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SLOVENIAN PARTISAN RESISTANCE OF 1941

ABSTRACT: *The Liberation Front of the Slovene Nation, in which the leading role was assumed by the Communist Party of Slovenia, defined armed resistance against the occupation forces in the Slovenian territory as a path towards national liberation and unification with the ethnic territories that formed a part of the German and Italian states. The first, smaller, resistance activities were recorded shortly after the occupation of Dravska Banovina, when the preparations for an uprising or its beginning sporadically sprouted both within and out of the Communist Party of Slovenia. The German attack on the Soviet Union added fuel to the resistance movement, which began to develop actively in July 1941. This brought an end to a period of chaos within the Communist Party of Slovenia, when the leadership and most of the members opted for resistance. At the time, 41 company-level units were formed with a strength of 15-50 Partisans. They were poorly armed and used guerrilla tactics, but, nonetheless, attempted to carry out a couple of larger actions, such as an action to prevent the expulsion of the Slovenian population. The organizers of the resistance movement sought to encourage a wider uprising of the Slovenian population, which succeeded on a larger scale for the first time in December 1941 in the Upper Carniola region.*

KEY WORDS: *occupation, Yugoslavia, Dravska Banovina, armed resistance, Liberation Front, Communist Party of Slovenia, Slovenian People's Party, Partisan Army*

The occupation of Dravska Banovina, the Slovenian political parties and the issue of resistance

After the Axis powers attacked the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941, the Slovenian territory was split between three occupying forces. Upper Carniola, Styria, Slovene Carinthia and northern part of Lower Carniola came under the Third Reich, Inner and the major part of Lower Carniola with Ljubljana were annexed by the Kingdom of Italy, Prekmurje became Hungarian and a couple of villages fell under the Ustasha's Independent State of Croatia. The Italian occupier, in particular, brought many military units to the occupied area, basically two divisions, while the German Army quickly withdrew to Croatia and the empty area was held by the German occupier, who had its police forces already in place. Moreover, for its annexationist intentions, the Italian occupier established its civil authority instead of, or parallel to, the existing Yugoslav administration, whose greatest part remained in place. This civil authority included a strong repressive force, meaning that the occupier could already effectively control the population by the end of April 1941.¹ Even though people showed readiness to engage in such a risky activity, which had already been demonstrated by the massive response of volunteers during the April War, no Slovenian political force was ready to risk an armed conflict in such conditions. The Slovenian territory was divided; Germany was destroying national social structures by deporting immigrants and the national elite; the state was defeated; the capitulation of the army, which was forced into captivity, was signed; and the fate of the state leadership was uncertain. The political objectives of the leading Slovenian political structures differed, insofar as they could persevere as a group at all, which was only possible in the Italian region of Ljubljana. Had they not committed high treason, the self-evident objective for the established political forces was the restoration of the pre-war Yugoslav state. They were in no hurry to begin resistance, for they assessed that they had to strengthen their positions, at least in those areas where they could, by demonstrating loyalty to the Italian occupation authorities in the Ljubljana region. Only the position of the Yugoslav government-in-exile to continue the fight, and the somewhat later appearance of Chetniks in the Serbian provinces of the country, forced them to define their actions in a different and more precise manner. The motive for the shift from the tactical welcoming of the Italian occupation and the

¹ Jože Pirjevec, „The Strategy of the Occupiers”, in: *Resistance, Suffering, Hope, in: The Slovene Partisan Movement 1941-1945*, editors Jože Pirjevec and Božo Repe (Ljubljana: National Committee of Union of Societies of Combatants of the Slovene National Liberation, 2008), 27-28.

annexation of the Ljubljana region to establishing illegal resistance organizations in May 1941 remains unclear. It was undeniably influenced by the clarification of the fate of the fugitive king and the Yugoslav government, which emigrated to Britain and joined the anti-Axis coalition. At the beginning of May 1941, Dr Alojzij Kuhar and Minister Dr Miha Krek made their first appearance on BBC Radio with a missive to Slovenians. In the light of this, the strategic idea of the Slovenian People's Party (the strongest party in Slovenia), of multi-political leadership, began to seem more fitting. In addition, the first restrictions imposed by Italy on the participating Slovenian forces located in the Ljubljana region could already be seen. Political strategy was also influenced by the mass imprisonment and expulsion of the national leading part of the population in the Styria and Carniola regions.²

