

Chetniks

(Serb., Cetniki, from ceta, "platoon"), Serbian guerrilla units that fought against the Turks and, in World War I, against Austro-Hungarian and German forces. In World War II, the Chetniks were armed bands of Serbs active in Yugoslavia during its occupation (1941-1945). They had in common their loyalty to the Yugoslav royal house, aiming to restore it to the throne after the war, and their commitment to a relentless struggle against the partisan forces led by Tito.

The first Chetnik units came into being shortly after the Yugoslav army's surrender to the Germans in April 1941, on the initiative of Col. Draza Mihajlovic, an officer of the Yugoslav general staff. Mihajlovic gathered around himself Yugoslav soldiers fleeing from the Germans, and began to organize them in the Fruska Gora Mountains of central Serbia.

Mihajlovic's men in Serbia took part in the uprising against the Germans in July and August of 1941, and even cooperated with the partisans under Tito. The uprising was suppressed by the Germans with unspeakable cruelty, causing many deaths and widespread destruction. This brought the Chetniks to three conclusions: (1) there was no point in waging a hopeless armed struggle against the Germans, a struggle that would threaten the very existence of the Serbian people; (2) the proper course was to organize and gain strength, so as to be ready for an Allied invasion of the Balkans; (3) the pro-Communist partisans were the most dangerous enemy of all, and it was the struggle with them that would decide Yugoslavia's fate after Germany was defeated.

These conclusions exacerbated the differences between the partisans and the Chetniks, which before long turned into a civil war. The Chetniks' struggle with the invaders came to a complete stop at the end of 1941, and gradually evolved into cooperation with the Italians and the Germans against Tito.

At first, the western Allies viewed the Chetniks as the core of the resistance movements in Yugoslavia against the invaders. But reports from British parachutists who joined the fighting forces in Yugoslavia began to reach the West, indicating that the Chetniks' policy was to fight the partisans under Tito, rather than the Germans and their allies. Consequently, the attitude of the western Allies underwent a change in the second half of 1942, and they switched their aid to the partisans who were fighting the German enemy. By the end of 1943, the break between the West and the Chetniks was complete. The Chetniks became collaborators and joined the forces fighting the partisans. After the occupation of Serbia by the partisans and the Red Army, the Chetniks were hunted down. Shortly after the end of the war, Mihajlovic and his men were captured and brought before a Yugoslav national tribunal. Most of them were hanged.

At the initial stage, there were some Jews among the Chetniks, but when it turned out that the Chetniks were not fighting the invaders and their collaborators, and in fact were inclined to cooperate with them, the Jews switched to the ranks of the partisans. As the Chetniks increased their cooperation with the Germans, their attitude toward the Jews in the areas under their control deteriorated, and they identified the Jews with the hated Communists. There were many instances of Chetniks murdering Jews or handing them over to the Germans.