighter. Nevertheless, the Partisan command agreed to exchange him in November and he was turned over to the Germans one month later in Pisarovina: Jere Jareb, „Svjedočanstvo hrvatskog književnika Gabrijela Cvitana iz jeseni 1944.“ in: ČSP, 3 (2003): 973-94. Judging by the same source, Cvitan was glad to be back in Zagreb where his old job was waiting for him. He was probably one of the rare people (or indeed the only one) who were offered for exchange by the NOVJ despite being an active-duty Partisan.

⁶⁸² HR HDA 1491, 2.241,17, Main HQ for Croatia to 5th Corps (6 December 1944).

⁶⁸³ *Zbornik/V/36/671-2*, NDH ministry of defense, daily report for 14 December 1944.

come with an altogether different agenda, it was too late: Bratina was lost and the “front line” pushed to the south of the village. On the next day, the Axis strike force continued its attack and by noon it advanced to within two kilometers of Pisarovina. Shortly thereafter, the Germans turned around and retreated with some haste back to their starting positions of 12 December. The 34th Division lost altogether five dead, ten wounded and four missing:

“The confusion and indecisiveness on the part of our forward units was caused by information that the Germans were coming to negotiate a prisoner exchange; in this way, the enemy could fire first on our unprepared units instantly killing one fighter and wounding five”.⁶⁸⁴

The attack came in midst of the preparations for the second December exchange (which took place on the 20th), so it is almost certain that the couriers and envoys frequently crossed the lines during this period. Whether the German battalion knew about the scheduled talks and decided to use them as cover to achieve surprise is not known. One must bear in mind, however, that this attack was provoked by the rout of the Home Guard battalion at Horvati. The involvement of or co-ordination with the German prisoner exchange commission therefore seems unlikely. The hasty departure of the battalion on the 14th was in all probability caused by fear that any prolonged presence of the Axis troops in the neutral zone would have adverse consequences for the functioning of the cartel.

The reluctance of the Partisans to open fire on the Germans may have been caused by an incident which occurred during one of the earlier exchanges. Because of a misunderstanding, a Partisan unit guarding the approaches to the neutral zone failed to remove the landmines it had laid on the road leading to Zagreb. As a consequence, one truck carrying the Yugoslav exchangees was severely damaged and several of the occupants wounded.⁶⁸⁵ Nemetschek, who was injured himself, remembered that “the guilty sentry was shot in front of my eyes”.⁶⁸⁶ The severity and swiftness of the punishment symbolized the Partisan leadership’s resolve not to permit any breakdown in the prisoner exchange such as that in the aftermath of Peternell’s death, even at the price of a reduced level of initiative on the tactical level.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 331-3, 34th Division of the NOVJ, After-action report concerning fighting around Bratina on 13-14 December 1944 (21 December 1944).

⁶⁸⁵ Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 848.

⁶⁸⁶ KAW, B/67: 145, Interview with Willibald Nemetschek conducted by Peter Broucek (10 September 1981).

January 1945 saw two exchanges, one of which was major in size: on the 17th the Partisans delivered around eighty Germans captured in the recent fighting in the Dalmatian hinterland. The number of fighters and sympathizers they received in return is not mentioned, so it is possible these prisoners were used to reduce the NOVJ's debt. The same was probably the case with the next swap in Pisarovina, on 26 January, where the Germans, represented by both Nemetschek and Ott, picked up sixteen of their men. It was agreed that Bakrač would join them for a trip to Zagreb. The convoy started from the village near 1600 hours. Two hours later, as the column was treading slowly through high snow drifts, the leading car was suddenly peppered by machine-gun fire. Calls to get out and surrender were intermingled with further shots aimed at the car. Bakrač and the others jumped from the vehicle into the nearby ditch in order to find cover. He tried to explain to the assailants who he was and what he was doing there, but to no effect: the Partisans took the whole party prisoner and drove off. One Partisan lieutenant ordered Bakrač to leave Nemetschek and Ott, who were both wounded, and follow him. The NOVJ envoy refused, and tried again to identify himself by producing his letter of authorization. The lieutenant did not desire to look at the papers, but insisted that Bakrač follow him. Much to the dismay of the German envoys who pleaded not to be left alone, Bakrač finally acquiesced and was taken to the nearby Partisan command. To his relief, the commander and the political commissar of the unit recognized him immediately and offered to do whatever was necessary to ameliorate the situation. Declining the proposal to send the Germans to Zagreb straight away, Bakrač had them taken to Pisarovina with orders they be treated in the best possible manner; additional medical help was provided and their belongings returned:

*“They were well accommodated, excellently cared for, and they were simply delighted! Their only reproach was that the detachment [which carried out the ambush] had not been informed [about the convoy] and that they continued shooting even after we had stopped. [They also commented that] if our people would not heed my explanations and even look at my personal documents, what good were theirs”.*⁶⁸⁷

On 29 January, Nemetschek and Ott were visited by Unger and a German doctor, and they all returned to Zagreb on the same day. On 1 February, the 1st Jäger Reserve Regiment repeated its action from mid-December by sallying forth into the neutral zone; although the available sources do not mention the reason, it would be hard not to link this incursion to the wounding of the German envoys. One battalion of the Žumberak Brigade intervened

⁶⁸⁷ HR HDA 1491, 2.241.,209-10, Bakrač to Krajačić (29 January 1945).

attempting to save the hard-pressed NCO school of the 34th Division and was surrounded. After the commander, commissar and twelve others had been killed, the remaining 110 men and officers surrendered;⁶⁸⁸ sixteen of the latter were subsequently shot. These killings represented the culmination of the terror campaign practiced by the Ustashe and the Germans in the last several months. On 2 February, the Main HQ for Croatia dispatched the following cable to Supreme HQ:

*“The Germans are constantly murdering our hostages. They hung 100 hostages in Zagreb for the dead general. Similar cases happen regularly. We are of the opinion that we should take reprisals. Clarification requested”.*⁶⁸⁹

Tito responded two days later and ordered the “sharpest reprisals” for the killings of hostages and added that the Germans and the Ustashe should be told about these measures.⁶⁹⁰ Consequently, Bakrač reported that he „protested sharply against the shooting of the sixteen officers and informed them that we would shoot 160 of their men”. Two weeks later, the NOVJ envoy confirmed that the reprisal had been carried out in the meantime and that he would bring the list with names of the executed on one of his next visits.⁶⁹¹ Surprisingly, the Germans refrained from taking revenge and continuing the vicious circle of reprisals and counter-reprisals. Bakrač’s collocutor, Colonel von Stephani, spoke in conciliatory tone about the whole incident:

*“He was extremely upset [by the shooting of sixteen Partisan officers] and by the fact that irresponsible individuals were trying to deepen the hatred between us and the Germans. Judging by his attitude, the whole thing came in a very bad moment”.*⁶⁹²

Despite all the incidents which occurred over the previous twelve months, the existence of the neutral zone centered on Pisarovina never came into question. In late March 1945, however, the Germans put forth a proposal to relocate it beyond the River Kupa, in the village of Lasinja, some 5.5 kilometers south of Pisarovina. The German side cited repeated

⁶⁸⁸ Zbornik/V/38/441-2, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (4 February 1945).

⁶⁸⁹ Zbornik/V/38/440, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (2 February 1945). The dead General was SS Brigadier Willi Brandner, the chief of German police for Zagreb, who was killed in an ambush on 28 December 1944.

⁶⁹⁰ VA, 119/4, 2, 1-19/2, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (4 February 1945).

⁶⁹¹ HR HDA 1491.2.241.,216-7, Bakrač’s reports from visits to Zagreb from 26 February–1 March and 12–16 March 1945 (undated). Bakrač quoted these reports in his article on prisoner exchanges written in the late Seventies, but added that he invented the shooting of 160 prisoners in order to terrify the Germans (Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 855). Judging by the original reports, the threat was real and the reprisal taken. I could not establish who was executed or where.

⁶⁹² Ibid. The incident came in the midst of the negotiations on a possible German withdrawal from the Western Balkans. For more details, see below.

violations of the original agreement by the NOVJ as the reason for their demand. More specifically, these included using the neutral zone as a transit area for reinforcements and as a safe haven for retreating Partisans; artillery and mortar fire was recorded as originating from within the zone on several occasions; Pisarovina was garrisoned with more troops than agreed and was used as communications and logistical base. All this made it impossible for the German troops to respect the neutrality of the area any longer. The draft of the proposal included an important instruction: the representatives of the NOVJ were to be informed that the proposal was not aimed at “curtailing [...] the talks on prisoner exchange in any way”.⁶⁹³

The proposal was delivered on 28 March 1945. Bakrač denied the German accusations and stated that the NOVJ had made a big enough concession when it chose to relinquish the right to keep troops on a piece of territory under its control in the first place. Therefore, the neutral zone could only be relocated closer to Zagreb and not any deeper into Partisan-held areas. He also maintained that only civilian institutions were present within the zone which, of course, was not the case. In support of his argument that the proposal should be turned down, Bakrač wrote that Pisarovina housed “all possible” civilian institutions, military schools, supply dumps and that it was an important station for moving troops and material from Slovenia to Kordun and vice-versa. The officers of the 34th NOVJ Division proposed moving the neutral zone to a village ten kilometers to the north of Pisarovina, stating that they would be able to hold the latter against any possible attack. Contrary to this opinion, Bakrač thought that Pisarovina could not be defended with the forces available and if the “bandits” would take possession of it, the NOVJ would lose one of the richest counties in this part of the country. The Main HQ for Croatia was requested to make the decision by 11 April.⁶⁹⁴ Expectedly, the proposal was turned down and Pisarovina remained the center of the neutral zone for the duration of war.

The German proposal was in all probability not motivated solely by moral objections to the abuse of the neutral zone by the NOVJ. Had this been the case, the issue would have been raised immediately after any of the incidents which transpired after Peternell’s death. Judging by the timing of the offer, more practical reasons were to blame. On 20 March 1945, the Yugoslav 4th Army began its offensive against the German positions in Lika and western Bosnia. One week later, Yugoslav tanks entered Bihać, thereby threatening to unhinge the entire right flank of the German front in the country. Karlovac now became strategically

⁶⁹³ HR HDA 1491, 2.241.,219-20, Relocation of neutral zone (undated).

⁶⁹⁴ HR HDA 1491, 2.241.,218, Bakrač’s report on visit to Zagreb from 26–29 March 1945 (undated).

important as it controlled the communication lines leading to the Croatian capital from the south-west.⁶⁹⁵ Pisarovina, thanks to its location, was ideal for launching sabotage actions and attacks on the road and railway connecting the two places. Relocating the neutral zone to the south, beyond the Kupa River, would enable the Germans to deepen their defensive belt in the area without jeopardizing the prisoner exchange cartel.

Despite being wounded, Nemetschek continued working on prisoner exchanges from his hospital bed. He was often being visited by Bakrač, and the two would configure each particular swap; implementation of their agreements was entrusted to Unger and Lieutenant Paul Manns, quartermaster in the office of the Plenipotentiary-General. Some cases were negotiated for months before they could be completed. The case of General Karl von Krebs gennant von Dewitz was by far the most complicated. He was captured during the second battle for Banja Luka in mid-September 1944 by the 5th Corps of the NOVJ. The Germans soon requested his and the exchange of SS Major Willi Wolter, chief of the SD in Banja Luka.⁶⁹⁶ The 5th Corps had apparently negotiated directly with the German commands in Bosnia in November, but to no avail.⁶⁹⁷ Despite the fact that the Partisans received in advance thirty prisoners for the former and nineteen for the latter⁶⁹⁸, the release of the high-ranking captives was postponed again and again. Bakrač reported several times in February and March 1945 that the Germans were becoming nervous about this. In early March, he had a “very sharp exchange” with Lieutenant Heinze of the SD in Zagreb, who threatened reprisals against the captured Partisans unless Dewitz was freed. Bakrač replied that in this case, the NOVJ would respond in kind; in the private communication with his superiors, he suggested that the 5th Corps set up a meeting with the Germans between 8 and 10 March but postpone

⁶⁹⁵ Erich Schmidt-Richberg, *Der Endkampf auf dem Balkan: Die Operationen der Heeresgruppe E von Griechenland bis zu den Alpen* (Heidelberg: Scharnhorst Buchkameradschaft, 1955), pp. 109-10; *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. II, pp. 550-1; NAW, T-77, Roll 1426, 000917-8, War Diary of Armed Forces High Command, entry for 31 March 1945.

⁶⁹⁶ Dewitz was the only German general to be taken captive in Yugoslavia prior to May 1945. For more details on his capture, see Milan N. Zorić, *XIII krajiška brigada* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1968), p. 234. The Germans also wanted to exchange Lieutenant-Colonel Werner Bornhausen who was captured in Serbia in late August (NAW, T-311, Roll 193, 000016, Daily report for 1 September 1944; *ibid.*, Roll 195, 000662, Supplement to activity report of Abwehr officer with Army Group F for period 1-15 October 1944, 14 November 1944). Kasche commented that this would not be easy because “Tito’s bandits do not have radio communication with [their] Main HQ for Serbia” (*ibid.*, Roll 194, 000440, Memorandum on duty travel to Zagreb on 13 October 1944, 14 October 1944). I was not able to find out any further details on Bornhausen’s fate.

⁶⁹⁷ VA, 461a, 5, 1/30, 5th Corps for 3rd Directorate of OZNA (8 November 1944).

⁶⁹⁸ Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 849. One of the thirty captives who were exchanged for Dewitz was the famous Slovenian poet Oton Župančič. Knowing that Župančič’s presence in Partisan ranks would have great political resonance, the Slovenian leadership requested his inclusion into the deal. Tito granted the request and sent appropriate instructions to the Supreme HQ: *Zbornik*/II/14/193, Kardelj to Tito (1 October 1944) and *ibid.*, p. 220, Tito to Supreme HQ (6 October 1944).

the release by another ten days.⁶⁹⁹ The handover did not take place as planned, however, and Bakrač wrote that Dewitz should be released quickly as the pressure in Zagreb was becoming unbearable. Furthermore, the Germans began to stall with other exchanges. The Main HQ for Croatia took his advice and ordered the 5th Corps to make the necessary arrangements. On the last day of March, the Corps informed the Croatian Partisan leadership that they could not deliver the general and Wolter to the Germans because of heavy fighting in its area of operations.⁷⁰⁰

Other high-profile prisoners were exchanged during these months. These included two of the NDH's provincial governors and several Ustashe officers. Partisans received up to ten of their own for each one of these men.⁷⁰¹ A higher ratio was also applied for a group of 26 German officers for which the NOVJ received 100 prisoners. The Germans also offered to exchange "2,000 wounded Serbs who were in captivity in Germany" (referring probably to soldiers of the former Royal Army captured in 1941) for the same number of wounded Germans. However, due to the immense logistical difficulties which would be involved in such a massive swap, the plan was never put into motion. According to the available information, the following were brought to Pisarovina in February and March:

- 25 February 1945: 41 Germans
- 1 March 1945: 60 camp inmates and 31 fighters of the captured battalion of the Žumberak Brigade
- 12 March 1945: 40 Partisans and 26 Germans
- 26 March 1945: 40 Partisans and 35 Germans
- 29 March 1945: 30 Partisans and 7 Germans⁷⁰²

According to Bakrač, the NOVJ's debt fluctuated between 50 and 190 prisoners; in late March, the precise number amounted to 129, including two captains, three senior lieutenants,

⁶⁹⁹ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 216-8, Bakrač's reports on visits to Zagreb from 26 February–1 March, 12–16 and 26–29 March 1945 (undated).

⁷⁰⁰ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 39, 5th Corps of the NOVJ for the Main HQ for Croatia (31 March 1945). Dewitz and his group were released sometime in early April. Ironically, the general survived Partisan captivity but not his return to Germany. He was tried for treason and executed by his own side in late April 1945: http://geocities.com/~orion47/WEHRMACHT/HEER/Generalmajor/DEWITZ_KARL.html (Last accessed 11 December 2011).

⁷⁰¹ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 189, To the command of Pisarovina (10 February 1945); *ibid.*, 218, , Bakrač's report on visit to Zagreb from 26-29 March 1945 (undated); Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 849.

⁷⁰² HR HDA 1491, 5.13.10., 78, German prisoners (undated); *ibid.*, 50, List of exchangees (29 March 1945); *ibid.*, 2.241., 207-8, 216, Bakrač's reports on visits to Zagreb from 12-16 March and 26 February–1 March 1945 (undated).

two lieutenants and one sergeant.⁷⁰³ The figures for April are sketchy, but it appears that the debt was at least partially settled:

- 11 April 1945: 53 Germans
- Around 13 April 1945: 5 Germans delivered on receipt by the Moslavina Area Command
- 28 April 1945: 54 Germans in exchange for 16 (or 18) camp inmates.⁷⁰⁴

Late April saw one of the last attempts to exchange a high-ranking captive. Vito Kraigher, one of the chief Partisan intelligence officers in Slovenia, who had been captured at the beginning of the month and brought to prison in Ljubljana. Aware of the possibility that he might break under torture and yield valuable information, the Slovenian leadership intervened. On 18 April, the head of the Croatian OZNA Ivan Krajačić-Stevo wrote a letter to Bakrač:

“[...] Request the exchange of Kraigher, Perc and Veludček, who have been captured eleven days ago. Slovenians have taken captive the commander of the 847th [...] Infantry Regiment [of the 392nd Legionnaire Division] Colonel Reisinger and another eight officers. Slovenians would give all of them for the aforementioned three. If Germans ask for more, we will give. Arrange the exchange at any price”.⁷⁰⁵

Offering German soldiers captured in Slovenia for exchange in Pisarovina was nothing new. In one recorded case, the Partisans captured an officer around Novo Mesto in the spring of 1944. While transporting him to their base, they stated that he would be sent to Kordun and swapped for captured Partisans.⁷⁰⁶ Kraigher's exchange, however, could not be organized in time: he was executed on either 3 or 4 May 1945.⁷⁰⁷ Several days later, the Yugoslav Army marched into Zagreb and the neutral zone at Pisarovina ceased to exist.

⁷⁰³ Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 849.

⁷⁰⁴ HR HDA 1491, 4.7.7., 31, Moslavina Area Command to Feldkommandatur in Bjelovar (8 April 1945); *ibid.*, 5.13.10., 78, German prisoners (undated); *ibid.*, 2.241., 63, Following comrades were exchanged (29 April 1945).

⁷⁰⁵ HR HDA 1491, 5.13.10., 61, Krajačić to Bakrač (19 April 1945). According to a German witness, the Partisans were sometimes required to give up fifty Germans for one of their “heroes” (Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, Vol. I/1, p. 84). Although this figure seems too high, Krajačić's letter confirms that the Partisans were generally willing to “pay” more for prominent members of their movement.

⁷⁰⁶ Ivo Pirkovič, „Pozabljena diplomacija v godzu“ in: *Delo*, 3 July 1980, p. 21.

⁷⁰⁷ Ljuba Dornik Šubelj, „Podatki o dr. Vitu Kraigheru so bili državna tajnost“ in: *Arhivi*, 28,1 (2005): 77.

5. Political talks, 1943-1945

Contact between the representatives of the NOVJ and German authorities from late 1943 to 1945 was not only about prisoner exchange. “The other part of my job and that of my German counterparts” wrote Bakrač “was to feel the pulse of the other side and react on current events”.⁷⁰⁸ This, of course, meant talking politics. The German ambassador in Zagreb, Siegfried Kasche remained a staunch supporter of some sort of accommodation with Tito and had therefore welcomed Stilinović’s return to Zagreb in early August 1943. He did not hide his intention to revive talks with the Communist-led guerrillas along the lines of the “March Negotiations”. On 27 August he drafted a memo in which he restated his dim view of the current German approach to the problem of the guerillas. Quelling the uprising using only martial and constabulary means had failed, as illustrated by the outcome of “Operation Schwarz”. The issue of a 100,000 Reichsmark bounty for Tito’s head in late July was counterproductive: it only served to increase his reputation and the number of his followers. Although the ambassador lamented that his earlier attempts to bring about a change in the German attitude towards Tito “were unfortunately turned down”, he was nevertheless willing to try again. Thus, in spite of the fact that the chances for political accommodation were slight, Kasche sought nevertheless “to establish contact” with the Partisan leadership.⁷⁰⁹ Several days later, he stated these views directly to Hitler. He mentioned Ott’s actions from May of that year and suggested that a political arrangement with Tito would have brought immense advantages had his suggestions been approved. “At this point, the Führer made a depreciative remark, but was not decidedly against it”.⁷¹⁰

The capitulation of Italy gave new impetus to Kasche’s initiative. On 9 September 1943 he dispatched a cable to the Foreign Ministry in which he requested a re-evaluation of the stance towards Tito and his Partisans. The latest developments prompted the Germans and the Ustashe to launch a propaganda offensive aimed at salvaging what could be saved from the debris of the September debacle. As Axis troops entered what was once the occupation zone of their former ally, they presented themselves as liberators from the Italian yoke. At the

⁷⁰⁸ Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 850

⁷⁰⁹ KAW, B/67: 141, Memo from Ambassador Kasche (27 August 1943).

⁷¹⁰ ADAP/E/VI/504, Memo on the meeting with the Führer on 30-31 August 1943 (8 September 1943). Kasche repeated these arguments almost word for word in the cable dated 29 September 1943. The length of his telegrams and his self-righteousness prompted sharp criticism from the Foreign Ministry which reminded him that the sole task of an ambassador was to implement the policy devised exclusively by the chief of state and the foreign minister: KAW, B/67:141, Kasche to Foreign Ministry (29 September 1943) and *ibid.*, State secretary to Kasche (21 December 1943).

same time they promised amnesty to all those who had joined the guerrillas owing to the Italian terror. German and NDH authorities reasoned that since Dalmatia and other territories were returned to the Croat state, many of the Partisans could be persuaded to break with the Communists and head home. The plan was but a repetition of previous attempts to drive a wedge between the rank-and-file and the leadership of the NOVJ and thus bring the uprising to its knees. The fact that one of Tito's envoys was a frequent visitor to Zagreb seemed a perfect opportunity to gauge the feasibility of this approach:

*"Moreover, I'm of the opinion that we should use any possible opportunity for establishing contact with Tito and exploit any possibility which would lead to the cessation of hostilities between us".*⁷¹¹

Hans Ott continued serving as Kasche's proxy during the Summer and early Fall of 1943. Judging by the already quoted documents, he devoted at least a part of his energies to engaging Stilinović on political matters. The details on these talks are unfortunately not known: neither Ott nor any of the German witnesses mentioned them in their post-war interrogations. According to Hans Helm, the police attaché in Zagreb, the whole matter was shrouded in secrecy. Kasche stood in close proximity to Ott and attempted to reserve his services exclusively for himself. Ott did occasionally share some information about the Partisans with Helm, but received instructions only from Kasche. The monopolization of Ott's services was done out of fear that any outside interference might compromise the link to the Supreme HQ of the NOVJ. For the same reason, Ott never disclosed any details of conversations he had with the ambassador.⁷¹²

One surviving document from late November 1943 fortunately provides a glimpse into the topics that were discussed between Stilinović and Kasche's envoys. The issue which dominated their last meeting was the offer of cease-fire made by the Partisans. Ott's impression was that this latest move reflected a general wish for a cessation of hostilities among the guerrillas; Stilinović himself appeared war-weary and apparently longed to return to his native Zagreb. The two agreed that the talks on a truce should be continued in Tito's headquarters in December. The invitation led Kasche to conclude that the Partisan leader sought to reach some sort of long-lasting arrangement with the Germans. He therefore provided Ott with guidelines for future talks on the subject. These were basically a repetition of the previous instructions used during the March Negotiations. Ott was to emphasize that

⁷¹¹ ADAP/E/VI/511, Kasche to Foreign Ministry (9 September 1943).

⁷¹² HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 146 Hans Ott, Statment of Hans Helm.

the Third Reich had no territorial ambitions in the Balkans. On the contrary, Germany was willing to heed the national aspirations of individual peoples for their own sovereign states, proof of which could be seen in the creation of the NDH. The creation of Yugoslavia was a mistake: anyone attempting to resurrect her should bear in mind that these strong centrifugal tendencies would sooner or later resurface again. The invasion of the Balkans in 1941 was aimed solely at securing Germany's geostrategic interests which were endangered by British scheming. Economic co-operation still lay at the heart of German policy in the region. The ambassador's envoy was instructed to emphasize that the Germans were not simply plundering the land and that the native population could profit from co-operation if it the Partisans would only cease their senseless actions. For example, the road leading from the Reich's border to Zagreb was financed and built by German companies and equipment and 75 percent complete. The undertaking could not be finished because the guerrillas destroyed the machines, killed one senior official of the "Organization Todt" and scared off the others. Kasche hoped that talks led along these lines could fulfill a number of aims. First and foremost, the Partisan leadership should be made aware that the Germans were open to some sort of settlement ("cheap way out", as the ambassador called it). Second, the contacts should pave the way for a mitigation of violence: mass reprisals along the rail lines in Croatia could be stopped in exchange for a halt in sabotage. Third, the above-mentioned offers should provide an incentive for further talks which could open new possibilities for the German side.

*"Another old guideline is still in force and is therefore to be followed: after each meeting, the Partisans must be the ones to give the initiative for further talks. Our side must [not approach] but always be approached [with such requests]. The Partisans must never have a justified reason for waiting for us to take the initiative, and we must never be in danger of being late with our answer".*⁷¹³

What stood behind the alleged truce proposal made by the Partisan side is hard to say: only several weeks earlier, Tito had explicitly forbidden the Main HQ for Croatia to lead any talks not pertaining directly to the prisoner exchange.⁷¹⁴ It is likely that the offer was discussed in the wider context of the relations between the Partisan Movement and Allied powers, just as it had been during the negotiations in March and April 1943. In the interim, however, British policy towards the Communist-led guerrillas had changed. The first military mission to Tito's HQ arrived in late May and its members reported favorably on what they

⁷¹³ See ADAP/E/VII/208-11, Note for Mr. Ambassador (29 November 1943) and an accompanying memo (28 November 1943).

⁷¹⁴ Zbornik/II/10/430, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (27 October 1943).

saw. In September, the mission was expanded with the arrival of Brigadier-General Maclean. Complementing the arrival of the missions supply drops from the British air force to the Partisans across the country also intensified. Despite the fact that the People's Liberation Movement was now *de facto*, if not *de jure*, recognized as an ally in the struggle against Nazi Germany, its leadership was still wary of British intentions. In early October, Tito wrote a letter to the Montenegrin command in which he expressed his view that the Western Allies were basically buying their way into the country with empty promises of material help.⁷¹⁵ He repeated his misgivings in a letter to the Macedonian leadership, adding that the British have a secret agenda and that they were still maintaining contact with Mihailović, which was "by all means absurd, but perfectly in line with English policy".⁷¹⁶

Evidently, Tito was convinced that the change in British attitude was cosmetic in nature, and that the possibility of their intervention in the civil war was still very real. Chetnik propaganda, allegedly based on the statements of British officers, claimed for some time that Allied landings in Dalmatia could be expected soon; these rumors had already convinced some Italian units in Montenegro desert the Partisans.⁷¹⁷ On 12 October, Tito dispatched a cable in which he informed Moscow that Maclean had tried to sound out his opinion on the possibility of a coastal landing, even with smaller forces. The leader of the Partisans retorted that such an action would carry immense difficulties and prove strategically useless.

*"He probably understood this as a sign of our opposition to such a landing. Nevertheless, their activities show that they intended to go ahead with the operation. We shall not allow this landing to take place without our permission and we are ready to oppose it by force. We request your opinion".*⁷¹⁸

In effect, Tito was attempting to obtain Moscow's help in dissuading the British from conducting any unilateral operations in the country. As long as the latter confined their actions to sending observers and supplies, the Partisans were keen on receiving continued Allied support. On 29 October 1943, a NOVJ mission was established in Bari. On 16 November, the Supreme HQ requested the Royal Navy intervene in the fighting for islands in the northern Adriatic; three days later, the Main HQ for Croatia was given a green light for evacuating heavily wounded, sick and invalids to Italy in accordance with the agreement reached with

⁷¹⁵ *Zbornik*/II/10/368, Tito to 2nd NOVJ Corps (9 October 1943).

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 362, Tito to Vukmanović (9 October 1943).

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 323, Tito to 2nd NOVJ Corps (26 September 1943); see also accompanying footnotes.

⁷¹⁸ *Jugoslavija 1918-1988*, p. 635, Tito to Moscow (12 October 1943).

Allied authorities.⁷¹⁹ In addition to using transport aircraft, the Allies also delivered some 3,000 tons of supplies by sea in November.⁷²⁰

By the time the Partisan envoy in Zagreb had brought the topic of truce to the fore, the position of the People's Liberation Movement had become immeasurably better than it had been in the early Spring of 1943. The Soviet Union was now providing unequivocal diplomatic support and the Western Allies had more or less acknowledged the NOVJ as a partner and began to supply it with war material. There was no reason why Tito would choose to abandon the Allied camp now that he finally secured himself a firm place in it. In light of these facts, it is not surprising that Vladimir Velebit described the November initiative as "a complete puzzle" in an interview given more than half a century after the events. The most likely explanation is that Stilinović merely employed the same tactic Kasche prescribed for Ott: provide incentive in order to keep alive interest from the other side for future talks.⁷²¹

Another old topic resurfaced during the contacts in November 1943; the possibility of economic co-operation between the two sides. Engineer Ott informed Kasche that he and Stilinović discussed three separate deals. The first revolved around the intended purchase of 9-10,000 horses through the same German military commission whose chief, Lieutenant-Colonel Pokay, was captured by the Partisans in July. The other two offers were made by private firms: "Elektobosna" of the chemical industry wanted to export chlorine to Germany and "Slavex" wished to secure a large consignment of timber for Switzerland. As the Partisans controlled the countryside and could disrupt the flow of goods on roads and railways, their approval was essential for the success of these business ventures. Stilinović replied that the purchase of horses would be agreeable, and that his side would even encourage peasants to sell the animals, if 2-2,500 head would be reserved for the Partisans. According to Ott, he gave a positive response to the "Slavex" offer. As far as the

⁷¹⁹ See cables from Supreme HQ to Main HQ for Croatia on 16 and 19 November 1943 in *Zbornik*/II/11/78 and 99, respectively.

⁷²⁰ *Special Operations: AAF Aid to European Resistance Movements 1943-1945* (Air historical office, 1947), p. 82.

⁷²¹ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 333-4. Schmider speculates that the real motive behind the initiative was to confuse the Germans and make them postpone the first phase ("Operation Kugelblitz") of their Winter offensive. This implies that Supreme HQ knew approximately when the offensive was to begin. However, according to the official Yugoslav historiography, the offensive caught the NOVJ completely by surprise: *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. I, p. 69.

“Elektrobosna” was concerned, Stilinović said that he would have to consult his superiors before giving a definite answer.⁷²²

Neither side was honest regarding the propositions. Allowing the German army to obtain fresh horses and feeding the German industry with war materials was tantamount to collaboration. Consequently, the Main HQ for Croatia did not even mention the first two offers in the cable to Tito on 16 November 1943. The third offer was different, however. The prisoner exchange cartel agreement was entering its final phase and the Croatian Partisan leadership thought that the acceptance of the proposition would not compromise the war effort, but would at the same time constitute a gesture of good will towards the Germans. Consequently, the Main HQ for Croatia suggested that the export of timber “for the clerks of Slavex be permitted for [this would have a] positive effect”.⁷²³ The wording of the cable implies that the Germans did not mention Switzerland as the final destination of the consignment. This was probably done out of concern that the Partisans would not enter a trade deal with international implications. Outwardly, the Germans maintained that the deal would be local in nature. During the meeting in Pisarovina on 16 January, Josip Brnčić was introduced to one Ferdinand Preindl, a representative of the “Slavex” company from Zagreb. Preindl told him that the Supreme HQ had approved the export of fifty cords of wood for personal use of the company’s employees through Stilinović. He now wanted to expand the deal to a hundred cords. If the Partisans would allow the lumberjacks to work unhindered in an eight-kilometer radius around the town of Pakrac, the company could arrange the release of captured Partisans from the local prison. Preindl added that some of them had already been released. Brnčić replied that he had no knowledge of this arrangement and that he would pass the offer on to his superiors, adding that the chances of a positive outcome were slight.⁷²⁴ At first it seemed that Brnčić was wrong. Two days after the meeting, the long-overdue response of the Supreme HQ had arrived: Tito approved the “Slavex” request. On 20 January, however,

⁷²² Kazimirović, *Nemački general*, p. 175. For the facsimile of the ambassador’s memo from 27 November 1943 concerning these talks, see Kazimirović, *NDH u svetlu nemačkih dokumenata*, unpaginated.

⁷²³ VA, 119/1, 1, 1, 55, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (16 November 1943). This sentence was omitted from the version printed in the “Sabrana djela” collection (vol. XVII, pp. 362-3).

⁷²⁴ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 669, Report on state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944). The German envoy Peternell also requested that the Zagreb office of “Organization Todt” be allowed to import a certain quantity of firewood, offering medical supplies in exchange. I have not found any further information pertaining to this particular offer.

the Main HQ for Croatia rescinded the approval on grounds that the Germans had not released the Partisans from Pakrac.⁷²⁵

The Germans continued to foster hopes that the Partisan movement could be split, both internally and from its allies abroad. The belief that the gap between the Communist leadership minority and majority of ordinary fighters was wide and open to exploitation was seemingly confirmed by a number of sources in the beginning of 1944. The large number of defectors in the early Winter months indicated that the Party was losing its grip on the army and that the process of decay had irreversibly begun.⁷²⁶ At the beginning of January, Horstenau was informed by his confidant Captain Haeffner, of an opportunity to exploit this state of affairs. One of his informants, “a man who had proven his influence among the nationally oriented Partisans by deeds”, told him that the guerrillas in western Croatia would be willing to get rid of the Communists and other enemies of the Germans in their midst. In exchange, they demanded a guarantee that their territories would be occupied by the Germans and not by the Ustashe. As a token of goodwill, they were prepared to relinquish control over a sizeable area along the Croatian-Slovenian border within three weeks. The captain added that “the willingness of the Partisans to collaborate politically and militarily” is the most striking proof that the guerrillas fight the Germans only because the latter support Pavelić and concluded:

“Now is the right time to put in motion the suggested plan for action against the Communist faction of the Partisan [movement]. The differences between Tito and the Yugoslav government-in-exile in Cairo have separated the spirits among the Partisans,

⁷²⁵ VA, 119/2, 1, 4-26, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (18 January 1944); VA, 119/1, 2, 4, 32, Main HQ for Croatia for 6th Corps (20 January 1944). The “Jamnica” Company from Zagreb had been producing its famous brand of mineral water since 1828. The spring itself was located just outside Pisarovina, in the hamlet of Jamnica. The company's owner, Rottenbucher, reached an agreement with the Partisans that allowed him to export a certain quantity of mineral water to Zagreb. The deal was brokered through the Office of the German Plenipotentiary-General. What the Partisans received in return is not known. Rottenbucher acted as a sort of a middle-man between the two sides: his driver served as a courier during the pause in the contacts following Peternell's death in May 1944 (HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 289 Nemetschek/Rottenbucher, statements of Willibald Nemetschek, Hans Ott, Eugen von Pott, Othmar Unger). As the war neared its end, some businessmen used the Partisan-German contacts to align themselves to the future victors. In April 1945, Ott arranged a meeting between a certain Đuričić of “Elektobosna” and Dr. Pfaff of the “Wiener Bankverein”, and Bakrač. They handed over 850,000 Kuna (and a typewriter) to the Partisan envoy and informed him of the bank withdrawals made in preparation for Pavelić's escape. In return, Bakrač assured them that the new rulers of Croatia would require their economic expertise after liberation (HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 223, Report on visit to Zagreb from 16-19 April 1945, undated). According to one German witness, Nemetschek used his good standing with the Partisans to barter foodstuffs for rare commodities like salt and tobacco, which he then sold in Zagreb (HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Johann Halbwindl).

⁷²⁶ NAW, T-314, Roll 563, 001077, Situation report of intelligence section for period 1 December 1943-10 January 1944 (12 January 1944).

[especially] as it turned out that all hopes which had been set on England and America were betrayed by London and Washington. We must act quickly, however, before Tito succeeds in tricking the majority of the population into believing that his regime is of nationalist orientation".⁷²⁷

The plan Haeffner referred to almost certainly was intertwined with the ongoing dialogue concerning prisoner exchange. The meetings in Pisarovina and Zagreb provided a good opportunity to demonstrate to the Partisans that their struggle was essentially futile and that it only brought suffering to the population. Josip Brnčić reported in late January that Major von Pott had broached the subject of the Allied bombing campaign against the NDH. The vast majority of casualties during the air raids were civilians; the German occupation forces lost a negligible number of soldiers. The major did not forget to emphasize that the choice of targets rested with Supreme HQ. The message was clear: the Communist leadership was squandering the lives of innocent people without achieving any tangible military results; the British, for their part, were willingly playing the role of executioner.⁷²⁸ It may be assumed that this subtle propaganda offensive continued whenever the delegates met from January to April despite scarce reference to it in the surviving documents.⁷²⁹ Far-reaching political issues do not appear to have been discussed during this period. Following the death of Peternell, all contacts were broken off with the ensuing pause lasting nearly a month.

As Spring turned into Summer, the contacts were not only re-established, but significantly intensified. The choice of envoys on both sides signals that these negotiations were sensitive in nature. Hans Ott, absent from the talks since the beginning of the year, returned to the negotiating table. As his presence in Zagreb was explicitly requested by the German ambassador, the chief intelligence officer of Army Group F recalled him from Bosnia and Herzegovina and put him at Kasche's disposal.⁷³⁰ Ott and Nemetschek travelled to

⁷²⁷ NAW, T-501, Roll 265, 000028, Haeffner to Horstenau (12 January 1944). Further details on this scheme are not known. What is certain is that the Partisans did not (peacefully) relinquish any territory in north-western Croatia.

⁷²⁸ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 669, Report on state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944).

⁷²⁹ In one of his reports from late April 1944, Bakrač wrote that, while en route to Zagreb, he had to spend one hour in the company of some German officers of the 1st Cossack Division in the village of Zdenčina. "This arrogant bunch of Prussian Junkers wanted to talk about the German victory and similar topics. I asked them to change the subject": HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 142, Report on prisoner exchange (27 April 1944).

⁷³⁰ The sources differ as to the exact date of the meetings during this period: Ott remembered that they took place on 20 June and 10 July (HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Hans Ott). Dr. Anton Fest, who was the head of the "Action Commando 2" of the SD in Sarajevo remembered that Ott had been in that city "in mid-1944" on intelligence business (Ibid., Box 9, File 164 Ott, Statement of Dr. Anton Fest). His claim seems to be corroborated by the letter from the chief intelligence officer of Army Group F, Lieutenant-Colonel Franz von Harling, to Kasche dated 12 July 1944. Harling informed the ambassador that Ott would be sent to

Pisarovina in the early Summer of 1944 where they were met by Bakrač and Stilinović. After they had finished with exchange-related business, the latter invited Ott for a short drive to the nearby village of Lasinja. Upon their arrival, they were met by Andrija Hebrang, the secretary-general of the Communist Party of Croatia. After some twenty minutes, Nemetschek and the two Partisan envoys were asked to leave Hebrang and Ott alone. What they discussed remains unknown: the German engineer later claimed that they only conversed about the exchange of some people from Jasenovac.⁷³¹ However, it seems improbable that Hebrang would devote his time and energy to doing what was essentially Bakrač's job. Ott went again to Pisarovina in September and mid-October, Hebrang and the chief Partisan intelligence officer in Croatia, Ivan Krajačić-Stevo, being his collocutors. That something was afoot is additionally confirmed by the fact that Stilinović travelled to Zagreb at least two times during the Summer. On at least one of these occasions, he was accompanied by both Bakrač and Dušan Tepšić. According to one source, the delegation was received by Major von Pott at the office of the Plenipotentiary-General, while according to the other the Partisans were granted a personal audience with Horstenau.⁷³²

Captain Gerhard-Oskar Merrem, an officer of the Abwehr who extensively toured the western parts of Yugoslavia in the late Spring and early Summer of 1944, used his visit to Zagreb to confer with Nemetschek and hear his impressions of the enemy's situation. Nemetschek told him that the latest political developments concerning the rapprochement between the government-in-exile and the Communist-dominated National Committee⁷³³ had led to the weakening of the Partisan movement. As an example, the German envoy to

him from Mostar where he "is currently employed with one of the front reconnaissance troops." (NAW, T-120, Roll 5787, 438219).

⁷³¹ HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statements of Hans Ott and Willibald Nemetschek. Yugoslav interrogators noted that Ott denied that he had asked Nemetschek to leave. The latter, however, stood by his statement given in 1948 that Ott held talks with high Partisan functionaries, including Hebrang, the content of which was not known to him: KAW, B:67/145, Interview with Willibald Nemetschek conducted by Peter Broucek (10 September 1981).

⁷³² Ibid.; HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Othmar Unger.

⁷³³ Under pressure from Whitehall, King Peter II dismissed his government, which was overwhelmingly Serb and staunchly pro-Mihailović, and tasked Ivan Šubašić, a moderate monarchist and member of the Croatian Peasant Party, with forming a new one. Šubašić, Churchill hoped, would be acceptable to Tito and the two could work together towards creating a unified front against the Germans; the move would also help save the monarchy and give the non-Communists a modicum of influence in the National Committee. In mid-June 1944, the new Prime Minister of the Royal government visited Tito on the island of Vis. After several days of talks they reached an agreement aimed at paving the way for a unified Yugoslav government in the near future. In exchange for being recognized by the Šubašić administration as the leading force in the country, the Partisan leadership agreed to negotiate with the government-in-exile which had been pronounced illegitimate by the AVNOJ in November 1943; Tito also agreed that the question of the monarchy should be settled after the war by popular referendum. Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Vol. II, pp. 318-9.

Pisarovina cited the fact that the clenched-fist salute had already been abolished.⁷³⁴ Nemetschek also said that he could detect a certain amount of dejection among the Partisans as the result of these events and if Tito would agree to serve under the Serbian King, then “the subversive propaganda [*Spaltepropaganda*] could have great effect”.⁷³⁵

While the envoys kept a close eye on developments in the enemy camp, Ambassador Kasche continued lobbying for a cessation of hostilities with the Partisans under terms favorable to Germany. A visit to Hitler’s headquarters in mid-August 1944 seemed a perfect opportunity to sound out the attitude of his superiors on the matter:

*“I mentioned the possibility of a cessation of hostilities against Tito which had presented itself in 1943. The Führer remarked that in this case we would have to let Pavelić fall. I denied this and said that we did not need to make any far-reaching political deals with Tito. As I declared that such a possibility, although not as favorable as in 1943, might still exist and should be exploited, the Führer made no objections”.*⁷³⁶

Deteriorating relations between the Partisans and Western Allies seemed to play into Kasche’s hands. Tito’s hesitation to form a coalition government led Churchill to believe he gave empty promises on Vis only to secure continued material support from the Allies. To make matters worse, reports from liaison officers in the field stated that these supplies were used to fight the Chetniks, rather than the Germans. The Partisan leadership, for their part, remained deeply suspicious of British intentions in the country. Numerous military missions and the increasing presence of British forces along the Adriatic coast were seen as harbingers of impending large-scale operations. Tito reasoned that an Allied landing at this point could serve no other purpose but to support the fledgling Chetnik movement whose last stronghold in Serbia was under direct threat from converging NOVJ forces.⁷³⁷

⁷³⁴ The clenched-fist salute had been replaced by a common military salute on 25 April 1944. The change applied only to field units and not local detachments (*Hronologija*, p. 722).

⁷³⁵ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000785, Experiences made during duty travel through Serbia and Croatia from 20 June to 4 July 1944 (5 July 1944).

⁷³⁶ KAW, B:67/142, Memo to foreign minister on meeting with the Führer (18 August 1944). For a slightly different version, see ADAP/E/VIII/456, Conversation with the Führer in main headquarters „Wolfschanze“ on 14 August 1944 between 1730 and 1830 (16 September 1944). Hitler’s silent approval of Kasche’s plan was at least in part the result of his ongoing frustration with the state of affairs in the NDH: in May 1944 he exclaimed that he would get rid of Pavelić as soon as the war was finished. Only eight days after the conference with Kasche, Hitler told Field Marshal von Weichs that he was thinking about dismantling the Croatian state and annexing her territory to the Third Reich: Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, p. 404.

⁷³⁷ Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Vol. II, pp. 322, 326-30; Dušan Biber, “The Yugoslav Partisans and the British in 1944, in: William Deakin, Elisabeth Barker [Ed.], *British Military and Political Strategy Central, Eastern and Southern Europe in 1944* (London: MacMillan Press, 1988), pp. 117-25. The tensions culminated in mid-

Ott had another meeting with Andrija Hebrang, probably during the prisoner exchange in Pisarovina on 12 October 1944. The details were related to Kasche who then passed them on to the foreign ministry:

*“Above all, the latter [Hebrang] wanted to know whether Germany would rather come to an understanding with the English or the Russians; he also wanted to hear whether, for this purpose, we already had any contact with England. In this connection the Partisans are not happy about Churchill’s visit to Moscow. They are afraid that the Soviets will concede Trieste, Istria and neighboring territory to the Anglo-Americans. Hebrang explained that nationalist Serbs were now once again leaning more strongly towards the Anglo-Americans: this would open up the possibility of landings by the latter - which the Partisans sharply reject”.*⁷³⁸

Kasche thought he had every reason to be optimistic about his initiative. On 13 October, he held a meeting with von Harling and used the opportunity to expound his views on the matter. The ambassador reminded the lieutenant-colonel of his old plan for “closer collaboration” with Tito’s troops from the Spring of 1943, which called for cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of the Partisans to a certain territory from whence they could wage the war against the Chetniks undisturbed by the Germans. Kasche told Harling that he now had a “good reason to hope that he could reach an agreement with Tito’s bandits, if even a loose one”. The chief Abwehr officer of Army Group F expressed his doubts by pointing out the close cooperation between the NOVJ and the Red Army in Serbia. Kasche was unperturbed and replied that much could still be achieved in this field by sustained effort.⁷³⁹ He made his intention to do precisely so known to the foreign ministry in the cable from the same day. In the list of high priority special tasks he set for himself, one included

“[...] maintaining constant contact with Tito’s organization with the objective of gathering intelligence on its political and military intentions. [This should also enable us] to

September when Tito left Vis aboard a Soviet plane headed for Rumania without informing the British. The island had a large British garrison and Tito, as he himself said, felt as though he was “in a mouse-trap”. The trip to Rumania was made in secret allegedly because Tito feared it might meet the same fate as Polish General Sikorski had. The latter was under British protection and had a troublesome relationship with Churchill prior to dying under mysterious circumstances in a plane crash in 1943.

⁷³⁸ Kasche to Foreign ministry (15 October 1944), quoted in Biber, *The Yugoslav Partisans*, p. 114.

⁷³⁹ NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000439-40, Memorandum on duty travel to Zagreb on 13 October 1944 (14 October 1944).

