ARSO JOVANOVIĆ

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL LIBERATION WAR

Publisher's Note

This 3rd English edition of *Overview of the National Liberation War of the Yugoslav Peoples* is published by Sava Press, translated from the pamphlets *Pregled narodnooslobodilačke borbe, Beogradska operacija: bitka za Pljevlja* and *Šesta i sedma neprijateljska ofanziva*. It is a direct translation from the originals.

Publisher: Ivan Rimac

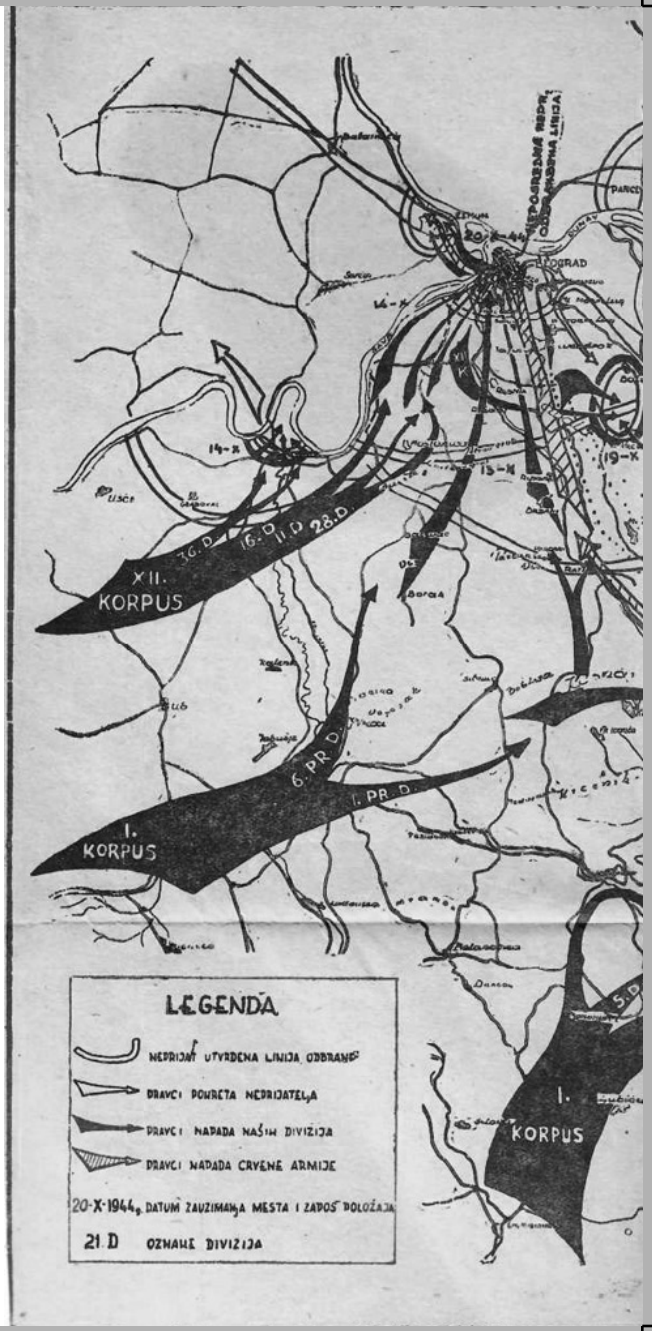
ISBN: 978-1-997536-23-9

SAVA PRESS
TORONTO 2025

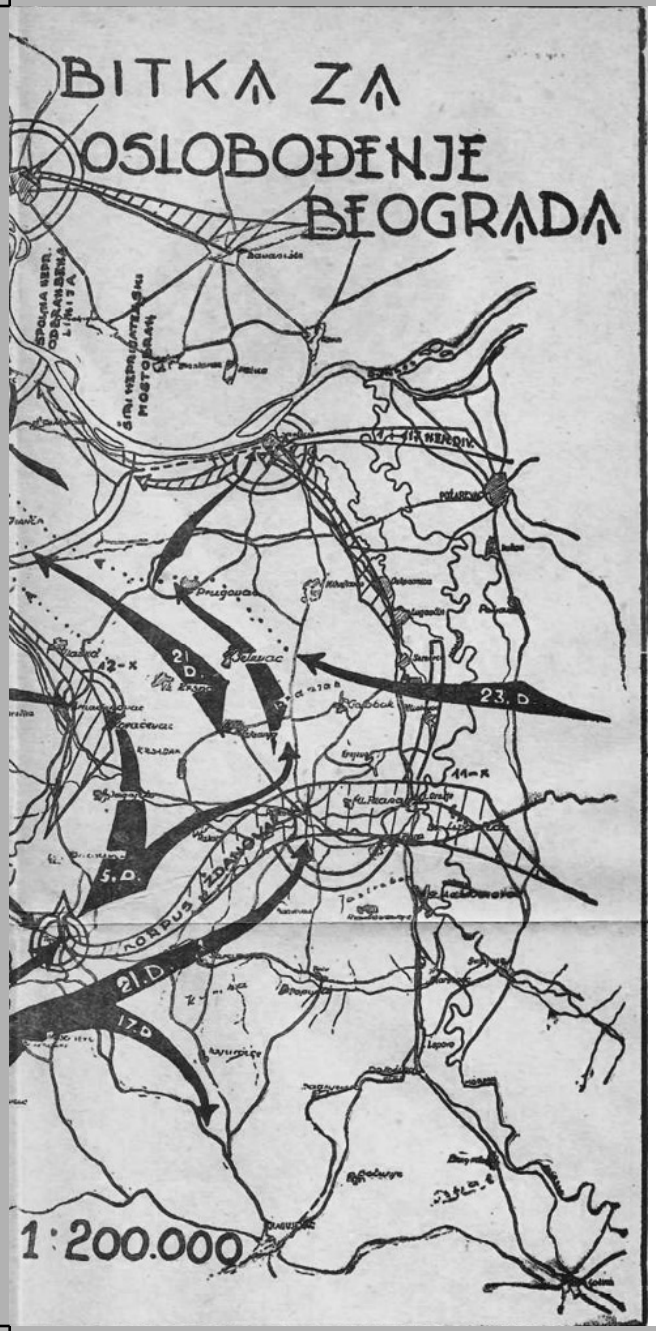
ARSO JOVANOVIĆ

CONTENTS

Overview of the National Liberation War 1
The Battle for Pljevlja 78
The Sixth Enemy Offensive 100
The Seventh Enemy Offensive 119
About the Author 145



BITKA ZA OSLOBOĐENJE BEOGRADA



OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL LIBERATION WAR

The operations of the National Liberation Army, due to their scale, great significance and the complexity of the military-political circumstances in which they were carried out, are the subject of in-depth studies in military history. Here, only a brief outline will be provided — a general review of those operations that had a major impact on the development of the National Liberation War. Furthermore, this review will not assess certain political events, such as the first session of the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) in Bihać, the Second Session in Jajce, etc., which were a consequence of the successful completion of specific wartime periods and were closely linked to military operations.

