Through the Nationalist Looking Glass: Twentieth-century Serbian Chetnik Ideology

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Historians have failed to look at Chetniks on the Chetniks' own terms. Even the most thorough study, Jozo Tomasevich's first volume of *War and Revolution*, explains the tactical and operational histories of the Chetniks as it relates to the Second World War and mentions that there should be a distinction made between the Chetniks of Draža Mihailović and the "old Chetniks," such as those of Kosta Milovanović-Pećanac and Vojin Vuk Popović, but does not explain much of *why* a distinction should be made nor what those distinctions are. Similarly, the devolution of the Yugoslav state in the 1990s saw the (re-)emergence of paramilitary units calling themselves Chetniks, at least colloquially, which begs the question of where these "new" Chetniks fit within the larger menagerie of Yugoslav, and indeed Balkan, paramilitarism. This paper, on the other hand, explores the ideological structures of groups which are called Chetniks: the "old Chetniks," that is those who fought from 1903 and formed Great War veterans' associations in the 1920s and 1930s; the Chetniks of Draža Mihailović from the Second World War, 1941 to 1945; and the paramilitary group nominally led by Vojislav Šešelj in the 1990s. The goal of this paper is to dispel some of the assumptions that non-experts of Yugoslav warfare have – that by way of sharing a name, Chetnik, *all* or at least *most* groups calling themselves Chetniks share an ideological affinity. I argue that the three time periods should be seen within their own historical contexts and with their own unique nuances and characteristics. Even experts on Balkan warfare have failed to articulate the differences between Chetnik groups, as the Tomasevich example shows. Even within particular conflicts at specific times, groups called "Chetniks" differed in ideology, tactics, ethno-religious make up and in various other ways. This

paper presents snapshots into each of these facets to further the argument that Chetniks – within isolated conflicts and over a *longue durée* – contained such differing, disparate, and even contradictory ideologies all of which threaten to confuse the very meaning of what "Chetnik" means.

"The Balkan Revolutionary Tradition"[1]

The term Chetnik comes to Serbian from Bulgarian and derives from *četa*, a unit, a member of which is a *četnik*. Undoubtedly the Serbian Chetniks get the name from the Bulgarian terrorist and insurgency group, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO) which wreaked havoc first in the Ottoman Empire, then in Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and later in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and finally in Yugoslavia. For the Serbian example, *četovanje* is the act of guerrilla warfare or insurgency and, for other historical processes outside the scope of this paper, is closely related to, but distinct from, words such as *ustaša* (itself deriving from *ustaniti*, to stand up), partisan, and other cognate words related to uprisings, insurgencies, guerrilla warfare and other similar acts of resistance, brigandage and freedom fighting. It should be noted, however, that each of the words presented above have their own distinct meanings and their own historical trajectories which are worthy of their own studies. Regardless, relations exist between these terms which identify them as existing on the spectrum of resistance.

Četovanje goes at least as far back as the Ottoman Empire-in-Europe period, that is from about the fifteenth to nineteenth-centuries. At various times amongst the Balkan peoples, there were groups calling themselves *uskoci* (from which the *Ustaša* derived their name), *hajduci* (Hobsbawm's "social bandits") and other similar terms. Groups calling themselves Chetniks first

[1] Phrase taken from Dimitrije Djordjevic and Stephen Fischer-Galati, *The Balkan Revolutionary Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

emerged amongst the Serbs in the early twentieth-century. Whether real or imagined, the Chetniks of the early twentieth-century derived their lineage from the *hajduk* bands of the previous century and the reason for this is because of what the *hajduci* came to represent during that century. *Hajduci* were imbued with nationalist qualities such as a singular ethnic identity (Serbian), a singular religious faith (Orthodox), and were portrayed to be fighting for freedom from the Ottoman Empire against its supposed evils, namely "Turks," Islam and empire. I have argued elsewhere, but bears repeating for its relevancy here, that the oral epic poetry was closely related to the nation building project of the Serbian state and the protagonists of the poems, the *hajduci*, became an important carrier for that nationalising process.[2] It is precisely this ethno-religiously nationalised *hajduk* figure which a number of the Chetnik bands of the early twentieth-century gravitated towards to develop their own identities.

From *Hajdukovanje* to *Četovanje*

The *hajduci* were also variously described as bandits, brigands, freedom fighters, terrorists, and other terms and was highly contingent on who was doing the describing. If the *hajduci* fought against the state, then they emerge in the state's sources pejoratively, as brigands for example, but if they were fighting on the side of an emerging state or for a common cause, then the term becomes something closer to freedom fighter or rebel. Indeed, this was perhaps the biggest critique of Hobsbawm's own romanticization of the *hajduci* and others as "social bandits": critics argued that *hajduci* were as often villains against the "people" as much as they were fighting for them.[3] In other words, various historical records show that *hajduci* fought not for the

[2] Stevan Bozanich, "Invented Warriors: The Legacy of the Invented Serbian Hajduk Tradition," in *Balkan Legacies: The Long Shadow of Conflict and Ideological Experiment in Southeastern Europe*, ed. John Paul Newman and Balázs Apor (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, Forthcoming 2021), 57–70.
[3] The most convincing of Hobswbawm's critics is Anton Blok, "The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14, no. 4 (September 1972), doi:10.2307/178039, http://www.jstor.org/stable/178039. See especially 499-500.

state nor for the masses, but for themselves and were often most interested in benefiting from whatever historical processes, local arrangements or any number of contingencies as made sense for their band.

