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## **THE LAST MONTHS OF THE SDK: SRPSKI DOBROVOLJAČKI KORPUS IN SLOVENIAN TERRITORY DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

*ABSTRACT: Article covers the history of the Serbian Volunteer Corps during the last months of the Second World War, when it was operating in Slovenian territory. After the retreat from their homeland, Serbian volunteers, considered by Germans as their most valuable partners, were moved to Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland to reorganize and to participate in counterinsurgency operations against Slovenian partisans. While undermanned, with limited weaponry and equipment, they were still considered by the partisans to be efficient fighters due to their knowledge and experience in (counter)insurgency tactics. Soldiers of the Serbian Volunteer Corps participated in the last battle on Austrian soil, before their surrender to British forces. Shortly afterwards, the British turned them over to Yugoslav forces and were later killed in mass executions.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Second World War, Slovenia, Serbia, Serbian Volunteer Corps, Operations zone Adriatisches Küstenland, Waffen-SS, Slovenian partisans, counterinsurgency*

## **Early history of the SDK**

Serbian Volunteer Corps (originally *Српски добровољачки корпус* / *Srpski dobrovoljački korpus*; in German *Serbisches Freiwilligenkorps*; thereafter SDK) was one of the collaborationist (para)military organizations, formed in Serbia during the Second World War, fighting on the side of the Third Reich against the local communist-led forces of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia (*Narodnooslobodilačka vojska i partizanski odredi Jugoslavije*, NOV i POJ/NOVJ), more commonly knowns as the partisans.<sup>1</sup>

SDK was formed on 15 September 1941 under the name of Serbian Volunteer Command (*Srpska dobrovoljačka komanda*; SDK). It was primarily formed using pre-war members of the far-right party Yugoslav National Movement (*Jugoslavenski narodni pokret* / *Југословенски народни покрет*), which was also known as the United Militant Labour Organization (*Združena borbena organizacija rada* / *Здружена борбена организација рада*; abbreviated to *Zbor* / *Збор* (Rally)). Also, the members of the youth organization of the Zbor, the White Eagles (*Beli orlovi* / *Бели орлови*), were heavily recruited into the SDK. The founder and leader of the Zbor, Dimitrije Ljotić (1891–1945) also joined the SDK, but he didn't take command of the formation. SDK was under the leadership of the professional military officer, Colonel Kosta Mušicki (1897–1946). Despite this, the members of the SDK were known as *Ljotićevci*, which shows how much important was Ljotić as the ideological leader of the SDK.

Primarily, the SDK was formed to combat the rising communist-led insurgency in Serbia, which was fighting against the German occupation and Serbian collaborationist government under the leadership of General Milan Nedić (1877–1946). At first, the SDK was composed of 12 volunteer detachments (of company size), which had between 120 and

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<sup>1</sup> George Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im zweiten Weltkrieg 1939–1945: Erster Band: Die Waffengattungen – Gesamtübersicht* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1977), 400 (hereafter Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen: Erster Band*); H. L. de Zeng IV, »History of the Serbian Volunteer Corps,« *Siegrunen* 28 (1982): 44–54.

150 personnel and were mostly commanded by the officers of the former Royal Yugoslav Army or Yugoslav Gendarmerie. Already on 17 September 1941, the first fight between the SDK and partisan unit happened in the village of Dražanj.

In November 1941, SDK with Gendarmerie and Chetniks of Kosta Pećanac (1879–1944) were put under unified command, named *Šumadijski korpus* (Šumadija Corps). On 15 February 1942, the SDK had 172 officers and 3513 soldiers. At the end of the same year, the volunteer detachments were reformed into five battalions (with around 500 men each) and on 1 January 1943, the SDK was renamed into Serbian Volunteer Corps (*Srpski dobrovoljački korpus* / *Српски добровољачки корпус*; German: *Serbische Freiwilligenkorps*; the abbreviation stayed the same: SDK).

SDK was formally under the command of Nedić's government, but it was under direct command of Supreme German Commander in Serbia (*Militärbefehlshaber in Serbien*). The formal connection between German military command and SDK battalions was established using German liaison officer, attached to each battalion. At first, there were four volunteer (infantry) and one Chetnik battalion, but on 4 January, they formed also a mechanized battalion, cavalry squadron and received six airplanes (which were mostly used as courier planes).