On 29 May 1941, following the occupation, the Slovenian People's Party adopted the established Slovenian Legion, which demonstrated its pan-national pretension both by its name and the adoption of the name of the armed formation of the National Council. The Slovenian Legion was an illegal military organization (in reference to the occupational authorities), which was not a part of the Slovenian People's Party, but was closely linked to its leadership. The intention of its founders was to establish a stand-by organization that could assume its position at full power at any moment in time, if summoned by the Yugoslav government-in-exile. As no one was expecting immediate foreign policy or strategic change, the Legion could devote itself to a long-term organization. The Slovenian Legion was believed to have approximately 2000 sworn members. In addition to purely organizational matters, its work was limited to collecting weapons, propaganda and the marking of opponents. In the formation of its structure, the organization relied on the branched structure of the Slovenian People's Party, which volunteers also emerged from. It was based on the system of triplets in settlements, municipalities and districts, with the main leadership in Ljubljana. Accordingly, the organization was supposed to form troops at municipal level and battalions at district level. Each member had to swear an oath, with the emphasis on the fight for freedom and the independence of the Slovenian nation in the context of the Legion

² Damijan Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941“, in: *Slovenci in leto 1941: znanstveni posvet šestdeset let od začetka druge svetovne vojne na Slovenskem*, editor Zdenko Čepić (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2001), 128 (D. Guštin; „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941“); Tone Ferenc, „Okupacijski sistemi na Slovenskem 1941-1945“, in: *Okupacijski sistemi med drugo svetovno vojno* (Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta UL, 2006), 71-78; Božo Repe, Kornelija Ajlec, „Okupacijske meje 1941-1945 skozi diplomatske arhive, življenje ljudi in ostanke na terenu“, in: *Okupacijske meje v Sloveniji 1941-1945*, editors Božo Repe in Kornelija Ajlec (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete UL, 2020), 7-33.

programme. The legion had two opponents – communism and the occupier. As it can be seen from the rare preserved documents, the occupier was not at the forefront of the Slovenian Legion's interest in the field, as almost all the attention was focused on communists. It is therefore not surprising that the affected viewed the Slovenian Legion as a continuation of the previous militant clericalism, especially as many of the organizers, just as in the party organizations, were younger priests, who were active in Catholic Action, through which a pre-war intolerant attitude of the Slovenian People's Party towards other world views, communism in particular, was transferred. Only after a misconception of the management of the Communist Party of Slovenia or the left camp was observed did the Slovenian People's Party seek to include the Slovenian liberals in its organization. When the Slovenian People's Party perceived the spread of the Liberation Front after 22 June 1941, and noticed its calls for armed resistance, it wanted to include the "natural allies in the fight against communism". However, the liberal group, which mainly comprised the leaders of the Sokol of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, separated from the Slovenian Legion and founded the Sokol Legion in August 1941. The neutral and the unsatisfied from both political camps later founded the Pobratim – the National Legion. Both of them together did not exceed 600 members.³

The armed resistance begun by Colonel Draža Mihailović in Serbia in the summer of 1941 caused difficulties in the preparations for the moment in which the forces of all three legions would intervene in the war. As the Yugoslav government-in-exile accepted and showed support for his fight, doubt about the correctness of the decision to wait for the (British) forces to approach Yugoslavia arose. The problem deepened even further when the left forces began the actual armed resistance in July 1941. They resolved this doubt by emphasizing that Mihailović "had no intention of provoking an armed conflict with the occupiers"; however, they were unable to dismiss the question of the establishment of an effective armed force on the ground. The Yugoslav government-in-exile, on the other hand, continued to call for peace through its authorized messengers, Dr Alojzij Kuhar and Dr Miha Krek, hoping to avoid utterly unnecessary casualties.