*channel in our own propaganda with the aim of splitting [the organization] from within [...und Einschaltung unserer Tendenzen zwecks innerer Aufspaltung]”.*⁷⁴⁰

Kasche remained convinced until the end that he was doing a good job; Hitler, the army and SS authorities in the NDH, however, did not share this conviction.⁷⁴¹ Likewise, Engineer Ott was apparently clever enough not to waste his, or the time of his Partisan colleagues, on talks along the unrealistic lines proposed by the ambassador. Bakrač's reports from the final six months of the war contain no mention whatsoever that Ott discussed the possibility of the Partisans switching sides. Even if he had been willing to implement Kache's ideas, his prestige and influence were in decline: high Wehrmacht commands were now assuming the lead role in the negotiations with the NOVJ.⁷⁴² The main issue for the Germans now was not how to spread discord among their enemies, but how to get out of the country as soon as possible.

Ott had been serving as Kasche's confidant, but he was at the same time Horstenau's top agent. Judging by the available sources, the Horstenau's agenda in the Spring and Summer of 1944 was markedly different from that of the ambassador. The Third Reich's situation became increasingly bleak and, at least since the Italian capitulation in 1943, Horstenau was convinced that the war could not be won. Under these circumstances, the general began to explore the possibility of reaching some sort of accommodation with the Western Allies. He stood in close contact with high functionaries of the HSS, as well as some moderate members of the Ustashe leadership who shared his views. Both groups hoped to gain Allied support for an independent Croatia after the war by switching at the most opportune moment. The Home Guard was supposed to seize control of the country thus providing the Allies with a secure bridgehead on the eastern coast of the Adriatic. Beginning in early 1944, the HSS made contact with the Allies through defectors and intermediaries in Italy and Switzerland. By the early Spring, they had also begun negotiating with the Croatian Partisans. In exchange for accepting the HSS as an equal partner in the resistance movement,

⁷⁴⁰ ADAP/E/VIII/499, Kasche to Foreign ministry (13 October 1944).

⁷⁴¹ Hitler called Kasche „a daydreamer“ in early September and let his displeasure with the ambassador be known through official channels of the Foreign Ministry in late October. Kasche, unsurprisingly, replied with his well-known self-righteous attitude; see ADAP/E/VIII/517, Foreign ministry to Kasche (30 October 1944) and accompanying footnotes.

⁷⁴² In his report on the visit to Zagreb in late February 1945, Bakrač wrote that Ott had become redundant now that high-ranking Wehrmacht officers were spearheading the talks: “They had seemingly lost the trust they had put into him“. HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 216, Bakrač's report on visit to Zagreb from 26 February–1 March (undated).

the Croatian branch of the Communist Party would be assured a firm place in the post-war sharing of power.⁷⁴³

According to Major von Pott, Horstenau desired to sound out the opinion of the Croatian Communist leadership through his envoys in Pisarovina and Zagreb. His ultimate aim was to either secure the silent recognition of the new, moderate Croatian government or to induce the local Partisans to join her. This would bring not only short-term dividends in the form of pacification of the country, but would also represent a major blow to the Yugoslav idea propagated by the KPJ. Furthermore, Tito's prestige as leader of a unified resistance movement would be ruined.⁷⁴⁴ Andrija Hebrang's presence at the talks with Ott was not requested by coincidence. He was known for his moderate stance towards non-Communist organizations like the HSS and the Catholic Church. Furthermore, he was often at odds with the Central Committee of the KPJ because of his alleged Croatian nationalist leanings.⁷⁴⁵ Despite the sustained efforts of the Yugoslav historiography to defame him as a traitor sympathetic to the plans of the HSS and Horstenau, there is no evidence that Hebrang made any commitments, either personally or through the Partisan envoys in Zagreb.⁷⁴⁶ He almost certainly informed his superiors of the contacts with Horstenau's representatives just as he had done in the past and requested instructions on negotiating techniques. The decision to receive Ott for a personal audience was a signal to the German commands in the NDH that the Partisan leadership had a lively interest in keeping the back-channel open. Apart from the fact that these contacts enabled gathering information on German intentions at this critical phase of the war, they could also be used for putting forth one's own diplomatic proposals when the right time came (see below).

One question that remained to be answered should the NDH join the Allies was the fate of the German troops on her territory. This issue was closely connected to the 20th July Plot against Hitler and the political designs concerning the future of the countries in the region. Von Pott claimed that Horstenau envisaged the resurrection of an independent Austria, perhaps as a part of some "Danubian Confederation" which would also include Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and possibly even Bavaria. In order to secure Allied

⁷⁴³ For more details on the Croatian peace feelers see Tomasevich, *Occupation*, pp. 442-9.

⁷⁴⁴ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 123 Horstenau, Statement of Eugen von Pott.

⁷⁴⁵ See for instance Tito's cables to Hebrang on 7 April 1944 (*Zbornik*/II/12/460) and 17 September 1944 (*Zbornik*/II/14/124). See also Djilas, *Wartime*, pp. 315-7.

⁷⁴⁶ The Yugoslav secret police exerted great effort in uncovering evidence of Hebrang's alleged personal contacts with Horstenau. Nemetschek later wrote that he was supposed to be the key witness in Hebrang's trial and bear "false testimony" against him (KAW, B:67/145, Interview with Willibald Nemetschek conducted by Peter Broucek, 10 September 1981).

support for his plan, he was willing to organize an anti-Nazi coup in the Balkans with the help of other high ranking Wehrmacht officers of Austrian origin, including Colonel-General Löhr, the commander-in-chief of Army Group E. The coup was supposed to be carried out by Croatian and “Austrian” units under their command with the aim of seizing control over the Adriatic coastline and parts of Austria and Slovenia and delivering them to the Allies.⁷⁴⁷ The idea was compatible with the plans of the 20 July plotters which called for a separate peace with Great Britain and the United States. Horstenau stood in frequent contact with Rudolf von Marogna-Redwitz, a known Bavarian monarchist, who was the head of the Austrian wing of the conspiracy and also the senior Abwehr official in Vienna. The liaison between them was *Sonderführer* Karl Ludwig Freiherr von und zu Guttenberg, who was sent to Zagreb in the early 1943 with the task of coordinating with officers disaffected with the state of affairs in Germany.⁷⁴⁸ The failed attempt on Hitler’s life and Guttenberg’s arrest⁷⁴⁹ did not put an end to Horstenau’s activities. The Allies’ apparent interest in the possibility of a separate arrangement with the Austrians in the Balkans was demonstrated by a leaflet dropped over Yugoslavia in mid-August. The leaflet was addressed to six Austrian-born generals of the Wehrmacht and it reminded them of their duty to help free their land of origin and to save the lives of Austrian-born soldiers under their command.⁷⁵⁰ In more concrete terms, the Allies demonstrated a willingness to discuss the capitulation of German troops on both the local and regional level in the first days of September.⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁷ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 123 Horstenau, Statement of Eugen von Pott. Horstenau’s attitude toward an independent Austria is a subject of some controversy: he had actively supported the *Anschluss*, feeling that the creation of 1918 could not survive. On the other hand, he had some connections to the Austrian resistance and had allegedly felt betrayed by Hitler who would not honor Austria’s “individuality”. His biographer, Peter Broucek, concluded that the solution closest to Horstenau’s heart was a political change within the Third Reich which would also be acceptable to the Western Allies: Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielicht*, pp. 42-3.

⁷⁴⁸ Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielicht*, pp. 40-1.

⁷⁴⁹ Several days after the assassination attempt, the head of the SD in Zagreb, SS Lieutenant-Colonel Günther Hermann (another Austrian) informed Horstenau that he had orders to arrest Guttenberg. Upon hearing this, the General offered to smuggle Guttenberg out to Partisan-held territory using the prisoner-exchange contacts. The latter refused, fearing reprisals against his family and the possibility that the Partisans would exchange him back at the first opportunity. Guttenberg had little to do with the Pisarovina Cartel during his time in Zagreb; he travelled to the neutral zone only once: HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 140 Guttenberg, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek; Maria Theodora von dem Bottlenberg-Landsberg, *Karl Ludwig Freiherr von und zu Guttenberg: 1902-1945: ein Lebensbild* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2003), p. 253.

⁷⁵⁰ Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielicht*, p. 43.

⁷⁵¹ In early September 1944, the head of the OSS mission to Mihailović, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert McDowell met with Rudi Stärker, the envoy of Minister Hermann Neubacher. Neubacher, an Austrian, offered to arrange a withdrawal of the German forces to the Sava-Danube line where they would be employed exclusively against the Red Army. McDowell replied that only unconditional surrender would be accepted (*FRUS/1944/1/549-50*, Cables of Alexander C. Kirk, United States political adviser on the staff of the Allied supreme commander in the Mediterranean, to the Secretary of state, 7 September 1944). British liaison officers to the Macedonian Partisans demanded unconditional surrender from the German garrison in Prilep in the same period (see next chapter).

Horstenau remained unscathed by the wave of retribution following the 20 July Plot but his career did not survive the machinations of his adversaries, Ambassador Kasche and Ustashe leader Pavelić. The formal reason for the general's downfall lay in the accusation that he made defeatist statements concordant with the attempts of two Ustashe ministers (Ante Vokić and Mladen Lorković) to bring about a pro-Allied putsch in the NDH. In reality, Pavelić accused him of being an accomplice, despite the fact that he himself knew of the overtures made by the duo. Kasche was more than willing to join this scheme in the hope of eliminating his most serious political rival in the country. Horstenau, disillusioned by the failure to gain the approval of his superiors for his policies in the NDH, had already been seeking a different posting since the Spring of that year. Consequently, he accepted the news of his removal from the post of the Plenipotentiary-General on 20 September with a calm heart; he had left Zagreb one week before.⁷⁵²

The haste with which the general left the Croatian capital is probably related to one last attempt he had made to effect an arrangement with the Allies. On 27 September 1944, the chief of the OSS station in Bern, Allen Dulles, informed his colleagues in Caserta, Italy, that Horstenau was willing to go ahead with the plan of "freeing Austria" with the help of his fellow officers. As a further incentive, Dulles' source informed him that the Germans had already evacuated the coastal regions and that the Allies would not have any trouble landing there. Although the general was relieved of his post a short while previously, he was willing to return to Zagreb and meet an American agent for detailed consultations. A preliminary meeting between Dulles' source and the agent could take place after 5 October in either the building of the "*Wiener Bankverein*" or at the seat of the "*Slavex*" lumber company.⁷⁵³ Once the contact was made, the agent would be led to Horstenau. If the Allies remained interested in his offers, the negotiations could be continued by an officer of appropriate rank. OSS HQ in Washington approved of the plan, despite misgivings about Horstenau's personality.⁷⁵⁴

Frank Lindsay, who had hitherto been a liaison officer to the Slovene Partisans, was chosen for this mission and dispatched to Croatia. His superiors understood that it would be both wise and practical to inform the Partisans about Lindsay's mission and request their help.

⁷⁵² Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 404-10; Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielicht*, p. 453-4, Entry for October 1944.

⁷⁵³ The choice of meeting place was not coincidental: Von Pott and Peternell had both been employees of this Viennese bank before the war. The close ties between the "*Slavex*" company and the German intelligence and military authorities in Zagreb have already been described.

⁷⁵⁴ Frank Lindsay, *Beacons in the Night: With OSS and Tito's Partisans in Wartime Yugoslavia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 220-1. According to Washington, Horstenau was an "egoistical opportunist [...] almost completely without an ethical code. Give as little as you can and extract everything that you can".

Tito had already been told of the possibility of a separate surrender of German forces and agreed to adhere to the guidelines issued by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 18 August.⁷⁵⁵ Lindsay therefore had no trouble in obtaining the support of the Main HQ for Croatia. He gladly accepted their offer to send one of their men on a reconnaissance mission and report back whether Horstenau was present in Zagreb or not. Much to Lindsay's disappointment, the Partisan agent returned with news that the general had been arrested by the Gestapo two weeks ago, and the mission was cancelled.⁷⁵⁶

General Edmund Glaise-Horstenau, one of the main advocates of contact with the Partisans managed to secure them a degree of legitimacy by skillful maneuvering and personal engagement. It was not unreasonable to expect that his successor would take an altogether different view in lieu of the increasing repression that followed in the wake of the July Plot. It came to be that Horstenau's departure had surprisingly little effect on the dealings in Zagreb and Pisarovina. Prisoner exchanges continued on a regular basis and contact with the NOVJ's Main HQ for Croatia was brokered via the same hands.⁷⁵⁷ Horstenau's successors⁷⁵⁸ had no personal ambitions and largely preferred things to remain as they were. Even if they were desirous of a greater role, they would have found their freedom of action severely curtailed by the new power factor in the NDH, the office of the Supreme Commander in the South-East (Army Group F). In light of the steadily deteriorating war situation, this command had great interest in keeping the back-channel open.

⁷⁵⁵ For the full text of the guidelines see *FRUS/1944/1/542-3*, Combined Chiefs of Staff to Eisenhower and Wilson (18 August 1944); for Tito's acceptance of the guidelines and his intention to use the German POWs for road construction see *ibid.*, p. 554, Alexander Kirk to Secretary of State (21 September 1944). The Combined Chiefs of Staffs was the supreme headquarters of the Western Allies' tasked with conducting joint military operations.

⁷⁵⁶ Lindsay, *Beacons in the Night*, pp. 222-4. Horstenau was in fact not arrested, but rumors suggested that something happened to him. On 19 October 1944, Tito was informed that the General had "disappeared" from Zagreb one week previously: *Zbornik/V/34/540*, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (19 October 1944).

⁷⁵⁷ Of the principle German figures involved with the prisoner exchange, only Major von Pott left Zagreb with Horstenau in October 1944 (HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 327 von Pott, Statement of Eugen von Pott).

⁷⁵⁸ The inspector-general of the NDH's armed forces, Hans Juppe, shouldered the running the office of the Plenipotentiary-General after Horstenau's departure. The post itself remained empty until late November, when SS-General Hans-Adolf Prützmann was appointed to it (See Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielicht*, p. 454, Entry for October 1944 and accompanying footnotes). Prützmann, however, remained in office only some six weeks and apparently visited Zagreb only once, in late December 1944 (NAW, T-311, Roll 193, 000345, Telephone conversation between SS-Colonel Constantin Canaris and Lieutenant-General Heinz von Glydenfeldt, 23 December 1944, 10,15h). On 15 January 1945, Juppe returned to the post and stayed until the end of the war. In his post-war statement given to the U.S. military authorities, Juppe mentioned prisoner exchange only in the context of Horstenau's activities in the NDH: Institut für Zeitgeschichte München (Institute for Contemporary History Munich, forthwith IfZ), ZS-0493, Interrogation of Hans Juppe (13 June 1947), freely accessible at <http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/archiv/zs/zs-0493.pdf> (last accessed 18 April 2013).

Despite the failure of the plan to contact Horstenau, the Allies were still not ready to give up the idea of the capitulation of the German occupation forces in the Balkans. A new initiative to this effect came from the head of the American military mission to the Supreme HQ, Colonel Ellery Huntington, in November 1944. On the 26th, Tito ordered the Main HQ for Croatia to send one of its representatives to Zagreb and establish contact with the German high command there:

*“His mission is to discuss the terms of surrender of the German troops in our area of responsibility [...]. Our terms are: 1.) they must surrender themselves and their weapons to us; 2.) We guarantee their lives, officers may retain their decorations, and they shall all be repatriated to Germany after the war. Inform us immediately about the possible negotiations”.*⁷⁵⁹

Tito insisted on these terms for two reasons. First, the surrender two German army groups to his forces, rather than to the Western Allies or even the Soviets, would cement the role of the new, Communist-controlled Yugoslavia in the anti-Nazi coalition and would greatly enhance her standing in the world. Second, there was fear that Yugoslav collaborationists would use the time needed for a staged withdrawal of the Germans to gain control of the western parts of the country and make peace with the Allies.⁷⁶⁰

Although no records of the German-Partisan talks from November and December have survived, it can be safely assumed that no progress was made. The terms proposed by the Supreme HQ were unacceptable to the German supreme command in the South-East. The overriding concern was not to fall into Yugoslav captivity after three-and-a-half years of very brutal fighting. General Erich Schmidt-Richberg wrote that “both the command and the troops expected that the retreat [from Greece] would be continued to the German border, where we would link up with the German front facing the enemy from the East”.⁷⁶¹ German commands in the field had already launched a propaganda campaign aimed at weakening their enemies’ resolve to interfere with their withdrawal. The Partisans parried by attempting to draw local units to the negotiating table in the hope of affecting their surrender. Each side relied on the

⁷⁵⁹ VA, 119/4, 1, 3-11, Supreme HQ to Main HQ for Croatia (26 November 1944); also printed in *Zbornik*/II/14/393.

⁷⁶⁰ Klaus Schmider, „Der jugoslawische Kriegsschauplatz (Januar 1943 bis Mai 1945)“, in: *Das deutsche Reich und der zweite Weltkrieg* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2007), Vol. VIII, p. 1066.

⁷⁶¹ Schmidt-Richberg, *Das Endkampf auf dem Balkan*, p. 147.

war-weariness of the other and claimed that humanitarian considerations were the main motive for their offers.⁷⁶²

Hans Ott remembered that, around Christmas 1944, the German high command in Zagreb discussed the proposition that had allegedly been made by the chief of the Croatian OZNA, General Ivan Krajačić-Stevo. The idea was that the German occupation forces would be allowed to conduct a staged withdrawal if they would cease operations and refrain from leaving a path of destruction in their wake.⁷⁶³ That this offer was, in fact, the cornerstone of the German negotiating position, rather than the Partisan one, is confirmed by contemporary reports of Boris Bakrač from February 1945 onwards.⁷⁶⁴ During his visit to Zagreb from 13-16 February, he was visited twice by Lieutenant-Colonel von Stephani. The latter wanted to know when the talks could be resumed and mentioned that the Yugoslavs could profit from them. He assured the Partisan envoy that the German side had lost none of its earlier interest in the matter and that Colonel-General Löhr was personally enthusiastic about it. Von Stephani emphasized the need for securing quick communications between the two sides so that the envoys could meet within 24 hours if necessary. Bakrač repeated the demand for the separate, unconditional surrender of German forces in Yugoslavia. The lieutenant-colonel replied that they “could not wage war on their own”, implying that the Supreme Command in the South-East would not take independent action in this question. As the Partisan plenipotentiary countered that now was the right moment to do exactly that, von Stephani said it was too early. “All right”, Bakrač said, “if you really think it is still too early, go ahead and keep waiting”. Despite Bakrač’s uncompromising stand, von Stephani parted with the wish that the two of them should meet more often and expressed hope that by working together, they could persuade their superiors to “mitigate the horrors of war”.⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶² German propaganda aimed to convince the Partisans that the German soldiers wanted nothing more than to go home in peace and that any attempt to stop them would only lead to unnecessary bloodletting. The Partisans, for their part, retorted that the Germany had already lost the war and that the continuation of fighting would be senseless. For the example of German leaflets requesting a free passage from the Partisans see NAW, T-314, Roll 1630, 000774-5 (undated, probably end of December 1944). The command of the 91st Army Corps had explicitly forbidden any local negotiations with the Partisans, fearing this would have a negative impact on the morale of the troops: *ibid.*, 000771, Instructions for Croatia (26 December 1944). For a German translation of one Partisan leaflet from the same period, see Kühnrich-Hintze, *Deutsche bei Titos Partisanen*, pp. 167-8.

⁷⁶³ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 147 von Harling, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁷⁶⁴ Bakrač’s reports on meetings in Zagreb and Pisarovina during January do not mention the discussions on the German surrender/withdrawal.

⁷⁶⁵ The German officer was trying hard to win over his Partisan counterpart. According to Bakrač, they parted “very amiably”, with von Stephani asking him whether he personally needed something or if “we on the outside [i.e. the Partisans]” needed medical supplies: HR HDA 1491, 2. 241., 215, Bakrač’s report on the visit to Zagreb from 13-16 February 1945 (undated).

The two envoys met again on 27 February during one of Bakrač's routine visits concerning a prisoner exchange. On being asked "how their thing was standing", the Partisan replied that he had nothing to add to what he had already said. By laying down their arms, the soldiers in Yugoslavia would not only secure themselves fair treatment in captivity, but would also render patriotic service to Germany: the country was in ruins and needed every man for the post-war reconstruction. Bakrač added that these talks only had sense if all involved recognized that the war was lost; otherwise, the whole matter was merely a waste of time. Von Stephani again had to use all his personal charm to convince Bakrač not to break off the contact. He said that any attempt to bring about an unconditional surrender would be doomed to failure. The army was completely infiltrated by the SS and the Gestapo and they could be expected to stage an internal coup the moment the surrender orders were issued by the high command. The lieutenant-colonel said he would not inform his superiors of the deadlock, but would inform them the Partisans were still considering the German proposals. He then implored Bakrač to try one more time to convince his leadership "to back down a little" and stop demanding the impossible. Just before the meeting concluded, von Stephani re-emphasized the need to meet as often as possible; only through continuous talks were they likely to achieve a solution that "would benefit all".⁷⁶⁶

It was obvious that Bakrač and his immediate superiors from the Main HQ for Croatia were not willing to depart from the original terms proposed in the late fall of 1944. The Germans therefore attempted to establish direct contact with Belgrade through someone who was thought to be more flexible. Vladimir Velebit, an old acquaintance of Engineer Ott and Tito's personal envoy during the talks in Livno in 1942 and "March Negotiations" in 1943 was chosen. He had been known to the Germans as "Dr. Vladimir Petrović" until the summer of 1944 when the BBC inadvertently revealed his true identity.⁷⁶⁷ The German Police attaché immediately informed the RSHA about the consensus in Zagreb that Velebit was not a Communist and that he was, in fact, sympathetic to the Western Allies.⁷⁶⁸ In addition to these obvious "qualities", Velebit was likely to take interest in what was transpiring in Zagreb for personal reasons: his closest relatives were arrested and interned immediately after the fateful broadcast. The Germans did not blackmail him, knowing this would not produce any result, but offered their release as a token of good will. In exchange, both Stefani and Ott (who in the interim had returned from hospital) requested Velebit's presence at the high-level meeting

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 216, Bakrač's report on visit to Zagreb from 26 February-1 March 1945 (undated).

⁷⁶⁷ Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 219. Velebit arrived in London in May 1944 as the chief of the NOVJ military mission.

⁷⁶⁸ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 327 von Pott, Archive of Hans Helm.

they were pressing Bakrač for in mid-March 1945. The meeting was planned to take place in Pisarovina at the end of the month with von Weichs dispatching a personal representative to broker a deal. Bakrač told the German envoys that the choice of delegates rested exclusively in the hands of the Main HQ for Croatia. He added that, since Velebit was entrusted with other tasks at the time, his presence might not be possible. The Germans replied that they asked for Velebit “precisely because he had just returned from London”.⁷⁶⁹

It would be safe to assume that the Germans thought that their propositions would be more acceptable to the anglophile member of the new, British-sponsored coalition government than to the local military command which appeared firmly in Communist hands. It is not a coincidence that the “Austrian card” was re-played at this very occasion. Von Stephani expounded that the army was still fighting in Yugoslavia only owing to the “stupid whim” of the supreme command in Berlin. Although the Supreme Command in the South-East had some latitude in decision-making, the strong presence of the SS and the Gestapo made a separate surrender impossible at this juncture. The worsening military situation, however, meant that Hitler’s hold over the army could not last much longer. Colonel-General Löhr, von Stephani continued, was an Austrian and understood the complexities of the region. He was more flexible than von Weichs (who was a German), and therefore more likely to seize the initiative once the right moment came. Löhr knew that Germany would be partitioned and Austria resurrected. Under these circumstances, his loyalties lay with his homeland and he would do everything to secure her future. To that effect, he would endeavor to appoint Austrians to the leading posts in the army under his command. Bakrač commented in his report that “*the conversation was, as always, permeated by the main question: why would we not take the territory when they were willing to give it to us without a fight*”.⁷⁷⁰

The high-level meeting the Germans were so keen on did not materialize. Von Stephani admitted on 27 March that he understood the reluctance of the Yugoslavs to compromise now that the war was practically over, but still expressed hope he would see Velebit in Pisarovina or Zagreb.⁷⁷¹ The Partisans should let him know by 11 April at the latest if they had an interest in such a meeting. Apart from the news that von Weichs was being

⁷⁶⁹ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 217, Bakrač's report on the visit to Zagreb from 12-16 March 1945 (undated). Velebit returned to Belgrade in early March 1945 after being appointed assistant to the Minister of Foreign Affairs: Velebit, *Tajne i zamke*, p. 340; See also „General Velebit extends his thanks“, *Novosti*, 6 March 1945, p. 1: <http://digicon.athabascau.ca/cdm/compoundobject/collection/ccan/id/156899/rec/1> (last accessed on 20 April 2013).

⁷⁷⁰ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 217, Bakrač's report on the visit to Zagreb from 12-16 March 1945 (undated).

⁷⁷¹ Velebit's relatives were released as promised on or about 1 April 1945: HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 44, To the 3rd Directorate of OZNA with the Ministry of people's defense (17 April 1945).

relieved and that Löhner was taking over, the officer “said absolutely nothing new”; he merely repeated his old views and added that Löhner’s new appointment could prove “very advantageous” for the Partisans. Bakrač gave no definitive answers and kept repeating that his superiors were reviewing the German proposals. Ott most likely sensed that the Partisans were, in fact, not interested in a deal and pleaded with the Partisan envoy not to disclose this to von Stephani.⁷⁷²

During the next instance the envoys met in Zagreb, the German situation in Yugoslavia took a sharp turn for the worse: on 12 April 1945, the Yugoslav Army (official name of the Partisan forces as of 1 March) launched a major offensive aimed at breaking the stalemate on the Strymian Front. The lines of Army Group E were pierced after two days of bitter fighting, and the Germans were compelled to begin a fighting withdrawal to the west.⁷⁷³ As a consequence, they decided to raise the stakes on the negotiating table. In a conversation with Bakrač on 16 April, von Stephani alternated between threats and promises in another attempt to secure the right of free passage from the country for German troops. The continuation of fighting, he said, would mean further casualties for the Partisans and a complete devastation of the country. On the other hand, the Germans were prepared to leave all of their heavy equipment to the Yugoslavs if they were allowed to retreat to the Austrian border unobstructed. Stephani was surprised that the Main HQ for Croatia could not see the obvious advantages of such a deal and suggested the Yugoslavs bring forth a military expert who could recognize the value of the German offer. If the Croatian Partisans would persist in refusing these generous terms, the lieutenant-colonel would gladly take the offer to their Slovene comrades. To this effect, he requested that the Main HQ for Slovenia be informed of the proceedings and Engineer Ott issued with a letter of safe conduct for a trip across the Croatian border.⁷⁷⁴

The “complete devastation of the country” von Stephani was threatening most likely the reason why the Partisans agreed to host two high-level meetings in Pisarovina in the last days of the war. This was done with the intention to avert the demolition of all strategically important objects in Zagreb, a move that the Germans were already preparing for.⁷⁷⁵ The first

⁷⁷² Ibid., 218, Bakrač’s report on the visit to Zagreb from 26-29 March 1945 (undated).

⁷⁷³ Karl Hnilicka, *Das Ende auf dem Balkan 1944/4: Die militärische Räumung Jugoslawiens durch die deutsche Wehrmacht* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Verlag, 1970), pp. 130-3; *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. II, pp. 576-81.

⁷⁷⁴ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 224, Bakrač’s report on the visit to Zagreb from 16-19 April 1945 (undated).

⁷⁷⁵ Schmidt-Richberg, *Das Endkampf auf dem Balkan*, p. 141. The Yugoslav leadership was very keen on taking the Croatian capital intact. At the beginning of 1945, Tito informed the Main HQ for Croatia that the British air force may target the bridges outside of Zagreb, but that the city itself “must not be bombed”: VA, 119/4, 2, 1-1, Supreme HQ to Main HQ for Croatia (2 January 1945).

meeting took place on 24 or 26 April 1945. The composition of the Partisan delegation bore witness to the importance they attached to the talks. Although Velebit was not among those present, the chief of the Croatian OZNA, General Krajačić was; he was accompanied by Colonel Vicko Antić and Major Bakrač. The German delegation consisted of Horstenau's old chief of staff, Colonel Hans-Harald von Selchow, Lieutenant Paul Manns and Engineer Hans Ott.⁷⁷⁶ The details of the meeting are not known, but it can be assumed that the Germans offered to cancel the planned demolitions in exchange for safe passage from the country. The Yugoslavs almost certainly provided vague answers in the hope that the contact would not be broken off: they were stalling for time as their main forces stood only some eighty kilometers west of Zagreb.⁷⁷⁷

The final (and dramatic) round of talks took place between 5 and 8 May 1945. On the 5th, Colonel von Selchow drove to Pisarovina and asked for terms of surrender. He was told that it would take another 24 hours until the terms were transmitted from Belgrade. By 6 May, Pisarovina was the front-line: the village and its surroundings were full of newly-arrived Yugoslav units preparing for an attack on Zagreb. As these troops knew nothing of the prisoner exchange arrangement, the arrival of Captain von Brauchitsch in a car adorned with a white flag caused some sensation. Luckily for the Germans, Bakrač was there to greet the Germans and explain their presence. He was then asked to come with them to Zagreb and discuss the terms with von Selchow. The idea of returning to the city amidst the chaos of the last days of the war was hardly appealing to the Partisan envoy. The way in which the Germans had treated him hitherto had been, in his own words, "beyond reproach", but the circumstances had changed: they were cornered and there was no way of telling what they might do next. Even if his immediate hosts remained correct, they had lost all control over the Ustashe. To make matter worse, Bakrač had no time to change and had to go to Zagreb for the first time wearing his Yugoslav major's uniform.⁷⁷⁸

His apprehensions proved to be well founded. As soon as the party left the Partisan-held territory, it ran into an Ustashe unit. Bakrač was dragged out of the car and his escort, a young intelligence officer from the 7th Serbian Brigade, was severely beaten. Von

⁷⁷⁶ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 254 Manns, Statement of Hans Ott. Ott mentioned that Nemetschek was also present, but he was in fact still recuperating from his wounds in one of Zagreb's hospitals. Von Selchow replaced von Funk in the second half of 1943. Although he was continuously informed on the running of the cartel, he preferred to not to take an active part and left the details to von Pott: Ibid., File 368 Selchow, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek.

⁷⁷⁷ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. II, pp. 624-6.

⁷⁷⁸ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 368 Selchow, Statement of Albrecht von Brauchitsch; Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 857.

Brauchitsch's explanations fell on deaf ears as the Ustashe were equally mistrustful of the Germans: they were informed that a nearby German unit wanted to defect to the Yugoslavs. The situation was saved by a young Ustashe officer who decided it would be best to leave the matter to his superiors in Jasterbarsko. Along the way, they met a unit of the German army, but the idea that they could place themselves under the unit's protection apparently did not cross von Brauchitsch's mind ("I could have strangled him then and there with my own bare hands", an exasperated Bakrač wrote later). Fortunately, the Ustashe command in Jastrebarsko agreed to let them go about their business, and they arrived at the German *Feldkommandatur* in Zagreb late that afternoon.⁷⁷⁹

The talks with von Selchow began immediately and the "wrangling", as the Yugoslav envoy called it, lasted until 0200 hours of the following day. The German offered to spare some military objects in Zagreb and its surroundings from demolition if the Yugoslavs would allow the remainder of Army Group E to withdraw to the Austrian border unobstructed.⁷⁸⁰ Bakrač, in turn, informed him that the Yugoslav side could only accept the surrender of the Germans under the same conditions which Army Group G in Italy had capitulated earlier that week. Von Selchow stated that the details surrounding the surrender in Italy were unknown to him and that he would have to request instructions from the high command which was already in Slovenia.⁷⁸¹ The talks were inconclusive, yet German sappers left the city untouched. Army Group E decided in the end not to carry out the demolitions. The reasons were twofold: first, the Ustashe leadership, supported by ambassador Kasche, pleaded against such a move, hoping perhaps they would soon return to the country.⁷⁸² Second, it seems probable that the German commanders had by then realized they would surrender to the Yugoslavs eventually. Under these circumstances, any demolitions in Zagreb would surely have adverse effect on the treatment of German prisoners.

Beginning on 7 May 1945, individual German units began surrendering to the Yugoslav Army.⁷⁸³ Others continued fighting, desperately trying to avoid a similar fate. On that same day, von Brauchitsch picked up Bakrač and his escort, ostensibly in order to drive them back to the front line. The German captain, however, had soon disclosed the true

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 858

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸¹ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 368 Selchow, Statement of Albrecht von Brauchitsch.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, File 164 Ott, Statement of Siegfried Kasche; Schmidt-Richberg, *Das Endkampf auf dem Balkan*, pp. 140-11.

⁷⁸³ The German 97th Mountain Corps capitulated in southwestern Slovenia on 7 May 1945: Schmider, *Der Jugoslawische Kriegsschauplatz*, p. 1069.

purpose of his visit: he wanted Bakrač to arrange an unobstructed withdrawal of a German unit that was fighting on the outskirts of the Croatian capital. The latter refused and was taken back to the city where he and the other Partisan officer had to spend two more days in hiding before being able to greet Yugoslav units on the streets of Zagreb on 9 May 1945.⁷⁸⁴

6. *Intelligence work in the Neutral Zone, 1943-1945*

As the envoys of both sides were able to enter and leave enemy territory almost on a weekly basis, they were in prime position to observe everything that could be of military interest and report back to their superiors.⁷⁸⁵ All German representatives were in one way or another connected to the intelligence services. Engineer Ott was involved with various military, political and police authorities in Zagreb, all of which he supplied with information. Although not involved directly in the prisoner exchange contacts, Ott's superior from the Zagreb's Abwehr station, Lieutenant-Colonel Klinkmüller, had a "lively interest" in these proceedings.⁷⁸⁶ Ott was also called upon several times to provide briefings on the nature, strength and disposition of the Partisans to high-ranking German officers, including Colonel Franz von Harling (chief intelligence officer of Army Group F) and SS Colonel Otto Kumm (chief of staff of the 5th SS Mountain Corps and later commander of the 7th SS Mountain Division "Prinz Eugen").⁷⁸⁷ He also shared information of military importance obtained through his various assets with Ambassador Kasche.⁷⁸⁸ Willibald Nemetschek, although formally not an agent, was also active in procuring intelligence data on the Partisans. He gathered information from the exchange prisoners or from conversations he had with the people of Pisarovina and its surroundings, and from his frequent trips across the NDH and abroad. The information was used by the intelligence section of the office of the

⁷⁸⁴ Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, pp. 860-2. Ratko Anđelković, the young officer in Bakrač's company, undertook the trip to Zagreb on his own. As an intelligence officer, he hoped to gather useful information on enemy dispositions prior to the attack on the city itself. His enthusiasm might have cost him his life on several occasions. Apart from being beaten by the Ustashe, he was nearly lynched by a mob while hiding in the flat of a German soldier of Croatian origin who took care of him and Bakrač after the Germans had left the city. Upon rejoining his unit on 9 May, he learned that he was suspected of desertion. He avoided capital punishment only after he had managed to convince his commander that he had acted in the best interest of the unit: Miladin Ivanović, 23. *srpska divizija* (Belgrade: Republički odbor SUBNOR, 1994), pp. 404-9.

⁷⁸⁵ One Partisan order from March 1944 read that a German car with a white flag sometimes comes to Pisarovina: „When this car appears, our units should take cover and not let themselves be seen by the passangers“ (*Zbornik/V/25/53*, Daily order of 2nd Brigade of 8th Division for 3 March 1944).

⁷⁸⁶ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 206 Klinkmüller, Statement of Eugen von Pott.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, File 147 von Harling, Statement of Hans Ott; *ibid.*, File 224 Kumm, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁷⁸⁸ See the facsimile of the ambassador's memo from 27 November 1943 in Vasa Kazimirović, *NDH u svetlu nemackih dokumenata i dnevnika Gleza fon Horstenau 1941 – 1944* (Belgrade: Nova knjiga, 1987).

Plenipotentiary-General for compiling situation reports. In addition, Nemetschek probably carried out other special intelligence tasks for Horstenau.⁷⁸⁹

The unsuccessful conclusion of Operation “Schwarz” and the growing Partisan strength in all parts of Yugoslavia was beginning to confirm that Tito, rather than Mihailović, was the most dangerous enemy of the Germans in the country.⁷⁹⁰ As all attempts to quell the uprising through brute force alone proved to be futile, the Germans began considering a more refined approach aimed at striking the enemy’s head rather than his muscle. This strategy held that the uprising would be dealt a severe, if not fatal blow if Tito could be eliminated through a surgical strike. The action was to be carried out by the so-called “Trupps”, special units attached to various German divisions formed around a core of men from the “Brandenburg” Division.⁷⁹¹ At roughly the same time as the Armed Forces High Command approved the plan in mid-October 1943⁷⁹², Marijan Stilinović was invited by Hans Ott and Captain Model to a lunch in the “Esplanade” hotel in Zagreb. During the meal, they commented on the photos published in a Berlin newspaper from the Gran Sasso raid conducted by German paratroopers, which freed Mussolini. Ott jokingly remarked that Tito should be very careful lest the same thing happen to him. The Partisan envoy, however, took the remark very seriously and informed Supreme HQ about it in a radio message. The cable was intercepted and deciphered by the German listening service, which had unpleasant consequences for Ott. First, he was interrogated by the SD chief in Zagreb, SS Major Hermann, and was then summoned to Belgrade in order to explain himself to his Abwehr superiors in Army Group F. Luckily for the engineer, he managed to convince them that the whole thing was nothing but an accident and that he did not have any motive for passing on secrets to the Partisan envoy.⁷⁹³

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Eugen von Pott.

⁷⁹⁰ Whereas some German intelligence services tended to give precedence to Mihailović over Tito in terms of organization, strength and discipline in the early months of 1943 (See the assessment made by Reinhard Gehlen’s “Foreign Armies East” on 8 February 1943 in *Trials of War Criminals*, Vol. XI, pp. 1016-20), there could be no doubt by the end of that year that Tito held the upper hand: *Zbornik*/XII/3/619-30, Commander-in-chief South-East, Situation estimate from the end of October 1943 (1 November 1943). For similar conclusions see the report of the Abwehr’s 3rd Section (intelligence on foreign armies) in NAW, T-77, Roll 883, 5632484, Enemy situation report (12 November 1943).

⁷⁹¹ Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, pp. 175-9.

⁷⁹² NAW, T-311, Roll 285, 000790, Armed Force High Command to Commander-in-chief South-East (15 October 1943).

⁷⁹³ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File Model, Statement of Hans Ott. Ott said after the war that he intentionally disclosed the information to Stilinović. He did this probably in order to ingratiate himself with his Yugoslav captors. Major von Pott believed that the remark was made intentionally in the hope that Tito would move his headquarters to a location more suitable for German attack: Ibid., File 164 Ott, Statement of Eugen von Pott. The incident also had a positive effect: thanks to the intercepted cable, the Germans learned Stilinović’s real name: Ibid., Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Willibald Nemetschek.

Despite the incident, preparations for the assassination went ahead. On 28 October 1943, representatives of the 2nd Panzer Army and the “Brandenburg” Division discussed “Special assignment Tito” which included an attack on the Bosnian town of Jajce, where the Partisan leader was known to have his headquarters.⁷⁹⁴ Two weeks later, the commander of the division submitted a detailed plan for killing or capturing of the Partisan leader. The plan envisaged two possibilities: a) an airborne attack on Tito’s stronghold or b) assassination. The latter could be carried out either by an explosive package sent to Tito by two German agents posing as Allied officers, or by poison administered by “an agent infiltrated into Tito’s circle”.⁷⁹⁵ Kidnapping was added to the list shortly thereafter, but this option would also require someone who could get close to the Supreme HQ. Ambassador Kasche thought he had a solution to the problem. On 10 December, he informed the foreign ministry that he introduced Lieutenant Boeckl, the commander of the mission against Tito, to Hans Ott. The latter was supposed to travel to Tito’s HQ in a few days, and this opportunity could be exploited to bring one of Boeckl’s men close to the target. Kasche added that he did not inform Ott about the plan.⁷⁹⁶ There were two possible reasons for this: either the ambassador feared that the engineer would not agree, or there were concerns that Ott might repeat the mistake from October and let something slip during his talks with Partisan representatives.⁷⁹⁷

Even had Ott been told of Boeckl’s mission and had he agreed to lead him to Tito, it is highly unlikely that he would have ever been brought anywhere near the target. On 9 November 1943, Tito received a cable from Dmitrov, warning him about a German agent posing as an officer with the Supreme HQ:

*“Link between this agent and the Germans is being maintained by the chief of the German intelligence service center Ott, director of aluminum firm ‘Hansa Leichtmetall’ in Mostar. He works for General Glaise [Horstenau] and uses the following code names: ‘Doctor Bauks’ [sic], ‘R’, ‘513’. This is for your information, so you can take appropriate measures.”*⁷⁹⁸

⁷⁹⁴ NAW, T-313, Roll 192, 7452291-2, Memorandum on meeting with General Phülstein and liaison officer to 2nd Regiment „Brandenburg“ (28 October 1943).

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., 7452963-6, „Brandenburg“ Division, Action against Tito (12 November 1943).

⁷⁹⁶ KAW, B/67:145, Kasche to Foreign ministry (10 December 1943).

⁷⁹⁷ Ott did not travel to the Supreme HQ, so the plan was cancelled. Boeckl proved to be a poor choice for such a delicate mission because of his constant drunkenness, and he was relieved of duty. His special detail, under the command of another officer, went into action with the paratroopers during the abortive attempt to capture Tito in Operation “Rösselsprung” on 25 May 1944: *Nemačka obaveštajna služba*, Vol. IX, p. 1489.

⁷⁹⁸ *Sabrana djela*, Vol. XVII, p. 282, Dimitrov to Tito (9 November 1943).

One day later, Tito responded that the case of the German engineer-spy “was well-known” to the Supreme HQ. There were no enemy agents in the Supreme HQ, the cable continued, but there was a Partisan officer whose task was to extract information from Ott. “The issue is known to us and there is no reason to be worried”.⁷⁹⁹

In his contacts with the Partisan envoys, Hans Ott had always tried to appear “as a German who was sympathetic and even friendly to the People’s Liberation Movement”.⁸⁰⁰ According to his post-war statement, the Partisans tried to capitalize on this attitude by attempting to recruit him as an agent. During one meeting in Pisarovina in the Summer of 1944, Stilinović told Ott that the Yugoslavs considered him “one of their own”, and asked him whether he was willing to supply information of military value. In exchange, the engineer was promised protection (presumably after the war) and was offered to be flown to Moscow to join the “National Committee for a Free Germany”⁸⁰¹ if he so desired. Ott accepted and was questioned on the strength and dispositions of the German forces and of defense plans of various towns and cities under Axis control. He was also asked for details on the “new weapons”, most likely, the V-1 flying bombs the Germans had been using since mid-June 1944.⁸⁰²

The fact that Ott accepted to disclose sensitive intelligence to the NOVJ’s representatives did not mean that he changed sides for good; one Partisan document from late October 1944 still calls him “the top German agent in our headquarters”.⁸⁰³ Ott almost certainly realized that the war was lost for the Third Reich and he sought to curry favor with the victors-to-be without actually defecting.⁸⁰⁴ Whenever he was in Zagreb, Bakrač approached him with new requests for information. Ott was not forthcoming while in hospital after sustaining injuries in late January 1945, citing security fears as the reason for his silence.⁸⁰⁵ After he had returned to duty in early March, he resumed his “spying” activities and supplied Bakrač with information on the strength and morale of German and NDH forces, as well as his personal impressions on the war situation in general. The intelligence he provided was of mixed value. For instance, he gave a reasonably accurate estimate of the

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 203, Tito to Dimitrov (10 November 1943).

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 355.

⁸⁰¹ The committee (in original: *Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland*) was formed in mid-1943 in the Soviet Union around a cadre of German Communists and anti-fascists recruited from the ranks of German POWs.

⁸⁰² HR HDA 1521, Box 31, File 546 Stilinović, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁸⁰³ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 200, (untitled) (27 October 1944).

⁸⁰⁴ Ott's colleagues Nemetschek and Manns followed suit, and both were recorded supplying Bakrač with confidential information in the early months of 1945. See HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 200 and 224, Bakrač's reports on visits to Zagreb on 15-18 January (undated) and 16 April 1945 (21 April 1945).

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., 206, Report on visit to Zagreb from 26 February –1 March 1945 (undated).

overall German strength in the Balkans in late March, putting it at 170,000 men.⁸⁰⁶ As their spring offensive in Syrmia got underway in mid-April, the Yugoslavs wanted to know more on the locations of various divisions and Corps under Löhr's command. The partial list that Ott provided on 14 April (and which Bakrač related to his superiors immediately) was practically useless.⁸⁰⁷ The engineer also told the Yugoslav major that the Third Reich would use a new wonder weapon ("soporific gas") to influence the decisions at the San Francisco peace conference and then sue for peace through President Harry Truman ("newcomer and therefore more understanding [than Roosevelt]"). These were, of course, nothing but rumors illustrative of the desperation that had set in the German ranks in the twilight of the war. Ott was no exception: in mid-April he asked Bakrač for advice on what course of action he personally should take in the following weeks. The latter answered him that he "could still be of great service" to the Yugoslavs, but only if he stayed where he was.⁸⁰⁸ Ott stayed in Zagreb until early May, when he went to Slovenia and then to Austria. He returned to the city in July 1945, again a prisoner of the Partisans.⁸⁰⁹

In addition to the efforts of their envoys to Pisarovina, the Germans used the exchanged soldiers as a further source of intelligence on the Partisans. The returning men were required to give statements with general observations on the time spent in captivity. The questionings usually revolved around unit identification, movements, strength, armament, morale and the supply situation of the guerrillas. Sometimes the returnees were asked very specific questions. For instance, in November 1943 the 2nd Panzer Army was informed that the AVNOJ session was to take place in the Croatian town of Otočac. The Germans therefore made a concerted intelligence effort to pinpoint the exact building where the event was to take place, in order to launch a precision air-strike. The efforts proved to be in vain, however; not even "the precise questioning of the German returnees, who had previously been kept in Otočac, produced any results".⁸¹⁰ The neutral zone and the mood of the local population were

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid., 207, Report on visit to Zagreb from 12-16 March 1945 (undated). Given that Army Group E totaled some 180,000 Men in early May (NAW, T-77, Roll 780, 5507027, Strength of Eastern Front, 14 May 1945) it would be reasonable to assume that it had about 200,000 at the time Ott made his report.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid., 220, (untitled) (14 April 1945). None of the three divisions Ott said were in Syrmia were actually there: the 118th Jäger was in Austria, the 114th Jäger was in Italy and the 392nd Legionnaire was in the northern Croatian littoral. The 181st Infantry was around Derventa, but it had not arrived from Bihać, as Ott claimed, but from Sarajevo. Of three corps commands (34th, 69th and 89th), Ott gave the correct location for only one (69th); the 34th was not in Central Bosnia, but facing the Yugoslav Army in Syrmia; the 89th Corps was not in Yugoslavia at all, but in Germany: <http://www.axishistory.com/index.php/axis-nations/germany-a-austria/149-germany-heer/heer-korps/2800-lxxxix-armeekorps> (last accessed on 26 April 2013).