In May 1943, Nedić wanted to increase the SDK personnel to form five regiments, but this request was turned down by the Germans. During this time, Germans captured and disarmed around 3,000 Chetniks of Pavle Đurišić (1907–1945). Due to intervention of Nedić and Ljotić, these Chetniks were released and used to form three regiments of so-called Montenegrin Volunteer Corps (*Crnogorski dobrovoljački korpus* / *Црногорски добровољачки корпус*), which later (in early 1944) became part of the SDK. On 15 September 1943, Nedić visited Adolf Hitler in Obersalzberg and gained permission to reinforce the SDK with at least five additional battalions (which could increase to 10 battalions if there are enough volunteers and equipment). This led to reorganization of existing five battalions to five regiments with 2 battalions each; process was completed by 20 October. But the worsening situation of Axis countries also reflected in the drop of volunteers to the SDK, which had difficult time to replace combat losses. At the end of 1943, the SDK had five regiments (with around 1,200 men each), artillery division

(five batteries with 560 men), mechanized battalion and cavalry squadron.<sup>2</sup>

In August 1944, the SDK had reached the strength of 9,886 men, which was the peak of the size of this formation. The next month Yugoslav partisans, with the support of the Soviet Red Army, begun an offensive to liberate Serbia. Unable to stop their progress, Germans, together with collaborators, started the strategic retreat towards the north, to Slovenia (and further to Austria). On 10 October 1944, the SDK command with its communication company were the last SDK units to leave Belgrade, the Serbian capital. German command wanted to use Serbian volunteers elsewhere, as they considered as their most valuable and useable collaborationist formation in Serbia. SDK was to be send to Operational Zone of Adriatic Littoral (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland*; OZAK), where they would be under the leadership of Odilo Globočnik (1904–1945), the High Police and SS Leader of the OZAK (HSSPF OZAK).<sup>3</sup> Most of the SDK personnel were transported to Slovenia using trains. First train left Serbian territory on 17 October, while the last left the 21 October. Part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the SDK left towards Slovenia on foot, crossing the territory of the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna država Hrvatska*, NDH). On 24 December 1944, between 30–40 SDK personnel were caught by the Croatian forces and killed, even though they were all fighting on German side. NDH considered the presence of the SDK on their territory as an intrusion, plus they weren't informed by the Germans of the transport of the SDK.

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<sup>2</sup> Archives of the Republic of Slovenia (hereafter) ARS, SI AS fond 1931, t. e. 602, interrogation report of Giorgij Ivanović, 20 April 1945; Milan Borković, *Kontrarevolucija u Srbiji: Kvislinška uprava 1941–1944. Knjiga Prva (1941–1942.)* (Beograd: Sloboda, 1979), 165–174; Milan Borković, *Kontrarevolucija u Srbiji: Kvislinška uprava 1941–1944. Knjiga Druga (1943–1944.)* (Beograd: Sloboda, 1979), 10, 149, 194, (hereafter Borković, *Kontrarevolucija u Srbiji 2*); David Littlejohn, *Foreign Legions of the Third Reich: Volume 3: Albania, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Hungary and Yugoslavia* (San Jose: R. James Bender Publishing, 1994), 255 (hereafter Littlejohn, *Foreign Legions of the Third Reich 3*); Hans Werner Neulen, *An deutscher Seite: Internationale Freiwillige von Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS* (München: Universitas Verlag, 1992), 226–232 (hereafter Neulen, *An deutscher Seite*); Gaj Trifković, »The Key to the Balkans: The Battle for Serbia 1944,« *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28 (2015): 528. For more on the SDK, see: Младен Стефановић, *Збор Димитрија Љотића: 1934–1945* (Београд: Народна књига, 1984) (hereafter Стефановић, *Збор*).

<sup>3</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 29, report on Nedićevci and Chetniks by Intelligence Centre of the 9th Corps, undated; Borković, *Kontrarevolucija u Srbiji 2*, 352–355.

## Coming to Slovenia

On 30 October the first train composition of 1,500 Serbian volunteers came to Ljubljana, which already on the same day continued to Postojna. Later, seven more trains followed. Serbs during their short stay in Ljubljana declared, that they “aren’t fanatics and loyal to Germans.” Many of them also told to Slovenians, that they “don’t have intention to fight and absolutely to shoot brothers” (e.g. Slovenians). Three highest Serbian officers on the first transport were also received by Leon Rupnik (1880–1946), President of the Provincial Government of the Province of Ljubljana and chief inspector of the Slovene Home Guard. Slovene Home Guard (*Slovensko domobranstvo*) was the main collaborationist force in the Ljubljana Province and the largest of all Slovenian-manned collaborationist forces.<sup>4</sup> At that time, Rupnik promised Serbian delegation, that Social Help, humanitarian organization in the Province of Ljubljana, will take care of Serbian civilians, that came with SDK personnel to the Slovenian territory.<sup>5</sup>

The first intelligence report by Slovenian partisans on the SDK is from 2 November, when they reported the plans of the SDK to be garrisoned in the towns (or villages) of Postojna, Prestranek, Št. Peter na Krasu (today Pivka) and Ilirska Bistrica. Partisan intelligence operatives also passed information that between 20 and 25 thousand Serbian soldiers will be moved in this area. Serbian soldiers told locals, that they “don’t want to fight with Russians”, but they will pounce with all force on partisans, which was contradictory to their earlier statements. Arrival of the SDK also raised the morale of the Slovenian National Defense Corps (*Slovenski narodno varnostni zbor*, SNVZ), which was the primary Slovenian-manned collaborationist force in the OZAK.<sup>6</sup> Slovenian

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the Slovene Home Guard, see: Boris Mlakar, *Slovensko domobranstvo: 1943-1945: ustanovitev, organizacija, idejno ozadje* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2003); Aleš Nose, *Domobranci, zdravo – Bog daj: protikomunistične enote na Slovenskem 1942-1945. 2., prenovljena in dopolnjena izdaja* (Ljubljana: Modrijan 2017).