When discussing operations, one must also discuss the army that conducts these operations. A country's politics create an army to safeguard the vital interests of its people. We have learned this through our own experience. The former reactionary Yugoslav rulers, who pursued a treacherous policy, led their people into the most disgraceful and horrific enslavement in our history. Their army, undermined by internal reactionary forces, lacking a military doctrine and a vision

for modern warfare, suffered collapse and complete disintegration.

However, when the liberation and patriotic forces of our peoples, led by the Communist Party, began waging war and organizing uprisings, they created an army that fought against the occupiers for four years, thus becoming part of the broader anti-fascist bloc of democratic nations. In this struggle, all the moral values of our peoples, which had been suppressed for centuries, came to the forefront. The people recognized their own strength, new political horizons opened up to them, they felt freedom and they were ready to fight for it through all the trials of this war. Even the numerous offensives by superior enemy forces, supported by all the traitors of our country, could not shake or break the ranks of our units. From battle to battle, the Army was forged and continuously grew until it finally became a great force — a firm guarantee of the freedom and independence of our homeland and a guardian of the achievements of this magnificent struggle, for which our peoples shed much blood.

The great liberation war saved our peoples from nazi extermination. This struggle erased the shame of betrayal brought upon us by the traitors and eliminated the danger of the Ustaše and Chetniks holding a bloody knife to the people's throat. Viewed narrowly from the perspective of

1941, one might have thought that our peoples would destroy each other through internal strife. However, through our long and difficult struggle, the brotherhood of our peoples was realized — the greatest achievement of this fight. Through bold and heroic resistance, we have gained an international reputation greater than ever before in our history. This struggle has given us not only the right to decide on the organization of our internal affairs but also the ability to participate, alongside our great allies, in shaping the future of Europe.

Our struggle and the very existence of our Army in the so-called "European fortress" were significant strategic factors for the anti-Hitler coalition. Yugoslavia did not become a base for the fascist forces — it became a graveyard for numerous fascist divisions. Our struggle exposed the cracks and weaknesses of fascist Germany and marked the path that all freedom-loving peoples of occupied Europe should follow. This gave our fight great international significance.

During the liberation war, the enemies of our struggle spoke of a so-called "Draža's army." Draža's army was never truly an army. It was composed of sharply divided forces driven by national chauvinism, power struggles, political speculation, inciting internal conflicts and civil war. These were poorly organized groups, and

lacking internal unity and without a solid political foundation, they inevitably disintegrated under stronger blows.

Let us look at the National Liberation Army. It endured the most difficult period in the history of our peoples — the period of fascist occupation — through heroic struggle. The soldiers of our Army carried the banner of freedom, brotherhood and unity across our land through harsh and bloody battles. Brotherhood and unity were forged first within our Army. This was the essence of the liberation war. All our peoples rose up to fight for their freedom, forming their own national combat units, which merged into a unified National Liberation Army. Within this Army, not only did fraternal solidarity and the fighting unity of our peoples manifest, but also their great military traditions, heroism, self-sacrifice, and deep love for freedom and independence were revived.

Comrade Tito always had before him the goal of liberating our country and securing the democratic rights of the people. He unwaveringly stood on the path of uncompromising armed struggle against the invaders. He was firmly convinced that our fight, within the broader development of wartime events and with the support of our allies, would lead to victory and the liberation of our country. He was not mistaken.

We achieved great and decisive successes.

The foundation of every military endeavour is strong organization. An army cannot function with improvisation — especially not under the harsh conditions of life and struggle that defined our liberation war. It required a great deal of systematic planning and strategic thinking to organize the resistance of a people oppressed under the fascist boot. This task was even more difficult because the occupier had, to a large extent, inherited and harnessed the entire state apparatus of the former Yugoslavia for its own purposes.

The reactionary political parties completely disintegrated. Some of their leaders fled abroad where they continued working against the people; others entered the service of the occupiers, while some passively observed events from the sidelines. The Communist Party, however, made every effort to unite all patriotic elements into a single front for the fight against the occupiers. Our people did not accept betrayal and did not recognize the capitulation, as the former rulers had hoped. The masses responded to the call of the Party and resolutely joined the struggle. The gathering of democratic forces into the liberation front only grew stronger as various enemies of the people increasingly sided with the occupiers in the fight against their own nation. Thus, as the struggle intensified, the democratic forces estab-

lished a solid military organization led by the Supreme Headquarters of the National Liberation Army. The Supreme Headquarters was not only a military command but, for an extended period, also the political leadership of the National Liberation War. Despite brutal persecution and heavy losses, the Communist Party maintained an extensive underground network throughout the country — politically well-directed and hardened by past struggles, even during the old Yugoslavia. As a result, the decision to launch armed resistance was quickly communicated across the country, ensuring the proper implementation of a broad, nationwide liberation war. The Party had an organized Military Committee (established as early as 1940), led by Comrade Tito. Less than three months after the April catastrophe, in early July 1941, military headquarters were formed and the armed uprising began across the country.

A favourable military-political moment had arrived for the uprising. The main fascist forces were engaged on the Soviet front, leaving the occupied territories with only minimal enemy presence. Furthermore, with the Soviet Union entering the war, the anti-Hitler coalition took its full shape.

It is also important to recognize that ever since the time of Peter the Great, whenever a Russian rifle was fired, we have risen in rebellion. That we

have never fully reaped the benefits of these great struggles is due to the imperial system of the time and the selfishness and backwardness of our own monarchies. Today, the circumstances are different. With the Soviet Union — a land of brotherhood, unity and democratic freedoms — at the head of the anti-Hitler coalition, small nations had the prospect of winning their freedom and independence through this struggle. Thus, once again, after 23 years under the old Yugoslavia, when even mentioning Russia was forbidden, we stood by our great Slavic mother, Russia, believing in its strength and victory.

The Soviet Union was the first to extend a hand to us after March 27 by signing the Pact of Friendship. There is no need to emphasize why this pact could not have an immediate effect, but it provided us with great moral support and demonstrated the interest of our Slavic brothers in our struggle.

To hinder the formation of a united front against the occupiers, traitors spread slander, claiming that the Communist Party had only entered the fight after Germany attacked the USSR. They sought to conceal the following facts: the enormous efforts the Party made to establish a united front for the defence of the country's threatened independence, the organization of massive demonstrations across the

country against the anti-national regimes and acts of betrayal, and the leadership of the people's movement on March 27 against the treacherous clique of Maček and Cvetković. One of the Party's actions was the courageous resistance of the 41st Regiment near Skadar against the Italian fascists, as well as the resistance of the reserve officers' school in Maribor against the German fascists. During the betrayal, many soldiers, following the Party's call, refused to surrender their weapons to the enemy, instead hiding them for later use against fascism. Every Party member, regardless of military obligations, was ordered to report to military units, but these units rejected them. Even during that brief war of betrayal, many Party members fell in the front lines of battle. They did everything in their power to prevent panic and demoralization, but the betrayal was so deep that little could be done. However, launching a general armed uprising in Yugoslavia while the main German forces were not yet engaged against the Soviet Union would have meant knowingly marching toward destruction — risking the annihilation of the people's uprising and, with it, the entire liberation war. Clearly, such an action would have benefited the enemy the most, not the broader fight against fascism.