⁸⁰⁸ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 223, Report on visit to Zagreb from 16-19 April 1945 (undated).

⁸⁰⁹ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 164 Ott, Statement of Hans Ott.

⁸¹⁰ NAW, T-313, Roll 487, 000983, 3rd SS Panzer Corps to 2nd Panzer Army (14 November 1943).

also observed from within. Thus, in early December 1943, the returnees could report that the people of Pisarovina hoped for a German takeover and that some were ready to provide active help to the troops.⁸¹¹ German intelligence was also very interested in the level of cooperation between the Partisans and the Western Allies and the atmosphere surrounding it. One Croatian returnee reported in early January 1944 that, although the British supply drops were becoming more frequent with each day, the Partisans still “cursed” the “reactionary circles” in the West for supporting their greatest enemies, the Chetniks.⁸¹² In late August 1944, one German travelling by wagon from Lika to Pisarovina for exchange used the opportunity to question the owner of the cart about Partisan airstrips in the area. The peasant told him that one such installation was currently under construction near Topusko and was almost complete. Once that was completed, the Partisans had told the peasant, the Allies would use the base for a large-scale airborne operation.⁸¹³ In December 1944, the German military police could report that the intelligence provided by the exchanged soldiers had proven “essential” for clarifying the enemy situation.⁸¹⁴

The three men tasked with the handling of the prisoner exchange on the Partisan side were well versed in the spy trade thanks to long years of working underground as active Communists. With the exception of Marijan Stilinović, who remained first and foremost a politician, they all spent the last year and a half of the war working in the intelligence structures of the Croatian branch of the NOVJ. Josip Brnčić had been employed in the Main Intelligence Center of the Main HQ of Croatia before being made the 10th Corps chief intelligence officer in March 1944. In early 1945 he was appointed chief of the Third Directorate (military counter-intelligence) with the Croatian OZNA.⁸¹⁵ Bakrač was a major serving with the same directorate at least since this organization had been created in the Spring of the 1944.

Bakrač’s reports on his trips to Zagreb from 1944 and 1945 provide a useful overview of the intelligence activities the envoys performed while negotiating prisoner exchanges. The reports usually contained observations on Axis fortifications in and around the city, and the

⁸¹¹ Ibid., Roll 488, 000439, Plenipotentiary-General to 2nd Panzer Army (7 December 1943). The fact that the local population did not universally support the Partisans was confirmed during the German incursion into the neutral zone in May 1944 when some 100 people chose to leave the area together with the German troops: *Zbornik/V/27/201*, Turopolje-Posavina Detachment to 34th Division (9 May 1944)

⁸¹² NAW, T-311, Roll 286, 000173-4, Statement of Dr. Dušan Dragojlović (17 January 1944).

⁸¹³ Ibid., Roll 192, 000899, Intelligence section of Army Group F to various Luftwaffe commands (27 August 1944).

⁸¹⁴ Ibid., Roll 188, 001039, Activity report of Chief Commissioner of Field Police with Army Group F and subordinated Secret Field Police Groups for December 1944 (5 January 1945).

⁸¹⁵ VA, 119/4, 2, 1-16/2, Supreme HQ to Main HQ for Croatia (30 January 1945).

number and morale of the troops who manned them. For example, Bakrač once used a short stop in the village of Zdenčina (last German outpost before the neutral zone) to scout its defenses and give an estimate of the garrison's strength.⁸¹⁶ In mid-January 1945, he wrote that the enemy positions along the road from Pisarovina to Zagreb remained unchanged since the last time he had described them. The "bunker-building frenzy" had subsided, the major said, and no new bunkers or trenches in the city itself could be observed. The streets were full of German military personnel, most of them in transit. Their morale was low, and an increasing number of desertions caused frequent checks by the military police.⁸¹⁷ The reports also contained details about the damage wrought by the Allied air raids. For instance, on 14 April 1944, the Main HQ for Croatia demanded more information on the effect of the bombing of Zagreb and the nearby airfield at Borongaj.⁸¹⁸ Two days later, Bakrač completed a list of installations damaged in the city and added that the "airfield was destroyed, but the hangers have largely remained intact".⁸¹⁹ The major also gave his impressions regarding the mood of the civilian population, details on everyday life and the functioning of the NDH's institutions.⁸²⁰

The visits to the Croatian capital also provided an opportunity to contact the resistance cells operating within the city. Bakrač wrote in mid-April 1944 that "since we have constantly been followed by [enemy] agents, we could only deliver the most important letters, but not much more".⁸²¹ One year later, the Partisan envoy met with a certain Major Gustin of the NDH's Home Guard, who provided him with the defense plan of Zagreb. This was a critically important piece of intelligence since the Yugoslav Army was expected to arrive at the city gates within several weeks. The information the major brought with him was encouraging: Zagreb would probably not be defended; the Home Guard were poorly armed and would not fight. "We can count one hundred percent on the help of both the Home Guard and the civilian population", Bakrač concluded.⁸²²

One question which remains to be answered is whether the opposing sides used the prisoner exchange to infiltrate agents into enemy ranks. In order to provide an answer, we

⁸¹⁶ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 142, Report on prisoner exchange (27 April 1944).

⁸¹⁷ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 200, Report on visit to Zagreb on 15-18 January 1945 (undated).

⁸¹⁸ *Zbornik/V/26/692*, Main HQ for Croatia to Žumberak area command (14 April 1944).

⁸¹⁹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 139, Report on prisoner exchange (16 April 1944); the airfield was severely damaged in the raid, with a substantial loss in aircraft: Danijel Frka et al., *Zrakoplovstvo Nezavisne države Hrvatske 1941.-1945.* (Zagreb: P.C. Grafičke usluge, 1998), pp. 118-9.

⁸²⁰ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 200, 215 and 217, Reports on visits to Zagreb on 15-18 January, 13-16 February and 12-16 March 1945 (all undated).

⁸²¹ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 139, Report on prisoner exchange (16 April 1944).

⁸²² HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 223, Report on visit to Zagreb on 16-19 April 1945 (undated).

must take a closer look at the involvement of the SS and the SD in the prisoner exchange process. These organizations were nominally prohibited from negotiating with the Partisans since November 1942. The reality was very different, however. Higher SS and Police Leader in Croatia, General Konstantin Kammerhofer, told his American interrogators that he, along with his subordinate, SS-Lieutenant Colonel Günther Hermann of Action Group E in Zagreb, played an active role in the Pisarovina cartel “although we had no authorization to do so from the Reichsführer SS [...]”⁸²³ German envoy Peternell, who died in May 1944, was Hermann’s agent.⁸²⁴ The camp at Jankomir, the main collection point for exchange prisoners, stood under the auspices of Action Commando 4 (Zagreb) of the SD. This same command often provided trucks for prisoner transports to Pisarovina, and its members went to the village on at least one occasion wearing the uniforms of the Wehrmacht.⁸²⁵

According to several Yugoslav sources, Action Commando 4 concerned itself with the systematic infiltration of agents through prisoner exchange. The commando’s chief, SS-Major Rudolf Korndörfer had personally led the operation, actively participating in the selection of the agents, some of which were recruited in the Jankomir camp. The agents were mostly camouflaged as “replacement Partisans”, i.e. the people who were offered for exchange instead of the persons whom the Partisan demanded, but who could not be found. In one instance, two such agents were exchanged with the group of Partisans in mid-July 1944. This operation ended in a failure, as one of the agents was arrested only three days after she had arrived in the Partisan-held territory and the other was forced into hiding. The Partisans got wind of the operation via their own agent who himself had been infiltrated through an exchange. He was an Austrian deserter who volunteered to go back and spy for the Partisans.⁸²⁶

This anecdote raises several points warrant further discussion. Korndörfer’s commando was directly subordinate to Hermann, who was very close to Horstenau. The two were so close, in fact, that this high-ranking SS officer was practically willing to let one of the 20 July conspirators (von Guttenberg) escape because he was the general’s close friend. Given that Horstenau was very interested in keeping the back-channel to the Partisan

⁸²³ IfZM, ZS-0948, p.39, Interrogation of Constantin [sic] Kammerhofer (31 March 1947), available at: <http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/archiv/zs/zs-0948.pdf> (last accessed on 28 April 1943).

⁸²⁴ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 196 Peternell, Archive of Hans Helm.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., File 289 Nemetschek, Statement of Erik Feldmann; ADAP/E/VII/209, Memo (28 November 1943).

⁸²⁶ KAW, B:67/164, Živorad Mihailović-Šilja, *O razmeni zarobljenika*, pp. 13-6. The author allegedly quoted some German documents and the chief intelligence officer with the Main HQ for Croatia, Dalibor Jakša-Maljić, but provided no footnotes; *Nemačka obaveštajna služba*, Vol. V, p. 588. This work, being a textbook rather than a historical study, also provides no footnotes.

commands open, it is unlikely that he would support any action which could compromise these contacts. Hans Helm, who was the police attaché to the German embassy and a man likely to possess knowledge of the SD covert operations, said that he did not believe the contacts were used for the infiltration of agents for precisely the same reason.⁸²⁷ The situation might have changed after both Horstenau and Hermann left Zagreb between October and November 1944, but the available sources do not explicitly mention any further infiltrations akin to that of the early Summer.⁸²⁸

Whether the Partisans exploited the prisoner exchange contacts for similar purposes is equally unclear. German deserters were known to have been used for counter-intelligence purposes on a local level, but the sources are silent on their possible involvement in more ambitious intelligence operations.⁸²⁹ It is known that the Germans were prepared for this eventuality, at least since late 1944, as the army's Secret Field Police became involved with the exchange cartel. On 25 November, it was decided that all returnees were to be isolated and subjected to questioning immediately after their release. The interrogators would then provide recommendations on the future deployment of the exchanged personnel.⁸³⁰ This measure came none too soon, for the listing service had managed to intercept a cable from the Main HQ for Croatia which instructed the Partisan intelligence organizations to "recruit the captured German soldiers and send them across the lines as terrorists and propagandists". As the prisoner exchange arrangement offered an excellent opportunity for infiltrating these defectors back into German-held territory, the Chief Commissioner of the Field Police with Army Group F made the screening of returnees the main task of the Secret Field Police Group 171. The commissioner had personally briefed his subordinates on the interrogation

⁸²⁷ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 164 Ott, Statement of Hans Helm. Helm was being continuously informed of the contacts with the Partisans, but he preferred not to get involved directly. He had even forbidden the attempts one of his top agents engaged in to recruit Bakrač for fear of jeopardizing the prisoner exchange contacts: Ibid., Box 31, File 24 Bakrač, Statement of Hans Helm.

⁸²⁸ Although the "replacement Partisans" caused some apprehension, what really worried the NOVJ commands were the common defectors from the NDH's armed forces who came over in droves nearly every month: HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1134, 605, Pisarovina command to 4th Corps' HQ (27 March 1944); Ibid., Roll D-1082, 552-3, Instructions for military-intelligence service (8 December 1943).

⁸²⁹ For one example, see Kühnrich-Hitze, *Deutsche bei Titos Partisanen*, p.101. Milovan Dželebdžić's monograph on the Partisan intelligence service (*Obaveštajna služba u NOR-u*, Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1987) does not make mention of the employment of German defectors and deserters as spies.

⁸³⁰ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000634, Supplement to activity report of Abwehr officer with Army Group F for period 16-30 November 1944 (10 December 1944). As an appropriate location for accommodation of the returnees could not be found by early December, the debriefings had to take place in one of the military hospitals in the city: Ibid., 000526-7, Supplement to activity report of Abwehr officer with Army Group F for period 1-15 December 1944 (27 December 1944).

guidelines and secured the full cooperation of the exchange commission under Nemetschek and Manns.⁸³¹

7. The prisoner exchange cartel and the treatment of prisoners, 1944-1945

As we have seen, the Germans entered 1944 with an entirely new approach towards Partisan prisoners. The NOVJ was denied formal recognition, but its captured members were granted the coveted “prisoner of war” status which should have entitled them to the protection of international law. Whether the troops on the ground would be able to break with old habits was still questionable. Their commands therefore repeated the new regulations for weeks after they had first become known. On 20 January 1944, the 15th Mountain Corps re-issued the leaflet from early December 1943 concerning the treatment of enemy captives and defectors which in part read “the enemy must be destroyed without thinking during the fighting itself”, but that the Partisans who surrender must be treated as prisoners of war.⁸³² Apart from special leaflets, troops were continually reminded of the new regulations in day-to-day orders: “[...] 6) It should be pointed out again, that the captured bandits must be classified and treated as prisoners of war (they are not to be shot!)”.⁸³³ The documents from early 1944 also stressed the importance of prisoner exchange. For example, on 28 January, the intelligence officer of the aforementioned Corps wrote that the office of Plenipotentiary General was “in steady need of exchange prisoners”. These should be “active Partisans and not those forcibly mobilized” and Horstenau’s staff should be immediately informed of their number. In mid-February, the intelligence officer noted that the need for these persons had become “very urgent!”⁸³⁴

⁸³¹ Ibid., Roll 188, 001040-1, 111043, Activity report of Chief Commissioner of Field Police with Army Group F and subordinated Secret Field Police Groups for December 1944 (5 January 1945). Reports of this command for 1945 are not available. Until more evidence comes to light, it is impossible to say whether the suspicions concerning the infiltration of German defectors were proven or not.

⁸³² NAW, T-314, Roll 563, 001320, To German soldiers (20 January 1944).

⁸³³ NAW, T-314, Roll 564,000367, Transport of prisoners of war and defectors (15 February 1944). The 2nd Panzer Army issued similar guidelines in mid-March: Ibid., Roll 565, 000479-80, Treatment of bandit defectors (15 March 1944). German primary sources for divisional and corps levels for the second half of 1944 are very sparse, but it seems that these orders were not changed until the end of the war. The much better preserved records of the Army Groups E and F certainly do not offer any evidence to the contrary.

⁸³⁴ NAW, T-314, Roll 563, 001327, Transporting prisoners of war and defectors (28 January 1944); NAW, T-314, Roll 564, 000366, Transporting prisoners of war and defectors (14 February 1944). Selection of suitable candidates for exchange was entrusted to divisional intelligence officers (*Nemačka obaveštajna služba*, Vol V, pp. 167, 170). For example, in late January 1944 in Western Bosnia, the 373rd Legionnaire Division arrested three women and one man suspected of harboring the Partisans. Three of them were sent to Germany for

What effect this new policy had is difficult to gauge. On the one hand, there are documents from the first half of 1944 that confirm that at least some German units were taking these orders seriously. The concerned KPJ district committee for Šibenik informed their superiors that “defectors and captured comrades are treated well [by the Germans], unless they are commanders. This dampens the fighting spirit and encourages surrender and defection”. The 7th Division of the NOVJ reported that since some of its fighters were exchanged, the “fence-sitters and ditherers” (*špekulanti i kolebljivci*) within the ranks ceased fearing capture.⁸³⁵ On the other hand, it had been observed that the troops, especially of lower rank, were becoming increasingly undisciplined, even to the point of observing the *Führerbefehle* only “conditionally”. The frustration caused by three years of constant, grueling anti-guerrilla struggle that seemed to have no effect now began to reflect itself in widespread looting, arson and massacres of civilians, even of those who were supposedly friendly to the Axis cause.⁸³⁶ Now that the NOVJ had been de-facto recognized as a regular army, it was expected it to fight like one. However, as the Partisans continued alternating between open confrontation and asymmetrical warfare when it suited them, the Germans reacted by applying both spontaneous and premeditated reprisals. These were undertaken whenever there was a real or perceived instance of a non-observation of the rules of war.⁸³⁷ All in all, it may be said that a Partisan who was captured directly by the Germans while carrying his arms openly had much better chances of survival in 1944 and 1945 than before. On the contrary, a civilian suspected of supporting a comrade engaged in underground activities or sabotage could expect little mercy if caught. A few examples: the 264th Infantry

forced labor, while the fourth person, who was the oldest in the group, was added to the division’s hostage pool (NAW, T-314, Roll 564,000323, Activity report of Secret Field Police Group 9 for February 1944, 26 February 1944). As all four were “bandit helpers”, and not serving Partisans, none were retained for exchange.

⁸³⁵ NAW, T-314, Roll 563, 001201, District committee for Šibenik to Regional committee for Dalmatia (16 February 1944); *Zbornik*/IX/6/55, 7th Division to 4th Corps (6 May 1944). During the fighting for the island of Šolta in May 1944, the Partisans evacuated their wounded by sea. One German unit noted that since these vessels were marked with Red Cross insignia, they were not fired upon: Ibid., 000078, Preliminary final report Šolta (12 May 1944). The restraint practiced by the German ground forces was unfortunately not replicated by the air-force and the navy. “Marin II” was a Partisan hospital ship used for ferrying the wounded from Šolta to Vis. The ship was strafed by German aircraft on 10 May 1944 with a loss of two wounded. A day later, the ship was sunk by German attack boats at the entrance to the harbor of Vis: nearly all the wounded and members of the crew perished. See *Zbornik*/VIII/2/320-7, 4th Naval Sector to NOVJ Navy Main HQ (12 May 1944) and *ibid.*, p. 330-2, NOVJ Navy Main HQ to all subordinated units (17 May 1944). The war diary of the Kriegsmarine’s Admiral of the Adriatic merely reads that the attack boats sunk “a larger passenger ship”: NAW, T-1022, Roll 3956, War diary entry for 11 May 1944.

⁸³⁶ Schmider, *Der Jugoslawische Kriegschauplatz*, pp. 1080-2. In April 1944, the 7th SS Mountain Division burned a number of Croatian villages in the Dalmatian hinterland and murdered some 2,000 inhabitants, many of whom had relatives serving in the NDH armed forces and various German formations.

⁸³⁷ NAW, T-314, Roll 563, 000741, Daily report for 9 June 1944; *Zbornik*/IV/27/638, Orders for operation „Sonnenstich“ (11 July 1944). Civilians suspected of supporting hostile Chetniks were treated in the same way: the 7th SS burned three villages in eastern Bosnia in late September 1944 after several of its members were killed by the Chetniks: NAW, T-311, Roll 193, 000804, Daily report for 20 September 1944.

Division once shot two “suspects” after one of its vehicles hit a mine; the 369th Infantry Division was ordered in July 1944 to burn two villages and hang all males capable of carrying arms as revenge for the killing of Luftwaffe Captain Kirschner and suspected mutilation of his body, etc.⁸³⁸

Captured Partisans were taken to NDH facilities and German camps in Croatia, or to German concentration camps in Belgrade and Zemun.⁸³⁹ From there, they would be shipped to special camps inside Germany or in the occupied territories. According to the German Red Cross, these facilities occupied a middle-ground between concentration camps and camps for “civilian internees”. By war’s end, it appears as though captured Partisans had been transferred to the POW camps occupied by the soldiers of the former Yugoslav Royal Army.⁸⁴⁰ How many members of the NOVJ were sent to these camps in 1944 and 1945 is

⁸³⁸ The treatment of Partisan captives in the last year of the war is in dire need of further research. My hypothesis is partly based on the published materials of the Yugoslav “State commission for investigation of the crimes perpetrated by the occupier and his helpers” (Miodrag Đ. Zečević, Jovan P. Popović (Ed.), *Dokumenti iz istorije Jugoslavije: Državna komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njegovih pomagača iz Drugog svjetskog rata*, Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2000, Vol. IV). The findings of the State Commission should be taken with a grain of salt as they were to a large extent determined by the need to justify the claims for reparations from Germany and those for Allied material help made by the Yugoslav government in the immediate post-war period (Tomasevich, *Occupation*, p. 743). Despite these shortcomings, the Commission’s materials can shed some light on the topic. For instance, all 29 junior officers, NCOs and privates (all from non-Cossack, non-SS units) accused by the commission of committing war crimes in the NDH during 1944 were apparently involved with massacres of civilians, not members of the NOVJ. The atrocities mostly took place in Dalmatia in the first six months of 1944 and were to a large degree carried out by “Trupps” made up of persons of different nationalities under German command. One contemporary Chetnik report from Dalmatia illustrates the difference between the treatment of “regular” Partisans and that of their real or imagined supporters. Whereas 180 “active Partisans” were taken alive and then transported as laborers to Germany, Partisan sympathizers and suspicious civilians found wandering in the countryside were shot out of hand: *Zbornik/XIV/3/657-60*, HQ of Dinara Chetnik district to district commander (29 May 1944). Likewise, none of the eight defendants (including Colonel-General Lohr, six other generals and one colonel) who were brought before the Yugoslav military tribunal in February 1947 were indicted on charges of executing captured Partisans after 1943. As they were tried under the principle of command responsibility they were accountable for the transgressions committed by their subordinates, it would be safe to assume that the latter obeyed the policy of sparing surrendering guerrillas to a large degree. For more on the tribunal proceedings see Jovo Popović, *Vješala za generale* (Zagreb: Stvarnost, 1986).

⁸³⁹ For instance, some 8,400 Partisans and Partisan suspects from the NDH were shipped to the Sajmište concentration camp in Belgrade from January 1943 to July 1944: <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/sr/sajmiste-anhaltelager.php> (last accessed on 8 May 2013).

⁸⁴⁰ *Zur Geschichte der Kriegsgefangenen im Osten, Teil III - Lebensbedingungen und Sterblichkeit in Kriegsgefangenenlagern Jugoslawiens, Polens und der Tschechoslowakei (CSR)* (Bonn: Deutsches Rotes Kreuz Suchdienst, 1959), p. 27. There is no definitive number regarding the mortality rate of captured Partisans in these camps. According to the incomplete survey of war casualties from 1964, 3,747 members of the NOVJ from the territory of today’s Croatia’s died in captivity: Vladimir Geiger, „Ljudski gubici Hrvatske u Drugom svjetskom ratu koje su prouzročili 'okupatori i njihovi pomagači': brojidbeni pokazatelji (procjene, izračuni, popisi) in ČSP, 3 (2011): 705. The de-facto recognition of the NOVJ as a regular army brought an end to the suffering of the captured Partisans who had been sent to work camps in Norway in 1942-3. The camps were run by the SS, OT and the Wehrmacht. More than 84 percent of the 1,373 prisoners who died in captivity and who are known by name died in the first two years. In January 1944, the inmates received the first food parcels from the Red Cross and in April all camps came under the auspices of the Wehrmacht. These events signaled

difficult to extrapolate. The Germans did usually not differentiate between those captured with arms and the civilians suspected of supporting them. In late July 1944, the quartermaster section of Army Group F reported that some 14,300 Italian prisoners “and bandits” were scheduled for transport to the Reich. One later report on the progress of the transport mentions only Italians, but not the Yugoslav prisoners.⁸⁴¹ Indeed, it seems that the Italians continued to constitute the bulk of the prisoners in German custody. According to the post-war testimony of a German soldier serving with the “21st Army Prisoner Collection Point” (*Armee-Gefangenensammelstelle 21*), the main task of his unit, formed in January 1945 in Sarajevo, was to handle “mostly” Italian POWs and deliver them to Wehrmacht’s transit camps in the region. Alfred Baumann, who served with Transit Camp 135 (*Dulag 135*) in Sarajevo during the same period, also remembered that the majority of inmates were Italian. In addition, he stated that “very few prisoners” were brought in during the first three months of 1945. When the camp was evacuated from Sarajevo to Zagreb in early April, it held close to 300 prisoners. In Zagreb, Dulags 135 and 185 which had been under the command of Army Group E were disbanded. Their inmates were handed over to Dulag 161 of Army Group F which was situated in the bricklaying district in the eastern part of the city.⁸⁴²

Details concerning the treatment of Partisans while in captivity are sketchy and sometimes conflicting. Judging by the available information, conditions in German prisoner camps in the NDH were much better than in occupied Serbia, where disease, torture and executions claimed the lives of prisoners well into 1944.⁸⁴³ Unlike in Serbia, the Partisans in Croatia were in a position to intervene on behalf of their men through the envoys in Pisarovina and Zagreb. Already in January, Brnčić protested owing to the allegedly maltreatment in the prisoner camps and demanded that the living conditions be improved. His German counterparts assured him “emphatically” of their commitment to the principles of

the beginning of a drop in the mortality rate (Dr. Barbara N. Wiesinger, “Iskustva i sećanja srpskih prinudnih radnika u nacional-socijalističkoj Nemačkoj 1941.–1945.” in: *Tokovi istorije*, 3 (2006): 80; Dragan Cvetković, „Nemački logori u Norveškoj 1942.-1945. godine—numeričko određenje gubitaka jugoslavenskih zatvorenika” in: *ibid.*, 2 (2012): 96-7; <http://logorcrvenikrst.wikidot.com/izlozba:internirci-jugoistocne-srbije-u-norveskoj>, (last accessed on 24 May 2013). By the end of the year, the inmates were allowed to receive additional food parcels and clothing from the United States and Yugoslavia (*Zur Geschichte der Kriegsgefangenen*, p. 27).

⁸⁴¹ NAW, T-311, Roll 190, 000619, Weekly report of the quartermaster section (27 July 1944). See also *ibid.*, 000559, Weekly report of the quartermaster section (15 October 1944).

⁸⁴² VA, 70, 5, 7 and 9, Post-war interrogations of German camp personnel (ca. 1947). “Dulags” were not meant to hold prisoners for a long time, but rather, to facilitate their “transit” to camps in Germany. On 15 November 1944, Army Group F gave permission to use Dulag inmates for prisoner exchange: NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000637, Contribution of Abwehr officer to the activity report of intelligence section for period 1-15 November 1944 (25 November 1944).

⁸⁴³ For the description of the camps at Sajmište and Banjica, see Glišić, *Teror*, pp. 132-151. An outbreak of typhus in mid-1944 killed almost ten percent of inmates in Dulag 172: NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000745, Monthly report of the chief medical officer of Army Group F for July 1944 (7 August 1944).

humanity.⁸⁴⁴ The majority of the returnees in mid-April 1944 had no complaints regarding their stay in prisoner camps; only one man cited poor treatment in captivity, while another complained of unsatisfactory care in a Zagreb hospital.⁸⁴⁵ It can be assumed that the steadily deteriorating war situation from mid-1944 onwards had an effect on the treatment of inmates; let us remember that the Germans released almost 200 Partisans in November 1944 because they had nothing to feed them with. Likewise, the sorry state of the German returnees and their reports on the conditions in the Partisan camps from late 1944 and early 1945 (see below) did certainly not serve as an incentive to improve the lot of the captured Partisans. In February 1945, Bakrač protested against instances of maltreatment but more so, since the Germans occasionally handed over members of the NOVJ to the NDH authorities. In other words, being in German custody was still much more preferable to being a prisoner of the Ustashe.⁸⁴⁶

Dobrivoje Krstić, who served in the 4th Sandžak Brigade, left a detailed account of his experiences from German captivity in early 1945. Wounded in the leg and unable to move, he and several of his comrades attempted to fool their way through the German lines in Eastern Bosnia. The ruse did not work and they were brought to a provisional prison already crowded with captured Partisans and suspicious civilians. After three days, Krstić received some food and basic medical treatment for the first time. Three weeks later, his group was shipped by train to Sarajevo. His injuries took a turn for worse and he had to be operated. In hospital, the

⁸⁴⁴ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 667-8, Report on the state of prisoner exchange (30 January 1944).

⁸⁴⁵ HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1091, 138, Report on prisoner exchange (16 April 1944). The promise made by the German negotiators in Zagreb and Pisarovina that the Partisan wounded would be treated in Axis hospitals, was honored in late January 1944 when the 2nd Panzer Army issued the appropriate order (Odić, *Neostvareni planovi*, p. 194). The order seems to have remained valid until the end of the war. References to the time spent in these institutions are repeatedly found in Yugoslav sources: See for instance VA, 119/1, 2, 1, 125, NOVJ Navy HQ to Main HQ for Croatia (27 February 1944) and interview with Viktor Malinarić at http://ipd-ssi.hr/?page_id=5296 (last accessed on 27 March 2013).

⁸⁴⁶ HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 215, Report on visit to Zagreb from 13-16 February 1945 (undated). NDH authorities pursued a policy towards the captured Partisans that was not always in line with the German one. The establishment of the neutral zone led the Ministry of Defense to order that all Partisans captured in the Zagreb area were to be brought to the provisional POW camp "Na Kanalu" (HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 810, Military report for the period 17-24 February 1944). In late July, the Ministry of Defense ordered that the prisoners should be treated according to the Geneva Convention and turned over to the Germans until a full-fledged POW camp could be established (VA, CK KPH, Roll 42, 448, Military report, 2 August 1944). Shortly thereafter, the Ministry issued an order calling for the execution between ten and fifty "insurgents or members of their families" for every slain member of the Home Guard or the Ustashe (ibid., 469). This may have been a reaction to the amnesty proclaimed by the Partisan-controlled National Committee after the Tito-Šubašić agreement; the amnesty was not valid for the Ustashe (Drago Karasijević, *Peti korpus NOVJ*, Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1985, pp. 273-4). By October 1944, the NDH Ministry of Defense officially revoked the POW status of captured Partisans (HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1194, 401, Enemy situation report for the period 1-31 October 1944). All these regulations were seldom heeded and remained overshadowed by the vicious life-or-death struggle that proceeded without interruption, between the Partisans and the Ustashe.

treatment was correct and he received three meals a day. When the hospital was transferred to Zagreb, Krstić went along with them. There he continued recovering from his wounds in a room shared with Germans and Ustashe. Once his identity was discovered by the latter, however, a Polish medical orderly had him moved to a room populated exclusively by convalescing Partisans. After recuperation, the inmates were sent to Dulag 161 in Zagreb's brick factory. According to him and several people⁸⁴⁷ who were brought there in early 1945, the conditions were very harsh: it was damp and cold and the food was terrible; some remember incessant interrogations and beatings. The prisoners were brought before a German commission and asked whether they preferred to go to Germany as laborers or to be exchanged in Pisarovina. Many opted for the first option, fearing the second was merely a ruse to get them in front of a firing squad.⁸⁴⁸

It remains to be seen whether the establishment of the prisoner exchange cartel had any impact on the Partisan attitude towards German prisoners in the last sixteen months of the war. As we have seen earlier, the Main HQ for Croatia issued an order already in mid-November 1943 that captured Germans were not to be executed "in principle" so that they could be used for exchange. As a result of the successful conclusion of the negotiations regarding the neutral zone in mid-January 1944, these orders were changed. The vague clause was omitted and all subordinate units were now obliged, unequivocally, to take German prisoners (including wounded) alive, report their names and ready them for exchange: "We have reached an agreement with the German authorities on this issue". The same order was repeated on 20 January, with the addition that even captured Ustashe were to be spared for the same reason.⁸⁴⁹

These regulations applied only to the territory of Croatia; the Partisan units in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not receive similar instructions, although they had been under orders to spare and hold prisoners for some time already. Why Tito chose not to widen the application of this principle to other parts of Yugoslavia when, in fact, he was obliged to do so according to the preamble of the Zagreb agreement is not clear. It would be safe to assume that this

⁸⁴⁷ Nikola Božić, *Rovovi i mostobrani: Osma vojvođanska udarna brigada* (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1989), pp. 394, 497.

⁸⁴⁸ Krstić was chosen to be exchanged by a lucky coincidence. While stating Bela Palanka (some 20 kilometers from Niš) as his birthplace he had drawn the attention of one German officer: "I'll set you free if you carry a letter to my wife in Niš", the officer said. Krstić accepted and his name was added to the next batch of prisoners to be exchanged in Pisarovina. After he had rejoined the Partisans in April 1945, he kept his part of the bargain and travelled to Niš. By the time he got there, the officer's wife had already left town: Dobrivoje Krstić, "Moj drugi život" in: *Četvrta sandžačka NOU brigada* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1986), pp. 359-60.

⁸⁴⁹ VA, 119/1, 2, 4, 24 and 32-3, Main HQ for Croatia to all subordinated units (16 and 20 January 1944).

obligation was largely a nominal one and that it was included as a concession to the Partisans (recognition of the Supreme HQ's authority in the whole of Yugoslavia). In practical terms, the agreement was local in nature, and Tito most likely desired to see first if the Germans would honor the deal before making any steps on a national level.⁸⁵⁰ By the end of the Winter of 1944, it appeared that their commitment to the prisoner exchange process and reduction of violence against captured Partisans was genuine. Almost certainly as a reciprocal measure to the order of the 2nd Panzer Army concerning the treatment of Partisan wounded in Axis hospitals, Tito released his own similar order in mid-March 1944. The order required that "the wounded soldiers of the German army and other enemy formations" be treated humanely and provided with medical help by all units of the NOVJ.⁸⁵¹ These orders did manage to curb, but not eradicate arbitrary executions of prisoners: the hatred towards the Germans was prevalent among both Partisan leaders and common fighters. Still, such incidents were not simply ignored as previously had been the case, but were investigated, either following German prodding or independently of it.⁸⁵²

Beginning in the Spring of 1944, the treatment of German prisoners was largely determined by the relations between the British and the Partisans. The Royal Navy and Air Force began operating in the Adriatic in late 1943. In February 1944, the British landed two commando units on Vis and proceeded to launch amphibious operations against the German-held islands in cooperation with the Dalmatian Partisan units. The treatment of prisoners in these joint actions soon became a source of friction between the allies. In mid-April, General Henry Maitland Wilson, Allied Commander in the Mediterranean, informed the War Cabinet

⁸⁵⁰ In January 1944, the Supreme HQ signaled its willingness to obey the Geneva Convention to the delegates of the IRCC on the condition that the Germans would do the same. The IRCC representatives discussed the issue in detail with the NOVJ's mission in Bari in May 1944, but no agreement was reached (*Zur Geschichte der Kriegsgefangenen*, pp. 24-7). The Yugoslav Red Cross organization received its first set of provisional rules only in late September 1944. It would take another six months before the main council's request for the location, number, and personal data of all POWs in the custody of the Yugoslav Army would filter down the chain of command: VA, 15a, 6, 9, Provisional rules for the Organization of Red Cross for Yugoslavia (23 September 1944); *Ibid.*, 119/4, 2-8/2, General Staff to Main HQ for Croatia (21 March 1945).

⁸⁵¹ *Zbornik*/IV/23/320, 3rd Corps to 16th Division (16 March 1944).

⁸⁵² Even Koča Popović, who was one of the most enlightened Partisan commanders, felt deep contempt, even disgust, towards the German prisoners he encountered. He likened Ilya Ehrenburg's "Fritz" (representing an average German, completely under Hitler's spell) to a certain Fritz of the Feldgendarmerie who had been captured and – to Popović's "deep regret" – released in exchange for some Partisans. The Partisan General also related the story of a German prisoner being shot by his Partisan escort in early March 1944: "we ordered an investigation" (Popović, *Beleške*, pp. 202, 205, entry for 7 March 1944). In January 1944, the units of the 6th Corps executed several Germans they had captured aboard a train. The German envoys in Pisarovina demanded an explanation, and the Main HQ for Croatia inquired about the incident with the 6th Corps' command (HR HDA 1450, Roll D-1090, 515, Main intelligence center to Main HQ for Croatia, 8 January 1944; VA, 119/1, 2, 4, 14, Main HQ for Croatia to 6th Corps, 8 January 1944). I have not found any further information on the findings of these inquiries and possible punishment of the perpetrators.

in London that the Partisans had shot some 45 Germans who were accused of war crimes, and that the British should prepare to distance themselves publicly from the incident should the story break.⁸⁵³ At the same time, Wilson dispatched a message to Tito in which he protested against this unlawful act and threatened that the good relations between the British and the Partisans might suffer on account of it.⁸⁵⁴

The joint landing on Korčula in the final week of April was a resounding success: the local German garrison was all but destroyed and some 450 to 500 of its members were captured.⁸⁵⁵ By 6 May, alarming news had reached London: the Partisans were apparently preparing for another round of executions. The War Cabinet decided on the same day that it would be best if the Prime Minister intervened personally. Five days later, Churchill dispatched a message to Tito in which he requested that all prisoners taken in the joint Anglo-Partisan actions be treated according to international law and all war crimes trials delayed until after the war. Although Churchill put an emphasis on humanitarian considerations, he also revealed the main source of British concern: as the island operations stood under overall British command, the Germans might blame them for the executions and retaliate against some 100,000 British POWs held in Germany.⁸⁵⁶

Tito, fearful of spoiling his relations with the Allies, had already reacted to complaints made by British officers in the country. On 9 May, he ordered the 26th Dalmatian Division on Vis to refrain from any further executions and send the suspected war criminals to his headquarters at Drvar, where they would face trial.⁸⁵⁷ In his talks with the deputy-chief of the British military mission, Lieutenant-Colonel Vivian Street, Tito assured them that the shooting of the prisoners had taken place without his authorization and that such things would not happen in Dalmatia again. At the same time, he said that the severity of German atrocities would not allow the postponement of the trials until after the war. On 13 May, he repeated his message to the Dalmatian partisans and the navy command in a sharper tone:

⁸⁵³ TNA, CAB 79/74, 170, Minutes of War Cabinet meeting (6 May 1944); *ibid.*, CAB 79/73, 98, Minutes of the War Cabinet meeting (13 April 1944).

⁸⁵⁴ Dušan Biber (Ed.), *Tito-Churchill: strogo tajno* (Zagreb: Globus, 1981), p. 136, Wilson to Tito (13 April 1944).

⁸⁵⁵ The Partisan navy reported shipping altogether 513 enemy prisoners from Korčula, but this figure might have included some civilians and collaborators: *Zbornik/VIII/2/270*, Daily report of 4th Naval Sector for 25 April 1944.

⁸⁵⁶ TNA, CAB 79/74, 170, Minutes of War Cabinet meeting (6 May 1944); *ibid.*, FO 954/34, 94, Churchill to Tito (11 May 1944). This concern was not unfounded. In the last week of 1943, the 2nd Panzer Army instructed the 15th Mountain Corps to report any breaches of international law on the part of the Western Allies: NAW, T-313, Roll 488, 000086, 2nd Panzer Army to 15th Mountain Corps (27 December 1943).

⁸⁵⁷ *Zbornik/II/13/65*, Tito to 26th Division (9 May 1944).

*“You are not allowed to shoot anyone. You have already caused us a lot of trouble. I have made a commitment to the Allies in this respect”.*⁸⁵⁸

The assumption of Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean that Tito would cling to the “Soviet precedent” of having war criminals tried during the war proved to be incorrect. On 23 May, Tito dispatched a message for Churchill, informing him of his decision to postpone the trials until after the war in accordance with the Prime Minister’s wish. “I can assure you”, the cable read “that you will have no difficulties from our side in this matter.”⁸⁵⁹

Maclean also reported on the Partisan attitude towards German prisoners in general: at the beginning of the war, the Germans were usually disarmed and released “or exchanged”. Since the Germans failed to reciprocate and had instead continued shooting all captured Partisans as *franc-tireurs*, the latter responded in kind. As the result of the latest incident, however, Tito decided to hand over all prisoners captured in joint operations to the British.⁸⁶⁰ Judging by the content of this message, the British military mission was unaware of the Pisarovina cartel and the effect it had on the Partisan prisoner policy. The Allies found out about the existence of some kind of exchange arrangement several days after Maclean had dispatched his report, as details of Tito’s latest offer became known. He requested the permission to transfer some 600 German prisoners from Vis to the Partisan base in Bari. This would presumably assuage British concerns over their safety and give them ample opportunity to question them. In exchange, Tito wanted them back as soon as their exchange could be arranged. On 23 May, the Allied Force Headquarter turned down the request.⁸⁶¹ One captured British serviceman told his German captors that his side was against the exchange of captured Germans and that it was endeavoring to gain full control over the prisoners on Vis.⁸⁶² The deal was reached: the British could have all prisoners except the officers, ethnic Germans and auxiliaries. On 13 June 1944, the majority of the prisoners from the island were loaded onto Allied vessels and shipped across the Adriatic to Italy.⁸⁶³

Tito had to back down owing to the situation he found himself in after the German attempt on his life in Drvar on 25 May 1944. After he had barely escaped the SS paratroopers,

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 95, Tito to 26th Division and NOVJ Navy HQ (13 May 1944).

⁸⁵⁹ *Strogo tajno*, p.149, Maclean to Orme Sargent (11 May 1944), and p. 162 Tito to Churchill (23 May 1943).

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 154-5, Partisan attitude to prisoners of war (18 May 1944). Up to this point, the Partisans jealously guarded their prisoners and only “loaned” them to the British for interrogation (see next chapter).

⁸⁶¹ Ibid., p. 162.

⁸⁶² NAW, T-314, Roll 563, 000016, Interrogation of Jack Holmes (8 June 1944).

⁸⁶³ Statement of Hans Stemmer about time spent in captivity from 25 April to 28 December 1944 (17 February 1945); facsimile printed in Weingartner, *Erinnerungen*, p. 201.

he went to Vis, effectively placing himself under Allied protection.⁸⁶⁴ The bitter taste remained, however, and from then on he sought every opportunity to deny the British the prisoners interned by the NOVJ.⁸⁶⁵ When he did agree to turn them over, he made sure that the Allies received only the wounded soldiers and NCOs; officers and men fit to walk were retained for exchange.⁸⁶⁶ The concern of the British for the welfare of captured Germans seemed over-excessive to the Partisans. It was a source of constant friction and had led to a number of incidents.⁸⁶⁷ Still, its effect cannot be denied. Most contemporary sources describe the treatment of German prisoners in the smaller camp on Vis and the larger one on the nearby island of Biševo during the Spring and Summer of 1944 as “good”, “very good” or “beyond reproach”. Thanks to Allied shipments, food was abundant and medical care was provided in the island’s main hospital. The prisoners were used for road building and harvesting. Nazi Party members, ethnic Germans and Croatian auxiliaries made up the penal platoon that was made to do the “hardest labor“. Leisure time was usually spent playing cards and football, but also in taking short walks outside the camp (naturally, under escort).⁸⁶⁸

The strong British presence in the littoral, as well as the presence of the Supreme HQ in the same area (first at Drvar, western Bosnia and then Vis) had the desired effect. German returnees, captured guerrillas and defectors all confirmed that the Partisans in the coastal region and the bordering parts of Bosnia were under orders to take prisoners and keep them (officers especially) for exchange. Cases of maltreatment of prisoners were rare and were not sanctioned from above.⁸⁶⁹ Although the Partisans in the remainder of Croatia were under

⁸⁶⁴ In early June, there were 5,000 British troops on Vis, along with some 4,500 Partisans: TNA, CAB 79/75, 374, Suitability of the island of Vis as headquarters (7 June 1944).

⁸⁶⁵ On at least one occasion, this decision stimulated prisoner exchanges on a local level. In early August, Tito prohibited the 2nd Assault Corps from delivering three Germans to the British mission and ordered them exchanged instead: *Zbornik*/II/13/640, Tito to 2nd Assault Corps (8 August 1944). For more on the exchanges in the area of this unit, see next chapter. For another example of prisoners being denied to the British see *Zbornik*/II/14/349, Tito to Main HQ for Macedonia (6 November 1944).

⁸⁶⁶ *Strogo tajno*, p. 385, Foreign office to Minister-resident in the Mediterranean (3 December 1944).

⁸⁶⁷ Koča Popović related an incident from Vis when the British attempted to arrest one high Partisan functionary for slapping a German soldier. “Captured German officers, when bathing, have their backs washed by English soldiers. They [the British] maintain the class distinction and class solidarity even in these circumstances. And they reproached us for intensifying the class struggle! [...] The English still want to fight this war in a gentlemanly fashion according to international regulations despite the fact that 195,000 people were murdered in Kiev alone by hanging, gas chambers, etc“. Popović, *Beleške*, p. 202, entry for 3 March 1944.

⁸⁶⁸ NAW, T-314, Roll 566, 000206, Interrogation of Danilo Zlender (20 March 1944); *ibid.*, Roll 565, 001186-7, Interrogation of Milenko Sojić (10 June 1944); Statement of Hans Stemmer about time spent in captivity from 25 April to 28 December 1944 (17 February 1945); facsimile printed in Weingartner, *Erinnerungen*, p. 201.

⁸⁶⁹ NAW, T-314, Roll 566, 000204, Interrogation of Armi Kovacic (14 March 1944); *ibid.*, 000027, Interrogation of Juraj [sic] Skrlec (30 May 1944); NAW, T-314, Roll 565, 001181, Interrogation of Joso Mažar (19 June 1944); *ibid.*, 001195-7, Interrogation of NCO Walter Weber (12 August 1944). Weber and several of his comrades were captured in June 1944. They were “neither bullied nor maltreated“ while in captivity. On the other hand, he

similar orders, they were more inclined to shoot their prisoners. One list of such incidents compiled by the German exchange commission in Zagreb in early August 1944 and presumably intended for Boris Bakrač, contains no mention of Dalmatia or its hinterland.⁸⁷⁰

The treatment of German prisoners began to worsen in the late Summer and early Fall of 1944. This coincided with the NOVJ's victories in Dalmatia and the rest of Yugoslavia and the steadily deteriorating relations with the Western Allies. The official policy stayed nominally the same, but OZNA reported that the treatment of prisoners “was still not as it is supposed to be” and that the question of prisoners of war should be decided once and for all.⁸⁷¹ Some 600 Germans captured on the island of Brač in late September were the first to suffer the consequences of this change in attitude. According to eyewitnesses, some 150 of them were used to clear the German minefields on the island without specialized equipment and those who survived were shot after they completed their work. Post-war accounts of survivors also mention executions of officers and decimation of ordinary soldiers through hard labor and typhus on Vis and Biševo.⁸⁷² According to British reports, the situation in nearby Montenegro was hardly any better. Their liaison officers informed the Allied command that the 2nd Assault Corps executed some 200 Germans near the town of Grahovo in early November. Wilson filed an official protest with Tito, saying that such practices only served to reinforce the enemy's will to resist and needlessly endangered the lives of Allied POWs in Germany.⁸⁷³ Although the 2nd Corps' command had categorically denied the accusations, Tito sought to assuage Wilson by issuing yet another order concerning the humane treatment of prisoners and threatening transgressors with “the severest punishment”.⁸⁷⁴

reported that the prisoners who were brought in later were not as lucky: four were shot and some others tortured.

⁸⁷⁰ HR HDA 1451, 2.241., 156-7, [untitled] (4 August 1944).

⁸⁷¹ HR HDA 1491, 12.1.1, 12, Activity report of Croatian OZNA's 3rd Directorate for October 1944 (undated).

⁸⁷² See G. Minisini, „Die erschreckende Bilanz“ and the accompanying essay by Matthias Roseanauer in: Weingartner, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 238-9. Hans Stemmer stayed on Vis until 2 December 1944. His contemporary report does not mention any atrocities: Statement of Hans Stemmer about time spent in captivity from 25 April to 28 December 1944 (17 February 1945), facsimile printed in Weingartner, *Erinnerungen*, p. 201. According to one contemporary document, the 8th Corps still had eleven German officers and about 600 NCOs and men in POW camps on Vis in early October (*Zbornik/V/34/520*). The books of “Zbornik” for the remaining months of 1944 do not contain similar information, which may lead to the assumption that the editors sought to conceal the dwindling number of prisoners in this period. Paradoxically, the Partisan 6th Corps in Slavonia was under orders to capture as many Germans for exchange as possible: *Zbornik/V/33/560*, Main HQ for Croatia to 6th Corps (29 September 1944).