<sup>5</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 89, situational report of Intelligence Patrol 1 Dolinar, 3 November 1944; ARS, SI AS fond 1912, t. e. 8, news of 2 November 1944; Stanko Kociper, *Kar sem živel: Spomini* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1996), 250.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the Slovenian National Defense Corps, see: Boris Mlakar, *Domobranstvo na Primorskem: 1943-1945* (Ljubljana, Borec, 1982).

collaborators also started to plan, how to deal a major strike against partisans with the help of the SDK.<sup>7</sup>

On the 10 November, a group of Serbian officers with Mušicki himself, visited Postojna (and the local tourist attraction Postojna Cave) and the next day also Pivka. This visit was meant to finally settle upon on future positions of the SDK units, when they arrive in the area.<sup>8</sup>

During this time, the German high command also subjugated the SDK to the Waffen-SS. As Waffen-SS in the second part of 1944 started to take control of most foreign military units, that were fighting on the German side, this also happened to the SDK, which formally joined the Waffen-SS. The order of integration was issued on 9 November but was carried out only on 27 November. At that movement, the SDK had five regiments, each with three battalions, communication company, logistics company and German liaison officer. The process of integration was concluded on 23 January 1945 with the order, issued by the *SS-Führungshauptamt* (SS-FHA), the operational headquarters of the SS, which proclaimed the SDK "attached to Waffen-SS" (*in die Waffen-SS versetzt*) as an "armed formation of the SS" (*Waffen-Verband der SS*). All the Serbian personnel of the SDK were "for the duration of war transferred to the Waffen-SS" (*für die Dauer des Krieges zur Waffen-SS kommandiert*). The same notification to the HSSPF OZAK also included information, that the SDK is composed of: Corps' HQ with communications company and five regiments with three battalions each. In March 1945, the Germans also started to use the designation of Serbian SS-Corps (*Serbisches SS Korps*) for the SDK. While Serbian soldiers never got Waffen-SS uniforms, insignia or identification papers, they received their supply of weapons, ammunitions, equipment, food, etc. through the Waffen-SS supply system.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 89, situational report of Intelligence Patrol 1 Dolinar, 2 November 1944.

<sup>8</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 67, intelligence report, 25 November 1944.

<sup>9</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1760, folder 257, »Serbisches Freiwilligen Korps«, 7 February 1945; Borković, *Kontrarevolucija u Srbiji 2*, 352–355; Littlejohn, *Foreign Legions of the Third Reich 3*, 255.

## First fights with Slovenian partisans

One of the first antiguerrilla actions of the SDK in Slovenia happened in the second part of the November 1944. Together with Germans and SNVZ units, Serbian volunteers participated in the operation. Serbian volunteers in several columns left Pivka and advanced towards the Snežnik mountain and the Brkini region. Action was a complete disaster, as Slovenian partisans, officially known as *Narodnoosvobodilna vojska in partizanski odredi Slovenije* (National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Slovenia; NOV in POS) were informed in advance regarding the plan and managed to move their units from the operational area. Due to confusion, several Serbian soldiers died as a result of friendly fire when skirmishes happened between their own units.<sup>10</sup>

On 19 December 1944 was a first day of a large operation against partisans in the Vipavska Valley (*Vipavska dolina*) and Trnovo Forest (*Trnovski gozd*). The operation was launched as a revenge for killing of one Serbian officer by the partisans. In the operation participated between 400 and a thousand soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the SDK, which were allocated to two battlegroups, led by Germans. First battlegroup had a starting point in Postojna with objective of seizing Otlica, while the second started operation also in Postojna, but with the goal of reaching Vipava (through Razdrto). First battlegroup quickly reached its goal, because it was opposed only by a weakened *Gregorčičeva brigada*, so it also continued towards Predmeja. The other battlegroups, including the second with Serbian soldiers, faced much better prepared defense positions by partisans. Partisan 9<sup>th</sup> Corps started to conduct a retreat of its units, which German-led units took advantage and on 26 December captured villages of Čepovan, Slap ob Idrijci and Dolenja Trebuša. At this point, German command realized that the partisan units managed to evade encirclement and decided to stop the operation. On 30 December, the German and Serbian units began returning to their garrisons. But during the operations, the SDK and part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the *10. SS-Polizei-Regiment* established new stronghold in the village of Col. The new stronghold was manned by