The earliest example of the use of the word *četnici*/*četnik*/*čete* amongst the Serbs emerged in 1903. The 1903 to 1918 period has been called "Serbia's golden age" by John Paul Newman because of the height of Serbian national and state forming programs.[4] Part of these programs was the employment of irregular units to both undermine neighbouring states and to fortify the influence of the emerging Kingdom of Serbia. *Čete* appeared on the territories called "Southern Serbia," that is Macedonia, as well as in "Old Serbia" (Kosovo, Novi Pazar and Metohija) and were led by *vojvode*, variously translated as commander, warlord, and duke. Some of the more (in)famous *vojvode* were Kosta Milovanović-Pećanac, Jovan Stojković-Babunski, Vojislav Tankosić, Vojin Popović, amongst others and these men can be considered the "old Chetniks."

The *čete* operated in the unredeemed territories first as marauders and bandits, terrorising the civilian populations, tactics similar to *hajdukovanje*. Organised into *trojke*, groups of three, *čete* would target specific houses and villages and plunder them. Villages, or even individual houses, which did not provide support to the *čete* would be singled out, robbed of any valuables and movable goods, and in extreme cases set alight. However, having the inhabitants stay in the houses was more valuable because they could provide more goods to plunder at later times, so burning was an extreme option. Much like in *hajduk* times, though, villages would side with particular *čete* to provide safety from other units in exchange for payment, most often in kind for

[4] John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

food, shelter, clothing, animals and livestock and other usable goods, though rarely for straight cash.[5]

Eventually, the Serbian state began to employ the *čete* to undermine Ottoman authority as part of an irredentist program to wrestle "Old Serbia" and "Southern Serbia" away. This may have occurred earlier, but the practice seems to have really got going under Petar I Karađorđević, the grandson of Karađorđe, the leader of the First Serbian Uprising and himself a *hajduk*.[6] Petar came to Serbia's throne after the May Coup which saw the end of the Obrenović Dynasty and the re-accession of the Karađorđević one in 1903, the same year in which the "old Chetnik" units were created. The close relationship between the crown and the guerrilla groups during this time may be explained by Petar's own experiences as a guerrilla fighter. Fighting first in the French Foreign Legion as Petar Kara, he later took the name of the famous *hajduk* Petar Mrkonjić and organised units in Bosnia during the Great Eastern Crisis, 1875-1878.[7] Like his grandfather, Petar was well versed in guerrilla warfare and familiar with the practices of both *hajdukovanje* and *četovanje*. Gravitating towards the *čete* may have been a natural, and politically cunning, maneuver.

It also helped that a number of the *čete* were part of the conspiracy that brought Petar to the throne. Perhaps the most relevant among the conspirators for our purposes was Vojislav Tankosić, nicknamed *Vojvoda Voja*. An army officer, Tankosić was tasked with executing the deposed King Aleksandar Obrenović's brothers-in-law during the coup which brought Petar to the throne. Tankosić was also part of the Serbian Chetnik Association, which was formed and

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[5] Panagiotis Delis, "Violence and Civilians during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913)," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 6 (November 2, 2018): 547–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1493854.
[6] Wayne S. Vucinich, *The First Serbian Uprising, 1804-1813*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982; Duncan Wilson, *The Life and Times of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, 1787-1864: Literacy, Literature, and National Independence in Serbia*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
[7] Mile Bjelajac, "King Petar I Karadjordjević," in *Serbs and Their Leaders in the Twentieth Century.*, ed. Aleksandar Pavković and Peter Radan (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 95–112.

assembled in Macedonia in 1903, though armed action did not begin until 1904. Interestingly, Tankosić also helped to create *Ujedinjenje ili Smrt* (Unification or Death), the group of army officers which would later garner the nickname of the "Black Hand" by its detractors and which was involved in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. Not only was he an active member, but he helped to write the group's constitution which called for the unification of all Serb-inhabited lands.[8] Given all of this, Tankosić represents one conduit by which paramilitaries came to be related to the Serbian (and later Yugoslav) state and army.

"Old Chetnik" Ideology

As Tankosić shows, a large number of Chetnik groups represented the unification of Serb lands. How "Serb lands" was defined is difficult to explain without its own study and is too large for the scope of this paper, but what is necessary to understand is that this was an important as an *idea*. Tankosić and the various para-statist and para-militaristic entities of which he was part certainly inhabit one of the more extreme nationalist ideologies but is by no means the only example. There were countless armed bands operating in and around the unredeemed territories and representing different ethno-religious groups. Even the Serbian units which ostensibly advocated for Serbian nationalism and which were part of the Serbian Chetnik Association spanned various ideological backgrounds or at least whose nationalism was capable of making concessions.

For instance, at least by the time of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, the members of Lieutenant Gutriković posed for a picture in which are Kosta Milovanović-Pećanac, Jovan

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[8] Dmitar Tasić, "Repeating Phenomenon: Balkan Wars and Irregulars," in *Les Guerres Balkaniques (1912-1913): Conflits, Enjeux, Mémoires*, ed. Catherine Horel (Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A., 2014), 25–36.

Stojković-Babunski, and Isa Boletini amongst others.[9] In other words, the image has leaders from the Serbian Chetnik Association and the Albanian League of Prizren, a political organisation formed in 1878 to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire for Albanian-inhabited lands. This image runs counter to nationalist narratives, both Serbian and Albanian, that pit both ethnic groups constantly at each other's throats. Similar narratives also have such figures as fighting for a singular nationalist cause, rather than the confused and uneven processes entailed in the practice of guerrilla warfare which is shown in the picture. Of course, this is not to say that the presence of multi-ethnic peoples amongst Serbian *čete* were typical nor that figures such as Boletini fought for Serbian independence (or that Serb *četnici* fought for Albanian independence, for that matter). Rather, it is meant to show that the singular narrative of ethno-religious nationalism is too complex and that a fuller picture is required. To be sure, there were nationalist causes to all of the irregular bands operating in "Old Serbia" and Macedonia even with the presence of non-Serbs in the units. If anything, this knowledge only complicates our understanding of the nationalist milieu and certainly casts doubt on the singular nationalist narrative.

