

# THE GREAT SERBIAN THREAT, ZAVNOBIH AND MUSLIM BOSNIAK ENTRY INTO THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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## **Abstract**

From the start of the uprising in summer 1941, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia conceived of the People's Liberation Struggle in Bosnia-Herzegovina as a specifically Bosnian-Herzegovinian liberation struggle, waged under Bosnian-patriotic slogans. Nevertheless, the status of Bosnia-Herzegovina within the future Yugoslav state was not definitely resolved until November 1943. This period – autumn 1943 – witnessed the mass influx of Muslim Bosniaks into the People's Liberation Movement, definitely transforming it from a movement that was overwhelmingly ethnic-Serb in composition into one that had a large Muslim Bosniak component as well. A decisive catalyst for the mass entry of Muslim Bosniaks in East Bosnia into the NOP was the fear among them that Hitler would cede East Bosnia to Nedić's Serbia, thereby establishing a Great Serbia in which the Muslim Bosniaks would be subjected to genocide. The KPJ, by championing Bosnian-Herzegovinian self-determination, was able to win over a large part of the Muslim Bosniak population that feared the Great Serbian threat. This paper will look at the relationship between the Great Serbian threat and the influx of Muslim Bosniaks into the NOP during 1943.

## **Chetnik deprivations in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

The year 1943 marked the turning-point for the NOP in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Italian collaboration with the Chetniks and the triumphalist Chetnik genocidal assault on the Bosnian Muslim and Croat population increasingly discredited the NDH and the Ustashas as the latter's protectors, revealing them to be powerless. The commander of German troops in the NDH estimated in March 1943 that only 2% of the NDH's population supported the regime, and that

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the regime's unpopularity made pacification of the rebellion impossible (AI 1979, doc. 38: 172). The flagship project of the Muslim autonomist resistance – the 13<sup>th</sup> SS Division “Handschar” – far from establishing a military force to protect the Muslims, threatened to remove their combat-age males from Bosnian soil and to leave their homes undefended from the Chetniks. Finally, with the Italian collapse in the summer and autumn of 1943, the Germans increasingly abandoned their hostility to the Chetniks and closed ranks with the latter on an anti-Partisan basis. Meanwhile, the NOP increased its activity among the Muslim and Croat population and, particularly, among the quisling forces, its agitation on the basis of Bosnian and Croatian liberation and self-determination. In this context, the Muslim population of parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina – including several prominent Muslim notables – and to a lesser extent the Croat population, increasingly began to go over to the NOP as the only possible saviour.

The Chetnik supreme commander Draža Mihailović, with his movement apparently at the height of its success against the Partisans, informed his Chetnik corps on 2 January 1943 of his plan to destroy the Partisan forces in the Bihać Republic in order to “liberate this Serb territory from Communist terror” (AI 1983, doc. 1: 8). Mihailović's “March on Bosnia” involved, in addition to a campaign against the Partisans, a genocidal assault on the Muslim population of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Sanjak. Although Mihailović ordered his subordinates in this period to win the support of Muslims and Croats, this represented merely a tactical manoeuvre that did not change the fundamentally anti-Muslim character of the Chetnik movement. Thus, in March, Mihailović listed as one of his successes: “In the Sanjak we have liquidated all Muslims in the villages except those in the small towns” (Mihailović 1998: 335). Pavle Đurišić, commander of the Lim-Sanjak Chetnik Detachment, reported to Mihailović on 13 February the results of the Chetnik actions in the Plevlja, Foča and Čajniče districts: “All Muslim villages in the three mentioned districts were totally burned so that not a single home remained in one piece. All property was destroyed except cattle, corn and senna.” Furthermore: “During the operation the total destruction of the Muslim inhabitants was carried out regardless of sex and age.” In this operation “our total losses were 22 dead, of which 2 through accidents, and 32 wounded. Among the Muslims, around 1,200 fighters and up to 8,000 other victims: women, old people and children.” The remaining Muslim population fled, and Đurišić reported that action had been taken to prevent its return (AI 1983, doc. 34: 182-185). These losses inflicted on the Muslims were in addition to the approximately one thousand women and children massacred by Đurišić's forces in the same area in

early January (Tomasevich 2002: 258). In March, according to a UNS report, the Chetniks massacred about five hundred Muslims in the Goražde district, “mostly children, women and old people”, and raped many women. In the village of Močevići, they built a lavatory out of Muslim corpses and wrote on the entrance “Muslim mosque” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 927).