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<sup>10</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 89, situational report of Intelligence Patrol 1 Dolinar, 23 November 1944.

around 600 soldiers, that also had 5 anti-tank guns. Serbian soldiers left Col (for Postojna) after two weeks.<sup>11</sup>

While first Serbian units were already in combat with Slovenian partisans, some SDK units were still arriving. Most of the SDK units came to Slovenia on the Osijek-Zagreb-Graz-Ljubljana-Postojna route. On Austrian territory, some units were replenished with new recruits, before they were sent to the OZAK. Other parts of the SDK used the Petrovac-Kraljevo-Čačac-Užiška Požega-Užice-Brčko-Gunje-Vinkovac-Zagreb-Varaždin-Klagenfurt-Jesenice route. This route was also taken by the artillery division of the SDK, that came into Bohinjska Bistrica on 25 December. At the time of the arrival, the artillery division had only two Italian heavy mortars and regular infantry armament, according to partisan intelligence service. After some time, the division was transferred to Prestranek.<sup>12</sup>

In December 1944, talks between Serbians and Slovene Home Guard started regarding potential merger. To that end, one officer of the Home Guard, who was previously Serbian volunteer, was named as a liaison officer between them. This cooperation resulted, "that almost every Home Guardsman had – in secret, of course – Yugoslav signs and emblems with the insignia of Peter II, which would they used in the right movement to change for current German ones," also reported partisan intelligence operatives. Slovenian-Serbian plan was thwarted by the Germans, when they arrested this liaison officer. Never less, talk regarding cooperation between Slovenian Home Guard, SDK, Chetniks and Russian Vlasovites continued.<sup>13</sup> At this time, some Serbs, who were previously members of the Home Guard, joined the ranks of the SDK.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 29, report on Nedićevci and Chetniks by Intelligence Centre of the 9th Corps, undated; ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 32, situational report Nr. 201 of the Intelligence Centre of the 9th Corps, 20 December 1944; ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 32, situational report Nr. 204 of the Intelligence Centre of the 9th Corps, 31 December 1944; ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 89, situational report of Intelligence Patrol 1 Dolinar, 1 January 1945; Franjo Bavec, *Bazoviška brigada* (Ljubljana: Odbor Bazoviške brigade, Partizanska knjiga, 1970), 396–406; Stanko Petelin, *Osvoboditev Slovenskega primorja* (Nova Gorica: ČZP Soča, 1965), 80–84 (hereafter Petelin, *Osvoboditev*).

<sup>12</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 28, interrogation report of Dragoljub T., 5 January 1945; ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 28, interrogation report of Jovan V., 27 March 1945; Petelin, *Osvoboditev*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 89, situational report of Intelligence Patrol 1 Dolinar, 1 January 1945.

<sup>14</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1877, t. e. 50, request for leave by Milorad P., 12 February 1945.



## Replenishment and disease

After arriving in Slovenia, the SDK started a process of reorganization, replenishment and inclusion of new recruits. These recruits started to come from different prisoner-of-war, labor and concentration camps, especially those in Austria and Germany. In the Austrian capital of Vienna, SDK also established a central recruiting office, which was actively seeing new recruits. Potential recruits were shipped from the camps to Vienna, given 14 days to think about joining the SDK or returning to the camps. On the other hand, the *SS-Gebirgsjäger-Ausbildungs- und-Ersatz-Battalion 13*, which was stationed in Austrian town of Leoben, was training new German (liaison) personnel for the SDK.<sup>15</sup>

While almost all new recruits were Serbians (or at least Yugoslavs), at least one Polish civilian joined the SDK. Krištof D. was interned by the Germans in October 1940 and then sent to work in Leipzig. There he worked in the steelworks for a year and a half, until he managed to flee back to Poland. After three months of hiding, he was captured and sent to Austria. He once again escaped, this time to Vienna, but was recaptured and this time sent to the concentration camp Launsdorf. From there, he on 14 February 1945 again escaped to Vienna, where he met a Serbian recruiter for the SDK. He decided to join the Serbian formation, and on 20 February he was in Ilirska Bistrica, where he was assigned to a training company. But already on 9 March he deserted with another soldier and joined the Slovenian partisans. When he was asked, why he had joined the SDK, he replied, that was the only opportunity to join the resistance.<sup>16</sup>

This process was also confounded with the spread of different viral diseases among Serbians, soldiers and civilians. Bad quality and small quantity of food, worn-out uniforms and clothes (and lack of them), resulted in spreading of especially louse-borne typhus not just among Serbians, but also among the local population. On January 1945, intelligence service of the NOV in POS noted several death cases, which resulted in a

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<sup>15</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1760, folder 257, »Serbisches Freiwilligen Korps«, 7 February 1945; ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 29, »Overview of Serbian Volunteer Corps and Chetniks« by Intelligence Point I, 19 March 1945.