The Yugoslav government-in-exile began to present Draža Mihailović's Chetnik units as units of the Yugoslav Royal Army in the occupied state, which it needed to do mainly for political reasons, as this

³ Bojan Godeša, *Kdor ni z nami, je proti nam – slovenski izobraženci med okupatorji, Osvobodilno fronto in protikomunističnim taborom* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995), 197-243; Metod Mikuž, *Pregled zgodovine NOB v Sloveniji, I* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1966), 303-315.

increased the Yugoslav government's importance in the British government. When the government appointed Draža Mihailović as the minister of the army and the navy, new dynamics began within the leaderships of the legions and their accompanying political forces in the Italian region of Ljubljana. It was by and large clear that the troops of this army would also spread across the Slovenian territory. Soon, however, the question arose as to who the commander of Mihailović's Royal Yugoslav Army in Slovenia would be. As this could only be one of the active officers, this could have a potentially weakening effect on the position of the Slovenian Legion and the influence of all political groups that supported the legions. The split between officers and political groups in reference to surveillance over the armed units marked all the subsequent war periods until the Italian capitulation.⁴

The Liberation Front and the issue of resistance in the Slovenian territory

The alternative to the camp of pre-war Slovenian political parties arose from organizations, societies and political and patriotic groups. Before the war, they had no governmental functions; however, they were important in influencing the transformation of political currents in the late 1930s. The main organizer of the armed uprising was the Communist Party, whose influence in the Liberation Front grew stronger until it became the most important political party and military force during the war. The inaugural meeting of the Liberation Front was held on 26 April 1941 (27 April according to some information). The initiator of this meeting was the Communist Party of Slovenia, together with the Christian Socialists, the left wing of the Sokol Society, cultural workers and other smaller groups which joined later. At the beginning, the Liberation Front had a coalition character. Its seat was initially in Ljubljana, later on the Polhov Gradec Hills, and finally in Kočevski Rog. The supreme plenary meeting of the Liberation Front initially adopted seven points and added two more in December 1941. The points defined the issues of national liberation, while the Liberation Front programme defined the internal organization for the post-war period when the Liberation Front was supposed to take power. The social class goals of the Communist Party were somewhat alleviated, as there were other groups within the Liberation Front that also influenced the programme

⁴ Franček Saje, *Belogardizem* (Ljubljana: Slovenski knjižni zavod, 1953), 198-214; D. Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941“, 130.

content, such as the Christian Socialists. The Liberation Front organized the Partisan Army in forests, and National Protection in cities; it also had an effective intelligence service.⁵

The first glimmers of the uprising were seen immediately after the occupation, both within and out of the Communist Party of Slovenia. In mid-April, the students of a Slavic seminar in Ljubljana joined forces and initiated a leaflet and a graffiti campaign. They later joined the Liberation Front. Even before the establishment of the Liberation Front on 20 April 1941, patriot/communists from Jesenice, Bled, Gorje and Bohinj had gathered in Slamniki above Bohinjska Bela on their initiative. The main topic was weapons collection and the preparations for armed resistance, which would of course be the Partisan resistance. The Jesenice communists also collected weapons of the Royal Yugoslav Army from the barracks and their fortresses in the Carniola region. The establishment of these groups, the collection of weapons and materials, propaganda, the distribution of leaflets, the drawing of symbols and writing slogans even before the organized uprising in different parts of the Slovenian territory, was followed by a number of unrelated actions. Thus, on the night of 29 April, members of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia burnt two German cars in Volkmer's passage in Maribor; in the hot pursuit that followed, the German police detained more than sixty young people. On the same day, an Italian soldier was attacked in Rašica near Velike Lašče. A couple of similar attacks followed in May (without casualties). The engagement of the Italian Carabinieri and three members of the Primorska regional, national and revolutionary organization TIGR (Trieste, Istria, Gorizia and Rijeka), who sought shelter in Yugoslavia after the dissolution of the organization, took place in Mala Gora near Kočevje. A member of the TIGR organization fell, the second one was injured and captured, while the third one escaped.⁶

A more severe uprising, however, began after the attack on the Soviet Union. This brought an end to a period of chaos within the Communist Party of Slovenia, when the leadership and most of the members opted for resistance upon the German attack on Yugoslavia and decided to go underground immediately after the occupation. Afterwards, the majority of the German Army was taken to Eastern Europe, and the occupied

⁵ Božo Repe, *S puško in knjigo. Narodnoosvobodilni boj slovenskega naroda 1941-1945* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2015), 57 (B. Repe, *S puško in knjigo*); Martin Premk, *Poljanska vstaja in boj proti okupatorju leta 1941* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2012), 28-29 (M. Premk, *Poljanska vstaja*). More about Liberation Front: Eva Mally, *Slovenski odpor: Osvobodilna fronta slovenskega naroda od 1941-1945* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2011).