Like Ustasha policy toward the Serbs, Chetnik policy toward the Muslims vacillated between violent aggression and attempts to gain their collaboration, so that the massive atrocities of Đurišić and others went hand in hand with the utilisation of Ismet Popovac’s Muslim Chetniks to pacify the Muslim population. In some areas, Chetnik commanders appealed to the Muslims on the basis of the Serbs’ and Muslims’ shared history of coexistence, much as the Partisans did (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 2, doc 367; box 3, doc. 640; box 5, doc. 1583). Yet such assurances could only ring hollow given their irregularity and evident insincerity. In this period, the Chetniks of the Bosanska Gradiška region announced that “Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Poles and Czechs may join us” but that “there is no place for Muslims among us” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 746). The issue of the Bosnian Chetnik newspaper *Vidovdan* that appeared on 1 March appealed to “honourable Muslims” to join the Chetnik struggle, but informed them that “you were Serbs, you have shown this and you will remain so”, and described Bosnia as a “Serb land” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 800). A second issue of *Vidovdan* appearing a few days later warned that “the Muslims must forever abandon the idea of an autonomist arrangement of the future state. Yugoslavia will be arranged on the basis of the South Slav tribes. The Muslims do not comprise a distinct tribe. An autonomist arrangement for the state is alien to the Serbian tradition and state idea.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 859). Thus, the Chetnik appeals to the Muslims, unlike Partisan appeals, did not involve any respect for Muslim or Bosnian individuality or autonomy. Combined with the frequent news of Chetnik atrocities this ensured that the Chetniks would have very limited success in winning Muslim support.

In the course of the Chetnik operations of this period, a document was circulated among the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, several versions of which fell into the hands of the UNS (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 781; box 4, docs 1358, 1384 + 1385; box 5, doc. 1500). The document, which was dated 20 December 1941, carried Draža Mihailović’s signature and claimed that the Chetnik goal was “the establishment of a Great Yugoslavia and within it a Great Serbia, ethnically clean within the borders of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Srem, Banat and Bačka”, and “the establishment of a direct border between Serbia and Montenegro as well as Serbia

and Slovenia, through cleansing the Sanjak of its Muslim inhabitants and Bosnia of its Muslim and Croat inhabitants.” (Dedijer and Miletić 1990: 26). Although this order may not really have originated with Mihailović and although his signature on it may have been a forgery, it is unclear whether it was a forgery originating with local Chetnik commanders seeking justification for a radical anti-Muslim policy or – more likely – with the Ustasha authorities themselves, seeking to discredit the Chetniks in Muslim eyes. Either way, the circulation of such a document can only have increased Muslim disquiet.

Italian support for the Chetniks meant that the NDH military was often wholly unable to offer the Muslim and Croat population any protection. According to the report of the Command of the 6<sup>th</sup> Gendarmerie Regiment of 13 February 1943: “The Italian military forces are arranged across the territory of our regiment – our population does not receive from them any kind of protection, on the contrary: in the course of the anti-Communist operations on the terrain they kill, imprison, plunder and destroy in the most cases those citizens who are honourable Croats and not Communist-Partisan sympathisers... The Chetnik forces are well organised and numerous and when in Eastern Herzegovina our authority is very weakly felt; the majority of our Catholic and Muslim inhabitants have fled, insofar as they were not exterminated.” (HDA Collection Oružničke pukovnije NDH, box 5, doc. 590). The evident impotence of the NDH’s political and military forces in the face of these atrocities discredited them in the eyes of the Herzegovinian Muslims and Croats. The Command of the 6<sup>th</sup> Gendarmerie Regiment reported at the end of March: “The suffering is great and among the mass of the people has provoked a great revolt and hostility toward the state authorities that are not in a position to hinder and prevent these misdeeds.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 4, doc. 1055). So contemptuous were the Italians and Chetniks toward the local non-Serb population that, according to one UNS report, they were readier to bombard Croat- and Muslim-inhabited areas than Serb areas held by the Partisans (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 4, doc. 1059).