⁸⁷³ *Strogo tajno*, p. 410-411, Draft of Wilson's message to Tito (22 December 1944).

⁸⁷⁴ See *Zbornik/II/14/412*, Tito to all regional and Corps commands (5 December 1944) and the accompanying footnotes.

Ironically, the drafting of this order coincided with mass atrocities against German prisoners committed by Dalmatian units during the Autumn operations that culminated in the battle of Knin (25 November-9 December 1944). Partisan troops, by then thoroughly brutalized, experienced victory on a grand scale which triggered a thirst for revenge; their officers either could not or would not intervene. Contemporary Yugoslav reports are frighteningly reminiscent of similar German ones from the years when the German occupation forces practiced unrestrained violence towards prisoners. One intelligence officer complained that not a single prisoner was brought in for questioning during two days of fighting around Knin: prisoners in his sector were taken several hundred meters behind the front line and shot without interrogation. "The enemy resistance would have been weaker had they not known what was going on. [As the enemy knew], he continued to fight tenaciously".⁸⁷⁵ Croatian soldiers serving with the German legionnaire divisions were usually transferred into Partisan units if they defected or were captured. In Knin, their fate was uncertain even after they had become Partisans. The local branch of OZNA wanted to shoot seventeen of them without collecting their particulars, let alone questioning them. A member of the judicial branch of the Main HQ for Croatia intervened and managed to save fourteen of them.⁸⁷⁶ The captured Germans⁸⁷⁷ were brought to the POW camp that was established in Knin after the battle. One OZNA officer reported on the conditions there in late February 1945:

"The prisoner camp under the auspices of [the Knin Area] Command is below any critique. There is no order at all and it looks more like a torture chamber than a camp. The prisoners have no blankets, no heating, the rooms are terribly filthy and badly ventilated, the prisoners do not wash themselves, the sick are not being isolated from the healthy, etc. [The command] has done nothing to improve the situation. I am of the opinion that we should pay

⁸⁷⁵ *Zločin i teror u Dalmaciji*, p. 95, 3rd Directorate of OZNA for Croatia to Commissar of Main HQ for Croatia (13 April 1944). The Germans were terrified at the prospect of being taken captive by the Partisans. When a unit of the 118th Jäger Division was surrounded on the island of Hvar in September 1944, one lieutenant urged a breakthrough at all costs: "He had already been captured once and exchanged, and he did not want to experience it again" (Dr. Willhelm Güther, "Wir und die Insel Hvar" in: Weingartner, *Erinnerungen*, p. 254). Ott told Bakrač once that the reason why the Germans were fighting so tenaciously was that they were afraid to surrender and that the sorry state of soldiers returning from captivity only served to reinforce this sentiment (HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 217, Report on visit to Zagreb from 12-16 March 1945, undated).

⁸⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86, Report of Drago Desput to Central Committee of KPH (17 January 1945).

⁸⁷⁷ The Germans reported 2,730 men killed or missing in the period from 1-5 December 1944 (NAW, T-311, Roll 184, 15th Mountain Corps to Army Group E, 8 December 1944), as well as some 700 wounded who had to be left behind in a railway tunnel outside of Knin. They all died as the ammunition that was stored in the tunnel went off. Both sides accused the other of intentionally triggering the explosion. According to one German survivor, the explosion might have been caused by a stray bullet: Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, Vol. I/1, p. 95.

*more attention to this, so that we could properly use the prisoners for the reconstruction of our country. If an Allied mission were to suddenly arrive [and find the things as they are now], it would leave a very bad impression of us as barbarians”.*⁸⁷⁸

One German doctor captured around Knin later wrote that all prisoners constantly hoped for being exchanged.⁸⁷⁹ This hope would materialize only for a comparatively small number of them. Unlike in the previous years, the NOVJ now held a front line and had a rear area in the classical sense of the word. POW camps were established in the coastal area and the inmates were used to remedy for the chronic manpower shortage the Partisans were suffering from. Common prisoners were put to menial tasks, such as unloading ships in Split and Zadar. Specialists were usually attached to the army rear services (workshops, etc.), but were also deployed to the front line: the engineer company of the 1st Dalmatian Brigade during the battle for Bihać in late March 1945 had in its ranks Austrians, Germans, Belgians, Dutch and members of other nationalities.⁸⁸⁰ Under these circumstances, massive prisoner exchanges did not seem as advantageous as before. Consequently, of all the Germans captured in Dalmatia in the last three months of 1944, we know for certain that the Partisans offered only the exchange of a small number of soldiers from Brač and a group of about 120 prisoners from Knin. An estimated third of the latter did not survive the forced march to Pisarovina in

⁸⁷⁸ *Zločin i teror u Dalmaciji*, p. 688, OZNA of Knin area command to OZNA of 8th Corps (21 February 1945). In mid-April 1945, the Germans in Zagreb requested permission to evacuate the remaining German wounded from the northern Adriatic islands of Pag, Rab and Krk and the adjoining coastal area by using a ship of the Red Cross. The Partisans would be welcome to attach one of their delegates in order to make sure that the mission remained purely humanitarian in nature. Bakrač recommended that the request be granted, for it “would spare us the trouble of having to care for the German wounded” (HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 224, Report on visit to Zagreb on 14 April 1945, 21 April 1945). The mission was probably cancelled due to heavy fighting in the area. Apprehension regarding the fate of German wounded proved to be correct: on 5 April 1945, the Partisans executed thirty German wounded on the island of Pag. When the German defectors protested, the Partisan commander replied that the shooting was vengeance for the death of the same number of his men. “Otherwise, I could not keep my men in line. This is like a rule [in our army]” (Kühnrich-Hintze, *Deutsche bei Titos Partisanen*, pp. 195-6). According to the official historiography, the Yugoslav Army lost 29 killed during the battle for the island (*Hronologija*, p. 1096).

⁸⁷⁹ Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, Vol. I/1, p. 96.

⁸⁸⁰ Ante Kljaković, „Mineri na Bihaću“, in: *Naša Prva dalmatinska 1942.-1945.* (Split: Slobodna Dalmacija, 1982), Vol. II, p. 445. The author adds that one Austrian and one German were later awarded the Yugoslav “Order of Valor”. Austrians were given preferential treatment in late October 1944 in order to entice them to join the newly-created “Austrian Battalions” of the NOVJ (*Zbornik*/II/14/355, Tito to Kardelj, 9 November 1944; *Zločin i teror u Dalmaciji*, p. 132, OZNA Dubrovnik to Mirko Glavina, 1 April 1945. The latter order stipulated that Germans should be used for “the hardest and most dangerous jobs”). The recruitment drive was largely unsuccessful. The political commissar of the 31st Serbian Brigade separated Austrians from Germans on one occasion in October 1944 and gave them a speech calling for them to join the Partisans. “They listened attentively but none of them came forward; they were marched off to a POW camp together with the Germans”: Isidor Đuković, *Trideset prva srpska NOU brigada* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1987), pp. 31-2.

mid-January 1945.⁸⁸¹ There was also one category of prisoners for whom the Partisans did not have much use in their rear area: German officers. In 1941, when the Communist-led guerrillas were still under the illusion that they were waging a class war, they executed all officers as representatives of the bourgeoisie. By 1945, self-interest had replaced ideology as the sole decisive factor in this matter since the Germans offered several Partisans in exchange for one officer (the exact ratio dependent on rank). Consequently, an officer captured in the last phase of the war had a much greater chance of being sent to Pisarovina than a common soldier.⁸⁸²

8. Conclusion

Contact between the German military and political authorities in Zagreb and the Supreme HQ of the NOVJ was established in August 1942 and reached their zenith in March and April 1943. The talks that were held in this period helped achieve at least a partial de-escalation of violence towards the prisoners on both sides. The Axis Spring offensive in May-June, carried out with unique brutality, had cut these talks short and undone all the progress made over the previous months. Both sides, however, were still very much interested in the re-establishment of the contact and readily exploited the opportunity as it presented itself in July 1943 in Croatia.

Using the capture of a high-ranking German officer as a pretext, the Croatian Partisan leadership sent the veteran negotiator Marijan Stilinović to Zagreb. During his frequent visits to the Croatian capital in the Summer and Fall of 1943, he discussed the establishment of a permanent exchange cartel with Horstenau and other members of his staff. Both sides had ulterior motives for these talks. The Partisans for their part still wanted to be acknowledged as a lawful belligerent and thereby gain political recognition. As for the Germans, Ambassador Kasche was convinced that the situation in the NDH could be stabilized through some kind of political arrangement with the Partisan movement. Horstenau also wanted to explore this

⁸⁸¹ Minisini, „Die erschreckende Bilanz“ in: Weingartner, *Erinnerungen*, p. 239; Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, Vol. I/1, pp. 85-7. It is possible that at least some of the Germans exchanged in March and April came from Dalmatia, but there is no conclusive evidence for this assumption.

⁸⁸² Eight officers were dispatched directly from Knin to Pisarovina in mid-December 1944. The 8th Dalmatian Corps added that one doctor chose to stay with the wounded rather than to be exchanged: HR HDA 1491, 2.241., 160, Message from the 8th Corps (14 December 1944). Another group of officers who had been captured at Knin, including one colonel of the 373rd Legionnaire Division, were exchanged in Pisarovina in March 1945: Schraml, *Kriegschauplatz Kroatien*, p. 209.

possibility, although he was much less optimistic than Kasche. On a more practical side, the German plenipotentiary-general wanted to exploit the contacts for intelligence purposes.

The exchange agreement began to take shape in October 1943. The draft was ready by late November and it included provisions covering the humane treatment of prisoners and of wounded soldiers, setting up of POW camps, rights and obligations of captives and burial procedures for the fallen. It was agreed to exchange prisoners as soon as they were made on a one to one ratio. Contrary to the Partisans' wish, the cartel applied only to the territory of the NDH, although the draft included the vague clause that both sides should strive to widen it to other regions, most notably Serbia. The signing of the agreement was originally scheduled for mid-December, but was repeatedly postponed. The reason for the delay was that the most senior German politician in the Balkans, Minister-Plenipotentiary Hermann Neubacher, feared that making any written obligations to the Partisan Movement would be equal to recognizing Tito as a full member of the Allied camp. The German high command in Berlin had similar concerns and made it clear that it would give its blessing only if the arrangement remained as informal as possible. Although the Partisans had hoped for a written agreement for precisely this reason, they had to settle for an exchange of verbal pledges instead. The final text of the agreement was approved by the German military and political authorities in Belgrade and the cartel became official in late January 1944.

The Partisan-held village of Pisarovina was designated as the main prisoner exchange point. Thanks to its favorable position and proximity to Zagreb, exchanges had been occurring there since late October 1943. In early 1944, the village and its environs were proclaimed a neutral zone; the Partisans pledged not to use it for offensive actions and the Germans would not occupy it. Despite several incidents (some of them serious), both sides were remarkably scrupulous about honoring the inviolability of this small patch of land. The "Special commando for prisoner exchange" was responsible for the day-to-day operations on the German side. Likewise, the Partisans had a special plenipotentiary who was entrusted with all matters pertaining to the cartel. Thanks to almost daily contact, the envoys developed close working and even personal relations; the favors they did for each other sometimes crossed the boundary of mere professional courtesy. This factor was crucial for the smooth operation of the cartel. Apart from the pause in May and June 1944, prisoners were exchanged at least once a month until late April 1945.⁸⁸³ The size and frequency of the swaps depended on the availability of suitable prisoners and on the sometimes intricate ratio system applied to

⁸⁸³ For a detailed overview of the prisoner exchanges in Pisarovina, see Appendix 1.

prisoners of different ranks. For instance, the Germans had great difficulties in obtaining political prisoners from Ustashe concentration camps since NDH authorities wanted to use these to exchange their own men in Partisan captivity. Prisoners of similar rank were exchanged on a one-to-one ratio, but higher-ranking Axis captives could be worth as many as thirty Partisans (the case of General Dewitz). On at least one occasion, the Germans retrieved some of their men by trading them for medical supplies.

The ongoing prisoner exchange offered both sides the opportunity to “feel the pulse” of their enemy and engage in back-channel diplomacy. It has been documented that both Horstenau and Kasche wanted to use the contacts in Zagreb and Pisarovina to further their own political aims. One option included spreading discord between the Communist command cadre and the majority of Partisans, who were not believed to be sympathetic to the idea of social revolution. It was thought that most of them could be induced to defect from the NOVJ via promises of fair treatment and some kind of political reform within the NDH. By the summer of 1944, Horstenau had made contact with the representatives of the Croatian Peasant Party and some high-ranking Ustashe officials who contemplated a pro-Allied coup. At the same time, he convened a series of meetings with the moderate head of the Croatian Communists, Andrija Hebrang. The plenipotentiary-general probably wanted to explore whether the Croatian Partisans would desert the Yugoslav cause in exchange for power-sharing in an independent Croatia backed by the Western Allies. Ambassador Kasche also had far-reaching political ideas, but unlike Horstenau, he wanted to bolster, rather than weaken the Ustashe regime. In order to do this, the ambassador hoped to split the Communist movement from within but also to separate it from its allies abroad. The statements of Partisan envoys concerning the strained relations with Great Britain only served to strengthen Kasche’s unshakable belief in the ultimate success of his endeavors. By late 1944, however, nobody in the upper echelons of power in the Third Reich took him seriously.

The Partisans did not decline to discuss political issues with the German representatives, although there is no evidence that they seriously contemplated even a local truce after the failure of the “March Negotiations” of 1943. The motives behind the similar offer they put forth in November of the same year are not entirely clear. Perhaps the offer was made in order to gauge the German reaction and keep them at the negotiating table. The contacts in Zagreb were put to good use one year later when Partisan representatives, acting in accordance with the Western Allies, broached the possibility of a separate, unconditional surrender of the German forces in Yugoslavia. The Germans, for their part, wanted to

negotiate their way out of the country in order to reinforce the Eastern Front. The Yugoslavs had no intention of allowing German forces to leave intact for reasons of prestige, but were careful not to appear inflexible before the German envoys in Zagreb. The talks therefore lasted until the very last days of the war and ended with no results, apart from the fact that the city of Zagreb was spared of demolition.

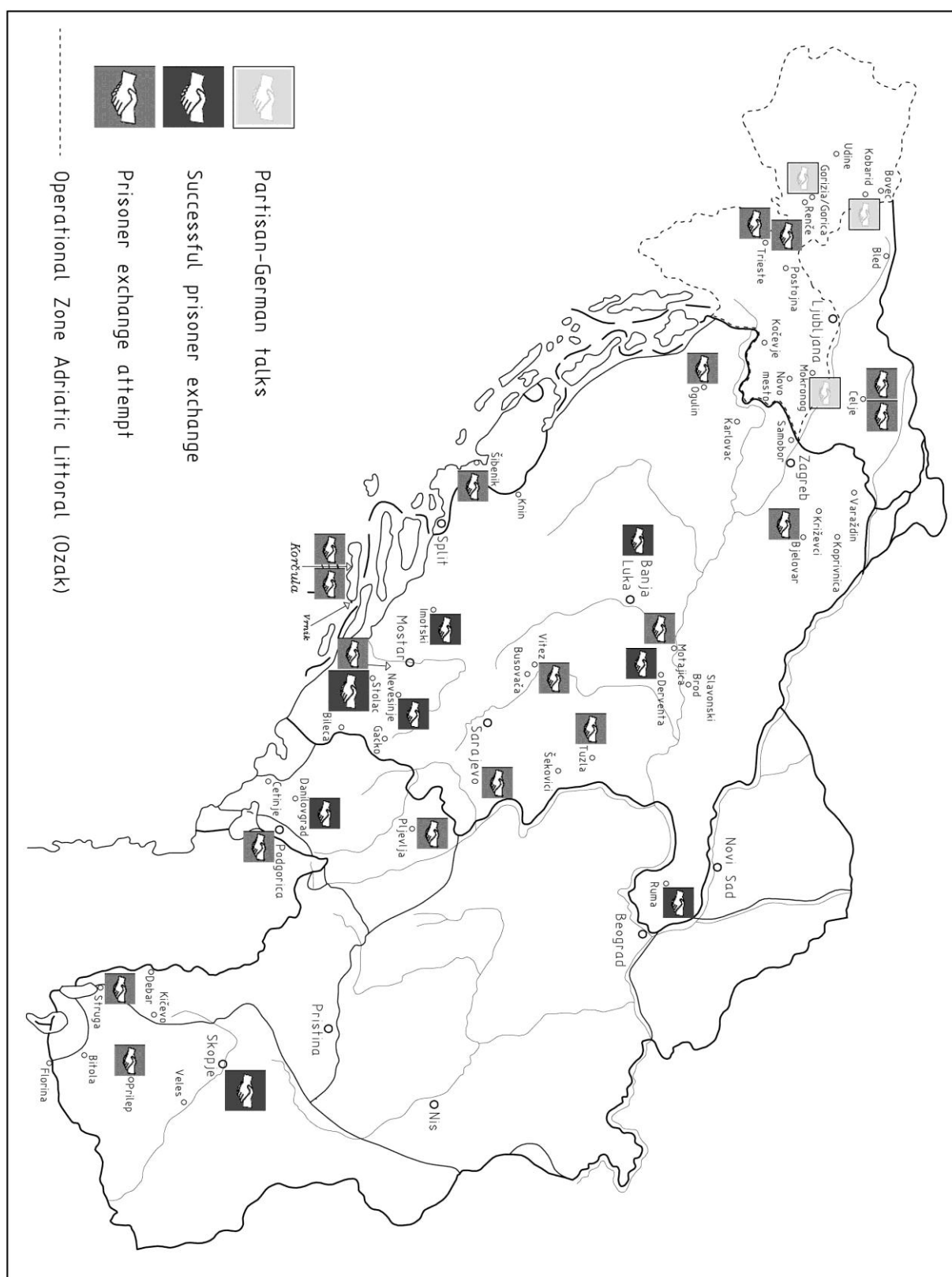
Both the Partisans and the Germans sought to exploit the prisoner exchange contacts for intelligence purposes. The principle envoys on both sides were either full members of various intelligence services or were closely connected to them. They invariably used their frequent trips to enemy territory to report on all matters of interest such as enemy troop movements, his strength and morale, but also on the attitude and loyalty of the civilian population behind the lines. At one point, Kasche even wanted to use his envoy Engineer Ott to infiltrate a German assassin close to Tito, but this plan never materialized. By early 1945, German negotiators like Nemetschek and Ott were increasingly prepared to supply the Partisans with sensitive information, hoping that this would improve their standing with the future victors.

The soldiers returning from captivity were also a valuable source of information. Since most Partisan units did not have secure rear-areas until late in the war, they had to take their prisoners with them. Captured German soldiers could consequently observe more than their Partisan counterparts who were confined to camps and prisons as soon as they could be transported from the battlefield. The question of whether the prisoner exchange cartel was used to infiltrate agents into enemy ranks remains open. Some German sources claim that Horstenau did not want to endanger the back-channel by cloak and dagger operations. It is possible that such actions were contemplated after Horstenau had left Zagreb in late 1944. At about the same time, the German counter-intelligence services were alerted to the possibility that the Partisans might attempt to infiltrate their own agents, recruited among German prisoners and defectors.

Did the establishment of the prisoner exchange cartel help change the attitude of both sides towards prisoners? The German armed forces were theoretically supposed to spare their captives from the mid-summer of 1943 as a result of Hitler's decision to augment the labor force available to the Third Reich captured members of resistance movements represented. In reality, the troops found the departure from the hitherto practiced policy of unrestrained violence difficult to comprehend. To make matters worse, the 2nd Panzer Army had effectively disregarded the order by a widespread application of terror against real or

imagined enemies on the territory of the NDH in the latter half of 1943. As a result, the officers and soldiers of the German occupation forces were even less inclined to obey the new regulations. The Partisans were finally granted POW status in December 1943, and German commands were determined to make troops act accordingly. The creation of the exchange system was repeatedly mentioned in the orders from early 1944 and was meant as a further incentive for the troops to follow the already issued guidelines on the treatment of prisoners. Although these orders never managed to completely eradicate brutality towards captured Partisans (especially towards those not fighting in a “regular” manner) and their sympathizers, it seems that the troops did obey them to a large degree in the last year and a half of the war.

Unlike the Germans, who considered the prisoner exchange merely an advantageous supplement to the already existing policy of taking prisoners for the sake of augmenting the labor force, the Pisarovina agreement became the cornerstone of the NOVJ’s prisoner policy in Croatia in 1944. Once the cartel became official, all units subordinated to the Main HQ for Croatia were explicitly instructed to spare their prisoners and keep them for exchange. As far as the Partisans were concerned, a live German was now worth more than a dead one. German prisoners also profited from the British presence in the region. Fearing reprisals against their own men in enemy captivity, the British exerted pressure on Tito to discipline his units and provide decent treatment to the German captives in Partisan custody. They also showed little understanding for the prisoner exchange and sought to gain control of all prisoners made in joint operations with the NOVJ in the Dalmatia. As handing over the prisoners to the British without compensation represented a clear loss for the Partisans, Tito sought to have them exchanged before they could be handed over. The period of fair treatment for prisoners ended by September 1944. Rapidly deteriorating relations with the British meant that the Partisans did not pay as much attention to their complaints as before. Tito still intervened when prompted by the British, but the interventions were not backed by deeds. Late 1944 saw widespread killings and maltreatment of prisoners in Dalmatia and its hinterland. Comparatively few of them were exchanged since the Partisans now had for the first time a solid rear area where they could keep their prisoners and put them to work. Much like the Germans in 1941-1943, the Partisans now occupied a position of strength and saw no reason to comply with international law or the provisions of the exchange cartel.



Chapter 5: Local prisoner exchanges 1943-1945

1. Introduction

This chapter concerns itself with those exchanges of prisoners negotiated by units independently of the Pisarovina cartel. In order to place matters into the right perspective, the chapter will not only cover the exchanges from 1944 and 1945, but also those which took place in the year preceding the establishment of the neutral zone. In this way, we shall be able to establish what effect the centrally-negotiated agreement had on the manner in which the war in Yugoslavia was conducted, and whether it bettered the prisoners' lot and increased their chances of being exchanged. Furthermore, other non-violent contacts and negotiations pertaining to issues other than prisoner swapping will be dealt with here as well.

2. Treatment of prisoners and prisoner exchanges, January-July 1943

Undoubtedly, owing to the first successful large-scale prisoner exchange of September 1942, both the Germans and the NOVJ took steps, albeit small, to curb indiscriminate killings of their captured foes by the end of that year. The motives for this were not the result of the concerted effort to move away from the abyss of barbarism but, rather more, both sides were driven by what might be termed as utilitarian or narcissist humanitarianism; in other words, enemy prisoners were not spared for the sake of sparing, but solely for the purpose of exchanging them for one's own soldiers who were captured by the opposite side. Even so, these measures raised the chances for captured prisoners of not being shot out of hand right after capture.

It seems that the ramifications of this policy also reached a region where local Partisans were not particularly keen on sparing German prisoners during 1942: Northern Croatia. In mid-January 1943, the 13th NOVJ Brigade captured five ethnic Germans in the town of Samobor. The HQ of the 2nd Operational Zone sent the prisoners under escort to the Main HQ for Croatia with a note: "It would not be bad if you could get some of our comrades in return for them".⁸⁸⁴ The German 187th Reserve Division was deployed in the region with

⁸⁸⁴ *Zbornik*/IX/3/113-4, 2nd Operational Zone to the Main HQ for Croatia (16 January 1943). I could not establish whether the Main HQ attempted to exchange the prisoners or not.

the primary task of guarding the important communications running through the area. Throughout January and February 1943, the division had to fulfill its mission amidst increasing Partisan activity to the north of the Sava and to provide a substantial force for Operation “Weiss” at the same time. On 18 February 1943, the Kalnik Partisan Detachment successfully raided a train between Križevci and Koprivnica and captured two members of the division. Two days later, a courier brought a letter from the Partisans, in which they offered to exchange the two for thirteen persons imprisoned in Križevci, Koprivnica, Bjelovar and Varaždin. Apart from the list of names, the letter also contained an invitation to a meeting on the 21st in the nearby village of Vrhovec: „We shall send one officer and twenty armed men. We guarantee a cease-fire for three hours before and three hours after the negotiations“.⁸⁸⁵

The division's command ordered a search for the desired prisoners on the next day and their transfer to German custody. On the 23rd, the results of the inquiry were concluded: out of thirteen persons, NDH authorities could establish the whereabouts of only five. Four of them had already been transferred to concentration camps and one was in prison in Varaždin. There were also three other Communists there who could be used for the exchange; one additional prisoner from the list was in German custody in Zagreb. Even before the inquiry was over, the division realized that the prospect of finding the prisoners and affecting their release from Ustashe police would be a difficult task. Therefore, all units were instructed to keep captured Partisans and rounded-up hostages with the division in the future and “not deliver them to Croatian authorities.” The division was envisaging the creation of its own prisoner camp as well.⁸⁸⁶

Details concerning the progress of the negotiations are lacking in both Yugoslav and German sources. The Partisan and German delegations did not meet on 21 February or thereafter, but the two sides, in all probability, continued their correspondence on the subject: on the 24th, the division formulated the guidelines for the exchange negotiations and one day later General Horstenau was informed of the proceedings.⁸⁸⁷ On 5 March, the divisional war diary noted that the negotiations had failed, but that two German prisoners managed to escape on the same day. Judging by their after-action report, fluid fighting in the area was the main obstacle to the successful conclusion of the exchange: the guerrilla column which escorted the

⁸⁸⁵ *Hronologija*, p. 426; NAW, T-315, Roll 1553,000543, Radio message from 462nd Reserve Regiment (20 February 1943).

⁸⁸⁶ NAW, T-315, Roll 1553,000137, 139, War diary entries for 21 and 22 February 1943; *ibid.*, 000558, Radio message from 462nd Reserve Regiment (23 February 1943).

⁸⁸⁷ Unfortunately, detailed reports on the negotiations were not included as separate appendices to the division's war diary.

prisoners was constantly on the move, something which made determining the time and location of the meeting between delegations impossible.⁸⁸⁸

The written statement of the two Germans about their time in captivity is interesting for several reasons. First, it showed that discipline in local detachments could be as severe as in “regular” Partisan units such as the Proletarian brigades: the orders of superiors, especially commissars, were obeyed without question; drunkenness was punishable by death. Widespread rumors that the Partisans mutilated their prisoners did not apply to the Kalnik Detachment: on the contrary, the prisoners were not maltreated in any way. “The grimmest hate” of the Partisans was directed at spies and Ustashe, who were executed after a brief trial; Home Guards were first disarmed and stripped of their clothes and then set free. The German prisoners were used for propaganda purposes; they were led around villages and the population was told that “even German officers could become Communist bandits”. The national and social composition of the detachment was especially interesting: the 600-strong group was composed mostly of people from Zagreb. Their leaders were all intellectuals and ethnic Croats.⁸⁸⁹ The last fact must have drawn the most attention from the Germans, since the Communist uprising in Croatia was still viewed as fundamentally Serbian (at the time, the only sizeable contingent of ethnic Croats in Partisan ranks came from Dalmatia); the report showed that the influence of Ustashe state was now beginning to wane even in the capital.

The above-described attempted local exchange was the last before the surge in brutality which started roughly with the beginning of “Operation Schwarz” in mid-May 1943. The month-long fighting in northern Montenegro and Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, marked by utter savagery, undid even the limited improvement of the prisoners’ lot which had come as the result of the “March negotiations”. As a consequence, in the three-month period after the battle (roughly from mid-June to mid-September) both sides showed great reluctance to take prisoners and were even less willing to talk to each other directly. This applied especially to units outside of Slavonia, mostly notably those around the Supreme HQ and the 369th Legionnaire Division which were still locked in a tenacious struggle in Eastern Bosnia.

⁸⁸⁸ NAW, T-315, Roll 1553,000143, 145, 608, War diary entries for 24 and 26 February and 5 March 1943; *ibid.*, 000864, Experiences made in Communist bandits’ captivity (undated).

⁸⁸⁹ NAW, T-315, Roll 1553, 000683-4, Experiences made in Communist bandits’ captivity (undated).

The 369th or “Devil’s Division” arrived in the NDH at the beginning of 1943 and quickly validated its moniker.⁸⁹⁰ The great brutality with which it conducted itself in “Operation Weiss” and subsequent fighting is attributable to several factors. One is the personality of its commander, Fritz Neidholdt, whose formative experience as a professional soldier was made amidst the carnage of the Eastern Front in the First World War.⁸⁹¹ Another factor was that its German officers and NCOs were inexperienced in guerrilla warfare and had no knowledge of the complex political situation in the country. They therefore often opted for what appeared to be the easiest solution: the application of brute force. The third factor was the Partisans’ policy aimed at undermining the morale of the Croats which made up the majority of division’s personnel. The policy consisted of applying different standards in the treatment of the prisoners according to their nationality. Whereas the Croats were often released after being stripped of their clothes, their German NCOs and officers were shot.⁸⁹² Sparing the common soldiers of the “Devil’s Division” was apparently not practiced by the Partisans during the tumult of “Operation Schwarz”. The division reported the largest number of missing of all German units in the battle, altogether 233.⁸⁹³ Even if one can assume that a large number of missing were killed in battle during the Partisan breakthrough and remained where they fell, there is no evidence that the Main Operational Group had any prisoners with it when it reached the relative safety of the Jahorina Mountain. This ensured that the division would carry out the orders on the treatment of captured guerrillas with special vigor.⁸⁹⁴

The breakthrough from the encirclement along the Sutjeska did not bring an end to the fighting in the region: throughout June, July and August, the battered Partisan divisions made their way through Eastern Bosnia, scattering NDH units and storming a string of smaller garrisons in the process. The 7th SS Mountain and 369th Division hounded the partisans, attempting to lure them into a pitched battle. This campaign was every bit as savage as the

⁸⁹⁰ The unit's nickname was adopted from the Austro-Hungarian 42nd Infantry Division, formed in Croatia, which earned it for its valor during the Great War: <http://www.axishistory.com/index.php?id=3940> (last accessed on 26 October 2012).

⁸⁹¹ According to historian Ben Shepherd, those German officers who fought in the East during the First World War showed greater propensity for brutality in anti-guerrilla operations in the Second World War than their colleagues who served on the Western Front. The difference can be attributed to the fact that the war in the East was conducted with less regard for international law than in the West, as well as to the strong influence of Social Darwinism and anti-Slav sentiment in the Wilhelmine army. Neidholdt fought on the Eastern Front for the duration of the war: Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 28-56, 215-35.

⁸⁹² NAW, T-315, Roll 2154, 000120, War diary entry for 15 January 1943 (19,45h).

⁸⁹³ NAW, T-314, Roll 560, After-action report for „Operation Schwarz“ (20 June 1943).

⁸⁹⁴ These orders remained the same for „Operation Schwarz“. During a conference with Neidholdt on 17 June, Lütters merely pointed out that the prisoners should be interrogated before being shot: NAW, T-315, Roll 2154, 001530, Conference with Commander of German troops in Croatia in Sarajevo on 17 June 1943 at 11 o'clock (20 June 1943).

one preceding it. The headquarters of the 2nd Proletarian Division reported that it had captured several soldiers of the “Devil’s Division” by mid-July 1943. The prisoners belonged to various nationalities, including Slovenes and Poles. “All were liquidated except for a Croat, a member of the SKOJ, who was taken into our ranks”.⁸⁹⁵ The 369th reported no less than 861 enemy dead and only twelve prisoners in the first three weeks of July. Reminiscent of the closing days of “Operation Schwarz”, the Germans monitored intelligence on the whereabouts of Partisan hospitals and dispatched patrols to find and capture them. Once located, the inmates faced a grim fate. On 17 July, in the vicinity of Šekovići, the 1st Battalion of the 370th Grenadier Regiment reported 43 enemy dead with no friendly casualties. The booty included one defunct heavy machine gun and “30 stretchers and medical supplies [...] the stretchers were destroyed as they were lice-ridden”. One day later in the same area, the division reported 29 “enemy severely wounded” shot, along with two members of the captured medical staff. The division would continue reporting executions of Partisan severely wounded into early August, despite the official change in attitude towards the guerrilla prisoners which was beginning to take shape at this time.⁸⁹⁶

3. Limited de-escalation and surge in exchange activities, September-December 1943

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the treatment of guerrilla prisoners began to change once Hitler issued his order of 19 July 1943. The order stipulated that the captured “bandits” should be treated as prisoners-of-war in order to weaken the Partisans’ resolve to fight and to secure a steady supply of forced labor for the German war industry. The de-facto recognition of POW rights to captured Partisans facilitated a wave of prisoner exchanges throughout Yugoslavia. German units on the ground were now not only more readily accepted Partisan exchange proposals, but were also willing to provide an impetus for the talks. The first such case took place in the vicinity of Ruma in Syrmia in late August 1943. On the 23rd, a company of the 173rd Reserve Division’s Engineer Battalion was conducting drills when it was suddenly attacked by the 3rd Vojvodina Brigade of the NOVJ. The company was practically

⁸⁹⁵ Zbornik/IV/35/546-7, 2nd Proletarian Division to Supreme HQ (14 July 1943).

⁸⁹⁶ NAW, T-315, Roll 2155, 000416, 385, 394, 400, 517, War diary entries for 20 July 1943 (10,00h), 17 July 1943 (13, 45h), 18 July 1943 (03,00h and 19,00h), 3 August 1943 (22,00h); for more details on the massacre see also Žarko Cvetković, “Lečenje i evakuacija ranjenika i bolesnika u NOR-u” in: *Sanitetska služba u Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu Jugoslavije 1941-1945: iskustva sanitetske službe NOV i POJ (JA) iz četverogodišnjeg narodnooslobodilačkog rata 1941-1945* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1989), Vol. IV, p. 58; Alfred Nick, “Zaštita ranjenika i bolesnika u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu”, in: *ibid.*, 281.

destroyed: 63 Germans were killed, three were wounded and 23 captured. The number of prisoners would have been higher had the Partisans not decided to execute some of the German wounded (according to a German witness), while the Yugoslav historiography claims that those killed had been sentenced to death for crimes committed in Yugoslavia following a brief court-martial.⁸⁹⁷

Immediately after the battle, the local German command decided to sound out the possibility of exchange.⁸⁹⁸ Contact with the Partisans was established through the efforts of the German police and one of its local ethnic German associates, a man named Felinger. Once he delivered the exchange offer to the Partisans, they informed the Main HQ for Vojvodina which in turn consented to the negotiations. Vukašin Bivolarević-Volf, a former sergeant of the former Royal Army and now a high-ranking guerrilla commander, was chosen to be the NOVJ's envoy. He was to travel to a crossroads just outside of Ruma, where German negotiators would be waiting for him. Due to technical difficulties, Volf arrived late and failed to find his counterparts. Aware of the possible consequences his failure to show up might have for the captured Partisans, Volf proceeded to Ruma alone. His decision was not without risk since he was armed and wore the uniform of a Partisan commander. Luckily, he was able to enter the town without problems and meet with Felinger, whom he already knew. Together, they drove to the German headquarters, where the local commander waited for them. Bystanders witnessed an odd scene when he and Volf traded the Nazi salute for the Partisan one and even shook hands. The negotiations were held in the presence of representatives of the German police and security service. Volf presented two lists of persons his side wanted in exchange for the captured soldiers. The one contained the names of Partisans who had been captured and the other, the names of those who had defected to the Germans. After checking the names, Volf was told that none remained in Ruma. The German commander offered instead all Partisans and Communist sympathizers held in the local

⁸⁹⁷ NAW, T-311, Roll 285, 000774, 173rd Reserve Division for Army Group F (2 September 1943); Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, p. 185. It is worth mentioning that the Vojvodina Partisans released three captured German soldiers in mid-June 1943 after "their innocence had been proven": *Zbornik*/I/VI/350, Operations report of the Main HQ for Vojvodina, entry for 13 June 1943. The release of prisoners so late in the war in Syrmia can be attributed to the efforts to popularize the NOVJ among the ethnic Germans who constituted a sizeable part of the local population.

⁸⁹⁸ Heinrich Scheuering from Nuremberg lost his 17 years-old son in the Ruma ambush and wrote a letter to the Armed Forces High Command in which he blamed the officers' negligence for the disaster. In support of his argument, Scheuering wrote that it was the "bandits", rather than the German command, who offered to exchange the survivors: NAW, T-77, Roll 1421, Investigation of an incident in Croatia (9 October 1943). This letter also shows that the exchange of prisoners with the guerrillas was not hidden from the German public.

prison, altogether 63 men and women. Seeing that insisting on specific names was not likely to produce any results, Volf agreed to these terms.⁸⁹⁹

Once the deal was struck, the German commander made a highly unusual gesture: he invited the Partisan envoy for a drink in the nearby tavern. The Gestapo officials went with them, although Volf remembered that his counterpart was not very pleased with their presence. The details of the conversation are not recorded, yet we can assume that the German officer had no other agenda than to satisfy his curiosity regarding his adversary. The Partisan envoy, for his part, did not miss the opportunity to release a propaganda arrow at his opponents. When they finished their drinks, Volf insisted to pay, saying it was the host's obligation to treat his guests. "Host?", inquired the Germans; "Well, I was born here", replied the Partisan, "whereas you are here only temporarily, tomorrow you will be gone." Unlike the police officials, the officer seemed to be amused by the answer. Emboldened, Volf decided to ask for a favor: he wanted to buy some cooking utensils for his unit. The officer readily acquiesced and, as it was Sunday, he arranged for a store to be opened so that Volf could purchase what he needed.⁹⁰⁰

The sources cataloging the exact number of prisoners exchanged as the result of the negotiations in Ruma differ: one contemporary German report states that 23 soldiers of the engineer company were released by 2 September 1943. In a post-war testimony, one intelligence officer of the 173rd Reserve Division mentioned some 30 Germans being exchanged in the period between 15 August and 30 September 1943.⁹⁰¹ It is possible that the negotiators agreed on an additional number of Germans which were to be delivered as soon as the Partisans had them. For instance, on 11 September, the 3rd Vojvodina Brigade ambushed a train several kilometers east of Ruma and captured 25 railway men and two German soldiers. The former were freed, but the latter were kept for exchange "at the earliest opportunity".⁹⁰² As no further exchanges between the 173rd Reserve Division and the Vojvodina Partisans have been recorded, it is possible that these two prisoners were subsequently freed as part of

⁸⁹⁹ Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, pp. 185-9.

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 189; According to other sources, the chief German negotiator was the notorious local Gestapo official, Anton Bauer: <http://www.subnor.org.rs/spomen-ploca-volfu#more-541> (last accessed on 28 October 2012). This episode illustrates the fact that the German police and the SD were not averse to negotiating with the Partisans directly, despite the fact that the higher commands took an unfavorable view of these activities. The handbook on the German intelligence service, prepared by the Yugoslav State Security in the Fifties, states that the German police command in Osijek negotiated several times with the Partisans regarding prisoner exchange: „The contacts were established through ethnic German village elders, while the talks themselves were conducted by the [Osijek Police] command members“: *Nemačka obaveštajna služba*, Vol. V, p. 521.

⁹⁰¹ NAW, T-311, Roll 285, 000774, 173rd Reserve Division for Army Group F (2 September 1943); Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Jugoslawien*, Vol. I/1, p. 85.

⁹⁰² Radovan Panić, *Treća vojvođanska NOU brigada* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1980), pp. 108.

the Ruma agreement. Given that the exchange was successful, it is surprising that the two sides did not continue swapping prisoners in Syrmia. Judging by the testimony of the intelligence officer, the German side had little incentive to take prisoners after seeing the sorry state which their men were in after their return from captivity.⁹⁰³

Mid-September 1943 also saw the first successful local exchange in Bosnia since April 1942 when the Ozren Partisan Detachment swapped prisoners with Germans in Tuzla. The 373rd Legionnaire Division was offered an exchange of thirteen German prisoners captured in fighting in the area west of Banja Luka. The 373rd requested permission from the 15th Mountain Corps to go along with the proposal. On 17 September, the 2nd Panzer Army granted the request and the exchange was made. The monograph on the legionnaire divisions comments on the event:

*“These people [the German prisoners] came back after a few weeks. They were treated relatively well, although they were dirty, lice-ridden and strongly emaciated. They were exchanged, a rare occurrence at the time”.*⁹⁰⁴

As we have seen earlier, the Partisans applied violence selectively when dealing with ethnic German prisoners, provided they were not members of the 7th SS “Prinz Eugen” Division. The decision to collectively punish the German minority for their collaboration with the Nazi regime was still far off, and there remained a glimmer of hope that they could be induced to participate in the People’s Liberation Movement. These efforts culminated in the creation of the “German Company ‘Ernst Thälmann’” on 15 August 1943 in Slavonia as an element of the Podravina Detachment. German was spoken, and the company’s members were allowed to wear the German national tricolor on their caps. The detachment was ordered to mobilize as many Germans as possible in the shortest possible time in order to upgrade the company to a full battalion.⁹⁰⁵

In early October 1943, the company accepted two German deserters from the Knin garrison in Dalmatia, Klaus Löwe and Adam König into its ranks. In late September they

⁹⁰³ The exchange at Ruma still has enormous symbolic significance for surviving Partisan veterans. On 2 September 2011, the 68th anniversary of the event, a plaque dedicated to Vukašin Bivolarević- Volf was erected on the spot where the exchange took place: <http://www.subnor.org.rs/spomen-ploca-volfu#more-541>, last accessed on 28 October 2012. The veterans gathered there again in September 2012: <http://www.sremskenovine.co.rs/2012/09/godiswica-razmene-zarobqenika/>, last accessed on 28 October 2012.

⁹⁰⁴ Đuro Milinović, Dragan Karasijević, *Jedanaesta krajiška NOU brigada* (Bosanska Gradiška: SUBNOR, 1982), p. 58; NAW, T-313, Roll 483, 000396, Cable from 15th Mountain Corps to 2nd Panzer Army (17 September 1943); Schraml, *Kriegschauplatz Kroatien*, p. 198.

⁹⁰⁵ *Zbornik/V/18/170-2*, 2nd Croatian NOVJ Corps to all subordinated units (15 August 1943).

staged a skirmish with the Partisans in order to mask their escape. Their families were, however, still in Germany and could face retribution if details of their plan were ever disclosed. In order to dispel any doubt concerning the incident, the Partisan unit which accepted the deserters sent a letter to the German command requesting the “exchange” of Löwe and König. The offer was framed in such a way that it would be unacceptable to the Germans. The offer was turned down, and the deserters were free to go to Slavonia for service with the German company.⁹⁰⁶

By the beginning of October 1943, the Partisans in Montenegro under the command of the recently formed 2nd Assault Corps had made substantial gains from the Italian capitulation. They disarmed a large number of smaller Italian units and managed to persuade the Italian division “Taurinense” to join their cause. As the result of these successes, spirits were high among the Communist-led guerrillas. Vukašin Nenezić, a youngster belonging to the Lovćen Partisan Detachment, was especially impressed by the stories of how Italians were surrendering across the country without even a shot being fired. On one October day, he and his brother Stevan were on the lookout for traffic on the Danilovgrad-Cetinje road. Suddenly, a motorized column appeared: Vukašin was certain it was Italian, his brother thought it was German. Not heeding Stevan’s advice, Vukašin sprang from his cover and ran to the road, hoping to bluff the column into surrendering. “I do not know how I could be so reckless”, recalled Nenezić decades after the events “[...] stories about the Italian soldiers and their [quick] disarmament carried me down to the road. I thought I too was able to perform such a feat, to do something I could brag about my whole life”. As soon as he stopped the column, he realized he made a big mistake: he was promptly surrounded by one officer and several soldiers in German uniforms. “The officer [...] had listened to what I had to say, said something to me in perfect Serbo-Croatian and ordered the soldiers to disarm me. I was simply in no condition to resist”.⁹⁰⁷

The Lovćen Detachment was informed soon thereafter that Nenezić was still alive and in Podgorica prison. He would have been left to his fate had his relatives not intervened with the detachment’s command. Jovana Stanojević, Nenezić’s aunt, proposed exchanging him for a German sergeant who had recently been captured; she also volunteered to take the letter of offer personally to the garrison in Podgorica. The commissar agreed, saying that he would do everything to effect the youngster’s release, whereas “the Kraut NCO was not worth a bean”

⁹⁰⁶ Nail Redžić, *Telmanovci: Zapisi o njemačkoj partizanskoj četi Ernst Telman* (Belgrade: Narodna armija, 1984), pp. 25-6.

⁹⁰⁷ Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, pp. 217-8.

to him. Consequently, the detachment requested a one-to-one exchange which should take place “right now, if possible, according to all military regulations and on the designated spot”. Furthermore, the Partisans would “guarantee the safety of your delegation as this is not the first time that we exchange prisoners.”⁹⁰⁸ Members of your delegation should come with a white flag; caution them not to leave the road, especially once they enter our territory [...]. We expect your answer through the bearer of this letter”. Stanojević went straight to Podgorica and delivered the message. After a short deliberation, the Germans drafted a written response in which they agreed to the terms. One day later, a car with horn blaring and a white flag waving entered the Partisan territory outside of Danilovgrad. The Germans and the Partisans exchanged salutes and, without further formalities, made the exchange.⁹⁰⁹

The fact that the Lovćen Detachment originally had no intention of proposing an exchange, as well as the scornful comment about the captured German NCO, implies that the exchange at Danilovgrad was an exception, rather than the rule in Montenegro during the final months of 1943. Indeed, judging by the available sources, the Montenegrin Partisans took a hard line towards German prisoners. It is important to note that such an attitude was officially sanctioned by the highest Partisan command in the area, the 2nd Assault Corps. On 23rd September, the Corps instructed its 3rd Division to not release a single German captured around Kotor, irrespective of the manner in which he surrendered himself. That this was in fact a thinly veiled execution order is corroborated by other documents from this period. On 11 October 1943, 800 Italians of the former Division “Taurinense” who volunteered to fight against the Germans were formed into the “Aosta” Brigade and attached to the 3rd Division. The division exploited the grim fate of captured Germans on at least one occasion to strengthen the bonds with its newly found allies. On 20 October, the division’s intelligence sector reported that the Italians’ morale was “pretty strong. The hate against the Germans is obvious. Two days ago, we handed them over several captured Germans for execution, and they did it with conspicuous pleasure”.⁹¹⁰ On 9 November, the HQ of the 2nd Corps prepared a document for the Main HQ for Macedonia containing advice on the formation and functioning

⁹⁰⁸ This section most likely referred to the prisoner exchanges with the Italians.

⁹⁰⁹ Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, pp. 219-221; *Zbornik*/III/5/202, Main HQ for Montenegro and Bay of Kotor to 2nd Assault Corps (12 October 1943).

