

## 11 Escape from Vis

As the Americans were aware that the Partisan forces were keeping 15 German divisions and at least 100,000 collaborators busy in the Balkans, in 1944 they established contact with Partisan headquarters and, following the British example, ended their cooperation with Mihailović. It was important for the Allied units in Italy, which were fighting 26 Wehrmacht divisions, that these German forces were not reinforced by those from the Balkans. Within this context, on 25 August 1944 a meeting took place on the Isle of Capri between Tito and William Donovan, a representative of the American intelligence service, OSS. In spite of this, the belief was affirmed within this organisation that intelligence gathering cells should be maintained in every part of Yugoslavia, even those under Mihailović's control. One reason for this was the fact that a fair number of American pilots had ended up in these areas after being shot down by the Germans while flying sorties over Serbia. The plan was implemented with the help of Ambassador Robert Murphy and other influential military personnel. On 3 August a reconnoitre team was parachuted in near to the village of Pranjane, eighty kilometres south of Belgrade, where Mihailović had gathered around 250 American pilots. With the help of the local population an emergency airfield was created and between the 9 and 10 of August, C-47 planes evacuated all 250 pilots in a daring operation that then continued until November. In addition, on 25 August the Americans sent another six operatives to the territory under Mihailović's command. Their leader, Colonel Robert McDowell, explained to the general that his one and only task was to collect military information and that his arrival should not be interpreted as political support for the Chetnik movement. In spite of this, a leaflet soon appeared which, among other things, stated: "Delegates have arrived from the Allied American government and personal envoys from President Roosevelt, a faithful friend of peace-loving small nations."

When Tito heard about this – since 1943 Ranković had had his people within Mihailović's headquarters – he responded with anger, all the more so because no one had informed him about the American agents' mission. He ordered his units to cease cooperation with the American and British liaison officers, and to limit their freedom of movement around the territory under Partisan control and their intelligence gathering. The British later managed to reduce this level of control, but this did not apply to the Americans, towards whom Tito maintained a very reserved attitude, convinced that they could not be trusted. It is also the case that the Americans did not trust him, for as early as June 1944 the OSS sent to Washington a report from Tehran, which was all but encouraging. Đilas had stopped off in the Iranian capital on his way from Moscow and, slightly inebriated, told a group of Western officers about his talks with Stalin. Stalin was said to have informed him that immediately after the War he would sever all contact with the British and Americans, and that he was counting on the support of Tito and his Yugoslav comrades in this. Another thing that contributed to poor mutual relations was the decision by President Roosevelt not to reply to two letters from Tito.

The mistrust that pervaded American-Yugoslav relations was most clearly expressed by William J. Donovan in his memorandum of 1 January 1945 to James V. Forrestal, state secretary for defence. In it, Donovan spoke about the necessity of covert OSS activities in Eastern Europe, implying that “all those who are not with us, are against us.” In support of this he quoted an excerpt from Tito’s speech, published on 29 September by the New York Times, which sounded like an announcement of imminent revolution, as Tito said that in some countries, communists had already shown insufficient courage and determination, and that when public demonstrations were impossible, armed struggle was necessary.

Tito’s departure or, to use a better word, escape from the Island of Vis must be placed in this context of disagreement and mutual suspicion between the Eastern and Western members of the anti-Hitler coalition. The escape was organised, in the utmost secrecy and in cooperation with the Soviets, by Ranković, the head of The Department for the Protection of the People (OZNA), founded in May of that year. The British, who were in control of the airport, were persuaded that Soviet pilots needed to practice night landings and that it would be best if they did so on Vis. The British gave permission and for three or four nights monitored the take-offs and landings of Soviet planes. When the Soviets were sufficiently “trained”, Tito left with them at three in the morning on 19 September 1944. His plane took off without any departure signals, in complete darkness, and they covered the head of Tito’s dog Tiger, who never wanted to leave his side, with a bag to muffle his barks. The lack of trust in the Allies was such that the plane carrying Tito was accompanied by another plane, which flew in the opposite direction over Bosnia. When a few days later, the British noticed that their guest had “levanted” without informing them or saying goodbye, they were greatly offended, but control of what went on in Yugoslavia had long before slipped from their hands. Kardelj’s sarcastic comment was: “After all, Churchill has to go on acting in a friendly manner, as otherwise the English will tell him his policies in the Balkans have been a complete failure. But the Russians are in Donji Miholjac!”

Tito provocatively responded to MacLean's later reproaches that he had gone to Moscow without informing his protectors: “Churchill does not ask me when and to where he may travel.” Tito’s escape from Vis did not remain a secret from the Germans who, in spite of their animosity towards Yugoslav communists, allowed themselves a little *Schadenfreude*. At a meeting with his officers, Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer SS*, said: “I’d like to offer another example of steadfastness, that of Marshal Tito. I must say this communist veteran, this *Herr* Josip Broz, is a man of strong character. Sadly, he is our enemy. He really has earned the rank of Marshal. When we catch him, we’ll deal with him immediately, I assure you of that. [...] However, I wish that we had a dozen Titos in Germany. [...] This man had nothing. He was among the Russians, the British and the Americans and had the courage to make fools of the British and the Americans and to defecate on them in the most comical way. He is a Moscow man [...] He has never capitulated.”