Mostar acted as a hub of Chetnik activity, through which Chetnik forces regularly passed at the will of their commanders and the Italians, plundering the inhabitants en route (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, docs 860, 881 + 944). The Chetnik administration for eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina was also based in Mostar, with Petar Bačović as military commander and Dobrosav Jevđević as chief political representative of the movement (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 5, doc. 1436). The city had its own Chetnik police force, whose repression was directed against the civilian population, particularly the Muslims and Croats. An agent of the UNS reported on 1 March: “In all

the municipalities and villages surrounding Mostar, the Chetniks rule and the Croatian [i.e. Croat and Muslim] population is threatened with danger and massacre more from them than from the Partisans, for where they go they kill and burn everything. At Buna near Mostar, almost all municipalities have been burned. At the municipality of Bijelo-Polje near Mostar, the Chetniks have disarmed the gendarmes, who were the only representatives of our authority, and sent them to Mostar. They are doing there whatever they want and are absolute masters.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 803). The Ustasha authorities in Mostar were forced to provide grain to the Chetniks, even though the citizens of Mostar were bordering on starvation (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 937). Jevđević felt sufficiently confident in this period to reply coldly to a German offer of an alliance against the Partisans, claiming that the Italians were fulfilling the Chetniks’ demands, and that so long as NDH troops remained in Bosnia, Chetnik policy would remain anti-Ustasha. Jevđević, nevertheless, had a suggestion for his German interlocutor: “I advised him, that that province [Bosnia] be surrendered to General Nedić or to the Italians, for otherwise it would never know peace.” (AVII Chetnik Collection, box 171, facs. 1, doc. 40).

This Chetnik domination of the Mostar region was not affected by the Chetniks’ rout in the Battle of the Neretva in March 1943. At the end of April, an agent of the UNS reported: “The impudence of the Chetniks around Mostar, Gacko, Nevesinje, Stolac and Bileća exceeds all bounds. They have already become so impudent that they rape wives and sisters in front of their husbands and brothers. The Chetniks hold all power in these parts, and that small part of our army that exists is impotent. In a short time, if this continues, there will be no Croats left in these parts at all.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 5, doc. 1403). The Chetnik police in Mostar arrested thirty young Muslims at the end of April on the grounds that they were Communists, several of whom were then murdered. When the Muslim mayor of Mostar intervened on behalf of the arrested with the Italian commander of the town, he was coldly received and shouted at by the latter (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 5, docs 1411 + 1468).

There was a corresponding sense of triumph among the Chetniks in the early months of 1943. Pavle Đurišić announced to the Muslims of the Sanjak that “our brave and invincible Chetnik detachments ALREADY RULE the whole of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Lika, Kordun, Northern Dalmatia, Slavonia and Slovenia”; he advised them that “it is the last chance for you to think about your fate” and to go over to the Chetniks immediately, “because afterwards it will be too late.” [emphasis in original] (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 812). The Chetnik leaders frequently treated the

Home Guard and Ustasha leaders with contempt, feeling that they had the upper hand. They carried Yugoslav flags through the cities of the NDH; they disarmed and robbed Home Guards and gendarmes; they taunted their NDH opposite numbers for their alleged cowardice and treason, with Jevđević publicly claiming that of “the mass of captured Communists” in Chetnik hands “90% are Croatian former Home Guards” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, docs 892, 920, 944 + 947). The commander of the Vučjak Chetnik Detachment boasted to the commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Home Guard Regiment in a letter of February 1943, that “after less than two years of the existence of the NDH in its original borders, we now hold 70% of that territory”, and that the Chetniks were “the relative masters of the NDH” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 797). The Chetniks in the Foča region engaged in this period in the systematic forced conversion of Muslims to the Orthodox religion; they also spread the news that the Italians had agreed that Bosnia-Herzegovina would form part of a Great Serbia (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 4, doc. 1112).

News of the Italian-Chetnik wrongdoing spread from Herzegovina across Bosnia-Herzegovina, catalysing the fear and insecurity felt by the Muslims and their dislike of the Ustasha regime. In Tuzla in the north-east, the Great Župan reported in March that local sentiment had been “negatively affected by the dispatch from Sarajevo of a large number of refugees to the territory of the župa, to regions already overflowing with refugees, as well as to those that are unable either to house or to feed them” and that “the feelings of the population have also been negatively affected by the sad news of the destruction of the Muslim inhabitants of Sanjak, Goražde and Čajniče; as well as the conditions arising from the taking over of government by the Chetniks – Montenegrins – in the districts of Nevesinje, Bileća, Gacko, Stolac and Trebinje; their approach to Mostar itself; and the attacks of the Partisans on Konjic and on the areas between Mostar and Konjic.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 832). In the town of Bosanski Petrovac in the south-west, the UNS reported at the start of April that “among the higher circles of the Muslims there is some degree of revolt and they are apparently not satisfied; they would like to achieve some degree of prestige in our state in the political sense and eventually to achieve an independent and autonomous Bosnia...” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 4, doc. 1101). When the Wehrmacht took control of Mostar from the Italians and Chetniks in early June, the change was greeted with rejoicing by the Mostar citizenry (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 5, doc. 1679). Yet in May 1943, the fraternisation of Germans and Chetniks in the town of Maglaj “provoked bitterness among the Croat population”, according to a report of the UNS (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 5, doc. 1490).