⁹¹⁰ This was an act of vengeance for the brutal treatment of the division's members who had fallen into German hands. Exactly how many were shot by the Germans is unknown. One report to 2nd Panzer Army dated 7 October 1943 mentioned the execution of eighteen officers of the „Taurinense“: Gerhard Schreiber (Ed.), *Die italienischen Militärinternierten im deutschen Machtbereich 1943-1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1990), pp. 198-9.

of brigade-sized units. Among other topics, the Corps' commander and political commissar wrote the following lines:

*“The brigades must be especially imbued with great hatred towards the Chetniks and the Germans. [...] We, for instance, are destroying all enemies in combat without mercy. We do not recognize the Germans as prisoners [of war] until they recognize our army and with it [the rights of] our prisoners”.*⁹¹¹

A similar situation is witnessed also in neighboring Eastern Herzegovina which was within the area of operations of the 2nd Assault Corps. The take-no-prisoner policy practiced by the newly formed 29th Herzegovinian Division of the NOVJ in the closing months of 1943 was responsible for the death of one important German prisoner who could have been used to affect the release of Partisan fighters captured in the area. The first incident took place in late November 1943 as the 29th came to grips with the 7th SS Division “Prinz Eugen” around the town of Gacko. On 26th November, one Partisan brigade ambushed an unsuspecting battalion of the SS mountain troops, inflicting heavy casualties in the process; the unit's commander, Major Horst Strathmann, was captured.⁹¹² Four days later, the 5th SS Mountain Corps informed the 2nd Panzer Army that the negotiations for his exchange had begun and requested information on the number of prisoners who could be used for this purpose. The army relegated the matter to the SD which agreed to help and inquired as to the time available for the completion of the swap.⁹¹³ The local commands knew that with each day the chances of success grew thinner. In order to buy more time, on 2 December, the Germans requested in writing that the captured major be spared. Otto Kumm, who took over the “Prinz Eugen” in 1944, wrote in his book that the division's offer to exchange Strathmann “for any required number of captured Partisans was turned down with the cynical answer that he had already been shot for the crimes of the Fascists”.⁹¹⁴ Whether the fact that Strathmann spent a part of his career in the SS serving in the concentration camp Buchenwald contributed to his demise

⁹¹¹ Zbornik/II/5/95, 289-90, 2nd Assault Corps to 3rd Division (23 September 1943) and 3rd Division to 2nd Assault Corps (20 October 1943); Zbornik/II/6/131, 2nd Assault Corps to Main HQ for Macedonia (9 November 1943).

⁹¹² Zbornik/IV/20/287, Activity report of 2nd Brigade for the period 1-15 December 1943 (entry for 2 December 1943).

⁹¹³ NAW, T-313, Roll 485, 001049-51, 5th SS Mountain Corps to 2nd Panzer Army (30 November) and Notification for 5th SS Mountain Corps (undated; probably sent on the same day or shortly thereafter).

⁹¹⁴ Otto Kumm, *Vorwäters, Prinz Eugen! Geschichte der 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Division 'Prinz Eugen'* (Dresden: Winkelried Verlag, 2007), p. 138.

is hard to tell. Even without knowing his biography, the Partisans would have found the temptation to shoot a higher-ranking officer of the notorious SS division hard to resist.⁹¹⁵

4. Local prisoner exchanges, 1944-1945

By the beginning of 1944, the impact of the high-level negotiations in Zagreb was becoming increasingly felt on the ground. Thanks to the fact that prisoner exchange was now officially approved and given legal framing, units began using this tool to retrieve their missing men. In order to regulate exchanges on the local level, the commanding general of the 2nd Panzer Army issued instructions to this effect on 18 February 1944. The purpose of the document was to enable the divisions to get their men out of captivity as quickly as possible, thereby saving time and reducing paperwork. From now on, the units did not need permission each time they sought to conduct a swap. They were also encouraged to exchange not only their own members, but all Germans and foreigners serving in the German occupation forces whom the Partisans were ready to offer. All returnees were to be interrogated and the results submitted to a military judge in order to establish whether the circumstances of their capture constituted a court-martial offense. In addition, all units, including the police and other subordinated formations, were reminded that Hitler's instruction of 18 August 1943 concerning the treatment of captives was to be obeyed at all times. Rendulic also voiced his concerns about the possibility of foul play on the part of the Partisans, who could use the system to first plant spies posing as POWs and then extract them through prisoner exchange. Special emphasis was put on the manner in which the negotiations were to be conducted; it should always be made clear to the enemy that

*“a prisoner exchange in no way represents an agreement or a treaty which could be interpreted as a recognition of Tito's bands as belligerent force in any form”.*⁹¹⁶

On the Partisan side, the only attempt to regulate local exchanges came from the Main HQ for Croatia. As we have seen, this command had prohibited its subordinate units to conduct local swaps without its express permission. This posed a serious problem, especially as the exchange had to be made quickly if it was to be successful. The KPJ's district committee for Šibenik devoted one part of its activity report for January 1944 to this issue:

⁹¹⁵ Steffen Grimm, *Die SS-Totenkopfverbände im Konzentrationslager Buchenwald* (Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2011), p.64.

⁹¹⁶ BA-MA, RS 3-7/14, Commander-in-chief of 2nd Panzer Army (18 February 1944).

*“Can we make a direct exchange when the life of a comrade is at stake? The Germans have captured a good party member, and we have taken some of them prisoner. Our people say that direct exchange is prohibited and that the prisoners must be sent to the Main HQ. By the time they arrive, the comrade could be long dead”.*⁹¹⁷

Despite this and possibly other requests for freedom of action, a unit in Dalmatia could not conduct a swap without consulting the Main HQ for Croatia for the duration of war. It seems that this order was not matched by similar instructions from regional Partisan commands outside present-day Croatia. By the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, units merely instructed their men to take German prisoners and bring them alive to brigade or divisional headquarters’ or to provisional POW camps. It was up to officers on the spot to decide what to do with their captives: they could be kept with the unit, or offered for local exchange, or sent to corps’ command which would then send them to Písarovína.⁹¹⁸

As early as 7 January 1944, the Germans learned from prisoner interrogations that “Tito has forbidden the shooting of prisoners”, news important enough to be included into the normally terse daily reports.⁹¹⁹ Five weeks later, the “Brandenburg” Division⁹²⁰ decided to try its luck in the exchange business. On 14 February, one of its companies had a clash with Partisans outside of Pljevlja. It lost several men, including one severely wounded soldier who had to be left behind. The Main Partisan HQ for Sandžak reported: “On the 16th, the Germans requested an exchange of this man for one Partisan, but he had already succumbed to his wounds. The exchange was offered in writing”.⁹²¹

In late March 1944, the 7th SS “Prinz Eugen” Mountain Division decided to try its luck again, this time with the 3rd Corps of the NOVJ in Eastern Bosnia:

⁹¹⁷ NAW, T-311, Roll 563, 001210, District committee for Šibenik, activity report for January 1944 (16 February 1944). In late February, the HQ of the Partisan Navy requested permission from Main HQ for Croatia to exchange three members of People’s Liberation Movement who were hospitalized in Šibenik: VA, 119/1, 2, 1, 125, NOVJ Navy HQ to Main HQ for Croatia (27 February 1944). It is not known whether permission was granted or not.

⁹¹⁸ *Zbornik/IV/20/515*, Order of 3rd Herzegovina Brigade (28 December 1943); *Zbornik/I/7/17*, Order of 2nd Proletarian Division (8 January 1944); *Zbornik/IV/22/221*, Order of 27th East-Bosnian Division (12 February 1944).

⁹¹⁹ NAW, T-78, Roll 331,6288126, Daily report of Supreme Commander South-East (7 January 1944).

⁹²⁰ The “Brandenburg” Division “ was a special unit formed under the auspices of the Abwehr on the eve of the Second World War. It was made up of highly trained individuals, fluent in foreign languages. The unit’s mission was to carry out raids and sabotage deep in the enemy rear. By 1943, the majority of the division was deployed in Yugoslavia, where it served in a purely infantry role.

⁹²¹ *Zbornik/I/16/360-1*, Main HQ for Sandžak to 2nd Assault Corps (17 February 1944).

“Consistent with the talks on prisoner exchange which had been held between the German military authorities and your Main HQ for Croatia, we request the exchange of Dr. Lunzer [captured in early February in the same area] and all other members of the Wehrmacht who might be in your custody. In pursuit of this goal, I invite you to send one or more envoys to Rogatica in order to discuss this and possible future exchanges.”

The remarkable thing about this letter is the form in which it was written. It was addressed to “Major-General Sir Kosta Nadj, Commander of the 3rd Corps”, a rare if not singular instance of Germans addressing one of the guerrilla commanders in the field with his self-chosen title along with the honorary “sir”. Furthermore, the letter “emphasized” that the Partisan delegation would be treated “in accordance with internationally accepted norms” and would “naturally” be provided with safe conduct; the offer was signed by a first lieutenant on behalf of the divisional commander. Judging by the style used, the Germans were very interested in safe return of Dr. Lunzer. Otherwise it would be hard to understand why the 7th SS Division would address the Partisans as their equals, especially in light of the ongoing “blood feud” between this unit and the guerrillas.⁹²²

The spring of 1944 also saw a failed attempt of prisoner exchange in northern Bosnia. The 12th Slavonian Brigade reported that one plane had crashed in the Motajica Mountain and that the pilot Dietrich Perkuhn was captured: “The Krauts offered to exchange him and we will try to make this happen.” According to German intelligence, the pilot had a broken arm and was treated in a guerrilla hospital. However, when the local German command refused to exchange him on Partisan terms (the latter demanded fifteen persons for Perkuhn), he was shot.⁹²³

The coastal region of Croatia became a contested ground beginning with the German occupation in the aftermath of the Italian capitulation. The traditional irregular warfare on land was supplemented by a “small war” on sea. The nascent Partisan navy, sometimes in cooperation with British vessels, attacked coastal shipping, conducted reconnaissance raids and generally sought to make life for the enemy as miserable as possible. All the while, it played a deadly cat-and-mouse game with its German counterpart which resulted in numerous small-scale naval battles. On one such occasion, 9th February, the Germans captured the Partisan armed boat NB 10 “Sloga” together with her thirteen-strong crew. One of the

⁹²² BA-MA, RS 3-7/11, To the commander of 3rd Corps Major-General Sir Kosta Nadj (22 March 1944).

⁹²³ *Zbornik*/IV/24/35, Activity report of 12th Slavonian Brigade for the period 20-31 March 1944 (1 April 1944); HR HDA 1491, ZM-286/37, 5.13.10, 111, (untitled) (4 August 1944).

captives was Ivan Mordin-Crni, a member of the regional committee of the KPJ for Dalmatia. Eight days later, a boat aptly named “Neutralni” (“The Neutral One”) was dispatched to Korčula with a written offer, signed by the commander of the 4th Operational Zone of the NOVJ Navy Srećko Manola, for the German garrison there.⁹²⁴ “Neutralni”, however, failed to fulfill her mission for unknown reasons and a second courier boat had to be dispatched on 1 March. The boat arrived safely to Vela Luka where the letter was delivered to the Germans. Shortly before noon, a major arrived with an answer: the exchange was set for 10 March at the same place weather permitting. He “vouched with his head” that the German air-force would not interfere, but he also demanded that the Allied planes do the same. The German interpreter also informed the Partisans that Mordin escaped shortly after he had been captured, but was killed by a patrol two days later.⁹²⁵

Undeterred by Mordin’s death, the Partisans decided to proceed with the exchange, until problems with securing the chosen German prisoners arose. The latter were supposed to come from the POW camp at Vis, the main NOVJ base in the Adriatic. The problem was that forty of them, including those who the German command picked out, had already been “lent” to the British in mid-February, and transferred to Bari for interrogation. The British now refused to return the prisoners, saying that they were not lent but, in fact, given away for good. On 9 March, the NOVJ mission in Bari filed a protest and demanded an immediate return of the Germans. The mission’s head was no other than Vladimir Velebit and he was no stranger to the exchange business. Aware of the intelligence value of returnees in general, he advised against the exchange of the Germans from Vis, saying it would compromise the island’s defenses.⁹²⁶ This suggestion was overruled by the NOVJ Navy HQ which now had permission from the Main HQ for Croatia to conduct the exchange as scheduled.⁹²⁷

One day later than agreed, on 11 March shortly after 1100 hours, a motor-boat carrying both the white and the flag of Yugoslav Partisans entered the harbor of Vela Luka on Korčula. There were five Partisans and thirteen Germans aboard, five of whom were heavily wounded. An hour later, they were joined by Lieutenant Gschweidl who was head of the proceedings on behalf of the 118th Jäger Division. A cursory check of the manifest revealed that the Partisans did not bring the soldiers the Germans originally wanted. The lieutenant

⁹²⁴ *Zbornik*/VIII/2/26-7, 32, Reports of 4th Operational Zone of NOVJ Navy to NOVJ Navy HQ on 17 and 20 February 1944; Manola’s letter, dated 17 February 1944, is reproduced in Weingartner, *Errinerungen*, pp. 202a.

⁹²⁵ HR HDA 1896, NOV-43/5907, 4th Naval Sector to NOVJ Navy HQ (2 March 1944).

⁹²⁶ *Zbornik*/II/12/194, 228, Cables of NOVJ mission in Bari to NOVJ Navy HQ on 2 and 9 March 1944.

⁹²⁷ VA, 119/1, 2, 1, 147, NOVJ Navy HQ to Main HQ for Croatia (8 March 1944) and VA, 119/1, 2, 4, 118, Main HQ for Croatia to NOVJ Navy HQ (9 March 1944).

informed his counterpart that he would have to wait until his superiors decided on whether to accept the exchange on new terms or not. At 2000 hours, the message finally arrived and was an unpleasant surprise for all: the German side refused to accept the eight healthy “replacement” prisoners the Partisans brought with them; the heavily wounded would have to stay behind, without compensation. The guerrilla envoy protested, saying he would be shot if he returned to Vis with five Germans less and no exchanged Partisans; he gave up only after Gschweidl threatened to use force. The lieutenant had more difficulties in convincing the eight Germans to board the vessel again and return to captivity. One of them, a naval administration official, was particularly adamant about not leaving Korčula, saying he would rather face a German court-martial than be a prisoner of the guerrillas again. Gschweidl repeatedly sent cables to his superiors, arguing the case of the eight men, but to no avail. At 2300 hours, the German command lost patience: the lieutenant was ordered to force the German prisoners back on board. With great reluctance, they finally did as they were told. Before the vessel departed, Gschweidl informed the Partisan envoy that his side was still willing to conduct the exchange under the original terms in two weeks’ time, on 25 March 1944.⁹²⁸

It was only after four months that the Partisans decided to contact the island’s garrison again. On 21 August 1944, a raiding party of the 118th Division’s 750th Regiment made a night landing on the small island of Vrnik and captured six Partisans, including a local Party leader, and two German deserters. The district committee in Dubrovnik immediately requested permission to send parliamentarians to Korčula to broker an exchange. The request was granted and a three-man delegation, including “a comrade which had already been to Vela Luka” (presumably in March) was dispatched to the island on the 23rd. The Partisans proposed to exchange the men from Vrnik for some twelve *Kriegsmarine* sailors recently captured on the Pelješac peninsula. The Germans agreed by the 24th and also floated the possibility of including the men from NB-10 “Sloga” into the deal.⁹²⁹ The war diary of the 750th Regiment mentions that the planned continuation of talks scheduled for 25th or 26th August had to be cancelled due to “tactical measures”. On the 29th and 31st Partisan envoys

⁹²⁸ Gschweidl's four-page report on the event, dated 12 March 1944, can be found in Weingartner, *Errinerungen*, pp. 202a-202d. The card index of the Military Archive in Belgrade states that Box 2086 contains Partisan-German correspondence pertaining to this exchange (items numbered 1-10). During my visit to the archive in March 2013, I was told that these documents could not be found in the aforementioned box. From the brief summaries available in the card index, it is evident that the Partisan command dispatched another letter to the garrison of Korčula on 20 March and that the courier boat brought back the German answer on the same day (documents no. 8 and 9). Six days later, the Partisans delivered a new list of German prisoners available for exchange (document no. 10). I could not find any evidence that the correspondence continued after this date.

⁹²⁹ HR HDA 1896, NOV-43/5913, 5th Naval Sector to NOVJ Navy HQ (24 August 1944).

visited Korčula again, but no further details are known. The exchange probably did not materialize because of the mercurial situation in Southern Dalmatia which compelled the Germans to begin evacuating the island on 9 September.⁹³⁰

The 118th Jäger Division did not remain out of the exchange proceedings for long, however. In mid-October 1944, its reconnaissance battalion was engaged in heavy fighting around the town of Imotski. On one occasion, Partisan units of the 8th Dalmatian Corps exploited the gap in the German lines and attacked an isolated outpost at the village of Zagvozd. The small garrison was overrun after several hours of fighting, losing all 57 men in the process. Out of these, 45 were taken prisoner. On 23 October 1944, 23 soldiers were exchanged for the same number of Partisans outside Imotski; the rest were sent off to the rear.⁹³¹

After its occupation in October 1943, Montenegro was placed under direct German rule. *Feldkommandatur 1040*, established in Podgorica, was subordinated to the Military Commander in the South East located in Belgrade, rather than the 2nd Panzer Army. Being effectively a part of the occupation system in Serbia meant that the authorities in the Montenegrin capital were not keen on negotiating with the guerrillas. In late July 1944, the 7th Montenegrin Assault Brigade made an attempt to exchange some German soldiers it had captured in recent fighting. The brigade addressed its offer to the German command in Podgorica and requested an answer, along with the date and place of the exchange. The Germans chose not to respond to the letter. A possible reason for this lay in the timing of the Partisan offer: it coincided with von Stauffenberg's failed attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July. Fearing that any kind of negotiations with the guerrillas might be mistaken for treason, General Wilhelm Keiper, the head of the military administration in the country, decided not to accept the exchange. Indeed, the shooting of ten Partisan suspects on 20 July in Cetinje seemed to confirm that the German command in Montenegro opted to maintain a hard line in the treatment of captured guerrillas.⁹³²

⁹³⁰ BA-MA, RH-37/4835, War Diary of 750th Jäger Regiment, entries for the 23rd, 24th, 28th, 31st August and 9 September 1944.

⁹³¹ Max Frey, „Der Kampf bei Zagvozd und meine Gefangennahme“ in: Weingartner, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 274-5. According to the book *Nemačka obaveštajna služba* (Vol. V, p. 387-8), the branch-office of the German Secret Field Police in Western Herzegovina arranged a meeting between an intelligence officer of the 118th Division and the local Partisans on an unspecified date. As the result of the talks, some 150 prisoners were exchanged. This would have been by far the largest local exchange of the war, but I could not find any further evidence that it actually took place.

⁹³² Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, pp. 221; *Hronologija*, p. 817.

The late Summer of 1944 saw heavy fighting in northern Bosnia, as the 13th SS Mountain Division “Handschar” tried to stem the rising Partisan tide. In early September, during the fighting north of Tuzla, the 18th Croatian Brigade of the NOVJ ambushed a German staff car and killed three of its occupants.⁹³³ The sole survivor, SS Lieutenant Lünen, a communications officer in the “Handschar’s” HQ, was captured. According to one “Handschar” veteran, the Partisans dragged the lieutenant along with them “for weeks” before liquidating him.⁹³⁴ Lünen’s presence in the Partisan camp was witnessed by the Canadian surgeon Colin Dafoe, who was attached to the NOVJ’s 3rd Corps operating in the area. Dafoe spoke to this “fine-looking, well-nourished young blond German officer” in English and even offered him a cigarette, an act which the Partisans were not all too happy about. The next time Dafoe met the prisoner, he was being led away by two Partisans. He never saw him again, but he did see the lieutenant’s “beautiful jackboots on a Partisan officer later”.⁹³⁵ The reason why the guerrillas did not shoot Lünen (“a member of the Nazi Party and an officer of the hated ‘Handschar’ Division”, as Dafoe recollected) straight away was because he was needed for exchange for some activists held in Ustashe prisons. The swap was proposed by the Germans and discussed with the envoys of the NOVJ’s 38th Division. As it turned out that the former could not provide the people the Partisans wanted, the negotiations were broken off and the unfortunate SS officer was executed.⁹³⁶

One of the most interesting cases of prisoner exchange—as far as the nature of those involved is concerned—occurred around Derventa in northern Bosnia in September 1944. There were no German units in this town, however there was a *Soldatenheim* (literally “Soldiers’ Home”, a place where soldiers could spend leisure time) staffed by 26 nurses of the German Red Cross. When Derventa fell to the units of the NOVJ’s 5th Corps on 8 September thanks to the defection of the Home Guard garrison, the nurses were captured. The news caused a flurry of activity in the office of the Plenipotentiary-General in Zagreb. On 16

⁹³³ Blagoje Pejanović-Pop, „Borba za Srnice“ in: 18. hrvatska istočnobosanska narodnooslobodilačka udarna brigada (Tuzla: IGTR “Univerzal”, 1988), p. 479-80

⁹³⁴ George Lepre, *Himmler's Bosnian Division: The Waffen-SS Handschar Division 1943-1945* (Atlglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1997), p. 223.

⁹³⁵ Brian Jeffrey Street, *The Parachute Ward: A Canadian Surgeon's Wartime Adventures in Yugoslavia* (first published by Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Publishers, 1987), Chapter 17; free electronic edition available at <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/eppp-archive/100/200/300/editio/parachute/html/chap-17.html> (last accessed on 4 November 2012).

⁹³⁶ Esad Tihić, *Posavsko-trebavski NOP odred* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1983), p. 223. One veteran of the “Handschar’s” 28th Regiment remembered there was an attempt to swap prisoners with Tito’s men. As this unit operated north of Tuzla at the time of Lünen’s capture, it is possible that he was referring to the above-mentioned episode: TV-documentary „Bosnier in der Waffen-SS“ (3Sat, 12 July 1998); Lünen’s name found its way into Bakrač’s notes, most probably as the result of Nemeček’s inquiries: HR HDA 1491, ZM-286/37, 5.13.10, 193, Exchanges (undated).

September, Colonel Selchow placed a telephone call to the operations officer of Army Group F, requesting permission to fly to Brod and try to exchange the nurses.⁹³⁷ Selchow's request was granted, but whether he made the trip or not remains unknown. We do know, however, that the head of the German exchange commission, Willibald Nemeček travelled to the area for the same reason. Nemeček's job was made considerably easier by Colonel von Funk, Horstenau's old chief of staff and the host of Marijan Stilinović during his first visit to Zagreb in August 1942. In his new function as the *Feldkommandant* in Brod, von Funk was able to give Nemeček information on the whereabouts of the headquarters of the 5th Partisan Corps where the negotiations were to take place. Furthermore, he provided the vehicles which took the exchanged nurses back to the German lines.⁹³⁸

The last recorded attempt at prisoner exchange happened in Central Bosnia in March 1945. This was precipitated by the capture of Colonel Eberlein, the commander of the 639th Security Regiment. On 26 February, an armored train the colonel was riding with was ambushed near Busovača. The Partisans managed to immobilize the train and chase off a portion of its crew; the remainder being pummeled into submission by artillery fire. 28 Germans, including Eberlein and his son, were captured by the 6th Krajina Brigade on that day. The immediate aftermath of his capture was especially unpleasant for the elderly colonel, as he had to wade through the freezing Lašva with the rest of the column. His request that he be enabled to cross the river without having to wet his feet went unheeded. Eberlein's subsequent protest and invocation of international law provoked a stern rebuke that the Germans thought of conventions only when they were losing.⁹³⁹

The colonel was brought to the HQ of the 4th Krajina Division and interrogated. During the questioning, he floated the idea of exchange and the division forwarded the request onto to the 5th Corps. As coincidence would have it, the necessity for a local exchange had recently arisen. Elements of the 7th SS Mountain Division appeared suddenly in the sector of the 4th Krajina Division on 1 March; one day later, a vigorous attack forced two Partisan brigades to retreat and leave the division's rear elements in Vitez defenseless. The Germans entered the town and captured a number of Partisans from the 11th Krajina Brigade, as well as 37 horses, 62 rifles, 14 machineguns, 2 sub-machineguns, one mortar and various other

⁹³⁷ NAW, T-311, Roll 193, 000633, Telephone conversations on 16 September 1944 (17,00h).

⁹³⁸ HR HDA 1521, Box 9, File 123 Horstenau, Nemeček's statement on Colonel Freiherr v. Funk.

⁹³⁹ *Zbornik/IV/34/225-6*, Activity report of 6th Krajina Brigade, entry for 26 February 1945; Nikola Japundža, "Kako je zarobljen štab njemačke borbene grupe 'Eberlajn'" in: *Šesta krajiška NOU brigada: ratna sjećanja* (Bečej: GRO „Proleter“, 1985), pp. 686-7.

supplies.⁹⁴⁰ After the battle, the news reached the Partisans that the Germans would be willing to discuss the exchange of Colonel Eberlein: his capture did not go unnoticed as he was also a colonel in the SA and a known nationalist figure from the days of revolutionary upheaval in Germany in the aftermath of the First World War.⁹⁴¹ The 1st Battalion of the 11th Krajina Brigade was therefore tasked with bringing a letter from the Corps for the German command across the lines. The courier who volunteered for the job reached German pickets and was taken blindfolded to a command post where he delivered the offer. Labović and Basta claim that Eberlein was exchanged for a number of Partisans plus the weapons and equipment the Germans had captured in Vitez. However, a number of sources claim otherwise. Dragomir Radišić, the political commissar of the 1st Battalion at that time, claims that exchange failed to materialize since the 7th SS withdrew from Vitez on 12 March 1945.⁹⁴² The activity report of the 4th Krajina Division for March (compiled in the first week of April) still shows the division short of its ten missing and one captured man, as well as all the equipment lost in Vitez. This should come as no surprise, as there is not a single piece of evidence that the Germans ever traded weapons and military equipment for prisoners.⁹⁴³ Furthermore, there is at least one document which confirms that Eberlein could not be exchanged in the field and that he remained in captivity. On 31 March 1945, the OZNA for Bosnia and Herzegovina dispatched one of its officers to the Main HQ for Croatia with a letter which in part read that the Bosnian units had a large number of German prisoners whose exchange could not be completed locally due to the military situation; “It should be mentioned that one of them is Colonel Eberlein-Ritter [sic] [...]”. Another document shows that the Partisans prepared a list of thirty persons who should be requested from the Germans for Eberlein’s release. Boris Bakrač’s records on proceedings in Pisarovina during the last weeks of the war, however, do not mention Eberlein’s exchange.⁹⁴⁴

⁹⁴⁰ Drago Karasijević, *Četvrta krajiška NOU divizija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1988), p. 397.

⁹⁴¹ Ernst Percy Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht 1940-1945* (Herrsching: Manfred Pawlak Verlag, 1982), Vol. VIII., p. 1131, War diary entry for 27 February 1945; Ellen Latzin, „Bayern und die Pfalz: eine historische Beziehung voller Höhen und Tiefen“ in: *Einsichten und Perspektiven* (Special issue 2/2006), freely downloadable at: http://www.blz.bayern.de/blz/eup/02_06_themenheft/11.asp#1 (last accessed on 13 May 2013); <http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=129751> (last accessed on 7 November 2012).

⁹⁴² Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, p. 267-8; Dragomir-Radiša Radišić, “U 1. bataljonu 11 Krajiške NOU kozarske brigade, od Prijedora do slobode” in: *Kozara u Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu: zapisi i sjećanja* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1978), Volume VI, pp. 397-8.

⁹⁴³ *Zbornik*/IV/34/613, Activity report of 4th Krajina Division for March 1945 (9 April 1945).

⁹⁴⁴ HR HDA 1491, ZM-286/37, 5.13.10, 38, OZNA for Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Main HQ for Croatia (31 March 1945); *ibid.*, 189, Eberlein (undated). Eberlein died in captivity in Sarajevo in 1949: [http://www.volksbund.de/index.php?id=1775&tx_igverlustsuche_pi2\[gid\]=f8da3186a5faa760b794557abdc4b9e](http://www.volksbund.de/index.php?id=1775&tx_igverlustsuche_pi2[gid]=f8da3186a5faa760b794557abdc4b9e) (last accessed on 16 January 2012).

5. Mini-cartel in Eastern Herzegovina, 1944

Eastern Herzegovina, or more precisely the area around Stolac, was the scene of a series of contacts between the Partisans and the Germans between June and September 1944. These contacts led to an unwritten agreement on prisoner exchange, which was in essence, a mini Pisarovina. The delegates also discussed and corresponded on issues beyond that of mere prisoner swap. The extraordinary thing about these talks is that they were led by two units which previously had an abysmal record on the treatment of enemy captives, the 369th Infantry and 29th Herzegovina Divisions.

It all began when the South Herzegovina detachment captured two German NCOs of the “Devil’s Division” on 20 June 1944. One day later, the Partisan command dispatched a letter to the German command in Stolac, offering to exchange the NCOs for two captured Partisans, including one “political worker”.⁹⁴⁵ The garrison replied affirmatively and invited Partisan delegates to Stolac, where the exchange could be made. The answer also requested that the Partisans send one of their brigade officers as “there is much to be discussed on the issue of military law [and its application] between the warring sides”.⁹⁴⁶ The Partisan HQ responded on the 26th, declining the invitation and proposing instead that the meeting be held on the “neutral” territory of Hill 286, near the hamlet of Poplat just south of the town. Both delegations should come to the meeting spot waving white flags and bearing no arms; the escort (consisting of no more than one platoon) should stay some distance away.⁹⁴⁷ The Germans agreed to these terms, and the political worker was swapped for one German soldier on 27 June 1944.⁹⁴⁸

The second exchange was planned to take place in two days’ time on the same place. Zora Kruševac-Roganović, chosen for the exchange, remembered the treatment she received in Stolac:

„The town commander [...] took my coat like a true gentleman and handed my bag over to his orderly. I was walking between him and the captain who was our interpreter; behind us came soldiers. It looked like a wedding procession with people [watching us] from

⁹⁴⁵ VA, 1627, 2, 15, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison (21 June 1944).

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid., document no. 17, Stolac garrison to South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment (23 June 1944).

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid., documents no. 16 and 19, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison (23 and 26 June 1944).

⁹⁴⁸ Mensur Seferović, *Trinaesta hercegovačka NOU brigada* (Beograd: Vojno-izdavački zavod, 1988), pp. 44. The exchange could not be made under the original terms, because the Germans failed to produce the both persons whom the Partisans demanded.

the streets. Once we arrived at Poplat, the commander and the captain took off their pistol belts, took a bottle of cognac and went to a hill some 500 meters away. The negotiations lasted for quite some time. About one o'clock in the afternoon, a flare was fired [from a signal pistol]. I walked to the hill escorted by a soldier of the „Devil's Division“. From the opposite side came our man [leading] one uniformed Kraut [...]. [The envoys then] exchanged 'Death to fascism' with 'Heil Hitler' [and parted]“.⁹⁴⁹

The negotiations lasted for four hours and were led in a “very correct” manner by both sides. The Partisans were represented by Danko Kundačina and Miloš Stamatović, the commander and political commissar of the South Herzegovina Detachment, respectively. The German commandant of Stolac, although fluent in Serbo-Croatian, did not talk much. The chief German negotiator was 1st Lieutenant Kurz, the intelligence officer of the 369th Infantry Division. The Partisan delegation opened the talks by protesting against the atrocities that followed German operations in the area and the harsh treatment of captured Partisans and their sympathizers. In short, the German army was not obeying the provisions of international law, a fact for which it will be “criminally persecuted in the near future”. Stamatović then moved on to political questions. He said that the Partisan movement would never accept the break-up of Yugoslavia as orchestrated by the Axis powers. Their army was an independent force, made up of all Yugoslav nationalities, including ethnic Germans who had their own Partisan Company in Slavonia. Behind the tightly organized NOVJ stood a political body, the AVNOJ, which was tasked with administering the liberated areas through a net of “People’s Liberation Councils”. Since the movement had been recognized by all of the members of the anti-fascist coalition, it could lay claim to being the sole legitimate representative of Yugoslavia in this conflict.⁹⁵⁰

Kurz responded that the NDH was a sovereign state and an ally of the Third Reich; it had the right to defend itself against Communist subversion and apply coercive measures against civilians who supported the guerrillas. He added that the German side had already taken necessary steps to ensure that all Partisan prisoners and suspect civilians were treated correctly by the Gestapo and NDH authorities; the Ustashe and the Chetniks were also under orders to deliver captured Partisans alive or face the death penalty. However, it was the 29th Division who was killing prisoners and thus breaking “an earlier agreement” negotiated between Engineer Ott and the Supreme HQ of the NOVJ already in November 1942. The

⁹⁴⁹ Seferović, *Trinaesta hercegovačka*, pp. 44-5.

⁹⁵⁰ Labović-Basta, *Partizani za pregovaračkim stolom*, pp. 256-7; VA, 1627, 2, 23, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to 29th Herzegovina Division (30 June 1944).

German side was opposed to such actions and proposed that the prisoners should be exchanged in the future. Kurz therefore requested that the negotiations be continued on a higher level, preferably with the commander of the 2nd Assault Corps, Peko Dapčević. He then inquired as to the location of the final resting place of the Luftwaffe ace Captain Kirchner and about the possibility of a transfer of his remains to Mostar. The Partisan delegation replied that it was not authorized to accept or refuse these requests, but could only relate them to their superiors. The Germans also proposed a truce along the lines of communication in Eastern Herzegovina; in exchange, they would refrain from incursions into the surrounding countryside. This request was refused on the spot.⁹⁵¹

In a letter dated 30 June 1944, the commander and the political commissar of the South Herzegovina Detachment informed the 29th Herzegovina Division of the proceedings, requested instructions and suggested that Kirchner's body be offered in exchange for Partisan prisoners.⁹⁵² After consulting with the command of the 2nd Assault Corps, the division instructed the detachment to convey the following to the garrison at Stolac: German prisoners would be treated according to international law; both sides should strive to exchange prisoners as soon as they are available; legionaries of Slavic origin would not be exchanged as they are mostly deserters who are coming over because of the "unbearable conditions" in the German army; Captain Kirchner's body may not be exhumed; the 2nd Assault Corps is considering the offer for direct negotiations and would inform the garrison about its decision in due time.⁹⁵³

The planned exchange of Lieutenant Stojan Vukčević, a Yugoslav-Canadian member of the British military mission to the 2nd Assault Corps, was the main topic of the German-Partisan correspondence in July and August 1944. The Partisan envoys requested his release at the meeting on 29 June and offered one soldier of the "Devil's Division" in return. The Germans refused to exchange him for a common soldier; "customs of war" required that he be exchanged for one NCO and at least two soldiers. They added that Vukčević was in Mostar and that he would be brought to Stolac as soon as the Partisans agreed to their terms. The correspondence continued throughout the next two weeks, but no agreement could be reached, as the latter kept repeating that one private was all whom they could offer. The German

⁹⁵¹ Ibid.

⁹⁵² Ibid.; This detail was not mentioned in any of the Yugoslav works dealing with the prisoner exchange in Herzegovina in 1944.

⁹⁵³ Ibid., document no. 27, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison (1 July 1944).

Summer offensive in Eastern Herzegovina (codenamed “Sonnenstich”) began on 13 July and lasted for two weeks, during which the negotiations were on hold.⁹⁵⁴

Although the results of the exchange up until now were relatively meager (both sides received only two prisoners each), the command of the 29th Herzegovina Division recognized the potential value of these contacts. As a result, the division issued an order to all subordinated units on 16 July 1944 that “all Krauts, but especially officers and NCOs, who surrender on their own free will during the fighting, are not to be killed, but brought to this command instead”.⁹⁵⁵ The impact of the exchange arrangement on Hill 286 could be felt even beyond the immediate confines of Eastern Herzegovina. In July 1944, the 5th SS Mountain Corps hosted a conference of representatives of all intelligence services active in its operational area. There were altogether 25 persons present, including intelligence officers from operative units, Abwehr’s “Front Reconnaissance Troops”, Secret Field Gendarmerie and the SD. Lieutenant Kurz of the 369th Infantry gave a report on the question of prisoners and the successful exchange agreement with the Partisans in Eastern Herzegovina. Based on his lecture, it was concluded that all units should strive to capture as many guerrillas as possible in order to exchange them for German soldiers in captivity.⁹⁵⁶

On 31 July, the 29th Herzegovina Division sent five Germans and one Croatian legionnaire (“infected with syphilis and therefore impossible to treat in Partisan hospitals”) to the detachment along with the names of six persons the corps wanted released in return. One day later, the division dispatched another two prisoners (one member of OT and one wounded Croatian soldier) for the same purpose. The detachment should do everything what was necessary to affect Vukčević’s release; captured civilian sympathizers and some Home Guards who were arrested for supporting the Partisans came second. As the exchange was planned to be expanded, the envoys were instructed to demand a list of prison inmates from Mostar. Last but not the least, the division cautioned the detachment not to use a depreciative

⁹⁵⁴ See the letters from Stolac garrison to the South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment in *Ibid.*, document nos. 26 (30 June 1944), 28 (1 July 1944), 30 (3 July 1944), 32 (6 July 1944), and 34 (9 July 1944); Partisan letters can be found in *ibid.*, documents 27 (1 July), 31 (5 July 1944), 35 (10 July 1944). In his letter to the Partisans dated 30 June 1944, Lieutenant Kurz also wrote that he was sorry that his camera did not function properly, and expressed his wish to make more photos with the Partisans the next time they met.

⁹⁵⁵ VA, 1145/2, 2, 14, 29th Herzegovina Division to all subordinated units (16-17 July 1944).

⁹⁵⁶ *Nemačka obaveštajna služba*, Vol. V, p. 158.

tone in its correspondence with the opposite side; letters to the garrison should be forthwith addressed to the “temporary occupation command at Stolac”.⁹⁵⁷

Despite the sharpening of the tone, the two commands continued working on a solution of Vukčević’s case during the first two weeks of August. On the 3rd, the Partisans requested the list of prisoners from Mostar and Dubrovnik, and offered a number of “full-blooded” Germans in exchange. The letter continued that the soldiers of other nationalities who were caught in the recent fighting did not want to return and the Partisans would not force them. As for Vukčević, the guerrillas were ready to offer one medical NCO for him, but other prisoners had to be exchanged with him no later than 13 August, or they would be returned to the 29th Division.⁹⁵⁸ As the Germans failed to deliver the list of the prison inmates, the exchange appeared to be doomed; the South Herzegovina Detachment was already complaining that the prisoners were becoming a burden.⁹⁵⁹ The garrison in Stolac therefore proposed to swap Vukčević immediately for the NCO at hand, while the difference could be settled in future exchanges.⁹⁶⁰ The exchange took place in the last week of August; some Yugoslav sources claim that seven Germans were released on this occasion for Vukčević alone.⁹⁶¹ In all probability, the Partisans gave one NCO for the British officer while the

⁹⁵⁷ VA, 1145/1, 1, 9-1, 29th Herzegovina Division to South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment (31 July 1944); *ibid.*, 1627, 2, 36/1-2, 29th Herzegovina Division to South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment (1 August 1944). The Germans replied in kind by changing the header of their messages “to the still-existent headquarters of the Partisan bands in Southern Herzegovina”. As the Partisans attached great importance to the formal side of negotiations with the Germans, the response of the town command did not go unanswered: “The way in which you addressed this command in your last letter shows that you intentionally deny the fact that we are an army recognized by our allies, an army [whose fighting prowess] you have felt on your own skin [...] during the past three years of fighting. On the other hand, you are occupiers and your command in Stolac is temporary” (*ibid.*, document no. 36/3-2, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison, 11 August 1944). The „Devil’s Division“ was no stranger to written duels with Partisan units. On one such occasion in early 1944, a German captain from the garrison at Jajce sent an envelope full of propaganda leaflets, letters of safe conduct for deserters and tobacco rationing stamps to a battalion of the 1st Proletarian Brigade. In a letter addressed to the Partisan commander personally the captain advised him to think the situation over and inform the garrison of when and where he wanted to surrender his unit. Both amused and angry, the Partisan commander prepared an answer, written in German, which contained “a torrent of taunts, loathful remarks and insults”. The letter, along with a single cigarette made of Herzegovinian tobacco, was sent through the same peasant who had brought the envelope. The courier soon returned with the reply from the garrison’s command. The answer consisted of the letter written by the Partisan commander with all grammatical errors underlined with green pencil. Underneath the original text the German officer added in Serbian: “Next time, please respond in Serbo-Croatian; altogether 36 errors; grade: F.” The Partisans later concluded that the German officer (“a known Gestapo official”) wanted to test their nerves and throw them off-balance just before the garrison made a sally against the Partisan positions outside of town: Ljubiša Veselinović, “Neobična prepiska” in: *Prva proleterska brigada: sećanja boraca* (Belgrade: Vojno delo, 1963), Vol. II, p. 133.

⁹⁵⁸ VA, 1627, 2, 36/2-2 and 26/3-2, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison (3 and 8 August 1944).

⁹⁵⁹ VA, 1144/2, 1, 28, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to 29th Herzegovina Division (12 August 1944).

⁹⁶⁰ VA, 1627, 2, 40, Stolac garrison to South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment (12 August 1944).

⁹⁶¹ Danilo Komnenović, Muharem Kreso, *Dvadeset deveta hercegovačka divizija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1979), p. 296. . The exchange of Stojan Vukčević illustrates how German units in the NDH learned to

remaining six were swapped for the same number of Partisan sympathizers from the lists provided by the 29th Herzegovina Division in late July and early August. This assumption is confirmed in a letter to the German command dated 30 August, in which the Partisans promised to include one private they owed for Vukčević in the exchange that was set for 2 September 1944. On this occasion, the Partisans received one of their fighters and five civilian sympathizers for altogether three German soldiers.⁹⁶²

By this time, the frequent correspondence between the two sides and occasional prisoner exchange on Hill 286 had evolved into a small cartel defined by verbally agreed rules. The negotiations were conducted by the South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment on behalf of the 29th Herzegovina Division on the one side, and by the 369th Anti-tank Battalion on behalf of the 369th Infantry Division on the other. It is worthy of note that this battalion had convened a special commission headed by Sergeant Swoboda and tasked it with overseeing all aspects of prisoner exchange.⁹⁶³ One letter written by Lieutenant Kurz in early September 1944 provides an insight into the inner mechanism of the agreement. The prisoners were swapped according to their rank: a German officer was worth one Partisan officer, or seven fighters or ten civilians; an NCO was worth one NCO, or three fighters or seven civilians; an ordinary soldier was worth one soldier or five civilians. The Partisans were understandably very interested in the release of their civilian supporters. They were also very eager to settle scores with those who had defected to the Axis side. In reply to one such request, Kurz wrote that the persons “who returned to civilian life in order to support Europe’s struggle against foreign enemies” stood under German protection and consequently could not be exchanged. The Partisans also wanted to include members of the NDH’s armed forces into the deal, but this idea was rejected by the Germans. The explanation was that these persons were exchanged under a separate agreement between the NDH and the Supreme HQ

disregard orders from above if they ran contrary to their immediate needs. On 18 August 1944, just several days before the British officer was exchanged, Hitler issued a secret instruction according to which the members of Allied and Soviet military missions were not to be treated as prisoners of war, but executed (NAW, T-311, Roll 192, 000601, Commander-in-Chief South East to Army Group F and 2nd Panzer Army, 18 August 1944). The order was not to be passed on to commands below the corps level. It is known that Vukčević had been brought to Mostar, the seat of the 5th SS Mountain Corps, already in July. This command could have therefore easily executed Hitler’s order, but it chose not to, for it would also have condemned several German soldiers to a very uncertain fate in Partisan captivity.

⁹⁶² Komnenović-Kreso, *Dvadeset deveta hercegovačka divizija*, p. 506; VA, 1627, 2, 45, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison (30 August 1944). The correspondence was interrupted several times in late August by the Chetniks. The Partisans demanded from the Germans that they protect the courier link between the two commands from their unruly auxiliaries (Ibid., documents no. 43 and 45, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison, 23 and 30 August 1944). Consequently, the Germans began marking the envelopes destined for the Partisans with a note: “Prisoner exchange—free passage allowed”: Seferović, *Trinaesta hercegovačka*, p. 119.

⁹⁶³ Schraml, *Kriegschauplatz Kroatien*, p. 72.

of the NOVJ and that the Partisans “should talk directly to Zagreb”. The real reason was, of course, that the Germans did not want to “waste” their prisoners on the soldiers of unreliable NDH formations which were anyway scarcely present in the region. The main allies of the 369th Legionnaire Division in Eastern Herzegovina were the Chetniks, and the Germans dully took their needs into consideration. For instance, the Partisans were informed that all Muslims and Croats who were captured as the members of the NOVJ were eligible for exchange. The Serbs, on the contrary, were recruited into Chetnik ranks. Lieutenant Kurz also did not fail to mention that, according to the same international law the Partisans so often invoked in their letters, prisoners were permitted to be relieved only of their weapons. This was a reminder that the guerrillas were continuously breaking their promise not to strip (and plunder) their German captives.⁹⁶⁴ The demand that the body and decorations of Captain Kirchner be exchanged for prisoners was refused with indignation: “According to our opinion and to the traditions of Western culture, [the return of a body] is a purely humane and chivalrous act”.⁹⁶⁵

The first week of September was spent in preparations for another exchange. The Partisans offered two medical NCOs (one from the “Organization Todt” and another from the “Devil’s Division”) in exchange for eight persons, including one councilman of the Communist-sponsored regional parliament for Bosnia and Herzegovina (“ZAVNOBIH”).⁹⁶⁶ The Germans replied that the exchange could not take place on 10 September as proposed because some of the wanted prisoners had not yet arrived for Mostar. The letter also contained a threat:

*“At the same time, we wish to inform you that this would be the last exchange if you persist in refusing to exchange the Croats [who are in your custody]. We know for certain that they want to be exchanged [with the rest]. We consider it our duty to show solidarity with our allies”.*⁹⁶⁷

The South Herzegovina Detachment attempted to calm the situation by offering “the only Croat” they had for one of their fighters who was believed to be in a hospital in Dubrovnik. At the same time, the guerrilla command re-affirmed its position that the prisoners of Slav origin

⁹⁶⁴ On 30 August 1944, the South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment informed the garrison in Stolac that the German prisoners would be returned in the same uniforms they were wearing at the time of their capture. The Detachment also promised to pass on the German complaints over this issue to their superiors: VA, 1627,2,45.

⁹⁶⁵ Ibid., document no. 46, Stolac garrison to South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment (2 September 1944);

⁹⁶⁶ Ibid., document no. 49, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison (7 September 1944); Komnenović-Kreso, *Dvadeset deveta hercegovačka divizija*, p. 105.