⁶ B. Repe, *S puško in knjigo*, 171-172; M. Premk, *Poljanska vstaja*, 43.

territories became the responsibility of the police and other supporting units. On 22 June 1941, when the Soviet Union was attacked, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia established the Supreme Command of the Slovene Partisan units. In September 1941, after its inclusion in the Yugoslav liberation movement, the command was renamed the Main Command of the Slovenian Partisan units. The communists' strategic concept of resistance was not based on limited military action, but rather on total resistance, the fight of all people against the occupier, which excluded only the "national treacherous gentlemen", those who collaborated with the occupier due to social class benefits. The most important shift occurred when the resistance was transformed into a national liberation project. The movement set the national liberation of all Slovenians as the ultimate goal of the resistance, to include the unification of everyone, especially those who were citizens of the neighbouring countries of Germany and Italy and implicitly also of Hungary. Thus, the resistance movement adopted the fundamental Slovenian national programme called the United Slovenia.⁷

In its concept, the uprising in Slovenia, initiated by the communists on 20 July 1941, was pan-Yugoslavian, but its execution was Slovenian, for it had to quite realistically take into account Slovenia's possibilities and availability. The forms of combat had yet to be gradually developed even in a purely professional, tactical and operational dimension. The question of the establishment of the armed forces was open in all three most important segments, i.e. team, command staff and weapons and equipment. The resistance organization solved all three problems on an ongoing basis during the combat and interdependently.

Providing enough soldiers was one of the most sensitive, and also the most important factors in establishing an armed force. In trying to recruit mostly younger men, the Communist Party of Slovenia initially focused on the circle of its members and supporters. Based on the first organizational document, the Partisan Act, they were supposed to be volunteers by status, but their recruitment could only partially be left to such an open draft. It was more important to recruit suitable members of political groups that were included in the liberation movement. The very differences in the organizational solidity between communists and other groups included in the Liberation Front had led to a completely disproportional representation in the armed forces. Out of approximately 1200 Partisans who joined the Partisan units before December

⁷ Lojze Ude, *Moje mnenje o položaju: Članki in pisma* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1994), 44-45; B. Repe, *S puško in knjigo*, 172-173; Vida Deželak Barič, *Komunistična partija Slovenije in revolucionarno gibanje 1941-1943* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2007), 35-91.

1941, two-thirds were connected to the Communist Party of Slovenia or to organizations from its circle (the Alliance of the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia, candidates and sympathizers).⁸

The organizers of the “people’s uprising” managed to ensure the spontaneous recruitment of troops into the Partisan units as late as December 1941. At that time, a large number of combatants joined the Partisan forces within a period of two weeks, from a wide region stretching between the Poljane Valley to the Upper Sava Valley. It is, however, true that the Partisan forces were, for the first time, confronted by a rapid decline of their troops due to departure from units. For the first time ever, the majority of newcomers were the sons of peasants, which meant that the Partisan Army was based in the countryside. The strategic control of the Partisan Army, i.e. the command positions in the Main Command of the Slovenian Partisan companies, was in the hands of the Liberation Frontmanagement, but in reality it was in the hands of the Communist Party of Slovenia. All other command positions were at tactical level, at the level of companies as basic units, for battalions it existed only occasionally or exceptionally as units that were commanded directly by their staffs. A large majority of the command staff came from the lines of the Communist Party of Slovenia, both because of the bodies that were established and the character of the organization of the first companies. Company commanders often became those who used to organize resistance in individual districts of the Communist Party of Slovenia as the leaders of “war committees”. Only a handful of them had any military education; for the most part they had experience of doing military service. Some of them were trained during the Spanish Civil War, including the organizer of the Partisan units himself, Dr Aleš Bebler. Two important soldiers of the Spanish Civil War, Franc Rozman and Dušan Kveder, joined the Slovenian Partisan Army as late as in the autumn of 1941, and immediately became a company and a battalion commander respectively.⁹

The former active officers and non-commissioned officers of the Yugoslav Royal Army were also considered as a potential pool of command staff. They had been included in the Liberation Front as a special group of officers, but the decision with regard to their assignment was not

⁸ *Zbornik dokumentov in podatkov o narodnoosvobodilni vojni jugoslovanskih narodov*, Part VI, Book 1: *Borbe v Sloveniji 1941*, Document number 5 (Ljubljana: Vojnogodovinski inštitut JLA in Inštitut za zgodovino delavskega gibanja Ljubljana, 1952) (Zbornik VI/1); D. Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941”, 134.