To that end, there is another element which can be said as being encompassed in "old Chetnik" ideology: the fragmentation, and possibly end, of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman fragmentation is one common ground on which most, if not all, actors in the *čete* could agree and the presence of multi-national, multi-faith actors is evidence of this. This is also an ideological holdover from the *hajduci* as presented in Serbian nationalist discourses. While someone like Boletini advocated and fought for Albanian independence, his cause benefited if Serbia achieved

[9] Gábor Demeter and Krisztián Csaplár-Degovics, *A Study in the Theory and Practice of Destabilization: Violence and Strategies of Survival in Ottoman Macedonia (1903-1913)* (Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, n.d.), 52.

its aims of "freeing" territories from Ottoman rule and so fighting alongside the Serbs made both tactical and operational sense, in both political and military terms. What this point shows is that short-term collaboration was not only desired but often necessary, and that collaborating in the short-term could lead to long-term gains. Any further ethno-religious homogenisation could wait until after the short-term goal has been achieved, in this case independence for Kosovo, Metohija, Macedonia and the Sandžak of Novi Pazar, and this is precisely what happened in the Balkan Wars.

The causes, events and results of the Balkan Wars have been recounted elsewhere, so will not be dealt with to any great extent.[10] All that is worth exploring as it relates to the current study and the Balkan Wars is that the conflict allowed the cover of war that often accompanies mass violence and genocide. In other words, the Balkan Wars was the event that allowed for the short-term goals of the *čete* to give way to the long-term aspirations of the units just as it had for the states involved. Seen in this way, the creation of the Balkan League by Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and Bulgaria on political and military terms against the Ottoman Empire has a direct parallel to the various ethno-religious identities joining together as *čete* to fight for a common cause. This is placed in sharper relief when one considers Bulgaria's position as an opponent to the other three Balkan League members in 1913: the political and military landscape had changed, as did the short-term necessity. Just as the *čete* joined their ethno-religious kin in 1912 to fight for the more immediate and necessary cause, the Balkan League also fractured in 1913.

This is one reason why there was such brutal treatment of civilian populations and why the order of battle proceeded so violently: the short-term goals of freedom for the territories had

[10] A good introduction to the nationalisms involved is Mark Biondich, "The Balkan Wars: Violence and Nation-Building in the Balkans, 1912-1913," *Journal of Genocide Research* 18, no. 4 (2016): 389–404, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2016.1226019.

been or were in the process of being achieved so that the long-term project of national assimilation and expulsion could proceed. Once the *čete* had fragmented along more or less ethno-religious lines, the brutal treatment of non-Serb peoples could begin.[11] Seeing Chetnik ideology in this period as a constantly moving, expanding, contracting and highly contingent entity helps to view the "old Chetniks" on their own terms.

The First World War prevented much evolution of Chetnik ideology, especially considering the nature of Serbia's experience of the Great War: long, bloody, and disastrous before the period of victory, redemption and unification of ethnic Serbs within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.[12] The presence of "old Chetniks" in Serbia's army, as professional soldiers and as irregulars, volunteers, and other avenues meant that prewar Chetnik associations emerged as veterans' groups.[13] Though part of the mandate of the various associations was ensuring veterans' rights, a large portion was dedicated to nationalist causes. The practices, reasons and ideology of the Chetnik veterans has been explored elsewhere and will only be recounted so far as to say that much of what could be said for the prewar Chetniks holds true in the interwar period: the ideologies differed within and between groups, people moved from one association to another for varying reasons and of which only one reason was ideologically nationalist, what being a nationalist meant and what nationalism entailed changed over time, even with the individual, within and amongst groups, and had no singular definitions.

With this said, we can pinpoint several common denominators of Chetnik ideology which have their origins in 1903 and, as we will soon see, extend well into the future. Fear of "the

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[11] The same could be said for non-Greek peoples, non-Bulgarian peoples, etc.

[12] For ease of use and clarity, I will refer to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovene as Yugoslavia, its name after 1929 and until 1941.

[13] The most thorough study of this phenomenon , and which covers not just Serb groups but Croat and, to a lesser extent, Slovene and Bosnian Muslim groups, is John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

other" is one element of Chetnik ideology by the interwar period. Who encompasses "the other," how they are dealt with, and the extent to which they are tolerated, however, seems to most often be the points of departure for the various Chetnik bands. With this comes protection of one's own nation and state. This is often disguised as anti-imperialism, but if given the chance to create an empire the Chetniks would undoubtedly be the midwife of its creation. Regardless, the discourse of anti-imperialism is how defence of one's own often gets interpreted. As Communism became a dominant ideology, especially after the Bolshevik rise to power in 1917, anti-communism became a cornerstone of Chetnik ideology. Anti-communism often meant siding with the Yugoslav crown was not only necessary but desirable, although this was not always the case.

Extreme Serb nationalism is perhaps the one denominator that most confuses our understanding of the Chetniks from this period and others. For the interwar period, the confusion is because Serbian nationalism varied across three main types.[14] The first type was exclusive Serb nationalism and entailed having territory only for Serbian people. Kosta Pećanac, for example, continued to operate in Kosovo and Metohija throughout the interwar period where his band harassed, killed and terrorised Albanians, Turks, Bosnian Muslims, Roma and other non-Serb peoples.[15] The second common type was Yugoslav nationalism which included elements of anti-Semitism, it fought against both Serbian and Croatian nationalism and its adherents were anti-communist and advocated for a unitary Yugoslav nation. While the influence of Fascism is questionable, there certainly were commonalities between the two ideologies. The third strain

[14] The fuller spectrum of Yugoslav extremism is detailed in John Paul Newman, "War Veterans, Fascism, and Para-Fascist Departures in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1918-1941," *Fascism* 6 (2017): 42–74, https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00601003.
[15] Dmitar Tasić, "Izmedju Slave i Oputžbe: Kosta Milovanović Pećanac, 1919," *Istorija 20. Veka*, no. 2 (2007): 119–25.

incorporates the previous two and couches Serbian nationalism within a larger Yugoslav nationalism. In this third variant, to be a Serbian nationalist is to be a Yugoslav nationalist. The motto of the Serbian Cultural Club (*Srpski kulturni klub*, SKK), for example, was "A Strong Serbian Identity, A Strong Yugoslavia."[16] For the SKK, other nationalities and ethnicities could exist within Yugoslavia but the recognition of Serbianism as dominant was necessary to prevent either expulsion or assimilation. While Pećanac's view of Chetnik-ism was the most famous by 1941, it is this last nationalist variant which would come to dominate Chetnik ideology during the Second World War and beyond.