⁹⁶⁷ VA, 1627,2,51, Stolac garrison to South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment (9 September 1944).

would not be exchanged unless they wanted to and “at this moment, there are no such people”.⁹⁶⁸

The Partisan response also read that the circumstances demanded the exchange be completed “in a most urgent manner”. The sense of urgency was caused by the fact that the newly arrived 13th Herzegovina Brigade had issued an ultimatum to the garrison in Stolac on 7 September 1944 without consulting the South Herzegovina Detachment beforehand. The ultimatum recounted the state of Germany’s desperate military and diplomatic situation in general and especially pointed out that all escape routes from the Balkans were severed. In order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, the garrison was summoned to surrender and disarm all collaborationist units under their command. If they agreed, they would be treated according to Geneva Convention; if not, they would be “considered as criminals and treated accordingly”. The Germans did not respond and the garrison remained in the town until late October.⁹⁶⁹

The ultimatum signaled an end to the prisoner exchange on Hill 286. The South-Herzegovina Detachment was disbanded and its personnel were transferred to the newly-created 14th Herzegovina Brigade. The brigade’s HQ delivered all documentation pertaining to the prisoner exchange to higher commands so that they may “continue to work on this matter.” The 29th Division did not see fit to continue contact with the Germans in Stolac in light of the growing strength of the Partisan movement and steadily deteriorating position of its enemy. The 14th Brigade, on the contrary, continued to desire to exchange prisoners even after the collapse of the Stolac arrangement. By mid-November, the brigade was deployed around Nevesinje, still facing elements of the 369th Infantry Division. When fourteen of its members (including one Italian) were captured, the unit contacted the German garrison and requested an exchange. The letter of offer included the threat that the Partisans would exact reprisals on German prisoners should anything unsavory transpire with the captive Partisans. This was, in fact, a hollow threat because the brigade did not have any prisoners at hand; the true purpose of the ultimatum was to buy time for collecting a sufficient number of Germans for the exchange. The brigade ordered its battalions to go on a prisoner hunt while requesting help from the 29th Division. Eventually, the needed prisoners arrived from the POW camp in

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid., document no. 50, South Herzegovina Partisan Detachment to Stolac garrison (9 September 1944). In the same letter, the detachment informed the Germans that none of the five members of the OT the latter were searching for (ibid., document no. 51) were in the custody of the 29th Herzegovina Division.

⁹⁶⁹ Komnenović-Kreso, *Dvadeset deveta hercegovačka divizija*, p. 506; Seferović, *Trinaesta hercegovačka*, p. 118-9. There is no evidence to suggest that the ultimatum to Stolac was linked to the similar call for surrender of German forces in western Macedonia which was issued at approximately the same time. The concept was probably devised by local Partisan commands who hoped to exploit the crisis caused by the defection of Germany’s Balkan allies and the arrival of the Red Army on Yugoslav borders.

Bileća. In the interim, the Germans had agreed to the offer and the fourteen Partisans were swapped for the same number of Germans between 23 and 25 November 1944.⁹⁷⁰

6. Prisoner exchanges on the “regular” fronts, 1944-1945

All of the previously described prisoner exchanges occurred under conditions of guerrilla war which had been raging in Yugoslavia—with slight alterations—since the beginning of the war. This included asymmetric tactics, a lack of secure rear areas and as well as the selective application of international law on the part of the Communist-led guerrillas. However, beginning in late 1944, regular warfare began to become prevalent in the province of Syrmia, west of Belgrade and in parts of Dalmatia. We shall now try to determine whether the prisoner exchange policy found application under the new circumstances as well.

Although the Partisans were increasingly able to fight in a regular fashion when it suited them, this style of combat was practiced only when necessary (e.g. covering a retreat). Losses in manpower and materiel incurred by superior enemy firepower were hard to replace and were usually disproportionate to the casualties inflicted on the enemy. The arrival of the Red Army and the liberation of Serbia in October-November 1944 alleviated the problems of manpower and supply to a large degree. Serbia represented a large, almost untouched, manpower pool which could now be exploited to the full. The quick establishment of a civilian authority enabled the NOVJ to launch a massive conscription drive which soon beefed up the strength of divisions in Serbia to approximately 8-10,000 men apiece.⁹⁷¹ Thanks to the safe ground link to the territory controlled by the Red Army, these large units could now be equipped with Soviet arms, which included T-34 tanks and “Ilyushin Il-2” ground-attack aircraft. Thus equipped, the NOVJ units were sent to engage the Germans along a fixed front which had been created in the western Serbian province of Syrmia in the aftermath of the Battle for Belgrade. The regular warfare fought in the trench lines in Syrmia was,

⁹⁷⁰ Ilija Perišić, “Prva omladinska brigade NOVJ u Hercegovini i aktivnosti skojevske organizacije” in: *Četrnaesta hercegovačka NOU brigada* (Beograd: Vojno-izdavački zavod, 1988), p. 21; Vukašin Senić, Mile Vukalović et al., “Borbena dejstva brigade” in: *ibid.*, pp.70-1. This book provides 25 November as the date of exchange, whereas German primary sources suggest that the exchange took place at least two days earlier. One intelligence report reads that, according to the statements of “exchanged prisoners”, the Partisans in the „Bileća-Gacko area” were commanded by British officers: NAW, T-311, Roll 184, Supplement to the daily report of Army Group E for 23 November 1944. The monograph on the 14th Herzegovina Brigade claims that one of its battalions went on a hunt for exchange prisoners near Sarajevo as late as January 1945: *Četrnaesta hercegovačka*, p. 172-3.

⁹⁷¹ Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Vol. II, pp. 414, 439; Ljubivoje Pajović, Dušan Uzelac, Milovan Dželebdžić, *Sremski front 1944-45* (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1979), p. 153.

however, much different from what the Partisan units had been accustomed to; on the other side, it was precisely the style of combat German units excelled at. Consequently, the NOVJ suffered a series of bloody reversals while trying to achieve a breakthrough in the Winter and early Spring of 1945. They would succeed in only in mid-April, less than a month before the capitulation of Germany.⁹⁷²

The both sides now facing each other in Syrmia were regular armies, at least as far as appearance and fighting techniques were concerned. The practices of war remained, however, largely unchanged. For instance, one German police battalion complained in December 1944 that a prisoner who was captured by his men “could have contributed to our knowledge of enemy intentions [...] had he not been shot while trying to escape”.⁹⁷³ At the same time, 18-year old Ruža Dević, a nurse attached to the 8th Vojvodina Brigade was not far from Osijek when her unit was overrun by the Germans and Ustashe. She, along with the other prisoners who could be transported to the rear (including the lightly wounded), was taken captive; the heavily wounded were summarily executed.⁹⁷⁴ The situation was hardly better on the opposite side of the front. Despite the repeated orders regarding the fair treatment of prisoners, the Partisan units on the ground often continued in their old ways. On 3 February 1945, the 25th Division of the NOVJ, deployed on the flank of the Syrmian Front to the south of the Sava, was ordered to send a captured German officer “most urgently” (repeated twice in the message) to the 14th Corps’ HQ. One day later, the Corps sent the following message to the division:

*“It is impossible to understand why you have failed to send us the German prisoners. Your treatment of prisoners does not only go against our orders and prevent us from gaining a clear picture of the situation; on top of that, it is a direct violation of the Supreme HQ's order concerning the treatment of prisoners”.*⁹⁷⁵

There is no evidence that the regular NOVJ units on the Syrmian Front ever attempted to exchange prisoners on the local level. The Yugoslav side also did not attempt to use the German prisoners from camps in Serbia for exchange in neighboring Croatia. This was in part

⁹⁷² Erich-Schmidt Richberg, *Das Endkampf auf dem Balkan: Die Operationen der Heeresgruppe E von Griechenland bis zu den Alpen* (Heidelberg: Kurt Vowinckel Verlag, 1955), pp. 76-89, 91-6, 111-3, 116-27.

⁹⁷³ NAW, T-315, Roll 1300, 001008, 2nd Battalion of 1st Volunteers’ Police Regiment “Croatia”, Comment of battalion commander (2 December 1944).

⁹⁷⁴ Nikola Božić, *Rovovi i mostobrani: Osmu vojvođanska udarna brigada* (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1989), pp. 393-4.

⁹⁷⁵ *Zbornik/IV/33/101*, 129, 14th Corps to 25th Division (3 and 4 February 1945). Gojko Nikoliš, veteran Partisan doctor, witnessed a long column of German prisoners being led to the rear on 12 April 1945 in Syrmia and commented that “their fate was not enviable”: Nikoliš, *Korijen*, p. 654.

largely due to technical difficulties of transferring the prisoners over the long roundabout route across half the country to Pisarovina. To create a separate cartel for the Strymian Front would have required a political will which was no longer present in the highest Yugoslav leadership. Indeed, for political reasons as well as prestige the decision was made not to exchange the inmates of prisoner camps in Serbia or to encourage units to do likewise. First of all, it would have been impossible to engage in this without drawing the attention of the numerous Soviet representatives in the country: we have seen how Tito had been striving to stay out of the limelight ever since the heated exchange with the Comintern in the first half of 1943. Second, gaining control over Serbia made Tito the undisputed ruler of new Yugoslavia. The Communist-controlled government was now in charge of the most populous province of the country. Its rule had all the trappings of a sovereign state, including civilian administration, control over its own economic resources, internal security and a regular army. Having prisoners was a symbolic sign of the new state's military power. Prestige now carried more weight than purely practical considerations: the German prisoners were worth more in clearing rubble off the streets in Belgrade in full view of the populace, than for use in the prisoner exchange. Third, it is likely that the Yugoslavs were now suffering from the same arrogance which plagued the Germans in the first phase of the war. With their strength constantly growing, and the outcome of the war certain, they were less likely to make concessions of any kind to their enemy.

7. Negotiations in Macedonia 1943-1944

In September 1943, occupied Yugoslavia was in turmoil resulting from the capitulation of Fascist Italy. All warring factions now directed their efforts to reaching the former Italian occupation zone as fast as possible. The prize was the occupation of the Adriatic coast and the capture of the 200,000-strong 2nd Italian Army together with its vast stock of arms and supplies. The 2nd Army was increasingly beginning to lose cohesion amidst the confusion caused by recent developments. As the central command disappeared, each Italian commander now had to decide for himself which course of action he should take. Some surrendered their units to the Germans or one of the competing guerrilla movements, some

decided to take sides and some attempted to take a neutral course and move to the coast in hope of being ferried across the Adriatic back to Italy.⁹⁷⁶

The capitulation of Italy provided a much needed impulse for the strengthening of the hitherto weak Partisan presence in the western part of present-day Macedonia. As in the rest of the former Italian occupation zone in Yugoslavia, the Partisans and the Germans (along with their Bulgarian allies) were competing against one another in the attempt to secure territory and disarm as many Italian units as possible. This led to the first skirmishes between the guerrillas and the German occupation forces in Macedonia. During the fighting around the town of Kičevo on the first day of November 1943, the Partisans managed to capture several German soldiers and officers, including one lieutenant-colonel. Two days later, the HQ of the Macedonian Second Operational Zone dispatched a letter to the German garrisons in Struga and Debar proposing a meeting in order to discuss the exchange of these men for leading Macedonian Communists held in Bulgarian prisons. At the end of the letter came a threat that specifying that unless the exchange was made within next five days, the Partisans would have the captives tried by their military court “for crimes committed against our people”. This, they added, would be done “in agreement and with approval of our mighty allies, the Soviet Union, England and America”. In order to appear as “regular” as possible, the Macedonian Partisans signed their letter “2nd Brigade of the Macedonian People’s Liberation Army” although no such unit existed as of then.⁹⁷⁷

The letter was carried to Struga by a courier-peasant and arrived there on 4 November. The German *Feldkommandant* replied on the following day with a letter in which he addressed his adversaries with their self-chosen title. In it, he wrote that his side agreed to the exchange which could take place as soon as the number of Macedonian prisoners in Struga could be established. In addition, the Germans requested that one heavily wounded soldier be released from Partisan captivity for medical treatment. On the same day, the Partisans replied:

“[...] You have not fully understood our letter. We want to exchange the prisoners we have for our national fighters who are in prisons and concentration camps in Bulgaria. We’ll inform you of their names when our delegations meet on the road between Mešeišta and Botun. You have to clear the issue with Bulgarian occupation authorities in Macedonia

⁹⁷⁶ For the brief overview of the operations following the Italian surrender in Yugoslavia see Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, pp. 301-3.

⁹⁷⁷ Koce Solunski, *Apostolski: od raganje do general* (Skopje: MM, 1983), p. 234. The sources differ as to the number of the prisoners in Kičevo: Solunski mentions thirteen, the official historiography eighteen (*Hronologija*, p. 602); German sources speak of three officers and fourteen missing men: NAW, T-501, Roll 266, 000386, Daily report of Armed Forces Commander South-East (5 November 1943).

beforehand so you can inform us whether you can agree to the exchange in principle. [...] We remind you that we agree to one-to-one exchange only if we get those people we're interested in".

The Partisans concluded the letter by saying that a doctor was sent to the wounded soldier. The Germans replied on the 7th, thanking the guerrilla command for the humane treatment of their injured comrade. As for the exchange, the reply read that the Bulgarian government would have to be informed of the names of the wanted persons before it gave its approval for their release. Furthermore, the Germans agreed to the one-to-one ratio and requested that the Partisan envoys bring the name-list to the meeting scheduled for 8 November. On that day, the Partisan command sent the list containing the names of fourteen persons. The accompanying letter re-emphasized the wish that the exchange should take place as soon as possible, but also warned that the arrangement would be null and void if even one of the people from the list failed to appear for exchange.⁹⁷⁸

The meeting was held as planned, but the specifics are unknown except that it failed to produce any results. One Partisan report dated 18 November summed up the results up to that point:

*"We are leading written and verbal negotiations with the German commands in Struga and Bitola for the exchange of the Germans captured in Kičevo. We requested the release of the following comrades from Bulgarian prisons and camps: [...] [They should be exchanged] one to one. The Germans tried to get these comrades from the Bulgarians, but there remain no updates".*⁹⁷⁹

Ever since the negotiations had begun, the Germans had difficulties procuring prisoners for the exchange. On 5 November, the German Plenipotentiary General in Albania requested 25 Macedonian prisoners for the exchange, stating he needed them by the evening of 6 November. On the 6th, the 2nd Panzer Army informed the local Abwehr command that the prisoners would not reach their destination until the 7th and that the command should buy more time by protracting the talks.⁹⁸⁰ Once, however, the Partisans had made it clear they would not accept just any prisoners the Germans were compelled to seek Bulgarian help. The

⁹⁷⁸ V.A. Ivanovski, 'Prilog kon proučuvanje na prašanje na razmena na zarobenici za vreme na narodnoosloboditelna vojna na Makedonija 1941-1944' in: *Istorija: Spisanie na sojuzot na istoriskite društva na SR Makedonija*, 9, 1 (1973): 63-65.

⁹⁷⁹ Solunski, *Apostolski*, pp. 234-5.

⁹⁸⁰ NAW, T-313, Roll 488, 000444, 2nd Panzer Army to Army Group E (5 November 1943); NAW, T-313, Roll 487, 000817, 2nd Panzer Army to Abwehr Troop 214 (6 November 1943).

German embassy in Sofia was therefore tasked with obtaining the release of the wanted Macedonian Communists. On 13 November, the Bulgarian Ministry of War turned down the request: The Bulgarian government was in principle opposed to exchanging military personnel for political prisoners; furthermore, it was feared that these particular Communists would cause much damage once they were freed.⁹⁸¹

The Partisans were apparently not informed of the news and the two commands continued with their correspondence, exchanging letters again on 19-21 November. On 26th, the Germans requested another meeting to be held on the 27th.⁹⁸² The probable reason for these protracted negotiations was that the Germans had widened the agenda by including a request of a different kind. Even before these contacts, the Bulgarians had attempted to approach the Partisans through civilian intermediaries with the proposal that they cease attacking Axis traffic on the vitally important Struga-Kičevo road in exchange for supplies. The Partisans responded to the idea by shooting two of the envoys and threatening the rest. According to the monograph on the “Slavej” Partisan battalion, which provided security for the Partisan delegations and also played an active part in the proceedings, the topic resurfaced during the November negotiations. The Germans probably tried to condition the release of the high-ranking members of the Communist Party on obtaining rights of free passage for their convoys on the Struga-Kičevo road. The Germans professed they had no interest in the territory surrounding this supply route: they even went so far as to say that the Partisans were welcome to shoot anything that strayed to the left or right of the road. The request was turned down on orders from the Main Partisan HQ for Macedonia. In early December, the talks were cut short by an Axis offensive launched against the guerrilla-held territory in Western Macedonia and were not continued thereafter.⁹⁸³

As we have seen in practically all the previous examples, the side that offered a prisoner exchange usually did it with some degree of haste. This was understandable given the uncertain fate which awaited prisoners, even if they survived immediate capture; the best chance to get the wanted persons back was to swap them before the captors changed their

⁹⁸¹ Dančo Zografski, „Pregovorite so bugarskiot i germanskiot garnizon vo Prilep 1944 godina“ in: *Prilep i prilepsko vo NOV 1944-15 maj 1945 godina. Materijali od Naučniot sobir održan na 14, 15 i 16 mart 1983 godina* (Skopje: SUBNOR Prilep, 1985), Volume I/1, pp. 331-2.

⁹⁸² V.A. Ivanovski, *Prilog kon proučuvanje*, pp. 65-6.

⁹⁸³ Stojan Risteski, *Partizanskot odred „Slavej“: Prilog kon proučuvanje na Debrca vo NOB, 1941-1944* (Skopje: NIO Studentski zbor, 1990), pp. 79-82. I have been unable to find German documentation which could confirm the claim (Solunski, *Apostolski*, p. 232) that the Germans dragged the negotiations on in order to lull the Partisans into a false sense of security. Under the new circumstances, the German prisoners became a liability and were executed after the offensive had begun: Marjan Dimitrijeviški, *Politikata na Tretiot Rajh kon Makedonija 1933-1945* (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 2001), pp. 81-2.

mind. There is, however, something extraordinary about the haste with which the Macedonian Partisans wanted to exchange their captured comrades. The important political decisions made on the highest level in early November may have been the reason behind it. On 5 November 1943, Tito informed the Croatian Communists that the second session of the AVNOJ would take place in Jajce as soon as it could be organized; six days later, Croatian and Slovenian delegates were ordered to prepare for the trip.⁹⁸⁴ A similar invitation for the Macedonian branch of the KPJ has not been found and it remains uncertain whether it had been sent in the first place. Nevertheless, the Macedonians still had to nominate their delegates for the session in order to give it an all-Yugoslav composition. The region was entitled to altogether 42 councilmen, but due to technical difficulties, the names of only seven could be confirmed by the opening of the session on 29 November.⁹⁸⁵ Out of these people, two were with the Main HQ for Macedonia, two were in Moscow and three, Mara Naceva, Bane Andreev and Lazar Koliševski were in Bulgarian captivity; their names stood at the top of the list of fourteen prisoners the Macedonian Partisans wanted in exchange for the Germans captured at Kičevo.⁹⁸⁶

All three were top Communist officials and it was natural that their comrades would have wanted them back even had they not been nominated for membership in the AVNOJ. However, the proximity of the date of the announcement of the session to that of the exchange offer suggest that the Macedonian Partisans wanted the trio freed so that they could either act in full capacity of absentee members, or even make the trip to the distant Jajce. The other possible reason for the sense of urgency is that the Macedonian Communists formed the so-called “Initiative Committee” in mid-November 1943, a body which would serve as the basis for the creation of the Macedonian provincial government.⁹⁸⁷ In either case, the presence of the captive Party veterans was required. The fact that they were nominated as councilmen for the AVNOJ while the talks with the Germans in Struga went on suggests that the local Partisan leadership believed in their successful exchange. However, since the negotiations

⁹⁸⁴ *Zbornik*/II/11/30, Tito to Main HQ for Croatia (5 November 1943); *ibid.*, p. 49, Kardelj to Central committee of KPH (11 November 1943).

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164, Vukmanović to Tito (30 November 1943).

⁹⁸⁶ Novica Veljanovski, “AVNOJ i Makedonija” in: *Glavniot štab na narodnoosloboditelna vojska i partizanskite odredi na Makedonija, 1941-1945: po povod devedeset godini od ragnjeto na Mihailo Apostolski* (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 1996), p. 238; Solunski, *Apostolski*, pp. 234-5. Choosing the candidates for the exchange was overshadowed by fear among the Macedonian Partisans that, if the negotiations went wrong, the Germans and Bulgarians could exact reprisals on these important members of the KPJ. These fears proved to be unfounded and all three survived captivity. On a side note, one of them, Lazar Koliševski, would become the first head of the collective Yugoslav leadership after Tito's death in 1980.

⁹⁸⁷ Vanče Stojčev, “Macedonia during the Second World War, 1941-1945”, in: Todor Čepreganov (Ed.), *History of Macedonian People* (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 2008), p. 266.

were broken off in early December, the Macedonian branch of the KPJ saw no alternative but to compile another list of nominees for the AVNOJ on 11 December which did not contain the three original names.⁹⁸⁸

Unlike in other parts of Yugoslavia, the Partisan presence in Macedonia was hardly felt prior to the Spring of 1943; the first “regular” unit was not formed until mid-November 1943. The talks held near Struga in November 1943 therefore played an important part in strengthening the self-confidence of the nascent Partisan movement in Macedonia. The fact that the representatives of the German occupation forces came over to their territory in order to negotiate on equal footing was understood as a sign of recognition from their mighty enemy. They, for their part, did everything to look and act as a regular army. Thus, the 2nd Operational Zone became the “2nd Macedonian Brigade” in order to lend additional credence to their letters to the local German command. The members of the delegation and the fighters chosen to provide security were especially dressed for the occasion in order to appear as soldier-like as possible. The Macedonian Partisans also did not fail to remind the Germans in the original letter that their army was a member of the wider anti-fascist coalition. Allied help, provided by air-drops, was put to good propaganda use: during a pause at one of the meetings outside Struga, the Germans had the opportunity to talk with common Partisan fighters. One of them had a lunch consisting of British-made tinned food and fresh white bread. Asked by a German from where he acquired such food from, the Partisan replied “Well, we have ovens, barracks, you name it”.⁹⁸⁹

Macedonia won in strategic importance in the late Summer of 1944. In light of the developments on the Eastern Front, it was only a matter of time before Army Group E would have to begin its withdrawal from Greece in order to avoid being cut off from its supply lines, and the shortest route to the north-west was through the Vardar valley. The Germans had, however, only a limited presence in Macedonia, as the country was occupied by their Bulgarian allies. Their loyalty was continually questioned as the Red Army rapidly approached Yugoslavia’s eastern borders. German fears materialized when Bulgaria declared neutrality on 26 August and began pulling out its forces out of Serbia and Greece. It was now a matter of days before the country would change sides for good. The Macedonian Partisans

⁹⁸⁸ *Zbornik*/II/11/164, Vukmanović to Tito (30 November 1943).

⁹⁸⁹ Risteski, *Slavej*, p. 82. The talks at Struga served to increase the national self-awareness of Macedonians in the early Nineties after the breakup of Yugoslavia. The manner in which the German command had conducted the negotiations and the way in which it addressed its Partisan adversary in November 1943 was taken as proof of the 50-year old tradition of the national “Macedonian Army” (Dragi Stefanija, “Od tajnite arhivi: makedonskata vojska,” in: *Delo*, 10 September 1993, pp. 16-7.

were under twin orders to attack major communications in order to stall German troop movements from Greece and to attempt to win over Bulgarian units for a joint struggle against the Germans.⁹⁹⁰

The town of Prilep in western Macedonia was situated on an important road linking Florina with Veles in the Vardar valley. In order to gain control of the town, the 41st Partisan Division began negotiations with the Bulgarian garrison, demanding that they either lay down their arms, or join the fight against the Germans. The Bulgarian commander acquiesced to the second option only after his country declared war on Germany on 9 September. Prilep was the scene of heavy fighting in the following days, as the arriving German reinforcements attempted to wrestle control of the area from the joint Partisan-Bulgarian forces. By 20 September the town was firmly under German control.⁹⁹¹

Even before the fighting began in earnest, the Partisan commands in the region toyed with the idea of demanding a surrender of the German garrison in Struga, promising in return that the prisoners would be treated according to the Hague Convention. The surrender would be demanded in the joint name of the Main HQ for Macedonia and the British military mission in the country. On 10 September, Mihajlo Apostolski, the chief of the Main HQ, gave the green light for the issuing of the ultimatum. Whether this was done is not clear, but judging by the German sources, there had been some “diplomatic” activity in the region at that time. In a memorandum on enemy dispositions in Macedonia, compiled on or about 10 September, the intelligence section of Army group F noted that several Partisan brigades were combined into a “Macedonian division” in the south of the country; this information was obtained from a “bandit parliamentary”.⁹⁹²

After Prilep had fallen and after the Germans had firmly established themselves in this part of the country, it was decided to widen the demand to include all major garrisons in western Macedonia. On 25 September, Captain Miller, an officer of the SOE and the British representative to the Macedonian Partisans, invited the German commander in Prilep, Major Gresser, for a round of negotiations. The latter replied he would accept only if British representatives were present as well. The Partisans acquiesced, and the talks between Gresser

⁹⁹⁰ *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. II, pp. 346-8.

⁹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 349; Zografski, *Pregovorite*, p. 335.

⁹⁹² Zografski, *Pregovorite*, pp. 335; NAW, T-311, Roll 193, 000394, Memorandum on bandit activity in Macedonia as of 10 September 1944; the document is undated, but judging from the time period it covers, it was prepared on 10 September at the earliest, or shortly thereafter. The 41st Division, created on 25 August in a village some twenty kilometers east of Prilep, was the first large Partisan formation from Macedonia: *Oslobodilački rat*, Vol. II, pp. 344.

and two representatives of the 41st Division of the NOVJ were held in the first days of October, with Miller acting as an observer. The conference was largely inconclusive, at least as far as the issue of surrender was concerned: the delegations merely agreed to meet again after having “additionally considered the matters involved”. The British captain used the opportunity to deliver a written demand for an unconditional capitulation of the German garrisons in Prilep, Bitola, Veles and Skopje. The ultimatum stated that the war would soon be over, that Allied armies were advancing from both east and west and that any further resistance would only result in more bloodshed. “In the event of surrender, all prisoners would receive fair treatment according to the Geneva Convention”.⁹⁹³

No further meetings between the delegations took place; the reason most likely being the arrival of German reinforcements into Macedonia. “The call for surrender to the German commander of Prilep made by an English liaison officer unsuccessful”, noted the intelligence section of the Army Group F on 3 October.⁹⁹⁴ The possible surrender of the garrisons was not the only issue discussed during the talks, however. The delegations also talked and agreed on a prisoner exchange, details of which were to be finalized at a later date. On 15 October, the HQ of the NOVJ’s 41st Division sent a letter to Major Gresser, along with a list of 145 Germans in Partisan captivity. The major was requested to provide a similar list of captured Partisans who could be exchanged for these soldiers. At the same time, the 41st Division repeated the call for unconditional surrender to garrisons in Prilep and Bitola. Combining the offer of prisoner exchange with the capitulation ultimatum most likely brought about an end to the exchange talks, as the Germans were not likely to give concessions under pressure.⁹⁹⁵

By early November 1944, the rear-guard of Army Group “E” included the area around the Macedonian capital, Skopje. The fact that the city would soon be abandoned did not lead the Germans to lower their guard. Acting on information obtained through one of their agents, the German counter-intelligence units, the 375th Front Reconnaissance Troop and 621st Secret Field Police Group conducted a raid in a shop located in the old Turkish Quarter of Skopje on 3 November. They arrested six persons they found there, as well as another six who tried to enter the shop shortly thereafter. Investigation showed that they were “active bandit helpers” who worked as couriers, propagandists or liaison people for the Partisans. The search of the

⁹⁹³ Zografski, *Pregovorite*, pp. 335-6.

⁹⁹⁴ NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000178, Evening report of intelligence section (3 October 1944).

⁹⁹⁵ NAW, T-311, Roll 183, 000071, War diary entry for 15 October 1944; Bora Mitrovski, *Petnaesti (makedonski) udarni korpus NOVJ* (Beograd: Vojno-izdavački zavod, 1983), pp. 118-19;

shop yielded sizeable quantity of various items, including weapons, leaflets, food and a wireless set. All suspects were brought into the German prison in the city.⁹⁹⁶

The arrest of these persons coincided with the negotiations led by the quartermaster section of the German 22nd Mountain Corps over the exchange of some ninety German prisoners for a similar number of Partisans. The negotiations dragged on for some time, mostly because the local collaborationists did everything possible to sabotage any arrangement between the Germans and the NOVJ. As the date of German departure was nearing, there was fear that the Germans would execute the prisoners. The Germans, for their part, knew that if they did not secure the release of their men now, while they still had contact with their captors, they would not be able to do it once they left Skopje. They therefore agreed to the Partisan condition that the twelve people arrested in the raid be included in the exchange.⁹⁹⁷ The deal was finally struck with the help of a collaborationist official of the city administration who had actually been a Partisan agent since 1941. On 10 November 1944, a column of about 100 inmates, escorted by German soldiers and some citizens, left Skopje and headed to the nearby village of Sopište. The Partisans were waiting for them along with their German prisoners. The swap was done in groups of ten until all captives were exchanged. The Partisan delegation included natives of Skopje who could verify the identity of the exchanged inmates. This was done out of fear that the Germans might attempt to infiltrate their agents posing as captured Partisans, but the apprehension proved to be unfounded. 93 released Germans were too weak and malnourished to join the units based in Skopje in the forthcoming retreat; they were instead sent first to Kraljevo and then to Sarajevo by train.⁹⁹⁸ In the end, the Partisan sympathizers were exchanged at the last moment: on 13 November 1944, one day before they left Skopje, the Germans shot nine residents suspected of sabotage.⁹⁹⁹

⁹⁹⁶ NAW, T-311, Roll 188,001068, Activity report of Group of Secret Field Police 510 for October, November and December 1944 (25 December 1944).

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁸ Hans Em, "Razmena na zarobenici: migovi što se pametat", in: *Dokumenti i materijali za osloboduvanje na Skopje, oktombri-19 noemvri 1944* (Skopje: Istoriski arhiv, 1968), pp. 255-6; NAW, T-314, Roll 1630,000283, War diary entry for 16 November 1944.

⁹⁹⁹ Dimitrijević, *Politikata na Tretiot Rajh*, pp. 118-9.

8. Negotiations and Prisoner Exchange in Slovenia, 1943-1945

After the demise of Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Slovenia was divided between the Germans and the Italians. While the latter occupied the so-called Ljubljana Province (south-western Slovenia), the former took the rest. In marked difference to other parts of Yugoslavia, the Germans practically annexed the Slovene regions, placing them under civilian rule of the provincial *Gauleiter* (Nazi regional leaders/provincial governors) of Carinthia and Styria. Harsh rule, which included forced Germanisation and the expulsion of some 200,000 Slovenes to Serbia and Croatia, made the Communist cause appealing to a considerable part of the population. The guerrilla war which ensued following the occupation was perhaps smaller in scope when compared to Bosnia or Croatia, but was nonetheless extremely bloody: Slovenia lost an estimated six percent of its population, proportionally even more than Serbia.¹⁰⁰⁰ The Germans took over the former Italian occupation zone in Slovenia in September 1943 and made it a part of the so-called “Operational Zone Adriatic Littoral” (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland* or OZAK). Apart from the Slovene regions, it also included Istria and Italian provinces of Trieste, Udine and Gorizia. Whereas in the Ljubljana Province, the Germans organized a collaborationist government, they retained the Italian administrative apparatus in the remainder of the zone. Although OZAK was technically a part of Mussolini’s “Republic of Salò”, the Nazi governor of Carinthia, Friedrich Rainer, held the highest political authority; militarily, the zone stood under the auspices of the Wehrmacht’s Army Group C based in Italy as of November 1943.

Due to the fact that the fighting took place on what was effectively the territory of the Third Reich, the Germans consistently refused to grant privileged status to captured Partisans. For most of the war, the latter were usually shot immediately after capture, used as reprisal hostages, or sent to extermination camps like Buchenwald, Dachau or Auschwitz.¹⁰⁰¹ The difference in approach to counter-insurgency between the 2nd Panzer Army in Bosnia and Croatia and the German units in occupied Slovenia is best illustrated by the order issued in late February 1944 by the military commander in OZAK, General Ludwig Kübler. Echoing the grim orders released by various German generals in Serbia and the NDH in the bleak

¹⁰⁰⁰ Tomasevich, *Occupation*, pp. 83-94, 121-3; *Zbornik žrtve vojne in revolucije: Referati in razprava s posveta v Državnem svetu 11. in 12. novembra 2004, ki sta ga pripravila Državni svet Republike Slovenije in Institut za novejšo zgodovino v Ljubljani* (Ljubljana: Republika Slovenija, Državni svet, 2005), pp. 17-8; freely downloadable at http://www.ds-rs.si/dokumenti/publikacije/Zbornik_05-1.pdf (last accessed 22 November 2012).

¹⁰⁰¹ Interviews with survivors from Istria can be found at http://ipd-ssi.hr/?page_id=211 (last accessed on 18 May 2013).

years of 1941-1943, Kübler proclaimed that the war against the Partisans must be fought in the manner in which it was fought in the occupied territories in the East.¹⁰⁰² Not until August of the same year did it occur to some units under his command that at least those persons who were forcibly recruited into Partisan ranks could be sent to Germany as laborers instead of being killed on the spot—for comparison, this possibility was on the table for occupation authorities in Serbia since March 1942.¹⁰⁰³ SS General Erwin Rösener, the head of German counter-insurgency efforts in Slovenia, had issued the order to treat the captured guerrillas as prisoners of war twice, in the autumn of 1943 and 1944¹⁰⁰⁴, but the order was only haphazardly followed: it was still very much up to the unit on the ground to decide what to do with its prisoners. For instance, one German commander who operated in today's Štajerska/Styria in late 1944 was noted for the fact that he spared his captives and sent them to the rear.¹⁰⁰⁵ At the same time, collaborationist propaganda in Ljubljana Province, acting with the consent if not on direct orders from German authorities, publicly denied the Partisans the protection of international law.¹⁰⁰⁶

The Slovenian Partisans, much like their comrades in the rest of the country, treated their captives according to the military formation they belonged to.¹⁰⁰⁷ Ethnic Slovenes who were forcibly recruited into various German units were usually taken into guerrilla ranks or set free. Such treatment was sometimes applied to ethnic German gendarmes as well, provided they showed no enthusiasm for the Nazi cause or if they did not commit any atrocities. Knowing that the humane treatment of prisoners could have adverse effect on the enemy's morale, the Partisans continued to release German gendarmes periodically well into 1944.¹⁰⁰⁸ Foreign nationals serving in the German army (for instance, Soviet citizens), were usually welcome to join the guerrilla ranks. "Pure Germans" of the frontline SS police formations and Wehrmacht were, however, not extended the same courtesy and were usually executed after capture. In the end it must be noted that there were many exceptions to the

¹⁰⁰² Gerhard Schreiber, „Die Wehrmacht und der Partisanenkrieg in Italien: '...auch gegen Frauen und Kinder'“ in: Ernst Willi Hansen, Gerhard Schreiber, Bernd Wegner (Ed.), *Politischer Wandel, organisierte Gewalt und nationale Sicherheit: Beiträge* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1995), pp. 253-4.

¹⁰⁰³ *Zbornik*/VI/15/867-8, After-action report of 137th Mountain Regiment (12 August 1944).

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Zbornik*/VI/8/434, Daily order no. 4 (6 November 1943); Tone Kregar, *Vigred se povrne: Druga svetovna vojna na Celjskem* (Celje: Muzej novejšje zgodovine, 2009), p. 112.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Milan Ževart, „Elaborat štaba Trečkovke bojne skupine o narodnoosvoboditelnem boju na Štajerskem“ in: *Časopis za zgodovino i narodopisje*, 153,2 (1990): 160.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Š.J., „Zakaj so komunistične izgube tako visoke?“ in: *Slovensko domobranstvo*, 28 December 1944, p. 14; available in digital format on <http://www.dlib.si/stream/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-IZGYWCAU/6e2b81b8-9ccf-4e93-a282-7f54637b6012/PDF> (last accessed 22 January 2013).

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Zbornik*/VI/13/43, 4th Operational Zone to Main HQ for Slovenia (18 April 1944).

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Zbornik*/VI/15/609, 4th Operational Zone to Main HQ for Slovenia (20 August 1944).

above, depending on the circumstances on the ground: in Slovenia, just as in the other parts of Yugoslavia, local Partisan commanders had the last word on the fate of prisoners.¹⁰⁰⁹

Despite the brutal occupation policy, Slovene Partisans and the German authorities were no strangers to negotiating with one another. In July 1943, the command of the Gorenjska/Upper Carniola Operations Zone held negotiations with some Gestapo representatives from Bled. The Germans stated that they were members of the anti-Nazi resistance and that they would allow free passage for the Partisan “Prešern Brigade” through their territory, as well as supply the guerrillas with weapons and supplies. The offer turned out to be a ploy when the German forces surrounded and destroyed a considerable part of this unit on 1 August 1943 while it waited for the promised arms delivery.¹⁰¹⁰

Mid-September 1943 saw contacts between the Partisans and the Germans in the Soča/Isonzo River Valley. In exchange for a local cease-fire and the right of free passage on the road from Kobarid to Udine and Gorica/Gorizia, the commander of the “Karstwehr” SS Battalion offered to release a number of inmates from the prison in Udine and recognize the rights of Slovenes living in the region. The Partisans replied they had no authority to make decisions, but that they would pass the offer on to their superiors. They also added that the release of prisoners would be a good starting point for further negotiations. On 16 September 1943, 56 prisoners were released from Udine. A German officer who escorted them to Partisan territory had the chance to meet several captured German soldiers and make sure they were treated correctly.¹⁰¹¹ One day later, at a meeting held on the Partisan territory around Trnovo, German envoys announced their intention to publish a leaflet informing the population about the event and the imminent cessation of hostilities. Despite the fact that the Partisans disapproved, the Germans went ahead with the plan the next day. The guerrillas reacted by capturing the two motorcyclists who were distributing the leaflets. The prisoners (one of whom was slightly wounded) were returned to the German garrison in Bovec/Flitsch with a letter calling for another round of talks. The SS battalion commander was furious that there was still no word from higher Partisan commands, and he broke off the meeting. The next day, the Partisans sent another two letters to Bovec. In the first, they apologized for the

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ževart, *Elaborat*, pp. 167, 176-7, 183; Kregar, *Vigred se povrne*, pp. 112-4; Thomas Barker, *Social Revolutionaries and Secret Agents: The Carinthian Slovene Partisans and Britain's Special Operations Executive* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 107.

¹⁰¹⁰ Stanko Petelin, *Prešernova NOU brigada* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1975), pp. 18-27.

¹⁰¹¹ In late September, the Germans found a draft of a letter in which the Partisans demanded they be recognized as a regular army and their captured members treated as prisoners-of-war; in the case of non-compliance, they threatened to shoot seven German prisoners: NAW, T-354, Roll 606, 001079, Interrogations of prisoners and captured enemy documents, 29 September 1943.

attack on the motorcyclists and expressed their gratitude for the release of prison inmates. In the second, they informed the German command that their proposals had been turned down.¹⁰¹² Several days later, the Germans launched a massive effort to secure the border region between Slovenia and Italy.¹⁰¹³

The Germans made similar overtures to the Partisan 7th Corps in Dolenjska/Lower Carniola in mid-December 1943. The Gestapo office in Sevnica sent a letter to the local Partisan command through a woman known to have connections to the guerrillas, requesting a meeting. The letter was passed from the HQ of the 15th Partisan division onto to the Main HQ for Slovenia. The supreme leadership of the Slovene Partisans decided to accept the German offer and Boris Kidrič, the political commissar of the Main HQ, was tasked with working out the guidelines for the Partisan delegation. It was agreed to hold the talks in the village of Mokronog on 18 December 1943; both sides also agreed to a truce in this area which would last for 24 hours. In the early morning, a “guard of honor” consisting of 28 Partisans, specially polished for the occasion, entered the village; their German counterparts already waiting, and lined up in front of the local tavern which would host the talks. The envoys followed soon thereafter: from the Partisan side Pero Popivoda and Jože Jurančič, the commander and the head of the Party organization of the 15th Division, respectively, and Milan Vidmar, a university professor from Ljubljana; the Germans were represented by two majors, one of the Wehrmacht and the other of the SD, and one interpreter. After exchanging formalities, which included inspecting the guards of honor, the delegations entered the tavern and began the talks.¹⁰¹⁴

The Germans came to the point immediately: they wanted a truce along the lines of communication leading from Ljubljana over Novo Mesto to Karlovac in Croatia. In return,

¹⁰¹² Tone Kebe, "Zgodbe iz NOB na Kobariškem" in: *Borec*, 1 (1979): 29-44 and *Borec*, 3 (1979): 167-80; Franjo Bavec – Branko, *Bazoviška brigada* (Ljubljana: Odbor bazoviške brigade, 1970), pp. 40-3. This episode was briefly mentioned in one document published in the "Zbornik" from the late 50s. Judging by the ellipsis, the editors chose to leave some parts out: *Zbornik*/VI/7/92, Operational HQ for Western Slovenia to Main HQ for Slovenia (24 September 1943).

¹⁰¹³ On 23 September 1943, the 2nd SS Panzer Corps issued an order according to which Partisan commanders were to be shot, but common Partisans were to be treated as prisoners-of-war (NAW, T-354, Roll 606, 000977, Special orders of intelligence officer, 23 September 1943). However, only a day later, Hitler had explicitly ordered the troops to crush the uprising "with ruthless severity" and execute anyone captured with arms. "After the operation", the order continued, "the Slovenian people must not represent a threat to us" (Ibid., 001007, Führer's order, 24 September 1943).

¹⁰¹⁴ Zdenko Zavadlav, *Partizani, obveščevalci, jetniki: iz dosjeja Zavadlav 1944-1994* (Ljubljana: Horvat M & M, 1996), p. 99; Ivo Pirkovič, "Pozabljena diplomacija v gozdu" in: *Delo*, 3 July 1980, p. 21. Pirkovič based the description of the negotiations in Mokronog on an unpublished interview with Jurančič. I would like to thank Dr. Boris Mlakar of the Institute for Contemporary History in Ljubljana who has kindly provided me with a copy of this article, as well as other material pertaining to Partisan-German contact in Slovenia.

they would not attack the Partisan-held territory and would even supply it with goods. As the Partisans refused to discuss this proposition, the Germans moved onto the second point of discussion, the exchange of prisoners. The Partisan delegation readily acceded to swap captives in the future and made Jurančič a liaison officer for these matters. Political questions never lagged far behind the issue of prisoner exchange: the guerrilla envoys demanded recognition of the Slovene Partisans as a belligerent force; the Germans refused to discuss this issue, stating they were not authorized to do this. The NOVJ plenipotentiaries then asked for their counterparts' opinion on the Slovene collaborationists. The Germans did not seem to be much concerned over the fate of their auxiliaries: according to some sources, they called them "traitors of the worst sort" and even mentioned their transfer to the Eastern Front; according to the others, the Germans said they were not interested in the civil war between the Partisans and the Slovene Home Guards and that consequently they would not intervene on behalf of their charges.¹⁰¹⁵

With the official part of the talks concluded, the Germans treated their negotiating partners to a lunch. At the table, they discussed the war situation in general, each side expressing a firm belief in the final victory. The atmosphere gradually thawed and jokes could be heard; smiling delegates were even photographed in front of the tavern. The Gestapo officer asked Jurančič about his background, offering to arrange for him a safe trip to Štajerska/Styria, where his next of kin lived. When the latter declined, saying that his brother and sister were executed there in German reprisals, the major offered to at least deliver a letter to his parents, informing them that he was alive and well. Jurančič accepted and scribbled a few words on a piece of paper. Five days after the talks, he got an answer from his parents through the Gestapo office in Sevnica. What was even more remarkable is that the old couple was never again harassed by the occupation authorities for the duration of the war.¹⁰¹⁶

¹⁰¹⁵ Pirkovič, *Pozabljena diplomacija*, p. 21; Interview with Dr. Boris Mlakar in: *Mladina*, 48 (1 December 2003), electronic version available at http://www.mladina.si/93264/slo-intervju--bernard_nezmah/?utm_source=tednik%2F200348%2Fclanek%2Fslo%2Dintervju%2D%2Dbarnard%5Fnezmah%2F&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=oldLink (last accessed on 22 November 2012); Arhiv Slovenije, AS 1877, 32/I, Report of the Slovenian Home Guard intelligence service of 31 December 1943; In a letter dated 7 January 1944, the British ambassador to the Yugoslav government-in-exile Ralph Stevenson informed his superior, Anthony Eden about the details of the proceedings; his source was the British liaison officer with the Slovenian Main HQ. According to him, the Partisans did not provide an unambiguous answer to the German truce proposal. Stevenson's letter can be found in National Archives, FO 536/11/59 106027 (synopsis of both documents courtesy of Dr. Mlakar). Lieutenant-Colonel Peter A. Wilkinson of the SOE, who was at the Slovenian Main HQ at the time, wrote in his "Memorandum on the Revolt in Slovenia" (27 April 1944) that the Partisans rejected the offer "with scorn": Barker, *Social Revolutionaries*, p. 111.

¹⁰¹⁶ Pirkovič, *Pozabljena diplomacija*, p. 21.

At first glance, the negotiations at Mokronog appear to be a failure; the Partisans would not accept the cease-fire and the Germans would not consider legitimizing a guerrilla army on their own soil. The available evidence, however, shows that the lot of at least some prisoners was improved in the months immediately following the talks. On 21 December 1943, the Main HQ for Slovenia informed the HQ of the 3rd Operational Zone that there was an opportunity to swap prisoners with the Germans. Consequently, the units should strive to capture as many officers as possible and report the results to the high command.¹⁰¹⁷ On 13 January 1944, the 7th Corps' 18th Division (which had crossed over into Croatia in the meantime) captured two German NCOs and one Russian in German service near Ogulin. The prisoners were not killed but offered in exchange for seven Partisans who were wounded in Slovenia and one female fighter. The Germans acquiesced to swap prisoners but had only eight Croatian Partisans on hand. The 18th Division declined to accept them and insisted on exchanging only those Partisans who were members of the division. The German command could only promise to do everything in its power to secure their release.¹⁰¹⁸ The fact that the 18th Division decided to contact its nearest German counterpart over a prisoner exchange was by itself not a problem; the fact that it failed to keep higher commands abreast of the proceedings caused some discontent, however. The division informed the 7th Corps about the deal only after it had been struck; consequently, the Corps "could not include the names of those comrades, who more than others deserved to be exchanged". For the same reason, the matter could not be relegated to the Main HQ for Slovenia "so that you [Main HQ] could make the exchange yourselves". The last line shows that prisoner exchange ceased to be a matter of local importance only. The highest Partisan commands in the country were not only taking a keen interest in the developments but were also willing to take an active part in the proceedings.¹⁰¹⁹ As in Croatia, the leading Partisan circles in Slovenia sought to curb

¹⁰¹⁷ *Zbornik*/VI/9/244, Main HQ for Slovenia to 3rd Operations Zone (21 December 1943).

¹⁰¹⁸ *Zbornik*/VI/10/171, 18th Division for 7th Corps (15 January 1944) and p. 281, 18th Division for 7th Corps (20 January 1944). I have not been able to determine whether the exchange took place or not. According to one document, the Ustashe released six male and six female inmates of Stara Gradiška concentration camp on 16 January 1944 so that they could be "exchanged in Slovenia": VA, CK KPH, Roll 42, 340, Letter from the Party organization in Stara Gradiška (April 1944).

¹⁰¹⁹ *Zbornik*/VI/10/276, 7th Corps to Main HQ for Slovenia (20 January 1944). Lieutenant-Colonel Wilkinson was told by the Partisans that two German attempts to contact the Main HQ for prisoner exchange were "scornfully rejected in principle". Nevertheless, Wilkinson added, "important prisoners are undoubtedly exchanged from time to time": Barker, *Social Revolutionaries*, p. 94.