<sup>16</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 28, interrogation report of several deserters, 27 March 1945.

quarantine of a whole town of Ilirska Bistrica. Locals with contact with partisans also spread the typhus among them; the outbreak among partisans was mostly limited to the Istria Detachment (*Istrski odred*).<sup>17</sup>

In early 1945, the SDK units were located as follows: Corps' HQ in Postojna, 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment's HQ in Prestranek with units along the railway line Postojna-Pivka, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment in Pivka and along the railway line Pivka-tunnel under Kilovčane, 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment in Jordani and along railway Jordani-Reka, 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment with HQ in Ilirska Bistrica and units along railway line Ilirska Bistrica-Jordani and Col, and 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment with HQ in Prem and its units along railway line between tunnel under Kilovčane and Ilirska Bistrica. In Postojna was also the HQ of the SKD's military police contingent (so-called Field Gendarmerie), which also included a group of 20 members of the secret police. In Slovenia, members of the SDK were also known as *Nedićevci* (after the Nedić). The primary mission of the SDK was security-in-depth of the road *Trieste-Rijeka*, railway line Trieste-Postojna and connecting roads between settlements in this area. The size of garrisons varied from 80 (in Orlek) to 900 (in Prestranek). Most active garrisons were Prem (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment) and Ilirska Bistrica (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment), where Serbian soldiers daily made combat patrols along the railway line, neighboring roads and settlements.<sup>18</sup>

An example of such major control action is the action of 16 February, when 3 German officers with 200 Serbian soldiers left Ilirska Bistrica at 3 AM. At first, they searched the village of Potok, and then Janežovo Brdo. Here, a small group of soldiers left to search the village of Ostrožno Brdo. After the return of the group, the whole column went to Prelože and Pregarje, from where they returned to Ilirska Bistrica in late afternoon. During this "action", Serbian soldiers managed to capture two partisans, while they also had beaten one civilian, who they suspected to be helping the partisans.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 89, situational report of Intelligence Patrol 1 Dolinar, 31 January; Maks Zadnik, *Istrski odred* (Nova Gorica: Partizanska knjiga, 1975), 624.

<sup>18</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 24, monthly report from 15 February to 15 March 1945 by Intelligence Centre of the 4th Battalion of 18th Brigade, 15 March 1945; ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 29, »Overview of Serbian Volunteer Corps and Chetniks« by Intelligence Point I, 19 March 1945; ARS, SI AS fond 1864, t. e. 4, situational report of Intelligence Centre of the HQ of 2nd Brigade of National Defence, 31 January 1945.

<sup>19</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1864, t. e. 320a, situacijsko poročilo št. 145 OC Komande istrskega vojnega področja, z dne 17. februarja 1945.

In mid-April 1945, the SDK had almost 8,000 men, which were equipped with (also) 29 antitank guns and 29 mortars.<sup>20</sup>

## Major operations

Serbian soldiers also participated in major antiguerrilla operations. One such operation was *Rübezahl III*, which started on 2 March. For the purpose of this operation, Globočnik established an operational group Lion (*Löwe*) and took direct command of it. Operational group was composed from two battlegroups: *Zuschneid* and *Köstermann* (both named after their commanding officers). *Zuschneid* had German units, Caucasian battalion and two battalions of the SDK, while *Köstermann* comprised solely of German units. Altogether, Globočnik had under his command around 6 thousand soldiers and his goal was the destruction of the partisan 30<sup>th</sup> Division. After the start of the operation, partisans managed to hold their initial position in Vipavska dolina (Vipava Valley) and Trnovski gozd (Trnovo Forest) for two days, but the Axis pressure was too severe and they afterwards they started with to retreat. The operation lasted for ten days; Globočnik managed to push partisan division away from the important communication lines and at the same time inflicting major casualties among guerrillas, but division itself survived due to skillful evasion.<sup>21</sup>

SDK in Slovenia (or OZAK) wasn't facing only the local guerrilla force, but also were faced with an occasional aerial bombardment by British and/or American air force. On 12 March, Allied planes attacked railway station and railway bridge in the Prestranek. During the attack, planes also bombed some buildings, where Serbians were staying. The partisan intelligence service reported (highly exaggerated) casualties: more than 80 killed and 150 wounded Serbian soldiers. Allied planes also attacked Serbian units on the field; the same month they attacked a column of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, when it was operating around the town of Idrija. The results of the attack, according to partisan

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<sup>20</sup> Zdravko Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus slovenske narodnoosvobodilne vojske: 1943-1945* (Ljubljana: Društvo piscev zgodovine NOB Slovenije, 1999), 344 (hereafter Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus*).