The 1941 Distinction

Like all cataclysmic events, the Second World War overthrew existing notions, ideas and even borders in Yugoslavia. In contrast, the Chetniks were once again able to ply their trade in the service of warfare. However, a different and distinct version of Chetniks emerged as a result of the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941.

Up to and including the first few months of Yugoslavia's war, the most famous of the Chetniks was Kosta Pećanac who, in 1917, led an uprising in Toplica which bestowed upon him a reputation as saviour and protector of Serbdom.[17] He fostered this reputation throughout the interwar period and, along with his "national work" described above, became the most well-known of the Chetniks in 1941. Perhaps in an attempt to save his people or perhaps out of genuine ideological affinity, Pećanac almost immediately sided with the Axis occupiers once the Royal Yugoslav Army was defeated and collaborated openly and willingly with them. This collaboration discredited him and his Chetniks as their reputation for fighting against the

[16] See, for example, the first edition of the paper *Srpski Glas*, November 16, 1939.
[17] For more on the uprising, see Božica Mladenović, *Toplički Ustanak 1917.: Zbirka Dokumenata* (Beograd: Istorijski Institut, 2007).

invaders, especially the "historical enemies" of Germany and Austria, was tarnished. As a result, Pećanac, and thus the "old Chetniks," became irrelevant in light of newer versions of *četovanje*.

In contrast, as a member of the Royal Yugoslav Army, Dragoljub "Draža" Mihailović was a trained army officer.[18] He fought in the Great War, retreated with the Serbian Army to Salonika in 1915 and, with the capitulation of the Royal Yugoslav Army in April 1941, took to the Serbian mountains along the Drina River to resist the Axis powers. With only several other officers with him, Mihailović dispatched fact-finding missions to Bosnia, Serbia, and Hercegovina to find like-minded officers and potential resistance elements. The results of Mihailović's movement from its inception in 1941 to its demise in 1946, with collaboration with the Axis occurring in between, have been recounted rather thoroughly elsewhere, but a key figure to emerge from this fact-finding mission was Dragiša Vasić, the president and co-founder of the SKK.

Vasić is an interesting case study. In the interwar period he was assumed to be a communist, or at least a sympathiser, after Vasić visited Moscow in 1927 and worked to free communists from prison.[19] This adds a further dimension, one that certainly challenges the notion of left- and right-wing politics, to the Chetnik ideological milieu. Regardless, the SKK was founded in 1937 by several leading Serb intellectuals, many of whom, like Vasić, would go on to support Mihailović, some of whom, including Vasić, made up the Central National Committee of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (*Centralni Nacionalni Komitet Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, CNK) of Mihailović's Ravna Gora Movement.[20] Interrogating the SKK's beliefs from the

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[18] The works on Mihailović, the Chetniks, the Ravna Gora Movement and nearly every facet of this period is well documented. Still, the best English language source remains Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: The Chetniks*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).
[19] Nikola Milovanović, *Dragiša Vasić: Od Gradjanskog Buntovnika Do Kontrarevolucionara* (Beograd: Nova Knjiga, 1986), 5.
[20] For more on Vasić and the SKK see John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 236-239.

interwar period will help shed light on the CNK's later wartime program, and to help flesh out Second World War Chetnik ideology.

The SKK's founding was based on fostering a Serbian national identity within a Yugoslav state. The intention was not to impede on Croat and Slovene national identities but rather to preserve Serbian culture in what they saw as an erosion of Serbian identity at the expense of other Yugoslav nations and, presumably, integral Yugoslavism as well.[21] The SKK's platform was most expressed in its newspaper, *Srpski glas* (Serbian Voice). Judging from several editions of *Srpski glas*, the SKK was vehemently opposed to the *Sporazum* of 1939, an agreement between the Yugoslav state and ethnic Croat politicians to create an autonomous Croatian *banovina*, province. Indeed, on the cover of its introductory issue of 16 November 1939, *Srpski glas* argued that the integrity of the Yugoslav state was even more necessary in light of the war than ever before. Rearranging and reorganising borders, as the *Sporazum* had done, would only further weaken Yugoslavia.[22] *Srpski glas* condemned the agreement and called for an autonomous Serbian entity to match the Croatian *banovina*. Their intent was to have the Serbs united within one contiguous territory, much like the ethnic Croats of Croatia were. To have nearly 1-million ethnic Serbs within the Croatian province's territory was proof of the eroding nature of the Serbian identity within the Yugoslav state to such an extent that even having a Serbian province was not enough:

> we think that the gathering [*okup*] of Serbs is necessary, but we will immediately add that the gathering [*okupljanje*] will not be enough, if simultaneously the Serbs do not wake up the same spirit that made their strength and greatness in the past, the same faith in national ideals and the same masculine determination to subordinate everything else to

[21] Dejan Djokić, "National Mobilization in the 1930s: The Emergence of the 'Serb Question' in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia," in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, ed. Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 62–81: 75.
[22] "Naša Reč," *Srpski Glas*, November 16, 1939, 1 edition, sec. 1.