The uprising developed gradually in some areas and surged forward rapidly in others.

By August 1941, the uprising in Serbia was not only firmly established but had already achieved significant successes. The weapons factory in Užice fell into our hands. Large territories in Western Serbia, Šumadija and Eastern Serbia were liberated. Almost all of Montenegro was freed. The uprising was steadily advancing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in the mountainous regions of Lika, Banija, Kordun and Northern Dalmatia. In Slovenia and Macedonia, the uprising was still in its early stages.

As we can see, the struggle quickly expanded and reached a massive scale, particularly in the eastern regions of our country — Serbia, Montenegro and Eastern Bosnia. This threatened all the strategic, political and economic advantages that the Germans had gained through their plundering of the Balkans. In other words, German control and conquest of the Balkans were called into question.

This was extremely dangerous for the Germans because the Balkans secured the flank of their forces on the Soviet-German front and protected the southern approaches to the German Reich. We know that the Germans considered the conquest of the Balkans a prerequisite for their expansionist ambitions, both toward the USSR and the Middle East. The Balkans was a crucial route for their global domination. This ex-

plains the large-scale occupier offensives against our National Liberation Army, which posed a serious threat to that so-called "living space" of nazi Germany.

By the summer of 1941, it was already clear that Germany's "blitzkrieg" in the East had failed and had turned into a prolonged conflict. However, on their southern, vulnerable flank — Yugoslavia — a very dangerous war had begun, a war behind their lines. The Germans sought to crush our struggle, and by the end of October 1941, they launched an offensive against our units in Serbia. For this offensive, they brought in four divisions along with part of Gavrilović's Ustaša-Domobran forces. The staging bases for the final phase of the offensive were the towns of Šabac, Valjevo, Kragujevac and Kraljevo, with a converging movement toward Užice. Užice was the most important military-political centre, housing the leadership of the liberation war, weapons factories and the most strategically advantageous sector of Western Serbia, held by our forces.

Here, it is important to highlight the treacherous role of Draža Mihailović. No agreement could be reached with him. His fundamental political strategy was:

a) To preserve the old state apparatus under German control so that, after Germany's col-

Scale 1:10,000,000 — The development of the uprising and liberated territories in Yugoslavia in the summer of 1941.

lapse, he could seize power — an arrangement he had already made with Nedić. This explains his passive stance toward the occupiers, allowing them unrestricted access to the country's resources;

b) To prevent the mobilization of the masses into the partisan ranks by any means necessary, including terror, direct combat and collaboration with the occupiers, and;

c) To wage a fratricidal war aimed at exterminating Muslims, Croats, Macedonians and others.

We waged an uncompromising and relentless struggle against the occupiers and our ranks grew rapidly. Draža's "units," which hid in the forests under the excuse that the time was not yet right, not only failed to grow in numbers but continuously dwindled. Our struggle forced Draža into a decision:

— Either to join the fight against the occupiers, as some of his detachments did — most of whom eventually joined our side, or;

— To align himself with the occupiers in the fight against us.

He chose the second option. At that time, our forces in Serbia numbered around 15,000 partisans, while Draža had up to 5,000 men, many of whom had been forcibly conscripted.

The enemy had suffered heavy losses and had

been pushed back into larger garrisons. Both the Chetniks and the occupiers were weak, so Draža still did not dare to attack us, although his bands were killing our couriers, smaller groups and individuals leaving Belgrade. However, he did not waste time before launching a full-scale attack on us. He established contact with Ljotić and Nedić and signed an agreement with the Germans in Valjevo.

To weaken us before the start of their general offensive, the Germans forced Draža to attack us in Užice. Because of this, we had to withdraw some of our forces for defence, which weakened our front lines against the Germans. At Karan near Užice, we defeated Draža, pursued his forces and surrounded him at Ravna Gora. He then offered a truce, which we accepted in the interest of the people and the fight against the occupiers. However, this agreement never materialized. A German offensive followed in which the Chetniks, together with the Germans, fought fiercely against us. After two months of heavy fighting, the bulk of our forces withdrew from Serbia and relocated to the Sandžak, from where we continued the struggle across all of Yugoslavia. In Serbia, smaller partisan units remained in Mačva, the Kosmaj sector, Eastern Serbia, Toplica, Jablanica and Vlasina. Many of these groups operated underground for a long time. Despite

all the persecution and terror by the occupiers and traitors, the insurgent rifle in Serbia never fell silent. Numerous offensives against Crna Trava, Toplica, Jablanica, Eastern Serbia and Kosmaj failed to destroy Serbia's liberation forces. With the favourable development of military and political circumstances, the National Liberation Army of Serbia re-emerged and played a decisive role in the liberation of Serbia.

Draža Mihailović, together with Nedić and Ljotić, divided power in Serbia. As the so-called "mountain king," as he was referred to abroad, Draža was granted control over mostly mountainous districts and villages by the Germans. There, he established his administration, coordinated with Nedić, and remained under the control of the occupiers. Many reactionaries, both within the country and abroad, placed great hopes in this authority.

Now, let us turn to Montenegro. A massive uprising broke out there on July 13, 1941. Everyone capable of carrying a rifle — young and old alike — rose up. This uprising clearly demonstrated, among other things, the deep love Montenegrins had for the Russian people. The masses, like a tidal wave, surged against the Italian fascists, and by the end of July, nearly all of Montenegro had been liberated, except for the cities of Cetinje, Podgorica and Nikšić.

With the liberation of Montenegro, the Italian occupation zone along the Adriatic coast was severed at a depth of up to 200 kilometres. This created a major breach, cutting through the enemy's communication network along the crucial coastal route. The breach was particularly dangerous for the enemy because it was located in mountainous terrain, well-suited for partisan warfare and its further expansion.

Because of this, the Italians reacted quickly and aggressively to suppress the people's uprising in Montenegro and prevent its spread. The lack of resistance in other areas of the Balkans under their occupation allowed the Italians to deploy significant forces against Montenegro — an entire corps consisting of four divisions, heavily supported by air power. Since the communication routes from the Neretva region eastward toward Montenegro had been cut off, the Italians brought troops from Greece and Albania. A smaller force was sent from Metohija, advancing through Peć and the Plav Valley along the Lim River, with the goal of preventing the uprising from spreading and linking up with Serbia through the Sandžak. The bulk of their forces advanced along the Skadar-Podgorica route to crush the partisan resistance in the Zeta Valley and the Montenegrin coast.

