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13 The Post-War Extrajudicial Killings

During the final military operations in May 1945, the Yugoslav armed forces caught and imprisoned 125,000 collaborators and 280,000 German soldiers; they were particularly careful to ensure that as few Gestapo members as possible escaped. Towards the end of 1944, Tito had twice promised amnesty to those members of quisling units who had not committed criminal acts if they joined the Partisans. After an agreement with Šubašić, numerous members of the Croatian Home Guard took the opportunity and deserted from the armed forces of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). However, as Šubašić had no influence in Serbia and Slovenia, in their ideological blindness Chetniks, Ljotić supporters and the Slovene Home Guard militias failed to follow this example. Although on 14 May Tito issued an order that the killing of prisoners of war and detainees must be avoided at all costs while those suspected of war crimes should be put in front of a court – “all prisoners of war are to be handed over to the military headquarters of Slovenia and Croatia” – as early as 18 May he closed down these two headquarters and annexed their units to the Yugoslav Army, a decision partly influenced by the threat of armed conflict with the British and the Americans on the western borders. When on 1 May Partisan forces liberated and occupied Trieste and Gorizia, serious tensions arose between Belgrade on the one hand and London and Washington on the other, as the Allies demanded the unconditional withdrawal of Partisans from this strategically important area and were prepared to march all the way to Ljubljana to achieve this. The sense of imminent threat that Yugoslav leaders experienced at this development probably only confirmed their conviction that the captured or returned Yugoslav collaborators needed to be “destroyed” as soon as possible. Approximately 30,000 managed to make their way to Southern Carinthia, but the British returned most of them to their home country even though they could not be under any illusions about the fate that awaited them. There were many discussions involving Tito and around Tito at the end of the war about the bloodbath that followed; one such occasion was at the meeting of heads of the Department for the Protection of the People, led by Aleksandar Ranković, in late September 1943 in Belgrade. At the meeting it was decided that all the members of the quisling units would be physically exterminated. The final decision of how to deal with them was probably adopted in Zagreb at a strictly confidential military consultation between Tito and the commanders of the four regional branches of the Yugoslav Army on the basis of the assessment of the strategic situation at the time. They were afraid that if it came to a conflict with the Western Allies, the collaborators would take their side and become a kind of “Trojan horse” or “time bomb”. When the British actually began returning them in the second half of May 1945, a colonel came to Slovenia bearing a letter from Ranković addressed to the local head of the Department for the Protection of the People, Matija Maček, saying that “justification” had to be carried out. The settling of scores with the Slovene Home Guard, the Ustashe, the supporters of Nedić and Ljotić, and the Chetniks was very thorough: the members of the first

were shot in Slovenia and the rest – at least those that were not killed on the spot – were forced on “death marches” towards the camps in the middle of the country where they were to be interned, but very few reached them alive.

Tito did not regret these killings: on the contrary, he thought they were more than justified, especially when he argued with Stalin. “At that time,” he said later, “there was no military attack on us because Yugoslavia was unified and the various reactionary elements in the country were unable to carry out any provocations because their main strength was obliterated during the national liberation struggle.” He, together with the others who were responsible, expressed the moral justification for the killings with the claim that the “sentence” for the victims had been “pronounced by the nation”.

Tito’s ruthless treatment of the “counter-revolutionaries” received no response in the West. It did receive praise from Stalin, of which the Yugoslav leaders were very proud. At a meeting with the Polish delegation, Stalin criticised the Warsaw authorities for their lenience towards the opposing forces and gave Marshal Tito as an example: “Tito is a cunning one. He has killed all his opponents.” In fact, Tito did not try to hide the fact, even though he did not want to discuss the matter at length. In 1946, at a dinner in Stalin’s *dacha*, the Soviet leaders asked him: “So how many did you kill?” – “As many as was necessary,” Tito replied laconically. In 1956, he openly admitted in Pula: “We carried out a revolution in blood with the help of the Liberation Army and in this way thoroughly cleansed our house...”

And so they did. In a report sent by Ivan V. Sadchikov to Moscow in the middle of February 1946, it said in relation to the possibility of an armed uprising against the regime that, according to Milovan Đilas, 200,000 collaborators had been killed after the liberation. And: “According to the interior minister’s report, 11,000 members of armed formations were destroyed. All the important commanders under Draža Mihailović were either arrested or shot.” Sadchikov commented that these numbers were too low and concluded his report with the statement that Tito was firmly in the saddle as no one posed a threat to him at home. A document drawn up in August and September of 1947 by the foreign policy commission within the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union also added that in Yugoslavia, “all reactionary and bourgeois forces” had been eliminated and “the roots of internal and external capitalism eradicated more thoroughly than in other (Eastern European) countries.”

In 1945 the well-known American journalist C. L. Sulzberger wrote in the New York Times that there were still approximately 50,000 anti-Communist guerrillas in Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav leadership denied this, calling it hostile propaganda. In fact the numbers were correct. At least 40,000 members of the disbanded military units, mostly Chetniks, were still hiding in the forests. Most of them had surrendered, but the most committed carried on a guerrilla struggle. The authorities organised decisive repressive measures against them and killed on the spot those captured during fighting or discovered in hiding places. In many cases this did involve people whose hands were indeed covered with blood, but it also included those who were not burdened by criminal acts. At the end of 1945, Tito gave an order that the extrajudicial killings had to stop. “No one is afraid anymore of the death penalty!” he said angrily at one session of the Politburo.