> those ideals. Within the limits of its powers, our paper is also intended to prepare for that rebirth.[23]

The presence of figures like Vasić in the CNK represents Mihailović's vision of a postwar Yugoslavia: one in which ethnic Serbs and Croats live separate but equal lives within one state, perhaps even dominated at a federal level by Serbs.

Another important figure in the SKK was Slobodan Jovanović, the wartime prime minister of Yugoslavia and ardent supporter, albeit in exile in London, of Mihailović's Chetniks. From his appointment in early-1942 until his dismissal in June 1943, Jovanović defended Mihailović and the Chetniks from claims of collaboration with the Axis, massacres against non-Serb civilians, and petitioned the British for more material support for the Chetniks.[24] Yet another important member of the SKK and who, like Vasić, was also included on the CNK, was Mladen Žujović.[25] When the "old Chetnik" and commander of the Dinara Chetnik Division Ilija Trifunović-Birčanin died in 1943 Žujović was named Lieutenant Colonel and appointed as replacement to Birčanin and assigned the regions of Dalmatia, Lika and Hercegovina. This appointment was rather important since the Dinara Chetnik leaders were resistant to coming under direct command of Mihailović's officers, and Birčanin provided the buffer between the central command of Mihailović and the *ad hoc* guerrilla administration of Dinara, of which more will be said later.

Stevan Moljević contributed most to the CNK and Mihailović's Chetnik ideology and was undoubtedly influenced by the events of the interwar period and by his involvement in the

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[23] "Naša Reč," *Srpski Glas*, November 16, 1939, 1 edition, sec. 1.
[24] Stevan K. Pavlowitch, "Yugoslavia in Exile: The London-Based Wartime Government, 1941-1945," in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, ed. Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 100–116.
[25] Lucien Karchmar, *Draža Mihailović and the Rise of the Četnik Movement, 1941-1942*, vol. 1 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 536.

SKK. Writing the pamphlet "Homogenous Serbia" (*Homogena Srbija*) in the summer of 1941, that is early in the war, Moljević outlined his plan for Mihailović's Chetnik movement.[26] The pamphlet is an ideological outline for creating an ethnically homogenous Serbian territory at the expense of all other ethnicities. If those ethnicities did not support the Serbian program, as interpreted by the CNK, then they should be classified as traitors and expelled or killed.[27] While the pamphlet did not itself become official policy, there is evidence that Mihailović pulled from it in some orders, as evidenced in his "Instructions" of December 1941 to the Montenegrin Chetniks. In essence, the document outlines the program for the Montenegrin Chetniks and instructs them to "cleanse" territories of undesirable populations with the goal of an "ethnically pure" Serbia, to create a common border between Serbia and Montenegro and to redeem "all hitherto unliberated" areas.[28] In response, the Montenegrin Chetnik leader Pavle Đurišić reported on 13 February 1942 that a week earlier 8,000 civilians were killed including women, children and the elderly, along with 12,000 fighters and that Muslim villages were "completely burned."[29] Though the report is from February 1942, the plan for instituting Moljević's "Homogenous Serbia" was well under way for several months beforehand.

The Dalmatian Variant

Variants existed even within the Second World War Chetniks. Nowhere is this most obvious than amongst the Dinara Chetnik Division (DCD), the contingent located around Dalmatia, Lika,

[26] Zbornik, book XIV, vol. 1, doc. no. 1.
[27] As Dulić notes, the "interpretation of 'guilt' was extremely wide" and cites the killings of women and children as an example. See, Tomislav Dulić, "Ethnic Violence in Occupied Yugoslavia: Mass Killing from Above and Below," in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, ed. Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 82–98: 86.
[28] Zbornik, book IV, vol. 3, doc.185, 457-458.
[29] ZBORNIK, book 2, doc. 34, 182-185.

Kordun, Hercegovina and western Bosnia. Here, rather distant from the central Chetnik command in western Serbia, and with its own pressures and demands, the style of *četovanje* was closer to the types found amongst the "old Chetniks" than of Mihailović's army officer background. This led to infighting amongst the DCD's leadership, explicit collaboration with the Italian occupational authorities, and the targeting even of ethnic Serbs who did not necessarily adhere to the leadership's principals. The DCD leadership also strongly resisted attempts by Mihailović to subordinate the DCD to his commanding officers. This in many ways sets the DCD apart from other Chetnik groups from around the same time.

The uprising in the region around the Dinara Mountain began in response to the genocidal policies and actions of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH), an entity carved out of Croatia and enlarged by the addition of Bosnia and Hercegovina and which had the support of both Italy and Germany.[30] Like in other parts of Yugoslavia, the insurgents did not necessarily adhere to any one political ideology, but they soon coalesced into two main camps: the nationalist and the communist. The first victims of the NDH genocide were Serbian elites which were almost exclusively males. When the remaining men went into hiding in the woods, the target group became women, children, the elderly and anyone else who did not or could not escape. The insurgents formed *ad hoc* resistance groups to defend villages from NDH violence. Eventually, ethnic Serbs escaped the territory of the NDH and its marauding army, the Ustaša, and arrived in the Italian occupation zone where they were detained in refugee camps which also acted as prisoner of war camps. It was within these camps that the first

[30] For more on the NDH and the Ustaša, see both Rory Yeomans, ed., *The Utopia of Terror: Life and Death in Wartime Croatia* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015); Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941-1945* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

elements of the Chetnik movement would coalesce.[31] Populated by women, children and the elderly, but also by the men in the forests and Royal Yugoslav Army POW officers, the camps became an ideal environment for disseminating both communist and nationalist propaganda. Italy, for its part, saw the potential that the camps provided to undermine NDH policies and territorial claims, not to mention its rule, and allowed, or at least ignored, recruitment. The camps eventually split into two ideological factions along nationalist and communist lines and these would become the start of the two main resistance movements. What each group resisted, however, became the main point of difference.