After intense battles lasting several days, by

the end of August 1941, the enemy managed to take control of key garrisons and push our forces further back. Following the breakthrough of the front, the uprising weakened. A portion of the population abandoned the fight, while reactionary elements began collaborating with the occupiers and actively participating in actions against the liberation movement. Another part of the population, however, rallied even more firmly into military ranks. This led to a brief pause in fighting throughout September, which the military leadership used to reorganize and restructure the armed units.

While the uprising in Montenegro was waning, the uprising in Serbia had not only solidified but had also intensified and achieved significant successes, particularly in Western Serbia. This fact, along with the organizational measures that had been undertaken, provided momentum for the rapid revival and renewed strengthening of the uprising in Montenegro. In the crucial Serbian-Montenegrin region, our forces were steadily growing.

The battles in Montenegro during September and October took on a more dynamic character. Communication lines were once again cut, and several towns — Šavnik, Žabljak, Gornje, Velimlje, Grahovo, Čevo and Mojkovac — were liberated. The enemy was pushed into larger gar-

risons, which had been fortified with strong defensive structures. Lacking heavy weaponry, we were unable to breach these positions. The fighting became stagnant, leaving our large forces underutilized. Therefore, it was necessary to free up these forces, give them greater manoeuvrability, and expand their military and political objectives. Thus, Montenegrin shock battalions, led by the legendary hero Sava Kovačević, advanced deep into Herzegovina, reaching Nevesinje, where they engaged in fierce battles to protect the Serbian population from Ustaša massacres. This had a significant impact on mobilizing the people of Herzegovina to join the uprising.

Other significant Montenegrin forces moved north at the end of November 1941 to link up with Serbian and Bosnian units and establish a stronghold for further offensive operations. This led to the Battle for the Sandžak. The attack on Pljevlja was unsuccessful, but during December, Montenegrin units captured Ljubiše, Foča, Goražde, Rudo and several other enemy strongholds. After these operations, they joined the Serbian partisan detachments along the Lim River, which had been pushed into this sector after the First Enemy Offensive in Serbia.

* * *

The expulsion of partisan forces from Serbia

Scale 1:3,500,000 — Liberated territory of Montenegro in the summer of 1941 (dotted area) and the joining of Serbian and Montenegrin partisans in the Sandžak, along with their offensive towards Bosnia (outlined in black: enemy garrisons).

had an adverse effect on the entire operational area east of the Bosna and Neretva rivers — encompassing Eastern Bosnia, the Sandžak, Montenegro and Herzegovina. This region was closely linked to Serbia, as both areas relied on the mountainous terrain along the Drina River, stretching from its sources in Montenegro to its confluence with the Sava. Weapons, ammunition and material aid were supplied from Serbia.

After our withdrawal from Serbia, Chetnik betrayal, combined with terror and massacres against Muslim and other patriotic civilians, created insecurity and confusion not only among the population but also within some partisan units. This was exacerbated by the fact that many had not fully grasped the extent of this treachery. Under the influence of Chetnik betrayal and their destructive propaganda, a wave of unrest emerged within several partisan detachments in Eastern Bosnia and the Sandžak, leading to wavering elements abandoning the partisan ranks.

The Montenegrin forces, in their attack on Pljevlja, failed to capture the town and suffered losses. The reactionary elements in Montenegro took full advantage of this, along with the events in Serbia, to fuel their treacherous propaganda and plans.

Unprecedented cold, burned villages, masses of refugees fleeing massacres, shortages of ammu-

nition, food, clothing and footwear — all these factors worsened our position.

The occupiers and domestic traitors had taken all necessary measures to suppress the uprising at its core. The partisan detachments, as the initial, cumbersome and inert organizational formations of the people's uprising, were unable to keep up with the pace of modern warfare. Under increasing difficulties and enemy pressure, they began to dwindle. Our forces were in decline. The national uprising and its organizational military-political structures were not yet firmly established and there was a real danger of collapse. Only a fighter with high political awareness, strong moral resilience and unwavering loyalty to his people could resolutely confront these hardships and overcome them. A new military organization was needed — one that was not only different in structure but also in its very essence. We found such fighters and such units in the Proletarian Brigades.

Due to this critical situation, on December 22, 1941, Comrade Tito formed the 1st Proletarian Brigade in Rudo from Serbian and Montenegrin partisan detachments. A little later, the 2nd Proletarian Brigade was formed from Serbian partisan units gathered in Nova Varoš.

The newly-formed 1st Proletarian Brigade crushed the occupying and Chetnik forces advancing concentrically on Rudo. However, the

Lim region was too narrow and within immediate reach of the German offensive group from Serbia. A prolonged stay there was not beneficial. It was necessary to stabilize the already shaken situation and establish a suitable stronghold — not only for rest, regrouping and strengthening our forces but also for regaining the initiative.

The Bosnian mining region and the Upper Neretva area, in connection with Montenegro, offered better military and political prospects. The rugged mountainous terrain, forests, canyons and rivers facilitated a more persistent defence. The central position of this area allowed for quick connections with other parts of our country. The mining basin promised the mobilization of new forces and its destruction would deprive the enemy of important industrial resources. For this reason, at the end of December, the 1st Proletarian Brigade advanced into the Jahorina-Romanija-Vareš sector. The 2nd Brigade remained behind to secure the stronghold in the Nova Varoš sector. Additionally, it had the task of maintaining connections with the remaining forces in Serbia and linking up with our forces in the Sandžak.

Through its energetic advance, the 1st Proletarian Brigade changed the situation on the Eastern Bosnian front. It provided strong support to partisan forces, reactivated operations on all ma-

jor routes, gathered partisan detachments around it and prevented their further decline. The brigade also took over positions abandoned by the Chetniks, halting their massacres. Many Chetnik units, which had fallen into disarray due to Chetnik betrayal, were absorbed and reorganized into volunteer detachments for resistance against the occupiers.

After shifting the operations and intensifying the struggle in this sector, the enemy launched a second offensive from two directions: one thrust from the Bosna River Valley toward the east and southeast, and the other from the Drina and Lim valleys toward the west. This was a manoeuvre aimed at encircling our forces.

Fierce battles unfolded around Sarajevo, on Jahorina and Romanija, in the Krivaja Valley near Olovo, around Vlasenica and Rogatica on one front, and near Nova Varoš, Prijepolje and Pljevlja on the other. After persistent efforts and intense fighting in January and February 1942, this hastily launched offensive — based on the assumption that we could be easily destroyed — was successfully repelled.

One of the most famous actions of this campaign was the breakthrough of the 1st Proletarian Brigade from Vareš through Rajlovac, Igman and Bjelašnica to Trnovo — one of the brigade's most glorious feats. The march lasted 18 continuous

hours in harsh winter conditions. Mount Igman will forever stand as a monument to the struggle and endurance of our proletarian fighters. Climbing over the frozen mountain ridges, no one was left behind. However, 160 proletarians suffered severe frostbite, and those who survived proudly bore the name "*igmanci*."*

Another remarkable action from this offensive was the breakthrough of the 2nd Proletarian Brigade, which, under continuous battle, moved from Nova Varoš to Čajniče, crossing Mount Zlatar and the Lim River. In January, they waded through the icy waters, carrying all their wounded across.

