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## Wartime in Yugoslavia

WARTIME. By *Milovan Djilas*. Translated by *Michael B. Petrovich*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. x, 470 pp. Plates. \$14.95.

The controversy surrounding Yugoslavia's involvement in World War II has produced an extraordinary amount of literature on the period 1941–45. Yugoslav resistance to the invaders was unique not only because it was fiercer than in other occupied countries but also because it was accompanied by a brutal civil war between the two principal resistance factions, the Tito-Partisans and the Mihailović-Chetniks. This conflict has continued into the postwar literature. Supporters of Tito have given a version of the facts which is often completely at variance with pro-Mihailović accounts. It is enough to compare Konstantin Fotić's *The War We Lost* (1948) with Vladimir Dedijer's *Josip Broz Tito* (1953), or Živan Knežević's *Why the Allies Abandoned the Yugoslav Army of General Mihailović* (1945) with Dušan Plenča's *Međunarodni odnosi Jugoslavije u toku drugog svjetskog rata* (1962).

Until fairly recently, even British and American literature emanated almost exclusively from protagonists of one side or the other. One can hardly tell that David Martin's *Ally Betrayed* (1946) and Phyllis Auty's *Tito* (1970) relate to the same war—so opposite are their conclusions. The same is largely true for books written by those who participated in Yugoslav events during the war either as American OSS or British SOE officers—for example, Stephen Clissold's *Whirlwind* (1949) or Louis Huot's *Guns for Tito* (1945). Into this category fall other authors who were liaison officers with Mihailović: Jasper Rootham (*Miss Fire*, 1946), Albert Seitz (*Mihailović, Hoax or Hero*, 1953); and with Tito: Basil Davidson (*Partisan Picture*, 1946), F. W. Deakin (*The Embattled Mountain*, 1971), Fitzroy Maclean (*Disputed Barricade*, 1957), Charles Thayer (*Hands Across the Caviar*, 1953). While invaluable as witnesses to historical events, these officers tended to see only one side of a cruel conflict and to identify with it.

Today scholars are no longer dependent upon personal reminiscences but can draw on archival material—British, American, German, Italian, and Yugoslav—and a more complex picture has begun to emerge than was apparent in either Partisan or Chetnik propaganda. Regrettably, two sets of files are still inaccessible: the OSS and SOE archives which, if opened, could illuminate the whole story. There is no doubt that these files, particularly those of the SOE, would put the British-Mihailović relationship in a new light and reveal some of the curious factors which contributed to the final rift in which the United States reluctantly joined.

Recent works which draw upon newly opened archives are *British Policy towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece*, edited by Phyllis Auty and Richard Clogg (1975), Elisabeth Barker's *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War* (1976), Matteo Milazzo's *The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance* (1975), and Jozo Tomasevich's *The Chetniks* (1975). This reviewer's *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies, 1941–1945* (1973) also drew heavily on archival sources.

The wartime memoirs of Milovan Djilas are of special importance because they come from a man who, while once prominent as a participant on one side of the conflict, is no longer a blind protagonist of that side. Djilas sheds additional light on controversial points which have divided the two camps for over thirty years. Let us pinpoint the most important of these areas of dispute:

*When did the Partisans begin the resistance against the Axis invaders?* The Partisans have consistently maintained that their resistance began immediately after the Axis attack on Yugoslavia (April 6, 1941). The adherents of Mihailović have replied: Not so, the Partisans began fighting the invaders only after Nazi Germany attacked the USSR (June 22, 1941). Djilas makes clear where the truth lies:

However, not even in the declaration of the Central Committee, which Tito wrote on the very day of the German attack on the U.S.S.R., was there an explicit call to arms, but only a summons to make ready for a struggle . . . we waited for Moscow's directive, and for once Moscow did not delay. . . . The attack on the U.S.S.R. . . . would have led them [the Communists—ed.] to take arms even without the Moscow directives (pp. 4 ff.).