“independent” negotiating activities by individual units, fearing that these could only be interpreted as a sign of weakness.¹⁰²⁰

Two documents from late March 1944 additionally prove that the both sides had taken further steps aimed at reducing the levels of violence towards prisoners. On 29 March, the 18th Division reported on a German surprise attack which cost the division nine dead and 63 captured. The latter were taken to nearby Kočevje and interrogated. According to the Partisan intelligence service, the Germans would not let the Slovenian collaborators beat the captured guerrillas saying “they considered them prisoners-of-war”. On the same day, the division issued an order for an attack on a German outpost in the vicinity of Kočevje which in part read: “Prisoners are not to be killed, but brought to the division’s HQ and interrogated [...]. This especially applies to Germans and their officers who can be exchanged”. It is safe to assume that the quoted provision came as a direct result of the news from Kočevje and the experiences made by the 18th Division around Ogulin earlier that year.¹⁰²¹

The Spring of 1944 also saw two cases of attempted exchange in the vicinity of Celje (outside of the 7th Corps’ area of responsibility). On 12 March, the 6th Partisan Brigade ambushed a car belonging to a head of the municipality of Gornji Grad and captured two of his daughters. The Partisans offered to exchange them for ten of their own, including two functionaries. The local German police chief reported to his superiors at the end of April that “our uncompromising stand” on the issue compelled the Partisans to release their female hostages without compensation.¹⁰²² Notwithstanding this refusal to trade political prisoners for civilians, the local police in Celje were not completely opposed to exchanging prisoners, especially if it enabled them to settle scores with deserters. In early June, one gendarmerie station was successfully stormed by the guerrillas largely due to the information provided by two gendarmes of Slovenian origin from Celje who had defected to the Partisans. The German after-action report claims that the two were supposed to be exchanged, presumably so that they could be punished.¹⁰²³

¹⁰²⁰ The 4th Operational Zone issued a special order on an unspecified date prohibiting units from negotiating prisoner exchanges on their own. The same command repeated the order in the early Summer of 1944: *Zbornik*/IX/6/493, 4th Operational Zone to all subordinated units (29 June 1944).

¹⁰²¹ *Zbornik*/VI/12/291, 18th Division for 7th Corps (29 March 1944) and p. 298, 18th Division for Main HQ for Slovenia (29 March 1944).

¹⁰²² *Zbornik*/VI/12/146, 4th Operational Zone to Main HQ for Slovenia (14 March 1944); *Zbornik*/VI/13/695, Monthly report of police and SD chief in Lower Styria to SS General Rösener (27 April 1944).

¹⁰²³ *Zbornik*/VI/14/544, 4th Operational Zone to Main HQ for Slovenia (1 July 1944) and p. 726, District gendarmerie command at Trbovlje to gendarmerie command at Celje (7 June 1944). Frank Lindsay, an OSS operative with the Slovenian Partisans wrote in his memoirs that in March 1945 the guerrillas captured

9. Negotiations and Truce in the Operational Zone Adriatic Littoral, March-November 1944

As early as March 1944, the Italian prefect of Gorizia, Count Marino Pace, attempted to establish contact with the local Partisans. According to the information obtained through their contact in the provincial administration, Major Muzzolini, the latter knew that the prefect wanted to discuss matters pertaining to the welfare of the civilian population. On 18 May 1944, Pace sent a letter to the Partisans, officially requesting a meeting; transportation, accommodation and security for the Partisan envoys were guaranteed. After having consulted with higher authorities, the intelligence section of the Partisan 9th Corps, deployed in the Slovene littoral ("Primorska"), decided to provide Pace with an audience. The Partisan delegation, initially consisting of two members, was instructed only to listen; they were not to make any offers or commitments. On 15 June 1944, Pace and Muzollini picked up the Partisan envoys in guerrilla-held territory. They first drove to Gorizia where they were joined by Pace's deputy, Locatteli, and a Partisan intelligence operative of Italian origin, Marcello Tausig (in some documents mentioned as Marcello Kralj). Together, they went to a villa near the village of Tapogliano, where the negotiations were scheduled to take place.¹⁰²⁴

Pace opened the talks by expressing his disappointment that the Partisan delegation was not empowered to make decisions on the proposals he was about to put forth. The prefect also added that he was speaking in his name only and not for the Germans. He went on to propose a neutral zone, the boundaries of which could be established later, where the Germans and the Partisans would refrain from fighting one another. Pace said that he would also speak to Rainer about the matter. Locatteli pointed to the difficulties in supplying the civilian population around Gorizia with food due to the Partisan attacks on the convoys and backed Pace's proposal as a means of alleviating the suffering of the civilians. The only thing that the Partisans would agree to was to relay the details of the talks to their superiors and to

German General "Konrad Heidenreich" around Celje/Cilli and executed him, although a high-ranking Partisan commander wanted to exchange him for captive fighters, including his cousin: Lindsay, *Beacons in the Night*, p. 326. Lindsay was most likely referring to the events of 2 February 1945 when Partisans ambushed a motorcade outside Celje, mortally wounding the Nazi district leader Anton Dorfmeister. Contemporary Partisan accounts mention that two generals were among the dead which turned out not to be the case (*Zbornik*/VI/18/797, 4th Operational Zone to Main HQ for Slovenia, message no. 98, undated; *ibid.*, 944-5, Report of the gendarmerie station Vojnik, 3 February 1945). In reprisal, the Germans hung 98 civilian hostages and captured Partisans on 12 February 1945 (Kregar, *Vigred se povrne*, pp. 122-4). This story illustrates that the idea of prisoner exchange continued to be attractive, but also shows that the war continued to be waged with customary brutality practically until its end.

¹⁰²⁴ Zavadvav, *Partizani*, pp. 92-3.

acquiesce to another meeting with the prefect. The envoys parted at about 1230 hours after a “lunch worthy of counts”.¹⁰²⁵

The Partisans immediately informed their commands about the content of the first round of negotiations. Miro Perc-Maks, the head of the local branch of OZNA, approved of the continuation of contacts and suggested the next meeting should be held on Partisan territory near Gorizia; he was willing to appear there as one of the NOVJ representatives. His attendance was, however, cancelled when the regional Partisan authorities re-affirmed their opposition to upgrading the delegation in a letter dated 24 June 1944; the negotiating team would merely be widened by two members of the so-called “Economic Commission” who would discuss the possible exchange of goods and other supply matters with Pace. The Partisan side would also propose an exchange of prisoners and request the recognition of the Primorska Partisans as belligerents. The site chosen for the negotiations was a villa in Bilje belonging to a local aristocrat. Prestige lay behind this choice, as confirmed by one of the Partisan delegates, Zdenko Zavadlav: “We wanted to treat Pace to the same feast he had treated us in Tapogliano and thus show him that the Partisans were civilized people capable of organizing [such a meeting] despite the war and occupation”.¹⁰²⁶

On 26 June 1944 the two delegations met at the arranged place and the second round of talks could begin. Count Pace was disappointed that no high-ranking Partisan officials were present at the negotiating table, for this time he brought concrete propositions with him. Now acting with German consent, Pace delivered a list of rail- and road communications the Germans wanted spared of demolition. Zavadlav and the others insisted on discussing prisoner treatment and exchange instead. The Count responded that he would take the matter up with the Germans and added that he could arrange a meeting with someone from the HQ of Army Group C if the Partisans so desired. Pace continued that the main issue for him was that the guerrillas accept a hands-off agreement along the lines of communication; all other issues could then be settled to mutual benefit. The economic questions were tackled by Locatelli and Peter Srebrnič, the official of the “Economic commission”. Amongst other topics, they also discussed the possibility of harvesting grain without the presence of Germans, the supply of foodstuffs to the population of Gorizia and their exchange for civilian clothing, as well as the sharing of the cisterns which had been captured by the Partisans. According to Srebrnič’s

¹⁰²⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰²⁶ Ibid., pp. 93-4.

report, all these issues were resolved in an amicable manner. After the lunch, the Axis envoys, escorted by Marcello, left the villa by car.¹⁰²⁷

During the negotiations, Pace promised to send a written document detailing the German demands through Muzollini within the next two days. Perc informed Zavadlav that the Partisan side would first wait until it received the offer and then refuse further talks regarding truce, citing their incompatibility with the aims of the NOVJ and its allies as the reason. When the document failed to arrive as promised, the Partisans instructed Muzollini to inform Pace that the talks would be discontinued. The story was, however, far from over. In the last days of June, Marcello returned from the 9th Corps intelligence section, where he had been transferred after the second round of talks. He brought with him the permission of the Corps to continue the negotiations with the prefect. On 3 July, the Count, accompanied by Muzollini, appeared in the Partisan base at Renča where he was informed of the news. The delegates then proceeded to establish a date for the next round of talks. After Marcello had suggested 5 July, he was asked whether the Partisan side would be willing to cease hostilities so that the negotiations could take place in peace. Marcello agreed, provided that higher Partisan commands approved of the arrangement.¹⁰²⁸

One day after the meeting, the entire Slovene littoral was in uproar as rumors of the alleged Partisan-German truce spread like wildfire. The courier who arrived from Gorizia to the Partisan HQ reported on the profound sense of disbelief with which both the Slovenian and Italian populations greeted the news. He also informed Zavadlav that the local German command had already released an appropriate circular order to the quisling forces. At first, Zavadlav was confused just as everybody else; after a while, he ordered Marcello to contact Muzollini immediately and to cancel the truce and any further negotiations. The latter appeared at Renča on 5 July 1944 bringing a message from the German command: they would refrain from all hostile actions on that day if the Partisans would do the same; those officers responsible for the premature breaking of the news would be punished; the leading Fascist in the town was already under arrest; the Fascist organization at Gorizia would be abolished and their activities curbed. The courier also added that the Germans were ready for further negotiations.¹⁰²⁹

¹⁰²⁷ Ibid., pp. 94-5.

¹⁰²⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁹ Ibid., p. 95.

This information proved to be correct: on 15 July 1944, the Main HQ for Croatia reported to the Supreme HQ that four German envoys entered Partisan territory outside of Opatija in the Croatian part of Istria.¹⁰³⁰ Two Germans were left behind as hostages while the remaining two and one Partisan representative headed for the town in order to negotiate “the peaceful retreat of the German army from Istria”.¹⁰³¹ Three days later, the Croatian command received a sharp cable from Tito:

“The actions of the Istrian comrades are highly reprehensible. They were not supposed to negotiate anything with the Germans, especially not without our express permission. We think that the whole matter is devised to compromise our relations with the Allies. All contacts with the Germans in Istria are to be severed [...]”.¹⁰³²

On the 23rd, the Main HQ attempted to clarify the situation: the news, they said, had not been relayed properly; the negotiations were led not by military units, but by a member of the Opatija Party committee without prior knowledge of the higher Party forums: “No deal was made [...] fighting against the Germans never ceased”.¹⁰³³ This was not the only attempt by the Axis forces in the region to initiate negotiations with the NOVJ. In the same cable in which the Main HQ for Croatia first informed Tito of the Opatija episode, it also carried news of the attempt of the Croatian Home Guards to establish contact outside of Sušak. The commander of the local garrison, Colonel Hinko Resch¹⁰³⁴ was seeking a written deal “on all military questions” with the Partisans. He expressed the wish to come over to the guerrilla territory for talks if his personal safety could be guaranteed: “he informed the German military authorities of his initiative and they approved his action”. Despite the willingness of the local Partisan commands to receive Resch and hear him out, the meeting never materialized. According to the telegram to Tito from 1 August 1944, the Germans insisted on

¹⁰³⁰ German units there were informed of the cease-fire on 5 July and apparently obeyed it until the 13th, when the Battle Group „Rijeka“ (*Kampfgruppe Fiume*) broke it owing to continued Partisan attacks in the area: NAW, T-1022, Roll 2552, War Diary of the Naval Defense Command Istria, entries for 5 and 13 July 1944. The appearance of the German envoys at Opatija only two days later illustrates the confusion which reigned during these days.

¹⁰³¹ VA, 119/4, 1, 1-16, Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (15 July 1944).

¹⁰³² VA, 119/2, 3, 6-7, Supreme HQ for Main HQ for Croatia (18 July 1944).

¹⁰³³ Ibid., Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (23 July 1944).

¹⁰³⁴ Colonel Hinko Resch (1893-1945) is sometimes accredited with saving thousands of people (including Jews) from German and Ustashe camps and prisons in Rijeka after the Italian capitulation. According to the only detailed biography available in either printed or electronic form (<http://www.lokalpatrioti-rijeka.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=50279> last accessed on 23 March 2013), Resch, although not a Partisan sympathizer, knew several people with ties to the People’s Liberation Movement. He was killed by the Ustashe in late April 1945.

escorting the colonel with two armored cars, which he refused.¹⁰³⁵ What precisely Resch or the German commands in that part of Istria hoped to achieve by negotiations, remains a mystery. The intelligence branch of the Main HQ for Croatia concluded that the whole episode was nothing but a German propaganda ploy aimed at “spreading confusion and taking advantage of it”.¹⁰³⁶

We should now try to explain the reasons behind the German wish to obtain a cease-fire in the littoral. Dr. Rainer claimed in his post-war interrogation that he approved of the truce on the grounds of the directive Hitler gave him upon his appointment as the High Commissioner for OZAK. The directive read that Rainer’s main task was to maintain peace and order: “If the Partisans would remain calm, then the mission would be fulfilled”. Furthermore, the former governor of Carinthia claimed the arrangement would have eased the suffering of the civilian population around Gorizia who were facing constant food shortages owing to the Partisan control of the surrounding territory. Still unsure as to precisely how Hitler would react to such imaginative interpretations of his orders, Rainer decided to consult SS General Odilo Globocnik, the chief of police and security forces in the littoral, and General Kübler, his Wehrmacht counterpart. Both agreed to the truce as a means of pacifying the region and securing the vital communications running through it. As additional assurance against a possible backlash, Kübler obtained the permission from his superiors in Army Group C in Italy who were not averse to negotiating with the Communist guerrillas themselves.¹⁰³⁷

The second possible explanation is that the SS Propaganda Regiment “Eggers”, elements of which were deployed in OZAK, was pulling the strings behind Count Pace. The objective of the operation would be to discredit the Partisans and sow confusion within their ranks: the premature announcement of the cease-fire on the 4th may have been the regiment’s doing. “The German side”, one report of Army Group F went, “did not believe in a successful conclusion of these negotiations, but it did believe that they could help pacify the bands and

¹⁰³⁵ Unlike the incident involving the Germans from Opatija, Tito allowed the Partisans in the vicinity Sušak to hear the colonel out: VA, 119/4, 1, 1-16, Supreme HQ Main to HQ for Croatia (17 July 1944); VA, 119/2, 3, 6-8 and 6-9, cables from Main HQ for Croatia to Supreme HQ (1 and 4 August 1944).

¹⁰³⁶ HR HDA 1450, D-1091, 483, 626, OZNA for Main HQ for Croatia (1 August 1944).

¹⁰³⁷ Facsimile of Rainer's statement given to Yugoslav authorities in 1947 printed in Zavadlav, Partizani, Part III, document no. 9 (unpaginated); The Army Group C negotiated “live-and-let-live” agreements with Italian Partisans at Breno and Edolo, north of Brescia, in August and September 1944: Roberto Spazzali, „La missione del conte Marino Pace, prefetto di Gorizia, tra i partigiani di Circhina (11 settembre-12 ottobre 1944)” in: *Studi goriziani*, 85 (January-June 1997): 49.

deepen their inner divisions”.¹⁰³⁸ Rainer was questioned about this possibility and said that, to his knowledge, Pace had no connection to the SS unit. He added that it is possible that the regiment simply seized the opportunity as it presented itself in early July and attempted to exploit it propagandistically. After consulting the available documentation, this indeed seems to be the case.¹⁰³⁹

Confusion was ripe on both sides and all levels: German signals intelligence intercepted a radio message from the 7th Corps of the NOVJ which in part read that the local German commander in the town of Postojna offered to defect to the Partisans. In another intercepted message, local Chetniks reported about the truce, which purportedly included arms deliveries by the Germans to the Partisans; the authors also speculated that the agreement was made with the consent of Moscow and Berlin.¹⁰⁴⁰ The collaborationist forces were, understandably, terrified at the prospect of a German-Partisan rapprochement. General Leo Rupnik, the head of the Slovene quisling government, protested to SS General Rösener, emphatically stating that his Home Guards would never accept this cease-fire. The latter saw himself compelled to publicly renounce the truce in the daily newspaper “Slovenec”:

*“It is rumored that an agreement with the bandits has been made in the Littoral. These allegations remain but a rumor for us in the Ljubljana Province! [...] The struggle will continue until the victorious end!”*¹⁰⁴¹

In order to clarify the matter, the SS general travelled to Trieste over the following days for a meeting with Governor Rainer. According to the latter’s post-war interrogation, Rösener told him he feared he would lose control over the Slovene Home Guard if the truce would remain in force. He therefore had to make a public commitment against it in order to dispel the fears of the collaborators. Besides, the general continued, the lack of unified German policy, vividly demonstrated by the recent events, was detrimental to German authority and prestige in the region. In Rainer’s opinion, the real reason for Rösener’s opposition to the negotiations was his injured pride owing to his exclusion from the matter. In light of these facts, Rainer could not hope to persuade him to widen the truce to his area of responsibility around the

¹⁰³⁸ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000717, Army Group F to 2nd Panzer Army (22 July 1944).

¹⁰³⁹ Zavadlav, *Partizani*, p. 96; Facsimile of Rainer’s statement given to Yugoslav authorities in 1947 printed in *ibid.*, Part III, document no. 9 (unpaginated).

¹⁰⁴⁰ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000720, Army Group F to Army Group C and OZAK (12 July 1944). Both rumors turned out later to be false: NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000717, Army Group F to 2nd Panzer Army (22 July 1944).

¹⁰⁴¹ „Slovenec“, 7 July 1944, p. 1; digital version available at [http://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-GOXPDXCR/?pageSize=20&relation=Slovenec+\(1873\)&query=%27keywords%3dslovenec++1944.%40AND%40keywords%3d07.07.1944%27](http://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-GOXPDXCR/?pageSize=20&relation=Slovenec+(1873)&query=%27keywords%3dslovenec++1944.%40AND%40keywords%3d07.07.1944%27) (last accessed on 15 November 2012).

Slovene capital. Fearing that any pressure on Rösener to change his mind would lead him report the whole matter to Himmler and Hitler, Rainer did not press the matter any further. He accepted the general's word that the troops in the Ljubljana province would not undertake any activities over the following days and would closely monitor the effects of the truce. "I did not believe that the cease-fire would last for very much longer", concluded Rainer.¹⁰⁴²

Did the truce really become effective on 5 July and, if so, how long did it last? Rainer remembered that General Kübler told him that the truce had been "mostly observed" by both sides for about two weeks.¹⁰⁴³ On the other hand, Kesselring's HQ informed Army Group F on or about 11 July about the negotiations and that the "bandits" repudiated the truce and made it clear they would continue with armed actions. The report added that Pace would try again, but that the outcome was not foreseeable.¹⁰⁴⁴ On 16 July 1944, the daily report of the Main HQ of the NDH Home Guard read: "The truce in Istria, which commenced on 5 July between the Partisans and the Germans, has been cancelled."¹⁰⁴⁵ Let us now have a look at the activity report of the NOVJ's 9th Corps for the first three weeks of July. The Corps' two divisions and four detachments carried out 22 armed actions in the period between 25 June and 4 July and a further 36 from 6-18 July 1944. None of the units reported any activity for 5 July and only one was active on the 6th. It is safe to assume that these two days of quiet were owed to the rumors of a truce. Faced with conflicting reports, the units most likely held off until clarification came from higher commands. Once this arrived, there was a noted increase in sabotage and attacks on Axis positions in the area which culminated in the storming of the garrison in Hotavlje (30 km NE from Gorizia) on 18 July. One day later, the Germans launched their own offensive against the 9th Corps.¹⁰⁴⁶ Judging by these facts, it seems that Kesselring's message was closest to the truth; the two-week "truce" Kübler was referring to was actually a period which saw no major activities on either side. By the beginning of the last week of the month, all illusions regarding the truce had vanished. On 22 July 1944, Army Group F informed the 2nd Panzer Army about the situation in the Slovenian Littoral: "Truce with the bandits did not materialize [...] The bandit leadership has apparently ordered a truce for the duration of the talks, but has later cancelled this order".¹⁰⁴⁷

¹⁰⁴² Facsimile of Rainer's statement given to Yugoslav authorities in 1947 printed in Zavadlav, *Partizani*, Part III, document no. 9 (unpaginated).

¹⁰⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁴ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000792, Army Group F to 2nd Panzer Army (11 July 1944).

¹⁰⁴⁵ *Zbornik/V/30/732*, Daily report of Main HQ of Home Guard for 16 July 1944.

¹⁰⁴⁶ *Zbornik/VI/15/38-59*, 9th Corps' activity report for the period 5-20 July 1944 (20 July 1944); *Hronologija*, p. 825.

¹⁰⁴⁷ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000717, Army Group F to 2nd Panzer Army (22 July 1944).

The already quoted intelligence report of Army Group F dated 11 July mulled the reasons behind the initial readiness of the Partisan leadership to negotiate: "In particular, it is unclear if it had been a decision of a local bandit command, or if Tito had something to do with it." This was important because the negotiations in Primorska coincided with rumors regarding an impending Allied landing in Istria. Some suspected that the true aim of the Partisans was to lull the Germans into a false sense of security prior to the invasion.¹⁰⁴⁸ On the other hand, some thought that the British themselves engineered the truce through Pace, who was rumored to have ties with the remaining Anglophiles in Mussolini's "Social Republic of Salò". According to this theory, the British were not desirous of the Communist Partisans gaining the upper hand in the Littoral. The truce was devised to give the Germans some breathing space enabling them to reinforce their presence in area. This would be followed by an all-out offensive resulting in the destruction of the guerrillas before the Allies landed.¹⁰⁴⁹ There is no factual evidence to support this story. What is certain is that Churchill and Tito were wary of each other's intentions concerning the Littoral but neither would go as far as to work with the Germans in order to thwart the other. During their meeting in Naples on 12-13 August 1944, they agreed to co-operate in the event of a landing in Istria. Behind the scenes, Churchill hoped that the operation would not only shorten the war but also deny this important region to the Soviets and their Yugoslav proxies. Tito for his part was already publicly laying claim to the region for Yugoslavia (it had been a part of Italy since the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920). In a letter to Stalin from the beginning of September, he stated that the National Liberation Movement "would not be pleased" by an Allied landing on the eastern coast of Adriatic, but if it came to that, the Partisans would prefer it took place in Istria¹⁰⁵⁰: it was far from Serbia and there were no Chetniks there who could rally to the Allies. The Germans continued monitoring the news concerning possible operations in Istria throughout that year. On the first day of September, a "reliable double agent" informed them that the Allies were planning to land at Trieste in five days with full knowledge of the Partisans.¹⁰⁵¹ Although the landing did not take place, the Germans continued to be on the lookout for any

¹⁰⁴⁸ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000736-7, Overview of enemy situation in South-East (11 July 1944); *ibid.*, Roll 190, 000799, War diary of Army Group F, entry for 10 July 1944. The possibilities of a landing in Istria and a subsequent advance to Vienna (known as "Ljubljana Gap Strategy") were discussed in British military circles beginning in March 1944 as one of the possible operations against "Fortress Europe": Thomas M. Barker, "The Ljubljana Gap Strategy: Alternative to Anvil/Dragoon or Fantasy?" in: *Journal of Military History*, 56, trifikovic1 (1992), pp. 61-2.

¹⁰⁴⁹ This version of events came from an ex- Gestapo official, Paul Dusch during his interrogation in OZNA prison in 1948; the facsimile of his statement was printed in Zavadlav, Partizani, Part III, document no. 5 (unpaginated).

¹⁰⁵⁰ Churchill, *Second World War*, Vol. VI, pp. 80,133-4; Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Vol. II, p. 330.

¹⁰⁵¹ NAW, T-311, Roll 286, Intelligence section of Army Group F to Army Group F HQ (1 September 1944).

signs of renewed diplomatic activity on the part of the Partisans in the Littoral. On 25 November, General Kübler informed his superiors that the “bandits” in Istria were not showing any “readiness to negotiate”.¹⁰⁵²

Judging by the available sources, the contacts with Count Pace were maintained exclusively by the local Partisan commands and without any interference from the Supreme HQ. Zavadlav, who in 1948 was accused of being a supporter of Stalin (and, conveniently, a Gestapo agent during the war), was interrogated and questioned regarding his decision to maintain negotiations, despite Pace’s efforts to broker a cease-fire with the German invader. Zavadlav replied that he had done so in order to attempt to recruit the Count for the Partisan cause.¹⁰⁵³ The whole operation, from the Partisan point of view, was meant to serve intelligence purposes: the negotiations were seen as an opportunity to feel the pulse of the enemy and attempt to discern the real motives behind his propositions. A lasting truce with the Axis forces in the area was not contemplated; this is evident from Perc’s instructions to Zavadlav from late June, the hasty cancelling of the truce by the latter on 4 July, as well as the attacks conducted on rail communications and collaborator strong points in the days following the announcement of the truce. Marcello’s clumsy acceptance of the cease-fire proposition made by the Axis envoys for the duration of the talks was blown out of proportions by the power of hear-say and possibly the German propaganda apparatus. Nonetheless, the misunderstanding proved to be his undoing: he was ordered back to the HQ of the 9th Corps, where a public prosecutor opened an investigation against him. This, in turn, led to his execution owing to “negotiations with the Germans”.¹⁰⁵⁴

Despite the unwanted fallout resulting from the talks with the prefect of Gorizia, the highest leadership of the Slovene Partisans was still very much interested in utilizing contacts with the enemy for propaganda purposes. In a letter dated 23 July 1944, the Main HQ advised the 4th Operational Zone to make contacts with Home Guard and even German garrisons and use the current international situation to undermine their morale. “Needless to say, none of

¹⁰⁵² NAW, T-311, Roll 197,000151, Intelligence summary no. 6 of the 97th Army Corps (25 November 1944).

¹⁰⁵³ The Count was not known for Nazi leanings; instead, he had strong sympathies for the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy which once reigned over the Littoral and adjacent Italian regions. His moderate policies and knowledge of the Slovene language made him an ideal choice for the prefect of ethnically mixed Gorizia (Zavadlav, *Partizani*, p. 96). When asked by the interrogator why he had not arrested Pace in Renče, Zavadlav answered that he the prefect was not considered “a hostile element”: Interrogation of Zdenko Zavadlav (16 November 1948), facsimile printed in *ibid.*, Part III, document no. 11 (unpaginated). Interestingly, Pace affected the release of Zavadlav from the German prison in Trieste in November 1943 after an intervention from the partisan’s father: Interrogation of Zdenko Zavadlav (26 October 1948), facsimile printed in *ibid.*, Part III, document no. 11 (unpaginated).

¹⁰⁵⁴ 9th Corps’ higher military court to provincial branch of OZNA for Primorska (15 August 1944): facsimile printed in Zavadlav, *Partizani*, Part III, document no. 4 (unpaginated).

these contacts may be used for achieving of some kind of truce with the Germans or the Slovene collaborators”. One day later, the Main HQ Commander expressly mentioned the Gorizia episode in its letter to the 9th Corps:

*“Inform us in particular about the possibilities of renewing the contacts which were established between Marcello and Rainer’s representatives; we hereby warn you that the renewal of these contacts may under no circumstances be accompanied by any talk of a cease-fire. The contacts should be used to accelerate the disintegration which has set in the ranks of the Germans and the White Guards. Any attempt to treat this matter as Marcello did will be considered a provocation”.*¹⁰⁵⁵

The final act of the Gorizia episode began in early September, when Count Pace was invited to a new round of talks. On this occasion, the Partisans promised to send envoys from the very top. On 11 September, Pace, Locatelli and Muzollini appeared on guerrilla-held territory as agreed and met Zavadlav, who was to be their liaison. After a long, arduous journey they arrived in the village of Trebuša, where they were received by Miro Perc, head of Partisan intelligence for the Primorska region. The fact that no higher-ranking delegates from the Slovenian leadership arrived for the talks that day raised Pace's suspicion. His proposition to postpone the meeting was, however, courteously declined and the Axis delegates were practically forced to spend the night in the village. The next day, the gloves came off: Perc informed the trio that they were under arrest. Pace's protests, made both orally and verbally, did not have any effect. The prisoners were kept in an attic of the local tavern, under constant supervision, until 7 October. Then the order came for a march south with a group of Partisans; after marching for three days in bad weather, Locatelli could not continue any further because of his heart condition and he had to be left behind. Fearing for his life, the prefect decided to attempt an escape: the party was in the vicinity of a rail line and he was sure he would meet Axis troops there. On the night of the 12th, Pace had quietly slipped out of the cabin he shared with his escort and stumbled into a German patrol shortly thereafter.¹⁰⁵⁶

Why the Partisans initiated the talks and what stood behind the arrest of Pace's delegation is not entirely clear. The Count was sure they were destined for a firing squad, “just as the two of their own envoys from the July talks”. The local chief of OZNA did, in

¹⁰⁵⁵ Zbornik/VI/15/94, 129, messages of the Main HQ to 4th Operational Zone (23 July 1944) and to 9th Corps (24 July 1944).

¹⁰⁵⁶ Spazzali, *La missione*, pp. 62-8. Locatelli managed to escape too in the following days; Muzollini's health had suffered severely during captivity (heart and intestinal problems) and he probably died during the march (ibid., p. 55).

fact, wish to execute them, but the service's main center overruled this decision and demanded the prisoners be brought to the headquarters in Bela Krajina. One way or the other, the prefect of Gorizia narrowly escaped death. His only satisfaction came from the fact that the German 188th Mountain Division launched an incursion into Partisan territory around Postojna and inflicted considerable damage. The success was largely due to the detailed information the prefect provided upon his miraculous escape.¹⁰⁵⁷

Although the truce talks did not have any long-lasting impact, they seem to have paved the way for "ordinary" talks on prisoner exchange in the Primorska region. In August 1944, one Partisan brigade commander was captured north of Gorizia. The Germans apparently wanted to exchange him for one of their own officers, but the negotiations failed for unknown reasons. The commander was kept in prisons in Gorizia and Trieste, only to be executed in the last days of the war. A similar fate befell certain Nesnes, a woman held captive by Italian Partisans fighting under the command of the 9th Corps. Since the Germans "refused to exchange" her for unknown reasons, she was still with the "Antonio Gramsci" Brigade when the unit came under attack on the morning of 19 November 1944 north-east of Trieste. As the Partisans started to withdraw, Nesnes refused to go with them: "After it had become clear that all attempts to motivate her to move would be in vain and as the enemy was rapidly approaching, she had to be killed."¹⁰⁵⁸

10. Conclusion

The years 1943-1945 saw numerous prisoner exchange activities on a local level between the Partisans and various German formations. The frequency of these contacts was largely determined by the scale and ferocity of the fighting. The willingness of a unit commander to offer or accept an exchange was thus dependent on the manner in which high commands on both sides decided to wage the war. 1943 provides the best example for this. Under the influence of the successful negotiations in the final third of 1942, both sides recognized the benefits of exchange and took the first steps in departing from a no-prisoner-policy which had

¹⁰⁵⁷ Facsimile of Rainer's statement given to Yugoslav authorities in 1947 printed in Zavadlav, *Partizani*, Part III, document no. 9 (unpaginated); Facsimile of letters from provincial branch of OZNA to OZNA center for Slovenia (12, 16, 19 September 1944) printed in *ibid.*, document no. 13 (unpaginated); Spazzali, *La missione*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Zbornik*/VI/17/767, Division „Garibaldi Natisone“, activity report for November 1944 (4 December 1944). It appears that the only successful prisoner exchange in Primorska took place in early October 1944 when three Partisans were exchanged for one German officer: Dr. Boris Mlakar's letter to the author (19 November 2012).

hitherto reigned. Although negotiating with the enemy still lay in the exclusive domain of the high commands, individual units were encouraged or, in the case of units around the Partisan Supreme HQ, ordered to take prisoners. The news that the exchange of prisoners was now either tacitly or openly approved by the higher-ups made units on the ground more comfortable with the idea of contacting the enemy on their own in the future.

The limited progress made in the last part of 1942 was undone by the series of large-scale anti-partisan operations in the first half of 1943. The operations “Weiss” and “Schwarz” were designed to destroy the core of the NOVJ by a maximum application of force and–violence. The fighting in the first eight or so months of 1943 was therefore marked by widespread shooting of prisoners on both sides. This reversal of the de-escalation process also reflected itself in the willingness to swap captives on a local level. Whereas there were two recorded exchange attempts in the period from January to August 1942, there was only one in the same time span in 1943 (Moslavina). One important factor contributed to the revival of exchange activities in the late Summer of 1943 and that was Hitler’s order regarding the treatment of captured guerrillas from 19 July. This instruction granted Partisans privileged status and signaled the beginning of a departure from the way the German counter-insurgency had been conducted hitherto. Not only was there now a steady supply of prisoners who could be exchanged, but the units were more likely to enter negotiations with the Partisans now that the latter were de facto, if not de jure, recognized as a belligerent side. The result was that the last four months of 1943 saw two times as many exchange attempts as in the previous twenty months combined. The fact that the prisoner exchange was officially recognized by the highest authorities on both sides as a legitimate tool in early 1944 gave a decisive impulse for local swaps. The 2nd Panzer Army issued an order which encouraged the subordinate units to seek out their guerrillas counterparts and exchange as many German prisoners as possible in their respective zones of responsibility. The Partisan units not commanded by the Main HQ for Croatia seemingly did not receive a similar order, but even if they had it would not have made much of a difference. Prisoner exchange was accepted as a necessity and was practiced since the beginning of the war. It should therefore come as no surprise that the Partisans offered the last recorded local exchange as late as March 1945, less than two months before the conflict in Europe finally ended.

In pursuit of this policy, the Partisans made attempts to exchange captives in all parts of Yugoslavia, with the notable exception of Serbia proper and, to lesser extent, Montenegro. They were most numerous in Bosnia and Herzegovina, regions where the lion’s share of the

fighting took place until the late Summer of 1944, but were also recorded in Sandžak, Syrmia, Dalmatia, parts of Slovenia, and in Macedonia. The guerrillas' negotiating partners came from all types of German formations deployed in the region, irrespective of their composition or experience in the Balkans: veteran, all-German *Jägers*, legionnaire units with Croatian personnel, freshly-arrived reserve divisions or Special Forces ("*Brandenburgers*"). Especially interesting is the relatively frequent involvement of the *Waffen*-SS units and security services and police in the local negotiations with the Partisans. They took part in roughly one fourth of all recorded exchange attempts, a remarkably high figure considering the "ideological" background of these formations. The nominal prohibition of all contacts with the Communists, issued in November 1942 by the highest circles in the SS hierarchy, should have excluded any involvement in such activities, but it did not. The troops on the ground had to adjust to the realities of war in the Balkans, just as their Army counterparts did. It must be noted that the exchange talks these units were involved in usually concerned either German civilians (laborers at Osijek, 1943, two women at Celje, 1944) or non-combatants (the case of Dr. Lunzer) or members of formations other than the SS (exchange at Ruma, the Eberlein episode). The generous terms offered by the SS Division "Prinz Eugen" for one of its officers in late November 1943 in Eastern Herzegovina may have been an attempt to induce the Partisans to spare members of the SS in the future. Unfortunately, the Partisans' insistence on maintaining their no-prisoner policy meant that very few SS soldiers survived immediate capture, let alone came to be exchanged.

Concerns over the prisoners' fate remained the prime motivation for swapping them. Despite the fact that both sides took steps to curb the levels of violence directed at their captives in late 1943/early 1944, brutality inherent to an irregular war could not be eradicated. If a prisoner could not be exchanged within a brief period immediately after his (or her) capture, he could be regarded as lost, either to a labor camp or firing squad. Whether an exchange was requested or accepted was still very much the prerogative of a unit's commander just as it was in the early days of the war. Ideology or arrogance, however, carried significantly less weight compared to 1941: only one of the unsuccessful exchange attempts discussed in this chapter (Podgorica, July 1944) failed on the grounds of unwillingness to negotiate with "bandits" or with "fascists". The majority of local attempts failed more owing to practical reasons such as prisoner escape (Moslavina) or premature death of the wounded (Sandžak). The mercurial tactical situation, a hallmark of partisan warfare, also accounted for at least two unsuccessful swaps, at Korčula in late 1944 and Central Bosnia in 1945. A local exchange was normally a matter of two units immediately facing one another; once contact

had been broken off due to tactical necessities, it was very hard to re-establish it. Furthermore, in the event one of the parties had to move on, there was no assurance that the unit coming in its stead it would be able to conclude the deal. Neither was there any guarantee that the new commander on the spot would be willing to go through all the trouble in order to exchange people whom he did not know. Unlike Pisarovina, local deals were all about swapping particular and not just any prisoners. The failure of one side to produce the requested persons whether they were common soldiers (Korčula in early 1944) or high-ranking Party members (Struga, November 1943) would invariably lead to a cancelation of talks. This in turn could have dreary consequences for the prisoners in Partisan custody, as they turned from a valuable asset into a logistical and security burden (the cases of Lünnen and Perkhun from March and September 1944, respectively). Necessity and practicality would then take precedence over orders concerning the humane treatment of German captives which were issued from late 1943 onwards.

Let us now look at some facts and figures. There were altogether 33 cases of local exchange in the years 1943-5. The influence of the Pisarovina cartel is clearly visible: whereas 1943 saw seven exchange attempts, 1944 and 1945 saw almost four times as many (24). Of these, sixteen attempts ended in failure owing to some of the above-quoted reasons; there is no information on the outcome of three swaps; and eleven attempts were concluded successfully. Due to the fragmentary nature of sources, it is difficult to provide a precise number of soldiers on both sides who were rescued from captivity in this way. The prisoners were usually exchanged par for par, but there were exceptions depending on the rank or importance of a particular captive. Under the assumption that the former was the case with the attempts for which there exists no definitive data, it can be said that the total number of exchangees in the years 1943-1945 was roughly 500. Out of these, ca. 200 were Germans while 300 were Partisans and their sympathizers.¹⁰⁵⁹ This represents approximately only one fourth of the number of people exchanged in Pisarovina. The difference can be attributed to several factors. Unlike the neutral zone, where the negotiators learned to know and trust each other through repeated dealings, two units rarely had the chance to negotiate more than one exchange. By the time the second opportunity presented itself, the unit could be transferred to another sector where it was faced with totally different conditions, such as an increased level of fighting or enemy units with unknown attitudes towards prisoners.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Not included in this figure are some 150 Germans who were allegedly swapped by 118th Jäger Division in Herzegovina. This would have been the biggest local exchange on record; however, the author could not find a second source to confirm that this actually occurred.

Just what could be achieved when two sides contacted each other regularly is best illustrated in the example of the 369th Infantry and 29th Herzegovina Divisions. These formations were waging their own little war in a clearly defined geographical region (Eastern Herzegovina) over a long period of time (from February 1944 onwards) with practically no interference from outside. Although it took several months before the idea of prisoner exchange was born, the concept was quickly embraced as it brought obvious advantages to all. In order to ensure that exchanges would be made in the future as well, both sides agreed to turn an isolated case into a system. As in Pisarovina, this included relegating all responsibility for prisoner exchange to specially chosen commands, the 369th Anti-tank Battalion and South-Herzegovina Detachment, respectively. These bodies, in turn, appointed delegates who through correspondence and meetings, worked out the details on a case-to-case basis. The swaps were always made at the same place (Hill 286), which both sides agreed to keep demilitarized. The system worked: at least four exchanges took place there in the period from late June to early September 1944, with the fifth being agreed on but cancelled. Despite the fact that the arrangement collapsed together with the German positions around Stolac in the early Fall, the South-Herzegovina Detachment (recently absorbed into the 14th Brigade) and the 369th traded prisoners once more in November, a feat which can be clearly attributed to the positive experiences made at Hill 286. All in all, some sixty prisoners on both sides were exchanged in Eastern Herzegovina; this modest number could have been higher had the system been widened to include wider area and other units as well.

Negotiations on the local level were usually led without ulterior motives, but not always. Using contacts pertaining to prisoner exchange to discuss other issues was practiced by both sides in the last two years of the war. The idea of trading prisoners for security, although not new (talks at Veliko Gradište on the Danube in 1941), became attractive only in the second half of 1943. The capitulation of Italy in September of that year gave wings to the Partisan movement and the Germans were faced with an increasingly aggressive enemy who grew stronger by the day. The main task of the German occupation forces remained the securing of vital lines of communication. Overstretched and undermanned units sometimes found it impossible to do this by applying brute force alone. Some commanders sought to complete their mission by using less conventional methods. Thus, the SS *Karstwehr* Battalion offered some sixty hostages to the Slovene Partisans if they would agree to evacuate the strategic Predil Pass in northwestern Slovenia in October 1943. The guerrillas accepted at first and took the prisoners, but conveniently changed their mind just before they had to fulfill their part of the deal. Such a turn of events did not spell the end to German-Partisan contact in

Slovenia. In mid-December 1943 their delegations met in the village of Mokronog, not far from the Croatian border, to discuss several issues. The main objective of the German delegation was to obtain a cessation of sabotage on the all-important ground communications linking the Slovenian capital Ljubljana with Karlovac in Croatia. The Partisans, for their part, wanted to be officially recognized as a belligerent force by their enemy. As neither side was willing to give way on these main issues, a compromise was reached only on the question of prisoner exchange.

The Germans attempted to reach a similar arrangement in the Slovene Littoral in the late Spring and early Summer of 1944. Acting through civilian intermediaries, they proposed a cease-fire on rail communications between Trieste and Gorizia, offering in exchange economic co-operation with the local guerrillas. The latter pushed for a prisoner exchange and demanded to be treated as a regular army. As it was customary to proclaim a local truce for the duration of talks (e.g. Moslavina, Mokronog), the Partisans did the same on the eve of the fourth round of negotiations, scheduled to take place on 5 July 1944. Owing either to a misunderstanding or, more likely, to a deliberate ploy of a German propaganda unit stationed in the area, the news broke out that the Partisans had agreed to a permanent cease-fire. There was widespread confusion over the following days as units on all sides attempted to discover what had or had not transpired. In fact, sabotage and small-scale attacks against Axis installations never let up and large-scale fighting resumed within two weeks after the incident. Despite this episode, the guerrillas were interested in continuing the contacts, now with the intention to undermine the morale of the Germans and their native collaborators. Their decision to take Axis envoys captive in September 1944, however, spelled the end for further negotiations in the Littoral.

In early November 1943, the Germans noticed the great interest shown by the Macedonian Partisans in obtaining the release of some of their comrades from Bulgarian camps. Although the government in Sofia quickly refused to turn them over to their allies for exchange, the Germans decided to hide this from the other side and protract the negotiations. By holding out the prospect that the captured Communists might yet be exchanged, the Germans sounded out the possibility of Partisans granting the right of free passage to Axis convoys along the important Struga-Kičevo road. The Partisans declined and the region became embroiled in heavy fighting as the Germans reverted to force of arms in order to secure the aforementioned supply artery. In September and October 1944, prisoner exchange negotiations were used by the Partisans and British liaison officers as a pretext for contacting

the German garrison in Prilep. What the former really wanted to discuss was the capitulation of German forces in Western Macedonia. In September, the Germans deliberately protracted the talks until they could be reinforced. By October 1944, Macedonia was flooded by the retreating units of Army Group E withdrawing from Greece, and the contact was severed for good.

It is worthy of note that the majority of the German proposals involving the exchange of prisoners for security along their supply arteries occurred in the peripheral regions of Yugoslavia. Whereas there were four attempts in Slovenia and Macedonia, only two such instances were recorded in the nexus of the fighting, the territory of the NDH, and even these two episodes (at Stolac and Sušak in the summer of 1944) took place on the country's borders. One possible explanation for the discrepancy could lay in the German perception of how their Partisan enemy functioned. Owing to the immense communication and geographic difficulties, the NOVJ's branches in Slovenia and Macedonia received general guidelines from Tito and the Supreme HQ which they had great latitude in executing. In addition, both of these formations claimed to be the national armies of the Slovene and Macedonian peoples who chose on their own free will to be a part of a wider, all-Yugoslav People's Liberation Movement. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that the Germans on the ground thought that the local, "national" Partisans would somehow be more susceptible to offers of local truce than the "regular" units close to the Supreme HQ.

Closing Thoughts

As each chapter in this work contains extensive conclusions, a few general observations will suffice. Frequent exchanges of able-bodied prisoners between the occupation forces and a resistance movement, partly through a cartel negotiated directly between their high commands, was a distinctive feature of the Second World War in Yugoslavia. At first glance, it seems surprising that the topic remained on the historiographical sidelines for almost seventy years. During the 45 years of socialism, Yugoslav historians devoted themselves almost exclusively to the research of war-related topics; exploits of nearly every Partisan unit, no matter how small, were dutifully recorded and published. The vast majority of these works, however, were to varying degrees laden with ideological overtones. Historians avoided everything which could blemish the lionized image of Partisans as uncompromising yet noble freedom-fighters and mortal enemies of Nazism. The subject of enemy prisoners was one of the sensitive areas everyone preferred to avoid, because any objective in-depth analysis of the topic would produce results in sharp contrast to the official version of the events. The truth was that the Partisans followed the rules and customs of war only when it suited them, and that they had no qualms about negotiating with the hated “fascist invaders.” The demise of socialism in the early 1990s did not remove ideology and daily politics from the historiography: the communist political agenda was merely replaced with the nationalist one. The result was that the Partisans’ diplomatic dealings with the occupation forces were commonly presented as proof that the Communists were, in fact, collaborating with the Nazis. As Western authors were themselves not completely immune from taking sides (especially during the Cold War), this controversial topic remained a prisoner of misconceptions and over-simplifications. For instance, the notion that the guerrillas indiscriminately slaughtered all their captives according to “Balkans tradition” is still present in some quarters. In reality, their approach was much more nuanced, with practical considerations far outweighing simple bloodlust in determining the fate of their prisoners.

The conflict in Yugoslavia was a brutal affair, combining elements of liberation war, civil war and ideological war. It was to a large degree a conflict of unrestrained violence, one that did not recognize the distinction between combatant and non-combatant. In these circumstances, captives on all sides could not hope for fair treatment. Since the prisoners’ lot could not be bettered by invoking international law or principles of humanity, the only remaining option was to appeal to enemy’s self-interest. The Yugoslav Partisans were first to

grasp this, thanks to the fact that exchanging prisoners had been practiced in the Balkans for centuries, regardless of the intensity of the conflict. The decision to spare enemy prisoners for exchange was at first not handed down from higher authorities, but originated with local commanders who wanted to rescue a relative or a fellow unit member. In general, the willingness to offer an exchange, and the treatment of German prisoners, depended on three factors: ideological considerations, policy on enemy prisoners, and external influence. The first factor dominated the Partisans' attitude in this matter in the period from July until December 1941. The illusion that class struggle was the root cause of the war made the Partisans treat common German soldiers well. In Partisans' thinking, they were also peasants and workers, manipulated by their reactionary officers into fighting for Hitler. The Germans' increasing brutality was not countered with officially sanctioned reprisals against the prisoners. As it became clear that the occupying forces would not reciprocate this clemency, the Partisans adopted a no-prisoner policy. This policy was pursued during roughly the first eight months of 1942. The third phase began after the first successful prisoner exchange between the Partisan Supreme HQ and German authorities in the NDH in early September of that year and lasted, with interruptions, until the end of the war. Pragmatism, rather than ideology, respect for international law or simple thirst for revenge, was at the heart of the new policy: a German prisoner was worth sparing only because he could now be traded for incarcerated Partisans or valuable Party members. These considerations led to the creation of the permanent exchange cartel with the German command in Zagreb in late 1943. The success of the Pisarovina arrangement influenced Partisan commands across Yugoslavia to spare their prisoners for exchange.