The evident collapse of the authority of the quisling state during 1943 was readily apparent to ordinary Home Guards, who were forced to coexist with Chetniks who openly defied both the laws and the draft call of the NDH (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 4, doc. 1243). The Chetniks, like the Partisans, frequently sought to induce Home Guards to defect, and unlike the Partisans they did so while enjoying the protection of the Italians, prior to the latter's capitulation (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 746; box 4, doc. 1382). Thus, the Axis's own quislings undermined the authority of the NDH. Jevđević's claim that 90% of Communists captured by the Chetniks were former Home Guards was a lie that contained a grain of truth, for a large section of Home Guard opinion was deeply hostile both to the Ustashas and to the Germans and ready to collaborate with their enemies. The UNS reported in April 1943 that in Trebinje in Herzegovina, the Home Guard officers were "almost all Serbophile and Anglophile" (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 4, doc. 1266).

In some areas Chetnik atrocities and NDH passivity began to turn the Muslim population toward the Partisans, whose propaganda naturally emphasised these grievances (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 3, doc. 927). The Staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bosnian Corps on 16 July 1943 reported that in the Šiprage municipality, a massacre of prominent Muslims by the Chetniks was "the source of a great ferment in the Muslim villages". Muslims who had up till then been unwilling to support actively the Partisans were now seeking out the latter to ask for weapons with which to fight the Chetniks. The Partisans were responding by arming the Muslims and organising them into local legions so as further to polarise their relations with the Chetniks and mobilise them gradually into the NOP (AI 1956a, doc. 86: 169-170). At this stage, the Muslim entry into the Partisans nevertheless remained limited, with large sections of the Muslim population still reserved or hostile. At Jeleč in the Zelengora region, the Muslim and Serb populations even formed an alliance for armed resistance to the Partisans.<sup>1</sup> The Command of the 6<sup>th</sup> Gendarme Regiment reported in late April 1943 that although the Croat and Muslim inhabitants of Herzegovina and Dalmatia were not well disposed toward the NDH, their support for the Partisans was also falling (HDA Collection "Oružničke pukovnije NDH", box 5, doc. 1420). The unpopularity of the Ustasha regime among the Muslims had not yet translated into mass support for the Partisans. The collapse of the NDH's defences at the local level and the expansion of Partisan activity following the capitulation of Italy in September 1943 increased the Muslim and

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<sup>1</sup> According to the report of the Staff of the 1<sup>st</sup> Proletarian Division of 13 August 1943 (AI 1956b, doc. 25: 66).

to a lesser extent the Croat population's discontent with the NDH's inability to defend it.

### **Italy's capitulation and the German turn towards the Serb anti-Communists**

Allied forces invaded Sicily on 10 July 1943, prompting the Fascist Grand Council to pass a vote of no confidence in Mussolini, after which King Victor Emmanuel III removed the Duce from power. The new government under Marshal Pietro Badoglio immediately began preparations to withdraw Italy from the Axis, beginning negotiations with the Allies in early August. The Italian forces in Yugoslavia consequently became increasingly inactive, culminating in their formal capitulation in September. Their collapse proved the decisive turning point in the Partisans' rise. In Bosnia-Herzegovina alone, the Partisans liberated thirteen towns during late August and September and nineteen during October.<sup>2</sup> But more important than the capture of territory was the growth in the size of the Partisan movement. In the Italian-annexed parts of Slovenia and Dalmatia, the newly created power vacuum immediately favoured the Partisans, who had been operating in these territories since 1941 and were now handed an open field. Between June and December 1943, the number of Slovene Partisan brigades rose from 6 to 18 and the number of Dalmatian Partisan brigades from 2 to 13 – all predominantly ethnic-Croat. In the rest of Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Serbs formed a solid majority of Partisans, the expansion was less spectacular but still considerable: from 17 to 25 brigades in Croatia proper and from 14 to 23 brigades in Bosnia-Herzegovina. For the first time, in Yugoslavia as a whole the majority of Partisans were non-Serbs.