By the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, after two major enemy offensives, our forces managed to consolidate and establish control over a key strategic area at the border of Montenegro, Herzegovina and Bosnia. In this region, we succeeded in breaking the occupiers' defence system and forcing the enemy into the cities.

The liberated territory was vast, providing the necessary freedom for manoeuvring. The emergence of strong Proletarian Brigades, their victories and their incredible endurance during these most difficult days instilled confidence and renewed momentum in the struggle. These mobile

* Igmanists.

proletarian units managed to unite and support the partisan forces in Montenegro, Herzegovina and Eastern Bosnia, giving new strength to the uprising — especially in Herzegovina, where it was still in its early stages.

By the spring of 1942, forces from Serbia, Montenegro, Eastern Bosnia, Herzegovina and the Sandžak formed four Proletarian Brigades (1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th) and three Shock Brigades (3rd, 6th and 10th). These brigades were the pinnacle of the people's uprising in the eastern part of our country. Despite all the measures taken by the occupiers, Chetniks and Ustaše, the uprising was not crushed. Instead, it produced strong military formations that would continue the struggle.

During these difficult early operations of the war, our fighters demonstrated great moral strength. Their political awareness and sense of purpose drove them into battle against fascism — far from their own homes. It was on this foundation that our military and political leadership based its decisions and future plans. On the other hand, the correct resolution of all the wartime challenges instilled trust in our leadership, and the fighters followed it unwaveringly. In this region, through the unification of Serbian, Montenegrin, Herzegovinian and Eastern Bosnian partisan forces, combat unity was forged in action.

Here, the most battle-hardened, most determined and most self-sacrificing among the Serbian people gathered — ready to bear the heavy burden of war across the entire country, fighting for the freedom of all our peoples.

Before the start of the Third Enemy Offensive, launched in the spring of 1942 against the main partisan strongholds in Yugoslavia (Montenegro-Herzegovina-Eastern Bosnia; Bosanska Krajina-Lika; Slovenia), our forces, through energetic efforts, managed to secure enough time to reorganize all our units into brigades in the tri-border region. The previous practice of large partisan detachments, which were tied to their specific areas, was abandoned. We applied all our operational experience to these new brigades, adapting them to the new conditions of warfare: fast and flexible movement, shifting operations to distant regions and greater manoeuvrability against a superior enemy that was doing everything possible to destroy us. These brigades became the true foundation of our Army — a solid, resilient and battle-hardened core.

* * *

The stabilization of the military-political situation in the tri-border area influenced not only the reorganization of our forces but also the strategic planning and approach to further parti-

san warfare. Comrade Tito, after forming a strike group of brigades, aimed to support and intensify uprisings in the western regions of the country. Remaining in the tri-border area was no longer useful for our main forces. The Italians had fully exploited the Chetniks, to the point that the fight was losing its primary purpose — the struggle against the occupiers. Keeping such a strike group on harsh mountainous terrain, with scarce food supplies, had no long-term potential and would weaken its striking power. At the same time, the Croatian masses, who had largely remained on the sidelines, needed to be mobilized and brought into the National Liberation Movement. Seizing the right moment — at the peak of the Third Enemy Offensive in the tri-border area — Comrade Tito launched a victorious offensive westward. "We are moving from here," Tito said. "In a new direction. We will carry the banner of the National Liberation War — the banner of armed brotherhood and unity of our peoples — through new regions of Yugoslavia. We will be the sowers of brotherhood among nations. Through your actions and persuasion, you will show that you are an army of a new type."

The movement began from Sutjeska in late June 1942, advancing in two directions: 1. 1st and 3rd Brigades advanced through Lelija-Kadinovik-Konjic-Prozor-Livno, and; 2. 2nd and

Scale 1:3,500,000 — Liberated territory in Montenegro, Herzegovina and Eastern Bosnia at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942 (outlined in black: enemy garrisons and units).

4th Brigades moved along the Foča-Trnovo-Igman-Raštelica-Kreševo-Fojnica-Bugojno-Glamoč route. To secure the movement in the tri-border sector, the 5th Montenegrin Brigade and the 10th Herzegovinian Brigade remained behind, while the 6th Bosnian Brigade, in order to protect the Eastern Bosnian base, had already been sent from the Romanija sector toward Mojkovac. Before the strike group set off, in April, we eliminated the strong Ustaša stronghold in Borač, located in the Upper Neretva Valley. This den of criminals, hidden deep in a canyon, had inflicted great suffering on our people in Herzegovina. By destroying this stronghold, which was positioned on the left flank of our advance route, we secured our movement across the Lelija mountain range. This movement resulted in the liberation of a vast territory in the western part of our country, where the strike brigades linked up with Krajina and Croatian partisan forces. In terms of its outcomes, this operation can be considered one of the most significant moves in the history of our war. Our partisan forces in the western regions (Bosanska Krajina-Kozara, Slovenia) had been put in a difficult position by the Third Enemy Offensive; Chetnik-Ustaša bands had gained significant momentum. The victorious march of our strike brigades, the destruction of the Sarajevo-Mostar Adriatic railway — the first major

Scale 1:5,000,000 — Offensive of the Proletarian Brigades in late spring of 1942 towards Bosnian Krajina.

sabotage operation of such scale in our war — along with the capture of towns such as Konjic, Prozor, Kreševo, Gornji Vakuf, Mrkonjić Grad, Duvno and Livno, had a tremendous impact, bringing new energy to our forces in the western regions. The arrival of these brigades and their battles along the Vrbas, Sana, Una and Dinara ignited mass resistance among the people.

As operations expanded across Bosnia and Croatia, we dismantled Pavelić's quisling apparatus and eliminated the bulk of his bloodthirsty Ustaša forces. Pavelić and his deputy Maček were completely exposed politically. The Croatian people saw firsthand the justification of the liberation war. In Dalmatia, a popular uprising erupted, spreading even to Croatian regions where resistance had previously been weak, such as Žumberak, Slavonia and Zagorje. This also had an impact on Slovenia.

The Army grew rapidly. We advanced from brigades to a higher level of military organization, forming divisions and corps. This marked the second major phase in the development of our Army. We now had strong strike groups, capable of conducting large-scale operations and solving strategic challenges across the entire Yugoslav front.

With the liberation of vast territories, a state began to emerge and people's power was established, culminating in the formation of AVNOJ in Bihać. Thus, the uprising of our peoples not only built and strengthened an armed force but also laid solid foundations for a people's government. This was of great importance, not only for our internal stability but also for our international position.