The split between communists and nationalists has been well documented, but for our purposes it is important to know that the men who would eventually populate the DCD collaborated with Italy against the NDH and against the Partisans. The process of collaboration began in earnest, and often at the initiative of the nationalist Serbs. It has been suggested that a number of the Chetnik leadership had pre-existing ties to the Italians and it made collaborating with them not only easier but logical.[32] Whatever the case, the Chetniks and Italians began their relationship by trading goods such as arms, clothing, medicine and food from the Italians in return for armed collaboration against the communists and the NDH.

For his part, Mihailović also sent officers from Ravna Gora to the rebellious regions of the NDH in an attempt to gather the insurgency under his leadership.[33] This had the intention of not only consolidating all the resistance units under an overall leadership but would also prevent the Partisans from gaining a foothold amongst the *Prečani*, as in those Serbs who lived outside of Serbia. The existence of the officers in the camps, then, was an important element for

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[31] Jovo Popović, Marko Lolić, and Branko Latas, *Pop Izdaje* (Stvarnost, 1988), 23-24.
[32] This is the argument in Jovo Popović, Marko Lolić, and Branko Latas, *Pop Izdaje* (Stvarnost, 1988).
[33] See the first volume of Kosta Nikolić, *Istroija Ravnogorskog Pokreta, 1941-1945*, 3 vols. (Beograd: Srpska Reč, 1999).

Mihailović to consolidate the resistance: the fact that he, too, was an officer of the Royal Yugoslav Army and resisting the Axis was an important psychological component. Even so, to ensure the direct connection Mihailović sent his own officers from Ravna Gora to make the connection and to organise the units along his structure.

Similarly, Momčilo Đujić's experience from the interwar period played a role in normalising relations between the Serbs and the Italians. Born in 1907 and ordained as a priest in 1931, Đujić found himself dabbling in politics by the 1930s. As part of a minority group (Serbs) within a minority territory (Croatia) Đujić, like many Serbs, saw himself at a disadvantage. Not only were the ethnic minorities within Yugoslavia gaining certain privileges, but the other minorities such as Serbs in Croatia were being ignored or even losing privileges from their perspective. Far from Serbia proper and the decision-making centre, and in an isolated territory surrounded by potential enemies, the Serbs in the Krajina – the region that acted as the military frontier between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires in the 17th to 19th-centuries – were at an exponential disadvantage. The 1920s and 1930s saw low-level clashes take on religious and ethnic tones in the Krajina and frightened many Serbs, some of whom took to arming themselves.[34] Đujić, similarly, invited the Chetnik Association of Kosta Milovanović Pećanac to Dalmatia in 1935 as an attempt to bring some semblance of organisation and clarity.[35] The Pećanac Chetniks, as outlined earlier, were responsible for genocide against ethnic Albanians, Turks, Bosnian Muslims and other non-Serbs in Kosovo, Metohija and Macedonia in the early 20th-century. The interwar period saw the Chetnik Association recruit new members, such as Đujić, who had little or no memory of the Balkan Wars (1912/1913), the Great War (1914-1918)

[34] Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016).
[35] Jovo Popović, Marko Lolić, and Branko Latas, *Pop Izdaje* (Stvarnost, 1988), 11-13.

or Chetnik actions of the 1920s.[36] Đujić, then, joined "one of the most reactionary [groups] in the country, with a police-regime character for carrying out national oppression of other Yugoslav peoples and persecution of the most advanced elements."[37] Around the same time, the *Ban* (Governor) of Croatia also complained to the Stojadinović government in Belgrade that Chetnik groups in Croatia, including Đujić's, were responsible for plundering private property.[38]

It has been argued that unlike other parts of Serb-inhabited Yugoslavia, the Krajina had no historical experience of *četovanje*, guerrilla war or insurgency.[39] However, this overlooks the presence of *hajduci* and other militarised actors in the region. Regardless, by arriving in the Kninska Krajina,[40] the Chetniks exported their violence and expanded their geographic scope to new communities and against other Yugoslav peoples. Đujić was the main mover in initiating this process. As a priest, Đujić was an important community member and emerged quickly as a natural leader in the region. When he was first ordained, Đujić was given a parish in Strmica, a small village on the border of Lika, Dalmatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina sometimes referred to as *Tromedja*, the tri-counties. He was responsible for re-organising the community and stoking their interest in religion, even successfully petitioning the government to restore the church bells of a local parish which had been used as cannon fodder by the Habsburgs. He soon was given the nickname "Father Fire" by the parishioners and "priest of left democracy" by the government. The former nickname signified his reputation as an eloquent and impassioned speaker who could motivate the masses, while the latter represented Đujić's role in joining labour strikes,

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[36] John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[37] *Vojna enciklopedija*, 2, Beograd 1971, 261 quoted in Jovo Popović, Marko Lolić, and Branko Latas, *Pop Izdaje* (Stvarnost, 1988), 12.
[38] Jovo Popović, Marko Lolić, and Branko Latas, *Pop Izdaje* (Stvarnost, 1988), 12.
[39] Jovo Popović, Marko Lolić, and Branko Latas, *Pop Izdaje* (Stvarnost, 1988), 11.
[40] Kninska Krajina refers to the military borderland and is meant to differentiate it from the Bosanska or Bosnian Krajina. Kninska refers to the area around and administered by Knin in north-central Dalmatia and includes Dalmatia, Lika, Kordun and sometimes parts of Hercegovina.

petitioning for workers' rights, and general anti-regime activity. However, at least one study of the Communist Yugoslav era has argued that Đujić's presence in labour strikes and rallies was actually a result of clandestine motivations to break the strikes and to undermine the regime in return for Italian favour. It was this pre-existing relationship with Italy, the authors claim, that made the Italians see Đujić as the ideal leader for anti-NDH insurgencies.[41]

