Rehabilitation of WW2 Collaborators and Demonization of Antifascism in Serbia and the Post-Yugoslav Space

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Since the early 1990s, the Second World War has undergone waves of radical revision in Serbia and across the post-Yugoslav space, with the positive recasting of fascist collaborators and the parallel negative reinterpretation of the anti-fascist struggle, which was also a socialist revolution in the Yugoslav context. What are purposes of the rehabilitation of fascist collaborators of the Second World War in Serbia and the post-Yugoslav space? How is the revaluation of (anti-)fascism used by the right-wing, fascist, liberal and conservative political actors to delegitimize the left? The main argument of this text, based on the analysis of the politics of memory of the Second World War since the 1980s,[1] is that the rehabilitation of fascist collaborators in Serbia is a result of a broad anti-communist political consensus rather than the work of fascist and right-wing actors alone, as it is usually perceived. While the text centres on Serbia, there are similar tendencies across the post-Yugoslav space, where fascist movements and collaborators of the Second World War has been positively recast since (at least) the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

The Chetniks, as the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland led by Dragoljub Mihailović is more commonly referred to, represent the central object of the radical revision of the Second World War and antifascism. By deliberately shifting the focus and leaving out or justifying their collaboration with the Axis occupation forces and atrocities committed against the Partisans as well as civilians, the political elites, media and revisionist historians have constructed them into an anti-communist antifascist movement and innocent victims of communism. This revision, which has been going on since the 1980s but has become a hegemonic narrative in 2000, is a parallel process of demonization and criminalization of communist antifascism, the Partisans as its representatives and, of course, of the contemporary left politics and alternatives to neoliberal democracy. Today, while the positive image of the Chetniks has become normalised in Serbia, there is also a nationalist appropriation of the Partisans and antifascism by the right-wing political elites and even far-right groups.

[1] Jelena Đureinović, *The Politics of Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Serbia: Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

Collaboration in the Second World War in Yugoslavia: An Overview

The Second World War in Yugoslavia was a war of occupation and liberation, but also a socialist revolution led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia – usually referred to as the People's Liberation War. A series of communist-led armed uprisings erupted in summer 1941 and spread across Yugoslavia, growing into a mass army with broad popular support by the end of the war. The Partisans were the only consistently antifascist force in the territory of Yugoslavia during the Second World War, and the only movement that self-identified as such.

Against the Partisans, there were different military and political actors who collaborated with occupation forces and saw communist resistance as a threat. The German occupation authorities placed Serbia under direct military command, compensating the lack of staff with relying on domestic collaboration, the government of Milan Nedić, to maintain order and facilitate economic and labour exploitation.[2] The Chetniks of Dragoljub Mihailović, who later became the central object of radical reinterpretation, represented the Yugoslav government in exile. They were nominally a resistance movement, though only in the first months of the war, and they had the Allied support until 1943 but they also engaged in collaboration with practically all collaborationist and occupation forces, more or less openly depending on the region.

The Chetniks never referred to themselves as antifascist, but they can also not be considered a fascist movement. However, they nurtured a fascist culture of violence, terrorising everyone suspected of supporting the communists, killing entire families and villages and committing crimes against civilians that were ethnically motivated and had no military purpose whatsoever.[3] Their central goal was to maintain the status quo and the prewar political order at any cost, to which a rapidly growing communist-led movement represented a threat, which is why the war against the Partisans became the priority for the Chetniks already in autumn 1941. Anti-communism is a key aspect of the Chetniks and their wartime activities because they were willing to collaborate with anyone to obtain arms for fighting the Partisans, while trying to preserve the image of a resistance movement. The attitude of the Allies gradually changed and in 1943, they abandoned the Chetniks in favour of the Partisans as the only resistance movement in Yugoslavia.

At the end of the war, the Chetniks, as well as other defeated political and military movements either fled Yugoslavia or faced punishment. Those who had collaborated with the occupation and fought against or persecuted the Partisans faced either executions or postwar trials. Dragoljub Mihailović was sentenced to death at a public trial in 1946 and executed shortly afterwards.[4] This period of the postwar retribution and consolidation of state socialism represents the lens of

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[2] Alexander Prusin, *Serbia under the Swastika: A World War II Occupation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 2.