For the first time in history, fighters from all our nations stood together on the same battlefield. This unity led to major victories — achievements that could only be attained through collective efforts and shared sacrifice. From this shared bloodshed grew the brotherhood and unity of our peoples — the greatest achievement of our struggle. With this movement, we established ourselves in the central region of our country, linking all our forces and securing control over the rugged terrain of the Dinaric mountain range, where the enemy could not fully exploit its modern military technology. From this powerful central stronghold, we launched operations toward the Sava Basin on one side and the Adriatic coast on the other. From this point onward, the Dinaric mountain range became a strategic lever, connecting Slovenian forces with our units in the eastern regions — Montenegro and Serbia.

* * *

During 1942, the focus of our operations

shifted from the eastern to the western regions. As a result, the occupier's bases in the west were seriously threatened. In other words, just as the Allied offensive in Africa advanced westward toward the Italian mainland, the focus of our operations moved toward the Adriatic coast. This established a coordinated strategic alignment, even across a great distance.

The entire German communication system, which ran from the east and north toward the Adriatic coast and Italy, was disrupted. Our units operated in the hinterlands of Adriatic ports, from where Romanian oil was to be transported to Africa and Italy. In this situation, the Germans wanted to eliminate their enemy in the Balkans, and in January 1943, they launched a massive Fourth Offensive against us. This offensive involved six German and seven Italian divisions, all Ustaša units and 18,000 Chetniks under Draža Mihailović, recruited from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The enemy's main plan was to encircle the free territory within the arc of Dinara-Neretva-Sarajevo-Banja Luka-Sisak-Karlovac-Gospić-Knin, and, through a converging movement, force our forces into Bosanska Krajina and destroy them.

It was extremely dangerous and risky to engage the superior enemy forces in frontal battles, as they were heavily armed to the teeth. This was

Scale 1:10,000,000 — The development of the uprising and liberated territory at the end of 1942 (outlined in black: enemy garrisons).

Scale 1:10,000,000 — Plan of the offensive
by the Division Strike Group.

especially true given that it was winter, making long-term survival in forest regions impossible. Our units were not well-equipped for winter warfare. Food supplies were insufficient. Having fought fierce battles throughout the second half of 1942, we had over 4,000 wounded in this region. Keeping these wounded fighters here would mean putting their lives in grave danger. Meanwhile, the uprising in the western regions of our country had fully solidified. Strong offensive forces could now be set aside and used to improve the military-political situation on other fronts.

The situation in Montenegro and Serbia had become very difficult after our main forces moved westward. Lacking support from the people, the Chetniks unleashed brutal terror. Reactionaries from abroad continued to support Draža Mihailović despite the fact that he was nothing more than an ordinary servant of the occupiers, and even supplied him with aid via airlifts. It was necessary to rekindle the fight in the eastern regions, to support the partisan groups struggling under extremely harsh conditions. Additionally, we needed to extend a hand to Albania and Bulgaria. In Albania, the uprising was still in its early stages, while in Bulgaria, a strong popular wave was rising against the traitorous ruling clique.

And so, Comrade Tito made the following decision in Bihać: with a strong offensive group

of five divisions (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 7th and 9th), to evade enemy encirclement and, in the first stage, move into Montenegro and the Sandžak, then in the second stage, continue the advance toward Metohija and Central Serbia — into the heart of the Balkans.

To execute this decision, the following plan was adopted: Two manoeuvring cover units were tasked with slowing the enemy's advance eastward, ensuring that the offensive group, along with 4,000 wounded, could cross the Neretva. The 4th Corps was assigned to fight from the Kupa to the Una, then move behind enemy lines and remain on its own territory. The 1st Bosnian Corps was given the role of covering the Una sector, escorting the operational group to the Neretva, and then, like the 4th Corps, moving behind enemy lines while staying on its own territory.

By mid-January, the offensive group had begun its movement eastward. Long operational routes, difficult terrain, bad weather, and the large number of wounded and refugees significantly slowed its progress.

The 4th Corps was subjected to envelopment attacks from Lika, the Kupa region and the Sisak-Kostajnica sector. It fought heavy battles until mid-February, after which it turned from the Una sector and launched a full-scale assault

on Italian forces in the Gračac area, decisively defeating them before returning to the Kordun and Banija regions.

On the Una and Sana, the 1st Bosnian Corps took on the cover role, engaging in fierce battles. The enemy encircled it from the directions of Krupa, Prijedor and Banja Luka, forcing it back into the Vitorog-Srnetica mountain massif and then toward Mount Šator. As a result, the corps was unable to fully complete its cover mission.

During its movement toward the Neretva, the offensive group captured Imotski, Prozor and Jablanica, completely defeating the Italian "Murge" division, which had been closing the encirclement on the western bank of the Neretva. A massive amount of war booty, stockpiled in these garrisons, fell into our hands — supplies intended for this division's planned offensive westward. However, our offensive group struck first, preempting their plans.

As the attack continued, our units assaulted Konjic to open a passage through the Upper Neretva Valley, but the attack failed due to a Chetnik offensive from the east. At the same time, Draža Mihailović's Chetniks arrived at the Neretva to complete the encirclement. Italian specialists operated their heavy artillery, while the Italians provided food and ammunition supplies. The Chetnik command and field hospitals

were located in Mostar.

Bloody battles broke out over the river crossings at the Neretva. This slowed and complicated the transfer of the strike group. Meanwhile, the Germans moved the 1st Alpine Division along the Sarajevo-Ivan Sedlo route to attack our left flank, while the 92nd Grenadier Division advanced from Bugojno toward Prozor, hitting us from the rear. The protective elements of the 1st Bosnian Corps were unable to halt their advance.

A very difficult situation arose in the Neretva River Valley. In response, we withdrew two divisions from the frontal battle on the Neretva and redirected them toward the Prozor-Donji Vakuf-Bugojno sector. Fierce fighting lasted for three days and three nights until we finally pushed back and partially destroyed the 92nd German Division, forcing it into a chaotic retreat beyond Bugojno. This victory allowed us to regroup our forces, cross the Neretva in mid-March, and then, near Prenj and Velež, completely crush Draža Mihailović's Chetniks.

The Battle of the Neretva lasted 37 days, fought under extremely harsh conditions. Our wounded soldiers slowed down troop movement and manoeuvrability. A typhus epidemic spread among the units, further worsening our position. The swollen Neretva River and the icy slopes of Prenj and Velež, occupied by traitor bands,

Scale 1:5,000,000 — The Battle of the Neretva (dotted: our units and their movements; outlined in black: enemy units and their movements).

Scale 1:5,000,000 — The Fifth Enemy Offensive (dotted: liberated territory and movements of our units; outlined in black: enemy units and their movements).

seemed impassable for any army. The occupiers and traitors already celebrated, thinking they had trapped us in a "cauldron."