⁹ Vida Deželak Barič, „Vloga, metode in mesto Komunistične partije Slovenije v organiziranju oboroženega odpora leta 1941”, *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino*, XXXII, Number 1/2, (1992), 103-107; D. Guštin, „Vprašanja oboroženega odpora 1941”, 135.

made until January 1942. The commanders such as Ljubo Šercer, Jaka Avšič and Mirko Bračič were also included in the liberation movement from the active officers and non-commissioned officers; however, they represented a minority in the command structure. Due to the duplication of command positions with the formation of posts for political commissaries, the need for command staff became even bigger. However, the management had fewer problems in providing this type of command personnel, as it usually focused on political suitability first and to a lesser extent on military experience, so most of the political commissaries were recruited from the functionaries and members of the Communist Party of Slovenia.¹⁰

The logistics, that is, the provision of material support to the armed Partisan combatants, presented a problem the organizers were aware of and responded to in a sufficiently organized manner. They mainly leaned on resources available within the resistance movement. The most important were weapons and ammunition; as only a small part had legitimized weapons in their possession before the war, the initial equipping with weapons was a mere collection of the weapons of the dissolved Yugoslav Royal Army. The logistic organization of the resistance movement was capable of providing weapons and basic military equipment to almost anyone who joined the Partisans, especially in the autumn of 1941 in the region of Ljubljana. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that this included only the basic infantry weapons, rifles, a small number of squad automatic weapons, light or heavy sub-machine guns and some explosive material. The Partisan units were not capable of handling heavier weapons, even if they had possessed them. Due to their use of guerrilla tactics, the enemy supremacy both in heavy armament and military tactics was not noticeable. In tactical terms, there were no other suitable tactics at the very beginning than the "hit and run" guerrilla tactic. The Partisan units used this tactic, which was also called the "Partisan combat", to fight. However, defensive warfare is also characteristic of this period of the armed combat in the Slovenian territory, which contradicts the very essence of guerrilla tactics. The Yugoslav Supreme Command noticed this characteristic of the Slovenian resistance and brought it to the attention of the first Yugoslav consultation on leading the uprising in Stolice at the end of September 1941. The endeavours of the Yugoslav leadership to accelerate the armed resistance in the Slovenian territory forced the Slovenian Partisans to carry out more military actions, which demonstrated elements that surpassed classical guerrilla warfare. The

¹⁰ D. Guštin, „Vprašanja oboroženega odpora 1941“, 136.

military action called “cleaning the territory” referred to gaining direct control of a part of an operational area in which the units had their bases, and what is even more important, their supplies, but the action also had a demonstrative political effect. Nevertheless, this signified the return to defensive action, as the units had to urgently defend these areas.¹¹

The request for a mass people’s uprising with the establishment of the territory under their control presented a tactical problem, among other things. The guerrilla army had to solve a number of emerging problems – rapid adjustments to the Partisan tactics, a great deal of complicated logistics, and above all, defence of the territory, which did not match the guerrilla tactics of the time. The introduction of these tactics was another negative side of the information flow and suggestions from Serbia and Montenegro, as their respective military power differed too greatly for the tactical patterns to be transferred without any danger. However, it had a great political appeal, for it clearly pointed to the strength of the resistance movement.¹²

The military actions of the Slovenian Partisans in 1941

From the military aspect, the activities in the former Dravska Banovina in the second half of 1941 can be divided into two periods of differing duration; the period of the summer uprising and the period of the planned military actions, including the second December uprising in the Carniola region as the most ambitious and successful one. In the first period, the period of uprising, the focus was on the preparation of resistance in the areas under the German occupation. In organizational terms, the uprising was planned as a series of independent actions of a differing intensity, predominantly sabotage actions. Nothing else was actually possible, since military units were not yet formed. The latter were established as late as in the second half of July 1941. The units were formed as units of selected individuals and not masses of insurgent population. Numerousness in units became a value only after receiving critics from the Supreme Headquarters in September 1941. The activity of the Partisan units was planned in parallel, for the most part from 27 July onwards. However, it was carried out with a varying intensity. From the very beginning, the desire to surpass pure guerrilla tactics and loose organization was

¹¹ Tone Ferenc, „Pismo Edvarda Kardelja iz Srbije 17. oktobra 1941”, *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja*, XI, Number 1/2, (1971/1972), 361-366; D. Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941”, 137; Zbornik VI/1, Document Number 81.