[3] 'Milan Radanović: Zatiranje tekovina komunističke borbe', Portal Novosti, 1 June 2015, https://www.portalnovosti.com/milan-radanovic-zatiranje-tekovina-komunisticke-borbe/; Milan Radanović, *Kazna i zločin. Snage kolaboracije u Srbiji* (Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2015).

[4] Milan Nedić attemoted to flee the country and surrender to the British soldiers in Austria, but he was handed back to the Yugoslav authorities, as many other Partisans' enemies. He was not put on trial because he committed suicide by jumping through the prison window in February 1946.

revisionist interpretation of the Second World War, shifting the focus away from wartime collaboration and atrocities to construct the narrative of communist terror.

Anti-communist Memory Politics

The crucial context for understanding the rehabilitation of fascist collaborators like the Chetnik movement is anti-communist politics of memory or historical revisionism motivated by anti-communism, where liberal, conservative and far-right discourse and actors intertwine. It is politics of the present as much as it is about the past because it also serves the purpose to delegitimise and criminalise the left.

Anti-communism has been a hegemonic political framework and broad consensus since the end of the Cold War, though it builds upon the tropes of Cold War era anti-communism. Various actors from the United States, Central and Eastern Europe and the European Union have partnered in the international advocacy and memory activism, globalisation of the anti-communist memory politics and the rise of anti-communism as a global cause.[5] It particularly gained momentum at the European Union level after 2008, through institutionalisation, funding and more aggressive promotion and popularisation.

The anti-totalitarian stance of the EU is crucial as it provides legitimacy to revisionist claims in the post-socialist countries like Serbia or Croatia. The EU also provides funding for projects, publications and events and stirs history writing and educational initiatives through the Platform for Memory and Conscience in Europe towards the lens of the communist terror, and away from any other perspectives that would depict the lived experiences or achievements of state socialism as anything but negative.[6] While the anti-totalitarian position officially equalises communism and fascism, it is communism that is condemned and criminalised more fiercely.

In Serbia, as well as other post-Yugoslav states, the EU anti-communism legitimises the revisionist claims, justifies them and provides the broader ideological framework for rehabilitation of fascist collaborators like the Chetniks. Observed through the prism of anti-totalitarianism, the Chetniks are true national heroes, as fighters against both fascism and communism who ended up as victims of the latter. At the same time, the Partisans can only be interpreted as perpetrators when placed in this framework with their antifascism contaminated by communist ideology and, thus, must be rejected.

The delegitimization of the revolutionary and antifascist forces from the past inevitably serves the purpose of invalidating the left in the present. As Kristen Ghodsee argues, the context of the growing economic instability, massive anti-austerity protests and fear of the re-emergent left is vital for the "victims of communism narrative", which is essentially "a public relations effort to link all

[5] Raluca Grosescu, Laure Neumayer, and Eva-Clarita Pettai, 'Transnational Activism and the Globalisation of Anti-Communism After 1989 Introduction', *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest* 51, no. 2/3 (2020): 9–20; Laure Neumayer, 'Bridges Across the Atlantic? Intertwined Anti-Communist Mobilisations in Europe and the United States After the Cold War', *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest* 51, no. 2/3 (2020): 151–84.
[6] Kristen Ghodsee, 'A Tale of "Two Totalitarianisms": The Crisis of Capitalism and the Historical Memory of Communism', *History of the Present* 4, no. 2 (2014): 118.

leftist political ideals to the horrors of Stalinism".[7] In that context of the crisis and precariousness of global capitalism, the political elites use the narrative of the communist terror to discredit all political ideologies that challenge the primacy of private property and free markets. It is a hegemonic discursive tool to criminalise and discredit the left by shifting any conversation about it to communist crimes.[8]

Across the post-Yugoslav space, various fascist movements like the Ustasha in Croatia have been positively recast and Yugoslav state socialism and the People's Liberation War as its birthplace are either criminalised, or the Partisans are appropriated, depoliticised, de-Yugoslavised and ethnicised. Anti-communist memory politics in Serbia has gone through various phases since the early 1990s, when it rooted itself in the democratic, liberal and right-wing opposition, becoming the official state policy in 2000. Today, since 2012, while the rehabilitation of fascist collaborators like Chetniks has been normalised, it is accompanied by right-wing and even far-right appropriation of the Partisans and antifascism.