The importance of this may be gleaned from the fact that, of 97 Partisan brigades in existence by the end of 1943, 38 were from Croatia and 23 from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Of the 38 Croatian Partisan brigades, 20 had an ethnic-Croat majority, 17 an ethnic-Serb majority and 1 an ethnic-Czech majority. At this time, the whole of eastern Yugoslavia (Vojvodina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia) was contributing only 18 Partisan brigades (LZ 1955–1971: 211-217; Dubravica 1996: 19-23, 29, 117, 120). Of the four Partisan corps formed before the autumn of 1943, two were Croatian and two

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<sup>2</sup> Glamoč, Foča, Goražde, Čajniče, Kalinovik, Gradačac, Modriča, Orašje, Bosanski Šamac, Gračanica, Vlasenica, Bijeljina and Zvornik were liberated in September and Tuzla, Livno, Duvno, Kupres, Bileća, Prozor, Posušje, Bosanska Dubica, Ljubija, Gacko, Vareš, Sanski Most, Rogatica, Ljubinje, Rudo, Višegrad and Sokolac in October.

Bosnian. At this time, Tito reorganised his army into eight corps – of these, three were Croatian (the 4th, 6th and 8th Corps); two were Bosnian (the 3rd and 5th); one was Montenegrin (the 2nd); one was Slovene (the 7th); and the last was the all-Yugoslav 1st Proletarian Corps. NDH military intelligence estimated in this period that the two Bosnian Corps that together comprised the overwhelming majority of all Bosnian Partisans, were 70% Serb and 30% Croat and Muslim by late 1943 (HDA Collection 487, box 3, doc. 7379). During the entire course of the NOP (1941 – 1945), 64.1% of all Bosnian Partisans were Serbs, 23% were Muslims and 8.8% Croats.<sup>3</sup> The Croat and Muslim contribution to the NOP was therefore very significant, amounting to approximately a quarter of all Yugoslav Partisans and a third of all Bosnian Partisans at the time of the founding by the KPJ of the new Yugoslav state at the second session of AVNOJ in late 1943. It was this multinational composition, more than victories on the battlefield, that held the key to the Partisans' eventual triumph.

The Italians were widely hated among the Bosnian Muslims as protectors of the Chetniks, and the fall of Mussolini was greeted with warm satisfaction by a large section of the Sarajevo Muslim population (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 5, doc. 1969). Yet it was clear to the Muslims that the fall of their Italian enemy created new problems and dangers for them. These were, conversely, times of hope for the Serb-nationalist right. The capitulation of Italy and the growing pressure on the Germans on several fronts brought about a change in their attitude toward the Chetniks and the Serb nation generally, with which they were now more ready to collaborate on a common anti-Communist basis. Nedić, meanwhile, had spent the first half of 1943 preparing for an eventual summons to visit Hitler, when he would be able to put before the latter his territorial demands. His ambition stretched to most of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Sanjak, eastern Slavonia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Baranja. On 18 September, Nedić met with Hitler and requested the annexation of Montenegro, the Sanjak, East Bosnia, Srem and Kosovo-Metohija. On this occasion Ribbentrop opposed Nedić's demands, and following a confrontation between the two, Hitler was forced to appease Nedić by promising him concessions elsewhere. Hermann Neubacher, Special Plenipotentiary to the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, was sent to Belgrade with the task of strengthening the Nedić regime and establishing a working relationship with Mihailović's Chetniks. Neubacher worked to unite the forces of Nedić, Mihailović and the Serbian fascist leader Dimitrije Ljotić in a common front

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<sup>3</sup> *Statistički Bilten*, Savezni zavod za statistiku, Belgrade, no. 1174 (April), cited in: Cohen and Warwick 1983: 64.

against the Partisans. The Wehrmacht's Command South East renewed or concluded a series of pacts with Chetnik commanders across the NDH, Serbia and Montenegro. A new puppet "Provisional National Administration" was established in Montenegro. A battalion of the Serbian Volunteer Corps under Nedić's former minister Mihailo Olćan was sent to the Sanjak. The Germans released from captivity Pavle Đurišić, who was sent to the Sanjak to organise pro-Nedić Chetnik forces, and the following spring was appointed head of a new "Montenegrin Volunteer Force", loyal to Nedić.