But our fighters' great courage and endurance, along with their deep love for their wounded comrades, ensuring they did not fall into enemy hands, prevailed. We broke through the encirclement and escaped the enemy trap. During the breakthrough, we completely crushed Draža Mihailović's Chetniks and continued pursuing the enemy across Herzegovina, Montenegro and the Sandžak, capturing Nevesinje, Ulog, Kalinovik, Gacko, Avtovac, Foča, Ustikolina, Goražde, Čajniče, Goransko, Žabljak, Šavnik, Mojkovac, and reaching the Lim River near Brodarevo and the Morača near Bioče. The defeat of Draža Mihailović was of great military and political significance. From that point on, he no longer posed any real threat. His treacherous role was fully exposed to the international public, and only after this did Allied missions begin arriving at our Supreme Headquarters.

* * *

The battles during the Fourth Offensive were extremely intense and difficult. Upon entering Montenegro and the Sandžak, we had to take a short break to transport a large number of wounded across difficult terrain and prepare for

the next phase of the operation — advancing into Metohija and Central Serbia.

However, the enemy did not remain idle. Seeing that they had failed to destroy us, they quickly and unexpectedly launched the Fifth Offensive in May 1943 against our operational group. In reality, this was a continuation of the Fourth Offensive, as the enemy had regrouped and brought in fresh forces.

The Germans transported already concentrated troops from Sarajevo by truck through Višegrad to the Lim Valley, securing full control of the area. The Italians closed the Nikšić-Podgorica route. From Peć and Novi Pazar, the Germans deployed two new divisions, occupying the Berane-Andrijevica-Kolašin sector. Just as we began advancing toward Morača and Lim, we encountered very strong enemy resistance.

In this situation, crossing Pešter toward the Ibar Gorge was extremely risky. We had to pull back our forces, which had already been oriented eastward. However, the enemy, by rapidly transferring troops from Mostar and Sarajevo, closed the Nevesinje-Kalinovik and Gacko-Foča routes along the Sutjeska River, thus completely encircling us strategically, and this encirclement was turning into a tactical blockade.

Remaining in this area under constant air and artillery attacks was not an option. There

was no food in this terrain. We had to break out of the encirclement once again. The chosen breakthrough route was Maglić-Zelengora-Jahorina-Eastern Bosnia, as it was the easiest tactical option. In Eastern Bosnia, we had a stronghold and access to food supplies for our units. Breaking through was extremely difficult. The canyon rivers hindered rapid troop movement and the evacuation of the wounded. The enemy employed a cunning strategy — they took defensive positions in canyons and mountain passes, while we had to forcefully break through each of these defences. Despite this, two key moments defined the success of the breakthrough: 1. Securing the mountain passes on Maglić, ensuring the crossing of the most challenging mountain terrain, and; 2. Holding defensive positions at Velike and Male Bare along the Gacko-Foča route, allowing our deep columns of units to pass through safely. The 2nd Dalmatian Brigade provided flank protection and, with unmatched heroism, endured intense enemy fire and relentless attacks to hold its ground. The 1st, 2nd and 7th Divisions carried out the breakthrough. There were three enemy defensive lines in the breakthrough area: on the Sutjeska; on Zelengora, and; on the Foča-Kalinovik and Višegrad-Sarajevo routes. Despite these challenges, we successfully broke through, defeated the enemy, and although we suffered sig-

Scale 1:10,000,000 — Liberated territory (dotted area) by the end of the summer of 1943 (outlined in black: enemy garrisons).

nificant losses, particularly from enemy aviation, we emerged victorious. Maglić, Sutjeska and Zelengora now stand as monuments to the heroic struggle and sacrifices of our people. The 3rd Division served as the rear guard for the strike group. In fulfilling this role, it sacrificed itself. It failed to break through with the main force. Scattered into smaller groups, its units fought their way into Herzegovina and Montenegro. After breaking through in June 1943, the strike group continued its offensive operations in Eastern Bosnia, capturing Han Pijesak, Vlasenica, Kladanj, Srebrenica and Zvornik. After a short rest, part of our operational group continued toward the Adriatic coast, while another part moved towards the Sandžak and Montenegro, holding these key strongholds at the doorstep of Serbia. This provided a strong boost to the renewal of the fight in Serbia and revived the uprising in Macedonia.

As can be seen, this account covers the operations of only a small part of our Army — specifically, the strike operational group, which, in relation to our entire Army, comprised at most 40 per cent of its forces. This was a manoeuvring group tasked with:

— Transferring operations to distant operational areas and expanding the uprising in regions where it was weaker;

— Drawing strong enemy forces toward it-

self, thereby allowing the partisan units on other fronts to develop and operate more freely;

— Launching surprise attacks to disrupt the enemy's transport system and supply bases, and;

— Resolving major military-strategic challenges through powerful offensive actions.

Given these tasks, it is clear that this group carried a heavy burden in the liberation war.

* * *

Through two years of intense battles, we inflicted heavy losses on the Italian occupiers. These blows, combined with the attacks of our allies, led to the capitulation of fascist Italy in August 1943 — a major event for the anti-fascist coalition.

We rightfully took advantage of this surrender, liberating vast territories from Gevgelija to the Prekosavska Hills, stretching over 700 kilometres in length and up to 400 kilometres in depth. The Slovenian Littoral, Istria and the Dalmatian islands, which had been unjustly severed from our national borders, were now free. We controlled almost the entire Dalmatian coast.

In Serbia and Macedonia, the fighting intensified and liberation forces secured important strongholds in the West Morava and Vardar regions, providing support to the Bulgarian liberation forces.

Alongside these military successes, this period also saw the Second Session of AVNOJ in Jajce, where historic decisions were made, laying the foundations of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia.

All these events gave new energy and momentum to the struggle. A flood of new fighters poured into the ranks of our Army, which grew significantly. The entire country was mobilized, bringing in new forces to fight against the hated fascists. Seized Italian weapons fell into the hands of battle-hardened fighters who knew how to use them effectively. Recognizing the increasing importance of our Army, the Allies began supplying us with weapons and military equipment along the Adriatic coast.

Our reinforced and well-armed Army launched powerful offensive operations across the entire country. The satellite regimes in Yugoslavia were on the verge of collapse, threatening Germany's strongest bases and outposts in the region. All communication routes leading from the Sava and Drava basins to Italy and the Adriatic were cut off, significantly worsening the German position on the Italian front. Similarly, all Morava-Vardar routes came under heavy attack, severely disrupting German connections with Greece and Albania, where the liberation movements — shielded from the north by our forces

— were creating a stronghold.