The 1980s and 1990s

The People's Liberation War was the focal point of the revolutionary and antifascist memory culture in Yugoslavia, and it was the central historical reference in society. From the early 1980s, the dominant war narrative was increasingly challenged in public. The narratives that questioned not only the official war memory but also the very existence of the Yugoslav state and its political order thrived in the public sphere, expressed, promoted and discussed like never before. The most important topics that emerged were: the focus on "the dark episodes" of the People's Liberation War, negative portrayals of Tito, focus on national victimisation and, finally, the reinterpretation of the Chetniks as another resistance movement.

The most important book of this decade, which created a blueprint for later anti-communist historical revisionism, was Veselin Đuretić's *The Allies and the Yugoslav War Drama* published in 1985.[9] He depicted the Chetniks as true antifascists who had to collaborate and the Partisans and communist ideology as foreign to Serbian people. The significance of this work is providing the basic plot story that became a commonplace in academic and non-academic discourses of Serbian anti-communism. His theses will only be further elaborated, reproduced and built upon in the decades to come.[10]

The first multiparty elections of 1990 consolidated the power of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and its leader Slobodan Milošević, the legal successors of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, and the Yugoslav state slowly descended into disintegration through armed conflicts.

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[7] Ghodsee, 117.
[8] Eric Gobetti, *E allora le foibe?* (Rome, Bari: Editori Laterza, 2021).
[9] Veselin Đuretić, *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama: Između nacionalnih i ideoloških izazova*, vol. 1, 2 vols (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, Balkanološki institut SANU, 1985); Veselin Đuretić, *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama: Prestrojavanja u znaku kompromisa*, vol. 2, 2 vols (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, Balkanološki institut SANU, 1985).
[10] Milivoj Bešlin, 'Četnički pokret Draže Mihailovića - najfrekventniji objekat istorijskog revizionizma u Srbiji', in *Politička upotreba prošlosti: O istorijskom revizionizmu na postjugoslovenskom prostoru*, ed. Momir Samardžić, Srđan Milošević, and Milivoj Bešlin (Novi Sad: AKO, 2013), 90.

Milošević's regime represented itself as the guardian of the legacies of the People's Liberation War and defender of Yugoslavia, celebrating antifascism but depriving the Partisan movement of its revolutionary dimension and transforming it into a Serbian movement. At the same time, commemorations of defeated Second World War forces and those considered victims of communism emerged in the political opposition, which rallied around anti-communism and anti-Yugoslavism.

The first manifestos of political parties, regardless of their orientation, called for a break with the communist past, criminalising it as the worst that had happened to Serbia and its people and advocating for national reconciliation. Among these parties, some were directly built on the continuity with the Chetnik movement, like the Serbian Renewal Movement (*Srpski pokret obnove, SPO*) or the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS*). The regime tolerated the commemorations and celebrations of victims of communism or the Chetniks, and the SRS was in the ruling coalition throughout the decade. The 1990s show the variety of anti-communism and the Chetnik revival, its practices and reasoning behind it, encompassing liberals, democratic parties, monarchists, the far right and neofascists and including both commemorations of victimhood under communism as well as the Chetnik revival in ethnically motivated atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2000: Anti-communism Prevails

In 2000, the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević brings a heterogeneous democratic coalition of former opposition parties to power, which drew its legitimacy from the narrative of a democratic revolution and defeating the last communist dictator in Europe. What followed immediately was aggressive dismantling of legacies of Yugoslav state socialism in all spheres, such as education, healthcare and economy, continuing the process that had started in the previous decade. The sphere of memory politics underpinned these changes, with the goal of convincing the people that their lived experience of state socialism was intrinsically negative, legitimising neoliberal policies and demonstrating that capitalism has no alternative. The discourses from the 1980s and 1990s turned into dominant narratives: references to socialist Yugoslavia disappeared from the public sphere, the narrative of victimhood under communist terror became prominent and fascist collaborators replaced the Partisans as positive references from the Second World War.