Regardless of the veracity of the aforementioned claims, Đujić nevertheless emerged as the leader of the Serb insurgents around Knin. Still, throughout the war, Đujić and his colleague in north Dalmatia, Dobrosav Jevđević, refused to hand over control of the DCD to Mihailović's officers.[42] At times, both men even went so far as to contradict "Mihailović's basic strategy."[43] This represents one way in which the DCD operated as a guerrilla unit rather than as a professional army. Insubordination of a commanding officer was not tolerated by Mihailović, but whether it was because the DCD was so far off or because Đujić and Jevđević commanded so much authority, nothing came of their defiance. It is also likely that Mihailović's own collaboration with the Germans, his knowledge and at least tolerance of collaboration with Italy in Montenegro, and the various benefits that collaborating with Italy brought outweighed the need to bring the DCD under his more direct command.

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[41] This is the argument presented throughout Jovo Popović, Marko Lolić, and Branko Latas, *Pop Izdaje* (Stvarnost, 1988) who go on to show that it was the interwar relationship with Italy that ensured his position as leader, facilitated agreements with the Italian occupational authorities, and later allowed him safe passage to and in the prisoner of war camps in postwar Italy and eventual emigration to America. As will be shown later, there may be merits for this argument given Đujić's postwar experiences as an informer for the CIA.

[42] Kosta Nikolić, *Istroija Ravnogorskog Pokreta, 1941-1945*, vol. 1 of 3 (Beograd: Srpska Reč, 1999), 182. It should be noted at this point that Jevđević was also a member of the interwar Chetnik Association and a member of the Yugoslav National Party (*Jugoslovenska nacionalna stranka*, JNS), to which was attached the Organisation of Yugoslav Nationalists (*Organizacija Jugoslavenskih Nacionalista*, ORJUNA) and of which Jevđević was also a member. For more on the interwar fascist and "para-fascist" peoples and parties, see John Paul Newman, "War Veterans, Fascism, and Para-Fascist Departures in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1918-1941," *Fascism* 6 (2017): 42–74, https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00601003.

[43] Kosta Nikolić, *Istroija Ravnogorskog Pokreta, 1941-1945*, vol. 1 of 3 (Beograd: Srpska Reč, 1999), 182.

At any rate, the DCD leadership determined that fighting the NDH and the Ustaša was far more pressing a concern than fighting the occupational authorities. Thus, a campaign against the NDH began which saw the DCD take arms, ammunition, money, clothing, food, medicine and other supplies from the Italians in exchange for undermining the NDH. The agreements began as oral arrangements but by early 1942 they emerged as formal written agreements between two warring parties. The rise of the Partisans in the Krajina also contributed greatly to pushing the DCD into Italian arms, if any cajoling was actually needed, and as the Ustaša slaughter of Serbs slowed and stalled by Autumn 1941 and into 1942 the Partisans soon became enemy number one. From the Italian perspective, the Chetniks became the Anti-Communist Volunteer Militia (*Milizia Volontaria Anti Comunista*, MVAC) units which operated from Dalmatia to Montenegro and into Bosnia-Hercegovina, essentially anywhere that Italy's influence reached. Though the agreements were not signed between the Italians and the Dinara Chetniks until 1941, the arrangements began on an *ad hoc* basis in the Autumn of 1941 and continued until the capitulation of Italy in 1943, at which point Germany replaced the Italians.

As the Chetniks increasingly lost ground to the Partisans after 1943, collaboration increased and became more frequent across Yugoslavia. The irony is that the Chetniks lost supporters because of their collaboration, amongst other things, yet the more they lost supporters the more open and direct the collaboration became. Of course, massacres against non-ethnic Serbs prevented other ethnic groups from joining the Chetniks as well. A great number of Chetniks met their demise either at the hands of the Axis or the Partisans, such as Pavle Đurišić of Montenegro, while others were caught, tried and executed at postwar trials, such as Mihailović in 1946. Momčilo Đujić, for his part, managed to flee abroad and eventually settled in San Diego, California. He died in 1999 at 92 years old.

Chetniks in the 1990s

When the Yugoslav wars of succession broke out in 1991, Đujić mobilised the Serbian diaspora to donate money during various cultural events and rallies at which he gave speeches. As the last remaining *vojvoda* and the most senior Chetnik, Đujić appointed Vojislav Šešelj *vojvoda* of the Chetniks in 1989.[44]

Šešelj's military career is limited and, despite the title of *vojvoda*, should be seen as a figurehead of the Chetniks and not anything more. However, his thoughts and comments are his biggest contributions to the Chetnik and more recent extreme Serbian nationalisms. Keeping with Serbian nationalist tradition, Šešelj advocated for the creation of a Greater Serbian state whose borders would extend to the outskirts of Zagreb.[45] Meanwhile, the Chetnik paramilitary unit, also known as *Šešeljevci* (Šešelj's men), was responsible, along with other paramilitary units, for events at Višegrad in 1992 which saw the killing of roughly 3,000 Bosnian Muslim men, women and children. People were rounded up from Višegrad based solely on their ethno-religious identity, brought to the famed Mehmed Sokolović Bridge, and shot. Their bodies fell into the Drina River and the cycle would continue. In other instances, victims were locked in houses and set alight.[46]

The actions of the *Šešeljevci* during the Yugoslav wars should be seen as a continuation from the Second World War, but with even more extreme outcomes. Part of the reason for the extremism in the 1990s is that paramilitary units like the *Šešeljevci* had the backing of and support from the state, whereas the Chetniks of the Second World War were dealing with

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[44] A video of this event can be seen at https://youtu.be/i0t95r8pcaQ.