*What was the nature of the resistance movements?* There is little doubt that the Mihailović-Chetniks started their resistance against the Axis invaders as early as May 1941, and we now have it confirmed by Djilas that the Tito-Partisans did not rise against the invaders until July 1941. The relative extent of the two movements is a matter of debate, although it is fairly well established that the Partisan resistance was, from the very beginning, fiercer than that of the Chetniks. Indeed, the very word resistance has a somewhat passive connotation and was more applicable to the Chetniks, whose aim was the return of the old order, than to the Partisans, whose initial objective was to alleviate German pressure on the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the Partisans immediately took the offensive and it is no surprise that early attempts at reconciling the two movements, through Tito-Mihailović meetings in the autumn of 1941, failed. Djilas writes:

Roughly speaking, Serbia was divided into three groups. The first was for local collaboration with the occupation forces. Its most influential representative was the fascist Dimitrije Ljotić. The former royal minister of war, General Milan Nedić, had placed himself at its head by becoming premier at the outbreak of armed conflict. A second group was for awaiting "favorable" conditions for an armed struggle. At its head was Colonel Draža Mihailović. The core of this group were royal officers who had fled to the forests; they were surrounded by many adherents of the old order. The third group was for an unconditional armed struggle against the occupation forces and the gradual creation of a new political and social order. This group was led by the Communists (pp. 95 ff.).

Djilas confirms that the original Partisan aims underwent a certain evolution. Within the war against the occupier, a "revolution" was taking place. Yet, he says:

if we employed the term "revolution," the reactionaries and profascists would depict the armed struggle against the occupation as the Communists' struggle for their own and Soviet power. Thus it was tactically more opportune—all the more so since the Comintern and the Soviet leadership so believed—not to flaunt revolutionary phrases. The term "National Liberation Struggle" was more attractive and accurate (p. 95).

Thus, in late 1941, there were two resistance movements in Yugoslavia with diametrically opposed long-range goals—one for the return of the old order and the

other for the establishment of a new order. No wonder that the two movements were soon at each other's throats. "The Civil War within a War" is the heading of Djilas's second chapter. In that civil war, the Partisans were not only the more aggressive but also the more dynamic; accordingly, the Chetniks soon found themselves on the defensive, as it were, on two fronts. This unexpected situation resulted in difficult decisions for many Chetniks. Some allowed themselves to drift into collaboration, others into accommodations first with the Italians and later even with the Germans. The problem with Djilas is that he often tends to lump every Serbian enemy of the Partisans—collaborationists, accommodationists, and Mihailovićites—into the single category of Chetniks, which he still largely equates with traitors. This is a gross oversimplification, since there were clearly many upstanding Chetniks who neither collaborated nor made accommodations with the enemy. There is incontrovertible proof that throughout the war Mihailović regarded himself as anti-Axis and absolutely loyal to the Allies. Witness his military actions against the occupier, observed and reported by Allied liaison officers and recorded in Allied archives; the anti-Mihailović actions by the Germans which continued into 1944 and which are recorded in the German archives; the rescue of American airmen who bailed out in Mihailović-held territory and were evacuated with the help of Mihailović and his supporters; and Mihailović's desperate attempts to get in touch with the Allied commander in chief in the Mediterranean after the Allies (based on one-sided and often distorted information) had broken off all relations with him.

*Who had contacts with the enemy?* It has been a Partisan contention that only the Chetniks had contact with the enemy. Djilas confirms that the Partisans did also. As early as 1942, for example, the Italian command provided supplies to the Partisans in Montenegro—ostensibly for Italian prisoners of war. On page 154, Djilas states:

at a fixed hour once a week Sava's [Kovačević's—ed.] couriers, properly dressed and armed, took their horses and mules to Nikšić to get rations. The rations were then distributed, half to the prisoners and half to Sava's staff and hospital.

The utter brutality of the war is demonstrated by Djilas's later reference to the fate of these Italian prisoners of war: "I asked him about the Italian prisoners, half of whose rations we had kept for our staff. . . . He said they had been executed" (p. 82).