¹² D. Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941”, 138.

noticeable. The Partisans fought not only to achieve military objectives, but were also focused on weakening the civilian occupation apparatus and material goods. The actions were therefore widespread, so the rapid and radical reaction of especially the German occupier was not surprising. With its police forces, it managed to destroy or disperse a large part of the Partisan units and inflict approximately 15% of losses on them. These losses comprised only the fallen and the captured.¹³

The first Partisan units emerged mainly in the surroundings of industrial centres, such as Jesenice, in the suburbs that the first group of Partisans, named "Obranca", gathered. The group was later renamed the Jesenice Company. The Germans soon learned that there were *gošarji* in the mountains that surrounded Jesenice. Rumours began to spread that there were around one hundred communists on the Mežakla Plateau awaiting an order from Moscow to attack the German outposts. On 30 July, this group engaged in combat with the German police officers. Smaller engagements continued throughout August. On 5 August the Cankar Battalion was formed by merging the Cankar and the Jelovšek companies and a group of volunteers, mainly with the purpose of liberating hostages in Begunje prison. However, the attack was not successful, as the Germans learned about it beforehand and secured the bridges over the Sava river. After the first engagements, the Cankar Battalion was divided into smaller platoons and groups of four, which then dispersed. The Jesenice company was divided into five groups of four, who hid around Jesenice, Gorje and on the Mežakla plateau, and were later combined into the Jesenice Company which went to the Pokljuka and the Jelovica plateaus. Up to mid-September as many as 19 Partisan companies and a few Partisan groups were formed in Slovenia. Among earlier actions, we should mention the Partisan incursion into Šoštanj and Lož in October 1941, the attack on Bučka, and the march of the Styria Battalion to the Kozjansko region.¹⁴

The second period of the armed resistance in the Slovenian territory began after a considerable decline in the Partisan activity and its numbers, which were caused by losses and the reduction of manpower; however, with experience from the first period that armed resistance was possible also in the Slovenian territory. The analysts at the September consultation of the military-political management in Stolice did not believe the military achievements of the armed combat in the Slovenian territory to be sufficient in comparison to Serbia and Monte-

¹³ Marjan Križnar, „Socialna in politična pripadnost borcev partizanskih enot na Gorenjskem in Štajerskem v letu 1941“, *Prispevki za zgodovino delavskega gibanja*, VI, Number 1/2, (1966), 318-335; D. Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941“, 139.

¹⁴ B. Repe, *S puško in knjigo*, 174-176; D. Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941“, 138-139.

negro, which is true from a purely military aspect. Nonetheless, they did not understand that the armed resistance in the Slovenian territory grew out of a completely different foundation, and that it could not rely on any kind of the Serbian national feeling of endangerment as it was the case in the area stretching from Lika to Serbia and Montenegro. Therefore, they jointly drafted a strategy for the autumn period – to encourage a mass people's uprising based on the feeling of national or even personal endangerment, and in military terms, to reach the vast areas under the control of the Partisan units, i.e. the "free territories". The first attempt to initiate the peasant population revolt in Posavje (which was threatened by expulsion) failed, as the idea was too ambitious and too demanding for the strength of the Slovene Partisan units at that time. The need for military success, which, to a certain extent, the political strengthening of the resistance was dependent upon, made the leadership of the liberation movement re-plan and carry out the action in winter conditions. The thought that snow would hinder the occupier might have been rational, but it was in a total contradiction to the basic knowledge of the psyche of the peasant people that they were trying to encourage to revolt. The plan of three epicentres of the uprising, i.e. in the Carniola region, in the area between districts, Kamnik and the Savinja valley, and on Mount Krim, encompassed three areas of great political and military importance.¹⁵