German consideration of the formation of some form of Great Serbia did not end, however. Neubacher broadly supported Nedić's goal of an expanded Serbia within the framework of the German order. His project, which he put before von Ribbentrop in October, was for a "Great Serbian Federation" to consist of Serbia, Montenegro and the Sanjak, to which would eventually be added East Bosnia up to the River Bosna. Nedić was to receive a greater degree of control over the civilian administration of Serbia, and a "Serbian army" was to be formed from the Serb prisoners of war in German camps. As Neubacher said after the war: "With Nedić strong in such a Serbia it would have been possible to defeat Tito in Serbia, Sanjak and Montenegro without the use of a single German soldier; the Serbian nationalists would have done the job for them." (Tomasevich 2002: 221-223; Prepa 1971: 302; Borković 1985: 276-279). In November, Hitler examined the plan with some sympathy, but ultimately rejected it for fear of strengthening and encouraging Serbian expansionism. According to Hitler, the Serbs "have shown a great state-forming strength and possess goals of conquest that stretch to the Aegean sea". At the same time, Neubacher's efforts to strengthen the Nedić regime were obstructed by other figures in the Nazi administration in Serbia who were unwilling to turn over any of their powers to Nedić.

Both before and during his negotiations with Hitler and Neubacher, Nedić had attempted to expand his influence into East Bosnia through arming and organising Bosnian Chetnik bands. Meanwhile, Mihailović planned to seize East Bosnia in the autumn of 1943 through a mobilisation of the Serb population. For this purpose, the Chetniks mobilised two corps in East Bosnia, the Drina and Romanija Corps, under the respective commands of Dragoslav Račić and Milorad Momčilović. They then proceeded to capture large areas of East Bosnia, including several towns. On 5 October, the Chetniks attacked Višegrad, which they captured after fierce fighting against the Ustashas, Home Guards and Muslim militia. This was followed by the Chetnik massacre of over two thousand Višegrad Muslim civilians, despite the efforts of Višegrad Serbs to protect and hide their Muslim neighbours (Tucaković 1995: 102-106). On

14 October, the Chetniks captured Rogatica, whose Muslim population had mostly evacuated the town in anticipation. The Chetniks slaughtered the few remaining Muslim civilians, as well as Partisan sympathisers from among the Serb population, and burned down a large part of the town. The Chetnik offensive was accompanied by propaganda and agitation for a Serb national struggle against both Partisans and Ustashas and for the annexation of East Bosnia to Nedić's Serbia or to Montenegro (HDA Collection "Oružničke pukovnije NDH", box 5, doc. 3938; Prepa 1971: 306-312).

These atrocities resulted in a new wave of Muslim refugees fleeing to Sarajevo and other Bosnian towns, where the local inhabitants drew the appropriate conclusion. As one Bosnian Muslim wrote somewhat cynically in a letter to a friend at this time: "The renewed slaughter of our people in Višegrad has disturbed spirits here as never before... It is tragic to watch the columns of refugees, poor and shabby, as they traverse the streets of the city. Wherever one looks there is suffering, so that one's heart bursts from the pain of it. These sad scenes have warmed the stony hearts of the Sarajevans; when it has got to this you can imagine how things look." (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 7, doc. 2398). So desperate did even prominent Sarajevo Muslims feel at this stage that some began to discuss the possibility of evacuating the entire Bosnian Muslim population to Turkey (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 7, doc. 2523).

### **Muslim reactions to the German turn toward the Serbian anti-Communists**

The Great Serbian threat was therefore ever present in the minds of the Muslim population, constantly reinforced by periodic Chetnik massacres of civilians. During September, the renewed mobilisation of Chetniks in the Sarajevo region coincided with the spread of rumours among the city's population that Hitler had promised Nedić the annexation of East Bosnia, Sanjak and part of Herzegovina to Serbia (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2305). In response to such rumours, the UNS reported that "the Serbs are increasingly joining the Chetniks" while "the Muslims are increasingly worried by these new actions of the Chetniks, seeing in them a danger directed against themselves..." (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2331). In the small town of Pale outside Sarajevo, seat of a well organised Chetnik band, rumours circulated among the Serb population that Nedić and Chetnik forces from Serbia would seize East Bosnia in conjunction with local Chetniks and would "eradicate the entire Croat population from these parts" (HMBiH Collection UNS,

box 6, doc. 2369). Rumours of this kind inevitably spread far afield; the false claims that the Germans had promised Nedić East Bosnia and that they were allowing Draža Mihailović himself to operate in Pale reached as far as Turkey (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2372). In January 1944, the UNS reported that “the people of Bosnia have been talking a lot recently about how 30,000 of Nedić’s Chetniks will enter Bosnia from Serbia and about how the border between Croatia and Serbia will be moved to the River Bosna. Naturally, this has provoked fear among the Croats and rejoicing among the Serbs.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 7, doc. 2863).