More important, Djilas confirms that the Partisans negotiated with the Germans in the spring of 1943 and gives details not published before. Prisoner exchanges between Germans and Partisans already had occurred in the summer of 1942. Djilas writes:

As for the Germans captured at Livno, it was taken for granted that they would be shot. However, in the course of their interrogation the idea came up that . . . we could offer them in exchange for our captured comrades . . . . The German command agreed to an exchange (pp. 198 ff.).

And later:

Some dozen Germans were captured . . . . The idea came up in a conversation involving Velebit, Ranković, Tito, and myself that a letter be sent to the Germans . . . offering the captured Germans in exchange for our arrested comrades. . . . It was Tito who developed the idea . . . that we send a letter to the Germans . . . proposing, in addition to an exchange of prisoners, that the wounded and prisoners be treated according to international conventions, and demanding specifically that the Germans recognize us as a "belligerent force" . . . we received an answer from the Germans . . . March 9, 1943 . . . Tito . . . proposed that I be appointed to the delegation as a member of the Politburo (pp. 229 ff.).

Djilas then reveals the tactics to be followed in the negotiations:

we had to offer them something convincing . . . we were to name Sandžak as the future Partisan territory, and the *Četniks* as our main enemy [italics supplied—ed.]. . . . There was not a word about the cessation of fighting between the Germans and ourselves, but this too was understood. I would not make public the essence of these negotiations if they had not already been made widely known abroad [foot-note: In greatest details in Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies*, pp. 106–112] . . . I assumed a common name—one borne by a Montenegrin hero of long ago: Miloš Marković. I was too prominent a figure to reveal myself, and too tempting a prisoner for the Gestapo in case the Germans renege on their bargain. Later, when Velebit and I went to Zagreb to negotiate . . . my pseudonym remained unidentified until the publication of Roberts' book (pp. 230 ff.).

As to the Zagreb negotiations, Djilas says that progress was made "toward a truce: the Germans indicated that they would cease operations as soon as we stopped our raids on the railroad line in Slavonia." And Djilas adds:

But no agreement was ever signed nor was there talk of our getting any weapons or help from the Germans. . . . Neither I nor the other Central Committee members had any pangs of conscience that by negotiating with the Germans we might have betrayed the Soviets, internationalism or our ultimate aims. Military necessity compelled us (pp. 242 ff.).

Djilas thus confirms that the war against the internal enemy was, at least in the spring of 1943, more on the minds of the Partisan leaders than the war against the occupier.

Djilas's book is revealing in many other respects. It gives us an intimate portrait of leading Partisan personalities, including, of course, Tito, about whom Djilas provides not only political details but also human touches. In the light of revelations about problems in Tito's relationship with his second wife Jovanka, the story of his wartime affair with Zdenka (Davorjanka Paunović) makes interesting reading. Yet his loyalty to Herta Has, his common-law wife from before the war, was such that he instructed Vladimir Velebit to make certain that she, a prisoner of the Germans or Croats, would be included in any prisoner exchange. (Tito's first wife was a Russian, Pelageia [Pol'ka] Belousova, whom he married in 1920 while in the USSR.)

Djilas describes the senseless brutality of the war—the hundreds of thousands of deaths and executions attributable more to the internal than to the external conflict. He lets us feel the atmosphere of terror created by the Partisans after capturing Belgrade in 1944, and provides a revealing insight into the feelings of the Partisan leaders vis-à-vis the British, Americans, and Soviets. In particular, Tito's relationship with the Soviets and Stalin is graphically described, including Djilas's own complaints about the behavior of Soviet troops during their stay in Yugoslavia in 1944–45.

Living in Belgrade under Tito's rule today, even the courageous Djilas may have had to exercise a certain caution in dissecting the Partisan myth. Nevertheless, future research into any aspect of the Partisan role in Yugoslavia during the period will be enormously aided by Milovan Djilas's *Wartime*.