The command of the Partisan companies chose the western part of the Carniola region as an area where a general people's uprising could create a free territory as a centre for the national liberation movement in Slovenia. The liberated territory would encompass the area of the Polhov Gradec hills stretching towards the Škofja Loka hills, to Bohinjski kot and to the Mežakla plateau. In this way, they wanted to adopt the same insurgent concept of resistance in the Slovenian territory as it was already used in the south. The uprising was prepared by the Cankar Battalion and the field committees of the Liberation Front, and encouraged by the hope that the war would soon come to an end due to the German defeat before Moscow. Among other things, the uprising was a response to the occupier's violence. The most successful action was an attack on a strong German patrol of the reserve police battalion above the village Rovt under Mount Blegoš in which 45 police officers fell, and which was followed by other smaller-scale actions. In mid-December, 350 Partisans gathered in Gorjuše and formed the Prešeren Battalion. However, the German units managed to chase them away, and the battalion was shrunk to only one company which the German units

¹⁵ Tone Ferenc, *Množična vstaja na Gorenjskem decembra 1941* (Ljubljana: Borec, 1971), 741-742; D. Guštin, „Vprašanje oboroženega odpora 1941“, 139-140.

destroyed on Mount Lipanca in 1942. The uprising became more widespread in the Upper Sava Valley. The Germans began to bring in reinforcements and narrowed down the area of the uprising by means of manoeuvres and attacks on the Poljane Valley where the Ivan Cankar Battalion was operational. Approximately 4000 German soldiers surrounded the battalion, and following fierce combat approximately 200 Partisans retreated (they went home unarmed) to Dražgoše on 27 December. On 9 January 1942, they were attacked by approximately 2500 German soldiers. After three days of fierce combat, the Germans entered the village and the battalion retreated. It suffered 9 dead and 11 injured, with the Germans suffering 26 dead. The battalion separated and went to different parts of the Gorenjska region, while the Germans burned down Dražgoše, shot 41 locals and sent all the other inhabitants to concentration camps.¹⁶

Of course, just like in Serbia, it turned out that the Partisan units were strong enough to take over the control of certain area, but not strong enough to deter a concentrated attack by the German occupation forces and by doing so to preserve control over the liberated territory. On the contrary, the German pursuit operations in the Carniola region had thoroughly cleaned out the Partisan units by March 1942, as all groups that spent winter there were tracked down, attacked and affected by the loss of combatants. A similar situation occurred in the Ljubljana region, where larger Partisan resistance cores spent winter south and east of Ljubljana. These cores presented the basis for the rapid increase in the number of the Partisan units in the Ljubljana region in spring and the shift of the Partisan centre of gravity to the region that was the central Slovenian region from the political aspect. The expectation of a wider uprising made the Italian occupier introduce the first widespread police measures. The Italians expected an initiative in resistance against the Partisans by the Slovenian nationally conscious anti-communist side, of course with the inclusion of the different social layers of the population.

The German occupier anticipated armed communist actions, especially as it had already begun with a systematic, pre-prepared police prosecution of the members of the communist parties in the early morning of 22 June 1941, in the areas of the former Yugoslav state that were under its occupation. The occupation authority reacted quickly and decisively to the first actions and the groups themselves. It identified their actions as *banditism*, although at the same time it talked about the political motives behind the violent acts. It hence sought to destroy all

¹⁶ Damijan Guštin, *Prva partizanska pomlad. Razvoj slovenskih partizanskih čet leta 1942* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2021), 21-28; M. Premk, *Poljanska vstaja*, 132-275.

the armed units and, as a rule, executed all the captured members. For the Italian occupation authority in the Ljubljana region, the armed resistance was an affair that intervened with the internal legislation of the state. Despite the formally equal legal status of the region (irrespective of its special status), Italy handed over the prosecution of the armed resistance movement to the military court, after a short episode with the extraordinary court in October 1941.