<sup>21</sup> Radoslav Isaković-Rade, *Kosovelova brigada* (Ljubljana: Odbor Kosovelove brigade, Partizanska knjiga, 1973), 629–644 (hereafter Isaković, *Kosovelova brigada*); Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus*, 371–377; Stanko Petelin, *Gradnikova brigada* (Ljubljana: Borec in Naša obramba, 1983), 456–459; Petelin, *Osvoboditev*, 94–97.

sources, were six killed and 19 wounded Serbian soldiers. Among the wounded, was also Nikola Ljotić, son of the ideological leader of the SDK. Nikola was at that time commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Company of the said regiment.<sup>22</sup>

Globočnik also decided to use Serbian units in the two last major operations in the OZAK, "The start of the spring" (*Frühlingsanfang*) and "The end of the winter" (*Winterende*). In these two operations were used two battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> regiment of the SDK and the artillery division. Infantry battalions were part of *Kampfgruppe Blank*, and the artillery division was assigned to *KG Dippelhofer*. Two infantry battalions were used initially to hold positions along the line Podbrdo-Grahovo-Reka-Spodnja Idrija, while the Serbian artillery was holding the line Spodnja Idrija-Škofja Loka. Partisan assessment of the SDK units after the operation was frank: "By the soldiers of the first volunteer corps is noted despair. From the hopeless situation, they are trying to save themselves, from which is noted a very good fighting and perfect guerrilla tactics, which they use. This was very clearly seen during several fights with our brigades and on the attack on the HQ of the 31<sup>st</sup> Division. Here they used small, very mobile units with light infantry weapons: these units are moving very conspiratorially and can quite easily break through our positions. The purpose of these attacks is to spread panic among our units and at the same time to destroy headquarters."<sup>23</sup>

In late March partisan intelligence reported several incidents between Serbian volunteers and Italian fascist units, which, according to partisan report, one time led to the killing of 6 Italians in Postojna. At the same time, they also reported that Ljotić had established, through Swiss contacts, a communication line with Konstantin Fotić (1891–1959), high-ranking Yugoslav diplomat, regarding the "exit from the complicated situation in which are the Serbian volunteers. They knew that the Germany will soon crumble and that they have committed plenty [of war crimes]." But Ljotić also had to continue to please his German overlord(s). On 27 March he attended a meeting, chaired by Globočnik itself, of all senior commanders of foreign units, fighting on

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<sup>22</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 43, report on aerial bombardment by the Intelligence Point B4, 15 March 1945; ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 44, informational report Nr. 43 by Intelligence Point B11, 5 April 1945; ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 88, informational report for 15 March 1945 by Intelligence Centre of the HQ of Notranjska Detachment, 16 March 1945.

<sup>23</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 97, monthly report from 21 March to 20 April 1945, 20 April 1945; Isaković, *Kosovelova brigada*, 647–668; Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus*, 387–394.

the German side in the OZAK, where they discussed the unification of all these units and to prepare for the arrival of Yugoslav 4<sup>th</sup> Army, which was heading (along the Adriatic Sea coastline) towards Trieste. At the meeting, they also started to plan the evacuation of the forces towards Austria.<sup>24</sup>

Two regiments of the SDK, with the support of 1,500 men of the Lički Chetnik Corps, were used on 24 March to scour the area of Brkini in search of the partisans. Partisans evaded any contact with the enemies, and another operation failed to achieve its goal – destruction of partisan forces.<sup>25</sup>

At this time, Allied planes increased the attacks on different strongholds of the SDK. On 2 April, partisans reported that Serbian soldiers had to leave Prestranek, Pivka and Postojna due to the bombings. In the strongholds, they left a small garrison and the rest of the soldiers were stationed in nearby villages. Aerial attacks were also used by Slovenian partisans to launch simultaneous attacks; on that same day, two battalions of Prešeren Brigade attacked SDK unit in the village of Bukovje and managed to expel them from the village. But the next day, combined German, Serbian, Home Guard and Chetnik attack forced partisans to leave the village.<sup>26</sup>

In mid-April 1945, the German 97<sup>th</sup> Corps, which was a primary military command in the OZAK, started to reinforce positions on the defense line Reka-Snežnik. Three regiments of the SDK, alongside units from *Dinarska divizija* and German *Polizei*, were assigned the positions in the area of Prezid-Čabar-Osilnica-Gerovo.<sup>27</sup>

Until 20 April, the Yugoslav 4<sup>th</sup> Army was advancing with relative ease towards the Rijeka and Trieste, but then came to heavily fortified

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<sup>24</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1848, t. e. 23, report of the Intelligence Centre of the 9th Corps, 29 March 1945; Drago Vresnik and Branko Jerkič, *Zaščita boja za svobodo 1944–1945: Poveljstvo Vojske državne varnosti – 1. slovenska divizija Narodne obrambe, Prva brigada VDV – NO* (Ljubljana: Društvo piscev zgodovine NOB Slovenije, 1999), 97 (hereafter Vresnik in Jerkič, *Zaščita boja za svobodo*).

<sup>25</sup> Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus*, 412.