The widespread Muslim warmth toward the Germans, prior to autumn 1943, was a product of their fear of the Great Serbian threat. According to a report from the German 114th Hunting Division, in April 1943: “The Muslims are in large part amicably disposed toward the Axis. They say of this, that the defeat of Germany would mean their ruin, because in the new Great Serbia they would not be able to achieve their right.” Furthermore, “The political goal of the Muslims is the autonomy of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some express the will also to be a German protectorate.” (AI 1979, doc. 56: 245-246). Consequently, the German turn toward increased collaboration with the Chetniks and quisling Serbia heightened the Muslim alienation from all Axis and quisling factions. According to one Ustasha source of this period:

German military officials have worked skilful plots and manoeuvres with the Chetnik representatives, and have at the expense of the prestige of the Croatian State and the Croatian state authorities defended the Chetniks and in ways and on occasions when they should not have done so. The Chetniks have exploited to the full this authorised position and have acted openly against our population, killing and plundering our defenceless people. Our Croatian state authorities, despite their best intentions, were unable, on account of the said German support and protection, to offer an effective defence to our population and enact the deserved retribution against the Chetnik criminals.

Chetnik officers were arriving from Serbia to reinforce and reorganise the Bosnian Chetnik forces, all with the complicity of the German authorities (AI 1956c, doc. 199: 461-462). A UNS report noted in mid-September: “The Chetniks endeavour to show to the Germans that many Croats are Partisans. The Chetniks’ standing with the Germans is now high.” Consequently “Among the Croatian population there is anger at the Germans on account of their support for the Chetniks.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2228).

Across Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Muslim and Croat population reacted negatively to the German turn toward the Chetniks. In August, the NDH police uncovered an underground Chetnik organization in Sarajevo that was

planning to take power in the town in the event that the British Army landed on the Croatian coast. The Germans intervened to secure the release of the Chetnik leaders, prompting the UNS to report that “the release of these Serbs has resulted in a great deal of discontent among the Croatian citizens, and all are wondering how far this will go and when there will be an end to such leniency.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2123). In Nevesinje in eastern Herzegovina, the Germans struck an agreement with the local Chetniks and “this agreement provoked a great sense of dissatisfaction among the local Muslim population”, while in the village of Fazlagića Kula near Gacko “a great deal of dissatisfaction is reigning due to the renewed arming of the Chetniks by the Germans”, according to a report of the UNS (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2173). The Nevesinje Muslims were particularly embittered by the refusal of the Germans to arm local Muslim militias, even while they armed the Chetniks (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2187). In Mostar, the Chetniks were well organised and enjoyed close relations with the German command (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 2381, doc. 2387). The Germans in Mostar also conducted negotiations with armed Chetnik commanders from the surrounding areas, whose arrival in the city was warmly welcomed by a section of the town’s Serb and Muslim population (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2264). At this time, Mostar was the locus of an “extremely widespread anti-state propaganda, partly Anglophile and partly Partisan in spirit, but in general united against the NDH.” (HMBiH Collection UNS, box 6, doc. 2266).

According to a report from the command of the Wehrmacht’s 15th Mountain Army Corps at the start of October: “The earlier jubilation of the population has been transformed into a negative and partly also a hostile stance toward the German Wehrmacht.” Furthermore: “Through its poor economic and Ustasha policies, the government has lost every basis of support, not only among the Orthodox and Muslims but also among the Croat population. The government has real influence only in some of the larger towns. The power and authority of the state no longer exist.” The Muslims gave no support to the NDH; “circles of Muslim intellectuals want either an independent state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which the corresponding nationalities would hold the territorial administration, and the Muslims would with a corresponding percentage participate in the government and would not depend on the arbitrary government in Zagreb as they have up till now, or they want a protectorate under which the military administration would have a corresponding possibility for development and activity.” Meanwhile, “Among the Catholic population, the reception of Serbian prime-minister Nedić at the Führer’s General Staff

has awakened panic that the Führer has made Nedić a particular promise for Serbia.” (AI 1979, doc. 145: 583-586).