In the area occupied by the Germans, the fight against the resistance Partisan groups was taken over by the police, i.e. the armed police force, the security police and the state secret police. In the autumn of 1941, the police SS battalions became the basic combat force that fought the Partisan units. After police processing, the captured members of the Partisan units were usually classified as those to be executed among hostages based on the order of the “police court” (which were in fact the highest police leaders).¹⁷

Conclusion

The first Partisan units consisted mainly of workers, the intelligentsia, secondary school students, and, to a lesser extent, peasants. All of them were extremely optimistic, as they believed that the war would soon come to an end (even before the snow melted). Appearance-wise, the first Partisans were a colourful company, including everyone from people in tourism to Sunday hunters, dressed in different uniforms. The same was true of their headgear, for the Triglav caps (*triglavka*) were introduced in the Partisan units only at the end of April 1942; later during the war, the Tito caps gradually established themselves. Even the name Partisans was not immediately established, as they were initially called *gošarji* and chetniks. For the most part, they were soldiers who had done their military service, Spanish fighters, some non-commissioned officers, and a very few officers of the former Yugoslav Royal Army. The Partisan Army was declared a non-party army; however, at the time of the uprising in 1941, the army comprised 39% of communist combatants and 36% of unorganized or neutral combatants, while the other combatants belonged to other political groups (Sokol, Christian Socialists, TIGR, socialists and others). In 1941, as many as 126 Partisans were killed in combat and 104 were convicted and shot. The armed resistance of the Slovenian Partisans, in particular the December uprising, was impactful not only in Slovenia, but also in the entire Third Reich. The resistance was mainly moral support to Slovenians. The organizers of the resistance movement sought

¹⁷ Zbornik VI/1, Document Number 97, 98, 100, 104; D. Guštin, „Vprašanje odpora 1941”, 141; B. Repe, *S puško in knjigo*, 175-177.

to encourage a wider uprising of the Slovenian population, which succeeded on a larger scale for the first time in December 1941 in the Upper Carniola region, when 665 new combatants joined the Partisan units within two weeks. Due to this, the Germans postponed the annexation of the Carniola and Styria regions to the Third Reich.¹⁸

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¹⁸ B. Repe, *S puško in knjigo*, 178-179.

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ПАРТИЗАНСКИ ОТПОР У СЛОВЕНИЈИ 1941. ГОДИНЕ

(Резиме)

О слободилна фронта и Комунистичка партија Словеније определили су се за оружани отпор након окупације словеначке територије априла 1941. године. Ова одлука је брзо сазрела након немачког напада на Совјетски Савез и постала је стварност након формирања првих партизанских одреда и њихових првих борбених акција, јула 1941. године. За разлику од других крајева Југославије карактеристично за Словенију било је да је главни организатор отпора била Ослободилна фронта а не Комунистичка партија Југославије (КПЈ). Већ од септембра 1941. године народноослободилачки покрет показао је намеру да развија националне оружане формације у оквиру општејугословенског

народноослободилачког покрета. Оружани устанак био је структуре сличне оној какву је неколико месеци раније планирало руководство КПЈ, и подразумевало је извођење револуције у оквирима оружане борбе против окупатора. Спровођење те директиве зависило је у великој мери од сналажења на терену и конкретних околности на локалном нивоу. До краја 1941. године формирана је укупно 41 јединица величине чете и снаге од 15 до 50 партизана. Иако су били слабо мнаоружани и користили се герилском тактиком у борби, партизани су покушали да изведу и неколико већих акција попут акције спречавања протеривања словеначког становништва. Од самог почетка оружани отпор пренешен је на за то погоднија сеоска подручја у близини градова. Покушавајући да придобије за своје идеје углавном млађу популацију, КПС се у почетку углавном ослањала на сопствено чланство и симпатизере. Организатори покрета отпора су међутим настојали да подстакну масовнији устанак словеначког становништва. То ће им поћи за руком већ у децембру 1941. године, када је само у Горњој Крањској партизанским јединицама у року од две недеље приступило 665 нових бораца. Координисане и готово истовремене акције партизанске гериле највише су се распламсале у Горњој Крањској и Штајерској у немачкој окупационој зони. То је изазвало интервенцију немачких и италијанских окупатора који су надмоћном оружаном силом успели да угуше устанак до октобра те године. У јесен 1941. године, под утицајем Врховне команде НОВ и ПОЈ долази до поновног оживљавања партизанских борби, чији је циљ био да се координисаним акцијама изазове масован устанак. Међутим, и поред привременог успеха у Горњој Крањској у децембру 1941. године, таква тактика показала се као преурањена на словеначкој територији.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: окупација, Југославија, Дравска Бановина, оружани отпор, Ослободилна фронта, Комунистичка партија Словеније, Словеначка народна странка, Партизани