As the source of legitimacy of Yugoslav state socialism, the Second World War became the most important object of revision. In line with the revisionist historians and anti-communist political actors of the 1980s and 1990s, the Chetniks resurfaced as the ideal reference, reinvented as true Serbian antifascists and victims of communism. Their anti-communist nature is crucial for their representation as the defenders of Serbia from communism, true representatives of Serbian people, honourable and upholding traditional values. Although the legislation on the rights of veterans equalised the Chetniks with the Partisans as two antifascist movements, the equalisation was only an illusion because the Partisans are juxtaposed as perpetrators and ideologically inacceptable.

How does this radical revision of history work? The interpretation of the Second World War and socialist Yugoslavia is through a very narrow lens of postwar retribution, ignoring the broader

wartime context. So, if we look at the Chetniks only through the lens of the punishment they faced at the end of the war, ignoring their collaboration or war crimes – they can seem like a resistance movement and innocent victims of communism. The same narrow lens of interpretation turns the Partisans into perpetrators and socialist Yugoslavia, when observed through the perspective of its most repressive period, transforms into a negative historical experience that has to be dealt with. Television series, documentaries, films, museums and revisionist historiography promoted and popularised the image of the past driven by anti-communism. Every bookstore in Serbia had entire shelves full of books about the Chetniks and various accounts of Mihailović's "Golgotha" in prison and during the trial.

The state officials, historians and other involved actors never interpreted the rehabilitation of the Chetniks as rehabilitation of fascist collaborators as the aim but rather spoke about a liberal strive for dealing with the past and honouring the victims of communism. This is the reason why state-sponsored initiatives after 2000 resemble the mechanisms of transitional justice and dealing with the past: rehabilitation laws, investigative fact-finding commissions (one for finding graves of those executed at the end of the war and one tasked only with finding Mihailović's grave) and changes to veterans' benefits laws to elevate the Chetniks to the same level as the Partisans. All these measures faced almost no resistance or criticism in the parliament or government, illuminating anti-communism as a political consensus after 2000.

The Chetniks became the ideal historical reference because of their ambivalent nature and behaviour during the war and because they can be easily constructed as both an antifascist movement and innocent victims of communism. According to this view, the Chetniks fought against both totalitarianisms and ended up as victims of the communist one. While the dominant narrative is about Serbian intelligentsia, bourgeoisie and peasants suffering under communism, the Chetniks represent the symbols of Serbian victimhood under communism. Every initiative – a film, exhibition, law, commission – had the at the centre, even when it seems to be about the broader suffering of the people. This has been the case since the 1990s.

Instead of Conclusion: The Hijacking of Antifascism

In Serbia since the early 1990s, the memory of antifascism has gone through stages of revision: the appropriation of the Partisans by the regime of Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s, their criminalisation and parallel rehabilitation of the Chetniks as antifascists in the 2000s and, today, the reemergence of large-scale official celebrations of antifascism. In the official discourse dominant in society, the interpretation of the Partisans has travelled from their portrayal as Serbs to communist perpetrators and, most recently, back to their celebration as a victorious Serbian army.

The only way the People's Liberation War and the Partisans can be commemorated in the post-socialist context is if they are revised to fit the pattern of anti-communist memory politics. That means erasing the revolutionary, communist and Yugoslav dimensions of the antifascist struggle, as well as the state that emerged from it, and transforming the Partisans into a Serbian army. Following this pattern, since 2009, there has been a growing revival of official antifascist celebrations in Serbia, focusing primarily on Victory Day and the local days of liberation in the Second World War. After the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka, SNS*) came to

power in 2012, they made the victory against fascism a focal point of state-sponsored politics of memory. The right-wing authoritarian rule in liberal democracy, such as the SNS, intertwines liberalism and the far right, showing that there is no large contradiction between the two. The overlap in the tropes used by the SNS and various far-right groups is evident in Victory Day celebrations, where the far-right groups often march in the Immortal Regiment procession, proudly celebrating the defeat of fascism.