<sup>26</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 88, informational report for 31 March and 1 April 1945 by Intelligence Centre of the HQ of Notranjska Detachment, 2 April 1945; Stanko Petelin, *Enaintrideseta divizija* (Ljubljana: Borec in Partizanska knjiga, 1985), 245–246; Drago Vresnik, *Druga brigada Vojske državne varnosti – Narodne obrambe: Prispevek k zgodovini VDV Slovenije* (Ljubljana: RK ZRVS Slovenije in Naša obramba, 1987), 302–303.

<sup>27</sup> Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus*, 418. For more on the 97th Corps, see: Roland Kaltenegger, *General der Gebirgstruppe Ludwig Kübler: Der Bauherr der deutschen Gebirgstruppe und seine Zeit* (Würzburg: Verlagshaus Würzburg, 2011), 291–321.

positions of the German 97<sup>th</sup> Corps on so-called defense line *Ingrid*. Partisan leadership decided to employ attacks against the German side. On each wing, a partisan division was sent to attack German positions, while remaining army units would continue with frontal attacks. On the right wing was present partisan 20<sup>th</sup> Division, which was given the task of capturing Pivka (with the previous liberation of Prezid and Babno polje). From 23 to 27 April, fighting between the units of the SDK and Chetnik *Dinarska divizija* on one side and partisans on the other lasted through a series of attacks and counterattacks. On the first day of the fighting, Dimitrij Ljotić, was killed in a traffic accident near Ajdovščina. Due to a heavy pressure by Yugoslav forces, the SDK and Chetniks started to retreat. On the 27 April, the Yugoslav 20<sup>th</sup> Division managed to destroy the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the SDK, which was holding villages of Koritnice, Knežak, Pivka and Milonja. The next day the same division also liberated Ilirska Bistrica, after the SDK regiment left the town. With the fall of Ilirska Bistrica, the Yugoslav 4<sup>th</sup> Army had an unopposed route towards Trieste.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of April 1945, two regiments of the SDK (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>) were holding positions on the line south of Kočevje (Kočevska Reka-Novi Lazi-Morava-Ajbelj-Gornja and Dolnja Briga). As they needed reinforcement, also the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was sent to their support. But during the fighting, partisans reported, that the armament and morale of Serbians are "extremely bad".<sup>29</sup>

On 6 May, the Operational group of the SDK, composed of three remaining regiments and 500 Chetniks, received order to start a withdrawal, beginning the next day at 6 PM. The plan was to move in the direction of Kranj and Radovljica, while at the same time repulsing attacks of the Yugoslav 29<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Lado Ambrožič-Novljan, *Gubčeva brigada* (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga in Odbor Gubčeve brigade, 1972), 929–938; Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus*, 421; Petelin, *Osvoboditev*, 196–197; Стефановић, *Због*, 327; Vresnik and Jerkič, *Zaščita boja za svobodo*, 294.

<sup>29</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 64, report on situation in Dolenjska, 26 April 1945; ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 64, report on enemy units in the line Novo mesto, Kočevje, Rakek, 1 May 1945.

<sup>30</sup> Petar S. Brajović, *Konačno oslobođenje. Sjećanja i obrade* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1983), 328–329; Kosta Nikolić, "Obračun Titova režima s jugoslavenskim monarhističkim protukomunističkim snagama na kraju Drugog svjetskog rata," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 3 (2012): 637.

Complete break of the German-led (mobile) defense in south of Slovenia also resulted in the splitting of the SDK units. Remnants of the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment managed to escape to Italy, crossing the Soča river, and to surrender to British forces. Remaining regiments, or parts of them, followed the initial (Northern) route through Ljubljana, Kranj and further to north towards Austria.<sup>31</sup>

Serbians, which managed to get into the Austrian territory, participated on 11 May with other German (-led) units (*SS- und Waffen-Unterführerschule Laibach*, 7<sup>th</sup> SS-Division "Prinz Eugen",<sup>32</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> SS-Regiment "Waräger",<sup>33</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> SS-Gendarmerie-Motorisierte-Bataillon, two tank companies, 503<sup>rd</sup> Chetnik Corps and the units of the Slovene Home Guard) in the last fight against the Yugoslav forces in the area of village of Villach. They managed to break Yugoslav positions, crossed the Drau river and only after that, they surrendered to the British units. Four thousand surviving Serbs were turned over by the British to the Yugoslavs, using the ruse of transport to Italy, where they would join their comrades. First transport left the prisoner-of-war camp at Viktring on 24 May at 9 AM and afterward it was given over to Yugoslav forces. By the way of Klagenfurt, Villach and Rosenbach, transport left Austria and entered Yugoslavia, heading southwards. Second transport left the next day, using the route of Viktring-Rosenthal-Rosenbach, which was also used by the third transport on 26 May. On the night of 26/27 May, Vlado Ljotić, another son of Dimitrij Ljotić and a member of the SDK, managed to sneak back to the Vitring camp, where he revealed the fate of Serbian volunteers and other Yugoslav nationals, German

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<sup>31</sup> ARS, SI AS fond 1851, t. e. 66, intelligence overview by the HQ of 4th Army, 6 May 1945; Klanjšček, *Deveti korpus*, 438.