The top Partisan leadership, for its part, made every effort to court the Muslim population on an anti-Chetnik basis in this period, as a couple of high-profile interventions made clear. In July 1943, the Zenica Chetnik leader Golub Mitrović and his staff were captured at Bijela voda by the 1st Proletarian Brigade, and were taken as prisoners to the Supreme Staff's base. KPJ Central Committee member Moša Pijade personally addressed the population of the locality on the subject of Chetnik treachery, and read to them the text of Mitrović's pact with the Ustashas, which had been discovered during the capture. Eleven local Chetnik leaders, including Mitrović, were sentenced to death and executed for two crimes: killing Partisans and killing innocent local Muslims (Kazazović 1984: 113-122). A month later, the Supreme Staff arrived in Šerići, another village in the Zenica region, where the local Muslim militia had a history of collaboration with the NOP, and on one occasion had helped to rescue a Partisan brigade from encirclement by the Germans. Tito spoke warmly to the villagers, and presented the militia – formally part of the enemy's forces – with a machine gun with which to defend their village from the Chetniks (Kazazović 1984: 128-132). This apparently impressed even the British agents attached to the Supreme Staff. As Vladimir Dedijer recalls: “I see a change in the English themselves. They are surprised by how well we live with the Muslims.” (Dedijer 1981: 323). The Partisans were, in fact, attempting to step in as the Muslims' protectors, just as the Ustashas' reputation in this regard was increasingly tarnished. They would reap the benefit from their policy in the autumn of 1943, with the large-scale influx of Muslims into the NOP, particularly in north-eastern Bosnia, and the accompanying expansion of Partisan-held territory, culminating in the first Partisan liberation of Tuzla in 1943.

## Conclusion

The success of the NOP in winning mass support among Muslim Bosniaks was the product of a number of factors: Communist championing of Bosnian self-rule and national liberation; Muslim alienation from and hostility to the Ustasha state; the roots and connections NOP activists had among the Muslim population; increasing Axis and Ustasha violence and repression against the Muslims; and the readiness of some Muslim notables to work with the NOP. Yet the Great Serbian threat was a decisive catalyst. It began with escalating Chetnik violence against the Muslims, aided and abetted by the Italian occupier, and culminated in the Nazis' own turn towards the Great Serbian forces following the Italian capitulation, and serious fears among the Muslims that

Hitler would turn part or all of Bosnia over to Nedić's Serbia. In this context, and the failure of the Ustasha state to protect the Muslim population from Chetnik violence, Muslims increasingly sought refuge in the NOP. The First Session of ZAVNOBiH, held in November 1943 on the eve of the Second Session of AVNOJ, by promising Bosnia-Herzegovina equality with other lands within the new Yugoslavia, helped cement Muslim Bosniak support for the NOP. It thereby played a crucial role in the NOP's ultimate victory.

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## VELIKA SRPSKA OPASNOST, ZAVNOBIH I ULAZAK BOŠNJAKA MUSLIMANA U NARODNOOSLOBODILAČKI POKRET

Od početka ustanka u ljeto 1941. godine, Komunistička partija Jugoslavije zamislila je Narodnooslobodilačku borbu u Bosni i Hercegovini kao posebnu bosanskohercegovačku oslobodilačku borbu, vođenu pod bosanskim patriotskim sloganima. Ipak, status Bosne i Hercegovine u budućoj jugoslavenskoj državi nije definitivno riješen do novembra 1943. godine. Ovaj period – jesen 1943. – svjedočio je masovnom prilivu Bošnjaka Muslimana u Narodnooslobodilački pokret, definitivno ga transformirajući iz pokreta koji je etnički bio pretežno srpski u kompoziciju koja je imala veliku muslimansku bošnjačku komponentu. Odlučujući katalizator za masovni ulazak Bošnjaka Muslimana iz Istočne Bosne u NOP bio je njihov strah da će Hitler ustupiti Istočnu Bosnu Nedićevoj Srbiji, čime će uspostaviti Veliku Srbiju u kojoj će muslimanski Bošnjaci biti podvrgnuti genocidu. KPJ, zagovarajući bosanskohercegovačko samoodređenje, uspio je osvojiti veliki dio muslimanske bošnjačke populacije koja se plašila velikosrpske prijetnje. Prvo zasjedanje ZAVNOBiH-a, održano u novembru 1943. uoči Drugog zasjedanja AVNOJ-a, obećavanjem jednakosti Bosne i Hercegovine s drugim zemljama unutar nove Jugoslavije, pomoglo je cementiranju muslimanske bošnjačke podrške NOP-u. Stoga je ZAVNOBiH odigrao ključnu ulogu u konačnoj pobjedi NOP-a.

**Ključne riječi:** revolucija, fašizam, antifašizam, otpor, saradnja