External influence also began to be felt from early 1944 on. The British were concerned that any atrocity perpetrated by the Partisans would result in reprisals against their own prisoners in Germany. Tito, anxious to keep his alliance with the British afloat, agreed to issue unequivocal orders on good treatment of German captives and make sure they were obeyed. Beginning in late summer of 1944, however, Tito's interest in both British attitudes and the prisoners' lot began to wane, for two reasons. First, thanks to the Red Army's presence in Yugoslavia, he was no longer dependent on British good will for the much-needed material help. Second, the Partisan movement was now in a position of strength and consequently saw no particular reason to give concessions of any kind to the Germans. Consequently, Tito showed no sincere interest in curbing the increasingly violent behavior of Partisan/Yugoslav units on the ground, or in punishing those responsible for the atrocities against German prisoners.

The Germans were the last of the Axis powers to recognize the potential benefits of prisoner-taking and exchange. Unlike the Italian army, which had led protracted counter-insurgency campaigns in Africa in the decades leading to the Second World War, the Germans had only a limited experience with this type of conflict, and had no opportunity (or inclination) to change their ways. Consequently, Italian commanders were much more flexible on the issue of prisoners and were ready to negotiate the release of their men with the guerrillas virtually since the first day of the uprising. The same goes for the civil and military authorities of the NDH. They had common history with their enemy, and knew well that the only way of saving the lives of the captives from their side was to trade them for those of the other. General Horstenau once observed that German foreign policy knew only of “either bombs or embraces”. The same can be said about the German army. Unlike their Italian counterparts, German officers were for the most part politically aloof and showed no understanding of the immensely complicated political landscape of the Balkans. They were the product of the doctrine which revolved around the idea of total and utter annihilation of the enemy on the battlefield. It was long maintained that this approach was valid for irregular as well as regular warfare. As time passed, however, and as the Germans sank ever deeper into the Balkans quagmire, units on the ground began to show more flexibility in dealing with their guerrilla opponents.

The German occupation authorities in Yugoslavia had no unified prisoner policy; the treatment of captured Partisans varied from region to region and depended on several factors. Serbia was considered the main bastion of the occupation system in the entire region, and the Germans believed they could hold the country only by brute force. Under these circumstances, negotiating with the guerrillas, even over a local prisoner exchange, was deemed counter-productive and was discouraged. As a consequence, the struggle between the Serbian Partisans and the occupying forces remained almost as bloody in 1944 as it was in 1941. The Germans faced an altogether different situation in the NDH: their troop contingent there was too weak to keep the insurgency in check, and widespread reprisals failed to achieve similar results as in Serbia, because the fear of Ustasha terror kept a large part of the population under arms at all times. Faced with a resolute enemy of steadily increasing strength, the German military, diplomatic and police authorities were more willing to negotiate than their counterparts in Serbia. The first successful prisoner exchange in September 1942 paved the way for further talks with the Partisans, but it did not change the old guidelines, according to which captured guerrillas were to be promptly executed. This attitude began to change only after the realities of the war forced Hitler to alter the policy

towards members of guerrilla movements across Europe in July 1943. More conscientious German commanders in the NDH, such as General Horstenau, used this semi-formal recognition of the Partisans' belligerents' rights to push for a lasting exchange agreement. The cartel, sanctioned by the High Command of the Wehrmacht, went into effect in January 1944. Unlike the Partisans, who adopted prisoner exchange as the mainstay of their prisoner policy, the Germans saw the cartel merely as a useful addition to already existing regulations concerning the treatment of captured Partisans. In this way, most of the ordinary prisoners could be shipped off for forced labor to Germany, as per Hitler's instructions, and the more prominent Partisans could be kept for exchange. Owing to the paucity of sources and lack of scholarly research on the subject, it is hard to tell to what extent the German troops on the ground followed the new policies. It seems that the reprisals in 1944 and 1945 were directed primarily against those Partisans who did not fight as regular soldiers, and against civilians perceived as their supporters. On the other hand, a Partisan caught openly carrying arms had much better chances of survival in the last seventeen months of the war than previously.

Whereas the negotiations on prisoner exchange brought at least a partial de-escalation of violence towards enemy captives, the political talks between the Partisan representatives and the envoys of German military and political authorities in Zagreb produced no results whatsoever. This should come as no surprise, given the irreconcilable differences between the ideologies that the envoys represented. The talks became almost an end in themselves, as a channel of communication both sides wanted to keep open. Paradoxically, it was Ambassador Kasche, a committed Nazi, who was probably the only person on either side who believed in the possibility of a lasting arrangement. There is no conclusive evidence that the Partisan leadership ever sincerely hoped for a rapprochement with the Germans. Tito's truce offer from March, and the pause in sabotage along the Zagreb-Belgrade railway in April of 1943, were the result of a desperate operational situation, rather than his changing convictions. According to some authors, this diplomatic initiative showed that Tito was not above the idea of entering into tactical collaboration with the occupation authorities in order to gain the upper hand against his civil war opponents, something Draža Mihailović was tried and executed for after the war. Unlike the Serb nationalist movement, whose talks with the Germans usually resulted in concrete joint actions against the common enemy, neither primary sources nor the vast secondary literature offer any evidence that the diplomatic contacts on political or prisoner issues led to collaboration between the NOVJ and the German occupation forces. Indeed, quite the opposite: the establishment of the neutral zone

and the intensification of local exchange contacts went hand in hand with the ever-increasing intensity of operations in the last twenty or so months of the war.

Much ink has been spilled over the anti-British attitude of the Partisans and their self-professed readiness to oppose the Allied landings in Dalmatia with force. There can be no doubt that the communist leadership was sincerely wary of British intentions in the Balkans, especially in the period prior to May 1943. Even after the arrival of the first British military mission to the Supreme HQ signaled the beginning of Anglo-Partisan co-operation, Tito remained convinced that Whitehall was attempting some sort of foul play aimed at undermining the Partisans' position in the country. His envoys did not hide their sentiment from the Germans during their meetings, and even accentuated it in order to keep them interested in continuing the contacts, especially during the crisis of March 1943. Several high-ranking Partisan officers mentioned in the March Negotiations that they were actively considering the possibility of armed conflict with the British, in case they intervened openly in favor of the Chetniks. Fortunately for the Yugoslav Communists, the course of events never put them in a position to make good on their statements. Regardless of what they said or felt, the fact remains that the alliance between the Partisan Movement and the British survived throughout the war despite its troubled nature.

This dissertation is the first attempt at a comprehensive analysis of non-violent contacts between the Partisans and the German occupation authorities in Yugoslavia in the Second World War. Far from being the final word on the topic, it is a starting point for further research on various aspects of history of POWs in the conflict (e.g. prisoner exchanges with the Germans compared with similar arrangements with other Axis formations, like Italians or Bulgarians, or the general history of prisoners in the region in the 20th century). As with much of the history of Western Balkans, the phenomenon of prisoner exchange has an element of paradox: Yugoslavia was probably the only place in war-torn Europe where representatives of two irreconcilable ideologies, Communism and Nazism, met regularly at the negotiating table. Both were primarily motivated by the wish to save their own men, but the talks did mitigate, however marginally, the horrors of the war.

Appendix 1-Prisoner Exchanges in Yugoslavia

1. Local exchanges

1941

Date and Place	no. of captured Partisans involved	no. of captured Germans involved	Success	Comment
1. Late July-Early August, Valjevo	1	1	NO	German prisoner escaped
2. Mid-August , Gornji Milanovac	6	1	YES	One source claims that altogether forty hostages (including civilians) were released by the Germans
3. Late August , Valjevo	1	1	NO	Partisans offered the Serbian mayor of Valjevo
4. Late August, Kikinda	1	1	YES	
5. August-September, Knin	?	2	NO	Germans shot as spies
6. Early September, Niš	?	7	NO	No response from the Germans; prisoners executed
7. Late September, Veliko Gradište	20-30 civilian hostages	12	NO	
8. Late September, Čačak	A number of hostages from local prison	3	NO	
9. Early October, Zvornik	?	3	?	Not known if the exchange took place
10. Mid-November, Leskovac	3	1	NO	Germans refused the exchange offer

1942

Date and Place	no. of captured Partisans involved	no. of captured Germans involved	Success	Comment
11. Early April, Doboj	5	3	YES	
12. March-April, Stolac	131	43	NO	Two to seven German wounded exchanged for medical supplies
13. Early September, Posušje	38-49	10	YES	Exchange conducted by the Supreme HQ; 22 Home Guard released with Germans

1943

Date and Place	no. of captured Partisans involved	no. of captured Germans involved	Success	Comment
14. Late February, Bjelovar	13	2	NO	German prisoners escaped
15. Late March, Konjic	17	27	YES	Exchange conducted by the Supreme HQ
16. Mid-May, Foča	3	3	NO	Partisans released; German prisoners refused to go back
17. Late August-early September, Ruma	63	23-30	YES	
18. Mid-September, Kobarid	56	?		Hostages released in exchange for the cessation of Partisan attacks on lines of communication
19. Late September, Banja Luka	?	13	YES	Unknown number of Partisans, probably ratio 1:1
20. Mid-October, Danilovgrad	1	1	YES	
21. November, Struga	25	13-18	NO	
22. Late November-early December, Eastern Herzegovina	?	1	NO	German prisoner shot

1944

Date and Place	no. of captured Partisans involved	no. of captured Germans involved	Success	Comment
23. January, Ogulin	8-16	3	?	Not known if the exchange took place
24. January-February, Šibenik	3	?	?	Not known if the exchange took place
25. Mid-February, Pljevlja	?	1	NO	German soldier died of wounds before the exchange could be arranged
26. February-March, Korčula	13	13	NO	Five German prisoners retrieved by force
27. Mid-March, Celje	10	2	NO	Partisans offered two civilians; Germans refused to trade them for fighters
28. Late March, Eastern Bosnia	?	1	?	Not known if the exchange took place

1944-continued

29. Late March, Northern Bosnia	15	1	NO	Partisan offer refused; German prisoner shot
30. Early June, Celje	?	2	NO	Two gendarmes were defectors and Germans wanted to exchange them back
31. June-September, Stolac	15	10	YES	Altogether four successful exchanges; another exchange planned for early September (2 Germans for eight Partisans), but failed
32. Late July, Podgorica	?	?	NO	Unknown number of prisoners involved
33. August, Trieste-Gorizzia	1	1	NO	Captured Partisan executed in 1945
34. Late August, Korčula	6-19	13	NO	
35. Early September, Tuzla	?	1	NO	Negotiations failed, German prisoner shot
36. September, Derventa	?	26	YES	26 nurses of the Red Cross for an unknown number of Partisans
37. Mid-October, Prilep	?	145	NO	Exchange offered but not completed
38. Late October, Imotski	23	23	YES	
39. Early November, Skopje	100	93	YES	
40. Mid-November, Trieste	?	1	NO	Captured collaborator shot
41. Late November, Nevesinje	14	14	YES	

1945

Date and Place	no. of captured Partisans involved	no. of captured Germans involved	Success	Comment
42. March 1945, Vitez	?	?	NO	German Colonel Eberlein and some other prisoners offered in exchange for an unknown number of Partisans; exchange did not take place

Altogether 46 attempted prisoner exchanges; sixteen successful, 25 unsuccessful, outcome of four unknown, one special case (Kobarid).

Approximate number of captured Partisans involved: 639-687

Approximate number of captured Germans involved: 526-538

Approximate number of exchanged prisoners: Partisans – 378-389; Germans – 254-261.¹⁰⁶⁰

2. Prisoner exchanges in Pisarovina

1943

Date	no. of Partisan prisoners exchanged	no. of German prisoners exchanged	Comment
1. 30 October	60	16	11 Home Guards
2. Late November	47	?	
3. 12 December	32	?	

1944

Date	no. of Partisan prisoners exchanged	no. of German prisoners exchanged	Comment
4. 18 January	60	44	16 Ustashes
5. 21 January	30	147 Ethnic German laborers	Delivered on receipt: 8 German soldiers in late January; 27 German soldiers in late March
6. 10 March	57		
7. 15 March	15		
8. 25 March	21		
9. 7 April	5	20	41 Home Guards
10. 15 April	32		
11. 25 April	32		
12. 27 April	23		
13. 6 July	37	164 German soldiers ¹⁰⁶¹ (probably including two deliveries on receipt around Ogulin and by Moslavina Detachment)	24 Home Guards 2 Ustashes
14. 14 August	10		
15. 30 September	82		
16. 12 October	24		
17. 15 November	184	?	30 German soldiers delivered on receipt around Ogulin
18. 20 November	79	?	
19. 4 December	32	?	
20. 20 December	39	?	Eight German officers from Knin probably included

¹⁰⁶⁰ Lower estimate; where precise figures are not known, it is assumed that the prisoners were exchanged one-for-one.

¹⁰⁶¹ According to Ambassador Kasche (NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000440, Memorandum on duty travel to Zagreb on 13 October 1944, 14 October 1944), who stated that 164 soldiers had been exchanged “in the recent time”. I assume that this refers to the period from the resumption of exchange in early July until mid-October.

1945¹⁰⁶²

Date	no. of Partisan prisoners exchanged	no. of German prisoners exchanged	Comment
21. 17 January	36	78	
22. 26 January	?	16	
23. 25 February	?	41	
24. 1 March	87-90	?	
25. 12 March	40	26	
26. 26 March	40	35	
27. 29 March	30	7	
28. 11 April	?	53	Additional five German soldiers delivered on receipt by Moslavina Detachment
29. 28 April	16-18	54	

Number of prisoners exchanged: Partisans–1150-55; Germans–779.¹⁰⁶³

For comparison: The 2nd Panzer Army had between 4,674 and 6, 677 MIA from January to November 1944.¹⁰⁶⁴
The overall number of MIAs incurred in the Balkans (including Greece and Albania) for the period 22 June 1941 to 20 April 1945 is estimated at 23, 976.¹⁰⁶⁵

¹⁰⁶² According to the article written by Boris Bakrač (Bakrač, *Razmjena zarobljenika*, p. 849), there were altogether eleven prisoner exchanges in Pisarovina from 15 January to 29 March 1945. I was able to trace only seven.

¹⁰⁶³ Sum of the figures provided in the table; the actual number is certainly higher, given that we have only incomplete information for nine exchanges. Willibald Nemetschek estimated that the grand total of exchangees, both sides included, was 2,000: KAW, B/67:145, Interview with Willibald Nemetschek conducted by Peter Broucek (10 September 1981).

¹⁰⁶⁴ NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 001029, Summary of losses in area of responsibility of Commander-in-Chief South-East (14 January 1945); the higher figure represents the sum of ten-day casualty returns of the Chief Army Surgeon (Heeresarzt): http://ww2stats.com/cas_ger_yesh_dec44.html (last accessed 1 June 2013).

¹⁰⁶⁵ NAW, T-78, Roll 414, 6383191, Losses of Field Army incurred through enemy action from 22 June 1941 to 20 April 1945 (25 April 1945). Yugoslav historiography was conspicuously silent on the overall number of missing the NOVJ had during the four years of war. Authors usually cited the official figures for killed (305,000) and wounded (425,000) but failed (or chose not) to mention the number of missing persons. The probable reason is that the Partisans did not always prefer to fight to the death, and that the NOVJ was plagued by desertion and defection, especially from early 1944 onward. Vlado Strugar mentioned in his one-volume history of the war that, in addition to members of the Yugoslav Royal Army and civilian laborers, some 34,000 "Patriots" (presumably Partisans and their sympathizers) waited for repatriation from Germany in mid-1945: Vlado Strugar, *Der jugoslawische Volksbefreiungskrieg 1941 bis 1945* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1969), p. 300.

Appendix 2: Dramatis personae

Bakrač, Boris (25 March 1912, Slavonska Požega –29 November 1989, Zagreb)

Bakrač became an engineer in 1936 and a full-fledged member of the KPJ in 1942. In March 1944, he was made the chief NOVJ envoy to Pisarovina and remained in this post until May 1945. He made 25 visits to Zagreb and had fifteen additional meetings with German representatives elsewhere. He developed very close, even friendly relations with his counterparts, which was essential for the smooth running of the prisoner exchange cartel. In the immediate post-war period, Bakrač joined the ministry of construction and after 1960 made a successful career as a member of the International Olympic Committee.

Brnčić, Josip (1914, Fužine – ?)

Brnčić was a KPJ veteran, taking part in illegal activities since 1932. In late 1943, he was serving as an intelligence officer with the Main HQ of Croatia, and in January 1944 he was chosen to be Stilinović's successor as the NOVJ plenipotentiary in Zagreb and Pisarovina. He oversaw the functioning of the neutral zone in its first three months. Brnčić took a personal interest in prisoner exchange since his brother was held in Ustasha custody. His exchange in March 1944 coincided approximately with the appointment of Brnčić to the post of chief intelligence officer with the 10th NOVJ Corps. This led many to believe that the release of his brother was the main reason behind his involvement with the exchange cartel. After the war, he made a career in the judiciary, serving as the public prosecutor, president of the Croatian Supreme Court and as Yugoslav minister of justice.

Broz, Josip (7 May 1892, Kumrovec – 4 May 1980, Belgrade)

Tito was born a peasant in the Croatian province of Zagorje. He traveled widely for a person of his social background. He tried a variety of jobs before settling on being a full-time revolutionary in the mid-1920s. In 1940, after a long period of intra-party struggle, he was made Secretary-General of the KPJ. He took a keen interest in the contacts with the Germans, which he saw as an opportunity for gaining political recognition of the Partisan movement. He made a serious error of judgment by offering a cease-fire to the Germans in March and April 1943. Although he later denied responsibility for the statements made by his envoys, there is no doubt that he was the main architect of the “March Negotiations.” After Moscow reprimanded him sternly for making overtures to the Germans, Tito deemed it wiser to stay out of the limelight; from mid-1943, the Main HQ for Croatia would be solely responsible for maintaining contact with the German authorities in Zagreb. The dominant features of Tito’s attitude to the whole question of POWs were pragmatism and self-interest: if sparing German prisoners would help release worthy Party members or better the relations with Western Allies, he would see that his orders on humane treatment of captives were followed. After he had secured the KPJ’s hold on power and Soviet backing in late 1944, his interest in the fate of prisoners faded. He was the undisputed ruler of socialist Yugoslavia until his death in 1980.

Horstenau, Edmund-Glaise (27 February 1882, Braunau am Inn – 20 July 1946, Langwasser)

Horstenau was an Austrian officer, politician, and member of the Nazi Party. He welcomed the first contacts with the Partisans in the summer of 1942 for both political and military reasons. As an opponent of the Ustasha regime, he was keen on exploring the possibility of change in the political landscape of the country: non-Communist Partisans would be allowed to join the process if they repudiated the Yugoslav idea and ceased their struggle against the Axis. In the end, neither he nor any other high-ranking German officer in Yugoslavia found the courage to press for the removal of Pavelić with sufficient vigor. In more practical terms, Horstenau viewed the prisoner exchange contacts as a useful tool for intelligence gathering and “feeling the pulse” of Partisan leadership. He used his considerable charm and many connections to “legalize” the prisoner exchange and make it acceptable to Berlin even before it became officially sanctioned in early 1944. His successors as the German Plenipotentiary-General in Croatia did not take any deeper interest in prisoner exchange or back-channel diplomacy, fearing perhaps that they would not be able to master their intricacies as Horstenau did. He committed suicide while in American custody in 1946.

Kasche, Siegfried (18 June 1903, Strausberg/Berlin – 19 June 1947, Zagreb)

Kasche joined the Nazi Party in 1926 and barely escaped being executed together with other SA-leaders in the “Night of the Long Knives.” He was appointed ambassador to the NDH in mid-April 1941 and soon turned into a vociferous supporter of the Ustasha regime. By mid-1942, however, not even Kasche could deny that some sort of internal reform was necessary if the state was to survive at all. Kasche therefore welcomed the establishment of first contacts with the Supreme HQ in August 1942, and lobbied for the continuation of talks with Đilas and Velebit in early spring of 1943. He sincerely believed that the Partisans were on the verge of changing sides and that their movement could be split from within and thus neutralized through a sustained diplomatic effort. Undeterred by the constantly worsening situation in the country and the fact that Tito had obviously no intention of leaving the anti-fascist alliance, Kasche remained committed to his agenda until the end of the war. The ambassador tried to portray his activities in the best possible light during his trial in Zagreb in 1947. He claimed that his efforts were aimed at easing the suffering of civilians and soldiers on both sides. He often repeated that he aided the Partisan movement through medical shipments. Kasche even requested that Velebit, Stilinović and Koča Popović appear as defense witnesses, which they declined. Kasche was pronounced guilty and hanged after the trial.

Nemetschek (alternatively Nemecek or Nemeček), Willibald (26 August 1916, Zagreb –?)

Nemetschek was born to an Ethnic German family from Zagreb. He was called up for service with the Wehrmacht in 1940, returning to Croatia in May 1941 to serve as an interpreter with Horstenau’s staff. In the summer of 1943 he began playing an active part in prisoner exchange negotiations and by 1944 he had become the chief “technical” envoy tasked with overseeing the day-to-day exchange operations. In this capacity, he did many favors to the Partisans, like affecting the release of their relatives and friends, carrying post and various other items from Zagreb to Pisarovina, etc. In exchange, Bakrač provided him with a letter of protection that enabled Nemetschek to stay in the country after German capitulation. The Partisan envoy also managed to find him a job in a state-owned construction firm. Nemetschek’s ordeal began in 1948 after the fall of Andrija

Hebrang. He was arrested and interrogated by the Yugoslav secret police that planned to use him as a witness against Hebrang. Nemetschek's family in Austria was informed that he was dead, and he was sentenced to eight years in prison. He was released on parole in 1954 but was not allowed to emigrate. As the authorities wanted to force him into taking Yugoslav citizenship, he escaped to Austria in 1972.

Ott, Hans (8 November 1892, Brühl/Rhein – ?)

A decorated veteran of the First World War, Hans Ott had a degree in mining engineering. His job took him on numerous field trips during the 1930s, including the Dutch Indies and Brazil. As an employee of the "Hansa-Leichtmetall" company, he arrived in Yugoslavia in September 1941. The idea of a direct prisoner exchange between the Supreme HQ and the German authorities in Zagreb originated with him in the aftermath of his capture in Livno in August 1942. A man of undeniable charisma, he soon won the confidence not only of Horstenau and Kasche, but also, to a certain extent, of the Partisans. From then until late 1943, he served as the main German negotiator in the talks with the Partisans. At the same time, he was an agent of the Abwehr and a source of reliable intelligence on the Partisan movement. He returned to Pisarovina in July 1944 as Ambassador Kasche's envoy, and had talks with Andrija Hebrang on various political issues. He was wounded in January 1945 while making a trip to the neutral zone, and remained in hospital for several weeks. Seeing that the war was lost, he tried to curry favor with the victors by supplying them with intelligence on German troop movements and other information of interest. On 9 May 1945 he contacted some Partisan units near Dravograd/Unterdrauburg by using the letter of safe conduct issued to him earlier. He stayed there until 13 July 1945, and was transferred to a prison in Zagreb four days later. The exact date and place of his death are not known; Willibald Nemetschek last saw him in 1948 during the investigation of the Hebrang case. Milovan Đilas wrote in his memoirs that Ott was "hauled back" to Yugoslavia by the secret police, and that he stayed in prison "until his sad end," answering questions about the existence of a German mole in the Supreme HQ during the war.

Pott, Eugen von (17 October 1893 – ?)

Eugen von Pott was a junior Austro-Hungarian officer and a son of Horstenau's fellow officer and friend Emil von Pott. Since 1921, he was a clerk with the Zagreb subsidiary of the "Wiener Bankverein." When the office of the Plenipotentiary-General was established in Zagreb in April 1941, Horstenau brought him on his staff. In his capacity as the chief intelligence officer, von Pott was involved with the negotiations from the very beginning. By late 1943, he was in overall charge of the prisoner exchange. He did not travel much to Pisarovina, preferring to do the work from his office in Zagreb. Von Pott was on good terms with Stilinović, but kept Bakrač at arm's length. He left the city with Horstenau in October 1944 and moved to Linz. In February 1949, the Yugoslav secret police kidnapped him and brought him to Yugoslavia with the intent of using him as a witness against Hebrang. His fate is still unknown.

Stilinović, Marijan (27 November 1904, Sveta Nedelja by Samobor – 6 December 1959, Zadar)

Stilinović joined the Communist Youth in 1920. He spent the years from 1929 to 1932 and from 1933 to 1941 in prison. After he and a large group of Communists had escaped from prison in Sremska Mitrovica in the summer of 1941, he was assigned to the Supreme HQ's Agitprop (agitation and propaganda) section. One year later he was chosen to accompany Ott to Zagreb, to arrange the exchange of the Germans captured at Livno. According to his superiors, "he sometimes lacks the necessary severity [...] he works independently, but hesitates when it comes to making decisions on his own". In other words, Stilinović was not narrow-minded and was flexible enough to be employed as a negotiator. At the same time he could be relied upon not to make commitments without consulting his superiors. Ott commented once that Stilinović knew just enough German so that one could converse with him and, "although a dedicated follower of Tito, he is forthcoming, deals with matters one at a time, and is never too rigid in defending his own point of view." He spent the second half of 1943 in Zagreb, negotiating the prisoner exchange cartel with Horstenau and his staff. Once the agreement was reached, he was transferred to other duties. Like his colleague Hans Ott, Stilinović was a troubleshooter who kept coming back to the negotiating table whenever needed. His war diary is a precious source of information on the first exchange in 1942. His plan to broaden his memoirs to include the contacts from 1943 onwards was thwarted by his premature death in 1959.

Velebit, Vladimir (19 August 1907, Zadar – 29 August 2004, Zagreb)

Vladimir Velebit was an offspring of an esteemed Zagreb military family and a lawyer by profession. In 1939 he was accepted into the Communist Party after having successfully performed a number of clandestine, high-risk missions. In the summer of 1942 he was involved in the exchange proceedings thanks to his knowledge of German, but it soon turned out that he had diplomatic skills as well. In November of the same year he led a Partisan delegation to the inconclusive negotiations in Livno. During the "March Negotiations" he replaced Đilas as the chief Partisan envoy, and helped free his pre-war acquaintance, Tito's wife Herta Haas. From mid-1943 until the end of the war, Velebit served as Tito's liaison officer to various Allied commands, both at home and abroad. Although he did not take part in the negotiations with the German authorities after May 1943, they requested his mediation on at least two occasions in 1944 and 1945. In the early 1950s, he served as the ambassador to Rome and London, and from 1960 to 1967 he worked for the United Nations.

Appendix 3: Selected Photos and Documents



I: The exchange at Studeno Vrelo, 5 September 1942: Vladimir Velebit is on the right.



II: Hans Ott (facing the camera) with the Partisans, Studeno vrelo, 5 September 1942.



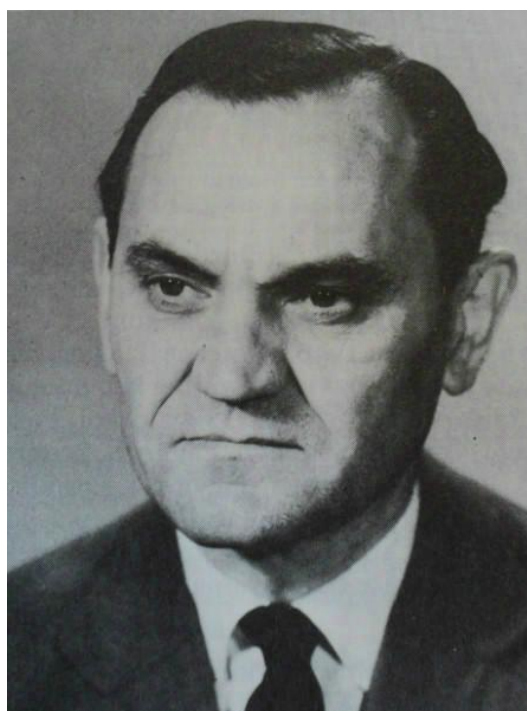
III: The exchange at Studeno Vrelo, 5 September 1942.



IV: The exchange at Studeno Vrelo, 5 September 1942.



V: Herta Haas (second from the left; photo taken in the months following her exchange)



VI: Boris Bakrač (post-war photo)



VII, VIII: General von Dewitz (above) and Colonel von Eberlein (below).





IX: Captured Partisans



X: Captured Germans

IZJAVLJENA DRŽAVA HRVATSKA
MINISTARSTVO UNUTRAŠNJIH POSLOVA
Tajništvo ministara

V.T.Broj: 899 -I-A- 1942.

U Zagrebu, dne 14. listopada 1942.

Predmet: Izvješće kot. upravitelja Marka Šakića o pregovorima između Nijemaca i partizana.

509 -3, 14.10.1943

MARKO ŠAKIĆ, upravitelj kotarske oblasti u Livnu javlja u predmetu ovo:

"Kako je poznato bio sam prilikom napada partizana na Livno od istih zarobljen, te sam se u robstvu nalazio od 7 kolovoza do 5 rujna o.g. zajedno samom u robstvu su se nalazili i nekoliko Nijemaca činovnika i radnika firme Hansa-Reichtmetall iz Livna. O našoj zamjeni vodili su se pregovori-putem hrvatskih vlasti, a za zamjenu Nijemaca, putem kapetana gosp. Heissa iz Mostara. Kao kurir Nijemaca iz Livna funkcionirao je g. Ott, direktor gore pomenute firme iz Livna, koji je tri puta iz Livna išao u Mostar, a dapače i u Zagreb. Kada je g. Ott treći put došao na pregovore o zamjeni, poslao je sa njime i partizana Marijana Sunjevarića u partizanskoj uniformi sa crvenom petokrakom zvijezdom na kapi i pod oružjem. Sunjevarić je prema mome saznanju sa g. Ottom i sa kapetana Heissom išao iz Mostara samovozom do Sarajeva, a iz Sarajeva krilašom u Zagreb. Sunjevarić je navodno imao od partizana odriješene ruke u svrhu prigovora sa Njemcima, i nakon šest do sedam dana se je povratio u Livno sa utvrđenim datumom razmjene i sa iskazom lica koja će se za zarobljene Nijemce zamijeniti.

Kako je moja rana u posljednje dane robstva sa bila pogoršala, jer je bila nastupila flegmona /trovanje/, to su me partizani prebacili iz zatvora u Glamoč, gdje sam se do tada nalazio u bolnici u Livnu i tu sam se nalazio zadnjih šest dana pred razmjenu. U bolnici sa ležao zajedno sa ostalim ranjenim partizanima te sam i pored toga što je kod mene bila neprekidno straža, imao prilike, da razgovaram sa mnogim ranjenim partizanima, pa i njihovim vodećim ličnostima koje su dolazile da ranjenike obilaze. Po povratku g. Otta i Marijana Sunjevarića iz Zagreba, partizani jednoglasno svi su govorili o tome, kako je njihov "drug" išao u uniformi i pod njihovim znacima u Zagreb i da je u Njemačkoj posvetu u Zagrebu pregovarao sa jednim Njemačkim generalom, koji je u svrhu tih pregovora doletio krilašom iz Njemačke. Pregovori o zamjeni zarobljenih Nijemaca, da su poslužili samo kao maske drugim pregovorima. U tim pregovorima koje je Sunjevarić vodio navodno sa Njemačkim generalom, Nijemci su partizanima nudili jednu teritoriju, da se oni kao "najjača" vojna snaga Balkana primire, da će ih Nijemci tolerirati i na toj teritoriji, da će partizani biti suvereni. Nijemci su navodno jedino tražili, da im partizani dozvole, da izvoze sa Njemačku rude i ostale zemaljske proizvode. Sunjevarić navodno je ovaj njemački prijedlog donio u Livno tako da predno Vrhovnom Štabu koji se nalazi negdje oko Glamoča i Livna dok za odgovor Vrhovnog Štaba je navodno ustanovljen, ali ga nisam mogao saznati. Kao kurir u ovim pregovorima će i dalje služiti pomenuti Ott, ako je za njega zamjena već izvršena. Da će g. Ott služiti kao kurir, rekao mi je član Vrhovnog Štaba, Dr. Vlado Petrović, navodno bivši advokat iz Zagreba, kada sam ga molio, da mi se pronadje i povrati po partizana mi oduzeti sat, koji mi je porodična uspomena. Tom prilikom mi je pomeo Petrović rekao: "Nastojati ću, da se sat pronadje u koliko se pronadje poslati ću Vam ga po g. Ottu, koji će još kod nas dolaziti kao kurir.

Na ove verzije koje su kolale među partizanima, izjavili su mi skoro svi partizani jednodušno, da oni ne mogu pristati predložiti Nijemaca jer je njihov cilj, da sa cijelog po rušja bivše Jugoslavije protjeraju okupatora, a oni neće, da se stave u po

XI: First page of the report of the county commissioner of Livno, Marko Šakić, about the German-Partisan negotiations in the summer of 1942 (AMBiH).

Entwurf

26/28-2
82

Der Deutsche Bevollmächtigte General in Kroatien für alle deutschen Wehrmachtsteile sowie Einheiten der Waffen // und der // -Hilfspolizei auf dem Gebiete des Unabhängigen Staates Kroatien und der Bevollmächtigte des Oberstabes der " Narodno-oslobodilačke Vojске i Partizanskih Odreda " in folgenden kurz " ONOVPO " genannt auf dem Territorium des ehemaligen Jugoslawien gehen folgende Verpflichtung ein:

- 1.) Sämtliche gefangenen Kämpfer beider Vertragspartner werden als Kriegsgefangene behandelt und sind nach Gefangennahme in ein eingerichtetes Gefangenenlager zu transportieren. Mit den Gefangenen ist menschlich zu verfahren und umzugehen. Die Gefangenen die nicht in Offiziersrang stehen können zu Arbeiten herangezogen werden, während Offiziere sowie Offizieren oder Beamten gleichgestellte Gefangene davon ausgenommen sind. Sämtliche Privatgegenstände der Gefangenen (Ausweise, Schmuck, Geld usw.) sind aufzubewahren und den Gefangenen gelegentlich ihrer Entlassung aus dem Lager wieder zurückzugeben.
- 2.) Verwundete der deutschen Wehrmachtsteile werden von dem ONOVPO, soweit sie ärztlicher Hilfe bedürfen, sofort den nächsten deutschen Kriegslazarett oder Truppenarzt gegen Bescheinigung übergeben. Die bei deutschen Wehrmachtsteilen gemachten verwundeten Gefangenen verbleiben bis zu ihrer Genesung in einem deutschen Lazarett.
- 3.) Tote von deutschen Wehrmachtsteilen, werden in Reihengrab einzeln nebeneinander beerdigt, so dass evtl. Umbettungen jederzeit vorgenommen werden können. Die Erkennungsmarken, sowie Wertgegenstände werden den Toten abgenommen und einzeln aufbewahrt. Die Aufzeichnungen über Lage und Inhalt der Gräber, sowie die Aufzeichnungen über die abgenommenen Wertgegenstände werden der nächsten deutschen Truppe auf schnellstem Wege übergeben. In gleicher Weise wird mit Gefallenen oder in Gefangenschaft verstorbenen Angehörigen des ONOVPO verfahren.
- 4.) Das oben erwähnte Verfahren bezieht sich auch auf alle Angehörigen des deutschen Wehrmachtgefolges sowie auf ähnliche Einheiten des ONOVPO (OP, Arbeitsbtl. u.ä.) soweit sie als solche ausdrücklich gekennzeichnet sind.

XII: First page of the draft of the prisoner exchange agreement, late 1943 (HDA).

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6.) Der Austausch erfolgt 1:1, d.h. die in deutscher Hand befindlichen Angehörigen des ONOVPO werden jeweils gegen einen deutschen Gefangenen ausgetauscht. Die Parteien sind sich darüber einig, dass in der Frage des Austausches möglichst freiwillig gehandelt wird, wobei die Rückgabe der Gefangenen möglichst auf dem kürzesten Wege gegen Empfangsbcheinigung erfolgen soll und der Zentralstelle, das ist für deutsche Wehrmachtsteile der Deutsche Bevollmächtigte General in Kroatien und für das ONOVPO einer noch von diesen zu bestimmenden Person mitgeteilt werden.

6.) Von diesen Vereinbarungen sind ausgenommen:

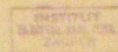
- a) Überläufer der deutschen Wehrmacht, gegen welche bei Gefangennahme in Sinne der bestehenden deutschen Kriegsgesetze vorgegangen wird.
- b) Angehörige des ONOVPO die in Uniform der deutschen oder einer verbündeten Wehrmacht auftreten, ohne dass die Hoheitsabzeichen und Rangabzeichen entfernt und durch die bei den Angehörigen des ONOVPO üblichen Abzeichen ersetzt wurden.

7.) In Sinne dieser Vereinbarung, welche mit Unterzeichnung in Kraft tritt soll nach Möglichkeit sofort auf dem Territorium des unabhängigen Staates Kroatien verfahren werden. Die Vereinbarung soll möglichst auch auf andere Teile des SO-Raumes, insbesondere auf die Gebiete des Goltes Adria und auf das serbische Gebiet ausgedehnt werden.

покупка, поступит до по необходимости - обмен на подручные М.В.В.

XIII: Second page of the draft of the prisoner exchange agreement, late 1943 (HDA).

Š T A B
V. Pom. Obal. Sektora
Pov. br. 121
24. augusta 1944



Rezmjena zarobljenika

ŠTABU MORNARICE NOVJ

U vezi tam. dep. traženja br. 55 od 24/8 izveštava se:
Noću 20/21 o.m. njemačka patrola u nepoznatoj jašini prebacila se čamci
ma na o. Vrtnik Vrnik, gdje su se te noći nalazili drug Eldan, obavešta
jac V. POS-a, 2 njemačka vojnika, koji su se 20 u veče prebegli i 6 te
renskih radnika.

Na traženje druga Marina Bonasere, sekretara O.K. Dubrovnik i Ko
mandanta Grupe J.D. Odreda stavilo se na raspoloženje jedan motorni le
ut sa posadom od dvojice drugova, od njih jedan je bio već na pregova
ranju u Veloj Luci. Kao treći bio je poslat jedan delegat O.K. Dubrovnik
sa pismom na Komandanta 750 puka u Korčuli.

Noću 19/20 bilo je zarobljeno na Pelješcu od pelješkog odreda
12 njem. mornara od posade broda Benvenuto Cellini i E 48.

U pismu je bilo ponudjeno da smo mi spremni na pregovaranje, te
da bi došlo u obzir razmjena.

23. o.m. upućen je motorni leut, koji se je vratio 24. u 18 časova.

Kako nam nije tačno poznat rezultat, jer nama nije još donjeto
pismo, kojeg je zadržao drug Marin, koji će večeras doći u ovaj Štab, ja
više se podrobnije sutra.

Danas je dobio ovaj Štab depešu sa Korčule u kojoj se javlja da
su svi koji su bili zarobljeni pobjegli djelomice prilikom sprovađanja
djelomice iz zatvora u Korčuli.

Smrt fašizmu-Sloboda narodu

Politkomesar:
Ostojić s.r.

Komandant: major
Ikica s.r.

P.S. U prilogu se dostavlja prepis akta njemačke komande u Korču
li. Mot. leut se vratio danas 24. o.m. iz Korčule. U obzir za izmenu ušla bi
i posada SLOGE. Detaljna obavještenja dati će vam Komandant Štaba Grupe
J.D.O.

Tačnost prepisa ovjerava
Sekretar, poručnik:



XIV: Letter in which the 5th Naval Sector informs the NOVJ's Navy HQ about the preliminary contacts with the German garrison at Korčula regarding the exchange of some captured Partisans, 24 August 1944 (HDA).

O.Ü., den 27. Oktober 1944

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An

Kommando des Mosl. Gebietskommandos

X. Agramer-Korps

=====

Mit dem Austausch der dort gefangengehaltenen 23 Domobranen und 1 Domobranen-Offizier am 28.10.1944 um 12.00 Uhr mitteleurop. Zeit bei der Mühle im Dorf katoličko Selište erklärt sich die deutsche Kommandantur in Popovača einverstanden. Der deutsche Offizier, der im Besitze eines entsprechenden Vollmachtsschreibens ist, ist berechtigt den Empfang der 23 Domobranen und 1 Domobranen-Offizier zu bescheinigen. In seiner Begleitung befinden sich 6 Bewachungsmannschaften, die eine weiße Fahne tragen.

Da alle gefangenen Partisanen an den Dtsch. Bevollm. General in Agram weitergeleitet werden, hier also keine Austauschgefangenen zur Verfügung stehen, wird die entsprechende Anzahl gefangener Partisanen von einem Beauftragten des Dtsch. Bevollm. General in Pisarovina übergeben.

Wenn das Kommando des Mosl. Gebietskommandos damit einverstanden ist, ist die deutsche Kommandantur in Popovača sofort zu benachrichtigen.

Die deutsche Kommandantur erklärt, daß sie sich streng an die vorgeschlagenen Abmachungen hält und wird an diesem Tage im Bereich Mala Ludina, Gornja Vlahinička und Gornja Jelenska keine Unternehmungen machen, und den Fluß Česma nicht überschreiten.

Unter den gleichen Bedingungen kann auch der Austausch, der im Lazarett in Podgarič verwundeten Deutschen durchgeführt werden, Zeit und Ort des Austausches ist von dort bekanntzugeben.

Deutsche Kommandantur Popovača



Major.

Ul.

XV: Letter of the German command in Popovača to the Moslavina Partisan Detachment over a local prisoner exchange, 27 October 1944 (HDA).

Z A G R E B 26.III.6 29.III.1945.

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26.III. stigao sam u Zagreb i toga dana nisam obavio ništa osim što sam bio kod familije Velebit i tamo uređio da će ovaj puta ići sa mnom.

27.III. vodili su se razgovori o razmjeni /konkretno o dva vel. čupana- tu još nismo došli do sporazuma- oni nude 12, a mi tražimo 18 drugova/

Istoga dana popodne razgovarao sam sa Stefanyem. Naglasio je da razumije što mi oklijevamo sa sastankom predloženim sa njihove strane, između gen. Velebita i nekoga od Weichsovog štaba, jer situacija se na zapadnom i istočnom bojištu neprestano pogoršava za Njemce, ali on nas uvjerava da tamošnja situacija ne utječe niti koliko na ovdašnju. Traže svakako da Velebit dodje, svezjedno im je dali u Pisarovinu ili u Zagreb. Traže neka mi stavimo predloge, koja područja bi htjeli da oni u prvom redu napuste itd. Rekao mi je sam da Weichs odilazi, naime da već sele, tako da Löhr ostaje sam ovdje, a to da je ~~maxim~~ povoljno za nas, jer Weichs je dobar poznavao naše zemlje, velik prijatelj Kravta itd. Ovih dana bio je Weichsov štab bombardiran u nekom dvorcu u St. Gradišci i sam Weichs je skoro nastradao- koliko bi to bila velika šteta da mu se ~~što~~ što dogodilo? On se nada da mi njihovu želju za jednim sporazumom svakako uzimamo ozbiljno, jer inače to sve skupa nema smisla. U glavnom nije apsolutno ništa novog rekao.

Pol sata prije toga razgovarao sam sa Ottom, koji me "molio" da ne kažem otvoreno Stefanyu da od tih pregovora neće biti ništa, i neka ne prekidamo sasvim svaki kontakt sa njima. Izgleda da me je stari pokušao provocirati, no ja sam ustrajao pri svojem da za sada doduše nemam nikakvog odgovora odozgo, ali da se nadam da će naši svakako uzeti u pretres njihov predlog.

Obojica su ponovno zamolili da svakako nastojim da Velebit dodje na jedan razgovor u Pisarovinu: oni su čak sada prebacili i njegovu familiju u par tizane, pa bi im ob valjda mogao toliko izići u susret i doći na taj sastanak. Dogovorili smo se, da ću im na slijedećem sastanku 11. IV. dati konačno odgovor.

28.III. dostavili su mi Njemci predlog o promjeni neutralne zone. Kao razloge navodjaju: povrede sa naše strane: prolaz naših trupa kroz Pisarovinu, dovlačenje pojačanja iz Pisarovine, držanje teškog pružja i pucanje iz zone Pisarovine, uskladištenje ratnog materijala i živežnih namirnica itd. Traže ni više ni manje nego da se neutralna zona prebaci u Lasinju ili neko drugo mjesto s ove strane Kupe. Odgovorio sam im da gore navedeni razlozi ne odgovaraju istini, da su u Pisarovini samo civilne ustanove i konačno da je Pisarovina naš oslobođeni teritorij, na kojem smo mi na našu štetu odustali od toga da držimo vojsku. Mi bi mogli samo tražiti da se neutralna zohaprobaci naprijed spram Zagreba a nikako još dublje u naš oslobođeni teritorij.

Razgovarao sam o tome sa štabom 34. divizije. Oni smatraju da bi se neutralna zona mogla prebaciti u Starjak/ desetak km sjeverno od Pisarovine/ jer da bi mi mogli braniti Pisarovinu. Moje lično mišljenje je da bi Pisarovina trebala i dalje da ostane neutralna zona: tu su sve moguće civilne uprave, razni kursevi, magazini, važno čvorište za prebacivanje trupa i materijala iz Slovenije na Kordun i obrnuto- mi snaga nemamo da Pisarovinu zadržimo, a ako nam tamo zasjedne banda, gubimo jedan od najbogatijih pokupskih kotareva.

Prilažem njihov pismeni prijedlog u originalu. Trebao bi do 11. IV. svakako odgovoromakati samo u grubim crtama.

Forsiraju svakako predaju generala Devitza i majera Woltera: mislim da ih ipak predamo jer ja već ne znam kako ću izdržati u Zagrebu, koliko me gnjava a zatežu na račun toga i sa ostalim razmjenama.

6 Ako ne mogu do 11. IV. dobiti odgovor ni na jedne od tih pitanja, molim a da mi se svakako barem javi, kada da uredim slijedeći sastanak s njima- tj. kad bi im mogao nešto odgovoriti.

Najvažnije: Hoće ili i kada će Velebit doći, šta je sa Pisarovinom i da se predaju Dewitz i Wolter.

S.F.-S.N.

Boris

P.S. Familija Velebit-baka i majka/ otac je umro/ stigla je ovamo. Vera Radimica koja je mijenjana 1.III. redjakinja je, a ne zaručnica Velebitova. Nalazi se također u Topuskom.

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