<sup>32</sup> For more on the "Prinz Eugen" division, see: Goran Babić, *Paor s bajonetom: Zločin i kazna vojvodanskih folksdojčera* (Beograd: Glasnik, 2012); Srđan Božović, *Divizija 'Princ Eugen'* (Pančevo: Narodni muzej, 2011); Thomas Casagrande, *Die volksdeutsche SS-Division 'Prinz Eugen': Die Banater Schwaben und die national-sozialistischen Kriegsverbrechen* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2003); Otto Kumm, *'Vorwärts Prinz Eugen!': Geschichte der 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division 'Prinz Eugen'* (Osnabrück: Munin-Verlag, 1978) (hereafter ) Kumm, *Vorwärts Prinz Eugen*); Otto Kumm, *7. SS-Gebirgs-Division Prinz Eugen im Bild* (Osnabrück: Munin Verlag, 1983); Otto Kumm, *The History of the 7 SS Mountain Division 'Prinz Eugen'* (Winnepeg: J. J. Fedorowicz, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> For more on the "Waräger" regiment, see: Klemen Kocjančič, "Between Vlasov and Himmler: Russian SS-Sonder-Regiment I 'Waräger' in Slovenia, 1944-45," *The Journal of Slavic Military History* 30 (2017): 50-60.

collaborators – return to Yugoslavia. In the following days, most of them were killed in mass executions, mainly in the Kočevski Rog forest.<sup>34</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After the Serbian Volunteer Corps arrived in Slovenia, it needed some time to reorganize and replenish their personnel, equipment and armament. The primary mission of the SDK was protection of important railway lines and roads in the operational area, with intensive monitoring of nearby areas. But more and more, German command started to use (selected) units of the SDK for participation in major operations, aiming with destruction of partisan forces in the region. During these operations, SDK gained some level of respect from partisans, based on their (counter) insurgency's ability. Most of the SDK followed other German (-led) units and retreated into Austria, where they surrendered to the British. But they turned them over to the Yugoslavian forces; shortly afterwards many Serbian volunteers were killed in Slovenia. The small force of the SDK, that managed to retreat to Italy, were more fortunate.

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<sup>34</sup> France Grum, *Vetrinjska tragedija: V spomin nesmrtnim junakom, izdanim v Vetrinju od 27. – 31. maja 1945 in pomorjenim za velike ideje svobode* (Ljubljana: Magnolija, 1991), 27–30; Boris Mlakar, *Slovensko domobranstvo: 1943–1945: Ustanovitev, organizacija, idejno ozadje* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2003), 501–508; Franci Strle, *Veliki finale na Koroškem* (Ljubljana: samozaložba, 1976), 162–184, 362–369.



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## **ПОСЛЕДЊИ МЕСЕЦИ СДК. СРПСКОГ ДОБРОВОЉАЧКОГ КОРПУСА НА СЛОВЕНАЧКОЈ ТЕРИТОРИЈИ У ДРУГОМ СВЕТСКОМ РАТУ**

**(Резиме)**

Српски добровољачки корпус је био једна од најзначајнијих колаборационистичких јединица која се борила на страни Немаца у Србији (и касније у неким другим деловима Југославије). Са продором совјетске Црвене армије у Србију у лето 1944. године Српски добровољачки корпус добио је наређење да се евакуише на територију данашње Словеније, где је провео последње месеце Другог светског рата. Након повлачења из отаџбине Српски добровољци, које су Немци сматрали најоданијим савезницима дислоцирани су у Оперативну зону Јадранско залеђе (Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland), која је покривала делове италијанске, словеначке и хрватске територије, да би се реорганизовали и учествовали у антигерилским операцијама против словеначких партизана. Иако су били без довољно људства, наоружања и опреме, партизани су у њима и даље свидели опасне противнике, ефикасне у борби захваљујући познавању анти герилске тактике и борбеном искуству. непосредно пред окончање Другог светског рата десио се покушај обједињавања свих југословенских колаборационистичких и ројалистичких јединица под заједничком командом, али се он није остварио. Последњег месеца рата, Српски добровољачки корпус учествовао је у борбама против 4. југословенске армије, неуспешно покушавајући да заустави њен продор према Трсту. Након тога већина Корпуса се повукла у Аустрију, док се мали део нашао у Италији. Припадници СДК учествовали су у последњој бици на територији Аустрије, пре него што су се предали Британцима. Убрзо потом, Британци су их предали Југословенској армији, тако да је највећи део њих страдао у масовним егзекуцијама.

*КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ:* Други светски рат, Словенија, Србија, Српски добровољачки корпус, Оперативна зона Јадранско приморје, Словеначки партизани, контрагерила.