[45] A truncated video of this event was located at Radovan Karadžić and Vojislav Šešelj, "Karadzic & Seselj 1991," YouTube video, 3:51, posted by "DoktorDabic," 23 July 2008, https://youtu.be/cGs_TmDw_Aw (accessed 15 April 2021), but has since been taken down due to copyright restrictions. I have not been able to find another copy online.

[46] International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, "Milan Lukić and Sredoje Lukić Judgement," July 20, 2009.

occupation and lacked the infrastructure of the state, a phenomenon which can be contrasted to the NDH genocidal campaign against ethnic Serbs, Jews, Roma and others. However, this only partially explains the brutality, excessiveness and extreme nationalist rhetoric associated with the Yugoslav wars and the Serbian paramilitaries specifically.

This is not to say that these phenomena did not exist at other times in relation to the Chetniks, but rather that they reached an apex in the 1990s. In comparison to the other examples presented in this paper, the *Šešeljevci* operated after decades of heightened tensions, rhetoric and increasing amounts of violence. Figures such as Šešelj built upon the ideologies of the Second World War, the Balkan Wars and the centuries' long stoking of Serbian nationalism. It has been well documented, for instance, that the rhetoric of the 1980s developed exponentially and rolled into the violence of the 1990s.[47] In other words, had the other instances of Chetnik violence, from 1903 to 1945, had time to develop along lines similar to what culminated in the 1990s they, too, would have exhibited similar levels of violence, rhetoric and extremism.

Much like the examples of the early twentieth-century and the Second World War, the actions of the *Šešeljevci* can tell us about their ideological beliefs. Certainly Šešelj's desire was a Greater Serbia, but he was by no means the only, let alone the first, Serb to advocate this view, yet we can still count that as part of the overall Chetnik ideology in the 1990s. Targeting and killing ethnic Bosnian Muslims and other non-Serbs also places the *Šešeljevci* within an exclusionary Serb nationalism. If given the opportunity, there is reason to believe that the *Šešeljevci* would have perpetrated violence against ethnic Croats in pursuit of a Greater Serbia in much the same way as they had against Bosnian Muslims.[48] Others have argued that the Ottoman

[47] As only one example, V. P. Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*. United States: Cornell University Press, 2004.
[48] Šešelj's concept of Greater Serbia shows this, for example. See "Case Information Sheet: Vojislav Šešelj," n.d.

practice of Muslims living in the cities while Christians and others lived in the countryside led to the view that cities are cosmopolitan, sinful, and represent the degeneration of Serbian culture and civilised society.[49] Anti-urbanism also fits within the larger phenomenon of modern nationalism which seeks a return to "traditionalism" and attempts to reject modernity, cities and other technological and societal developments.[50] Ironically, scholars of nationalism have shown time and again the modern origins of nations and nationalism, yet it appears as though nationalism is the one modern concept which nationalists adhere to despite these origins. Ultra-masculinity is another concept which has prevailed amongst the Serbian paramilitaries. This can be expressed in thought and in speech, as evidenced by Šešelj's language to judges, lawyers, reporters and others throughout his war crimes trial and since.[51] Yet ultra-masculinity can also be expressed more violently, such as in the mutilation of sexual organs, rape, and the murder of men and boys as happened in Višegrad.[52] Again, it is worth noting that none of these points are exclusive to the 1990s nor to the *Šešeljevci* but rather this era has been better documented, more thoroughly investigated and occurred at a time in which social media, the internet and other technological advances make possible what was never before conceived.

Conclusion

[49] Ivo Žanić, *Flag on the Mountain: A Political Anthropology of War in Croatia and Bosnia*, London, Saqi Books, 2007.
[50] Jussi Backman, "A Russian Radical Conservative Challenge to the Liberal Global Order: Aleksandr Dugin," in *Contestations of Liberal Order: The West in Crisis?*, ed. Marko Lehti, Henna-Riikka Pennanen, and Jukka Jouhki (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 289–314, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22059-4.
[51] See for example, https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/26672-seselj-firebrand-believer-in-greater-serbia.html.
[52] Stevan Bozanich, "Invented Warriors: The Legacy of the Invented Serbian Hajduk Tradition," in *Balkan Legacies: The Long Shadow of Conflict and Ideological Experiment in Southeastern Europe*, ed. John Paul Newman and Balázs Apor (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, Forthcoming 2021), 57–70.

Can it be said that there is a unified "Chetnik" ideology? Certainly there are particular hallmarks of Serbian nationalism as advocated by the various Chetnik groups. Extreme hatred for the other, strong desire to protect the in-group members, genocidal violence towards civilians and out-group populations, ultra-masculinity and extreme nationalism appear to be certain characteristics. There are other markers to which Serbian nationalists lay claim, such as anti-imperialism, but are really just window dressing for the perceived slight by "the West" because of the latter's actions during the 1990s. Yet, none of these point to a specific trend of Serbian nationalism but rather are signposts of other extreme nationalisms as well. There is a paradox of nationalism that makes it both able to transcend ethnic, national and state lines while also creating hard divisions and borders between groups of people. It is extremely plastic and malleable, able to be shaped and shifted at the whim of the sculptor. This malleability is also why recent events have shown the cross-national nature of nationalism, for instance, Šešelj's support for Donald Trump's election and re-election campaign[53] or the strong interest in Serbian nationalism by the New Zealand mosque shooter.[54] The trans-national character of nationalism is not new, as evidenced by the "old Chetniks" cooperating with ostensibly disparate ethnic and national groups for a common cause. However, when it came to it, the Chetniks split with their Albanian and other counterparts and devolved to warfare amongst themselves. For all of the potential positives that nationalism can bring, it is the destruction and the overwhelmingly negative aspects that make nationalism a dangerous phenomenon. Looking at the Chetniks through their own eyes has shown this.

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