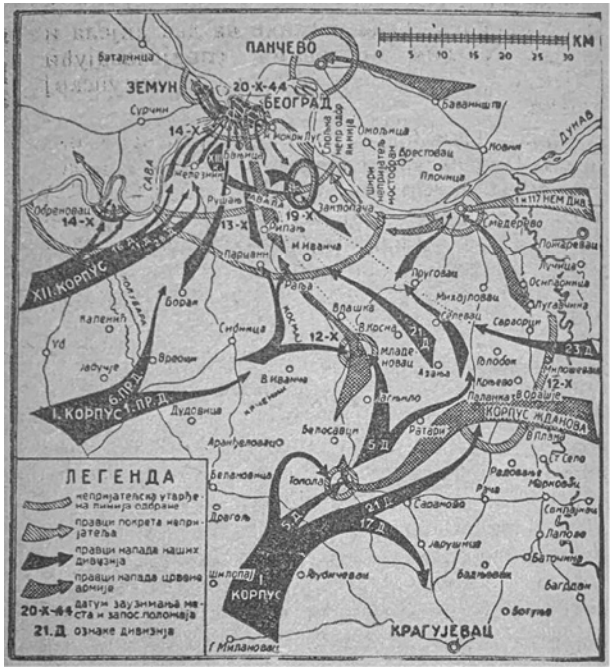
Thus, our Army tied down German forces in the Balkans, preventing their troop movements. By securing the Adriatic, we held a firm right flank, preventing the Germans from establishing naval and air bases for operations against the Allies on the Italian front. There was now a real danger that Yugoslavia would become a centre for spreading the people's uprising to neighbouring countries. The entire German military structure in southeastern Europe was at risk, and Germany's position in the Balkans was seriously shaken.

By the end of 1943 and throughout 1944, Germany was preparing to defend the Balkans to secure its southern flank, which was exposed toward the Danube lowlands. Additionally, having lost significant territories in the East, Germany was highly motivated to maintain control over the Balkans to continue its plundering operations. The Germans sought to preserve their weakened reputation among their Balkan vassals and Yugoslav quislings. The struggle for democratic rights among the Balkan nations, which was strongly supported by Yugoslavia, had the potential to escalate further and bring an end to the brutal German regime in the region. Because of these factors, the Germans launched two major offensives against our Army in quick succession —

the sixth and seventh offensives. These began in mid-October 1943 and ended by late June 1944, when our Army fully seized the initiative.

We will not go into detailed accounts of these offensives. What is notable, however, is that the Germans changed their previous approach to fighting us. Previously, they stubbornly sought to encircle and destroy us in "Cannae-style" operations. They believed that by eliminating the uprising, they were simply crushing a series of isolated rebellions. However, they eventually realized that they were engaged in a full-scale war against us. Our Army had not been destroyed even when our forces were small and our free territory was a tiny, isolated stronghold. Now, however, the Germans faced a well-armed army with extensive combat experience, spread across three-quarters of the liberated territory of Yugoslavia. The change in German tactics consisted of forming strong strike groups, primarily composed of armoured and mechanized units, which were used to attack specific operational areas. In both offensives, they began by attacking the flanks — the Slovenian-Istrian and Macedonian operational areas — before converging these mobile groups in the Bosnian operational sector to complete their offensive. Through rapid advances, they aimed to disrupt life in our controlled territories, hinder the unified deployment of our

Scale 1:4,000,000 — Concentration of our forces for the liberation of Serbia.



The Battle for the Liberation of Belgrade.

Army and complicate our strategic operations, in accordance with the broader European military situation. However, the weaknesses of this German strategy were clear. They lacked sufficient forces. Across the vast expanse of our battlefield, the enemy's strike groups were met with fierce counterattacks, causing them to lose their offensive strength before the final phase of operations. This left our units with full freedom of manoeuvre. Forces from one sector could intervene to support neighbouring units, attacking enemy bases in the rear. During the final Seventh German Offensive, the airborne attack on the Supreme Headquarters in Drvar on May 25 also took place. With this assault, the Germans attempted to destroy our unified military and political leadership, delivering the most serious blow to the gains of our struggle. They sought to decapitate the movement and the Army, sow chaos and panic in our command, and, just before the opening of the Second Front in Europe, eliminate one of the warring forces that was shaking the foundations of the "European Fortress."

All the German plans failed. As in all previous offensives, our Army emerged stronger and further battle-hardened through new combat experiences. We retained control over all key strongholds in our country.

By late spring 1944, after the Seventh German

Offensive, the bulk of our forces was concentrated in the Bosnian-Montenegrin operational area. Positioned on this powerful central stronghold, our forces were ready to quickly intervene across all regions of the country, depending on developments in the military and political situation.

During the summer of 1944, the military situation was defined by the following factors:

— Allied progress in Italy had stalled, offering no prospects of a rapid breakthrough into the Po Valley or further northward advance. As a result, there was no operational need to keep large forces in the western part of the country. The forces stationed in the Slovenian-Istrian sector were sufficient to continue disrupting enemy transportation, further worsening the German position on the Italian front.

— The situation on the Eastern Front presented an entirely different picture. During the summer operations, the Red Army had broken through German lines along a wide front, rapidly advancing westward and southwestward, reaching the Bug River. Concentrating stronger forces in the eastern part of the country now offered significant operational opportunities.

— In Serbia, the traitors Nedić, Ljotić and Mihailović, sensing their imminent downfall, carried out unprecedented terror against the patriotic Serbian population. Various opportun-

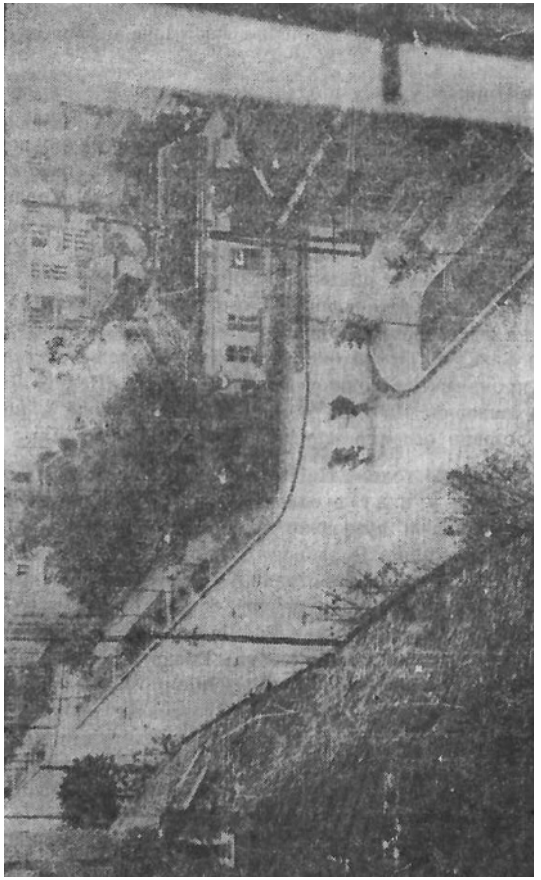
ists, both domestic and foreign, hoped to turn Serbia and Belgrade into a second Warsaw. Although the liberation movement in Serbia had gained significant momentum, our forces struggled to withstand the numerically superior German and Bulgarian occupation troops, along with local traitor bands. Support was needed for the Serbian forces, which had already secured solid strongholds and controlled large liberated territories near the South Morava River and Eastern Serbia, while smaller units held certain areas in Šumadija.

— Among the Bulgarian people, there was a growing movement to overthrow the fascist regime. A strong blow against the Bulgarian occupation troops in Serbia could accelerate this process.

All these factors necessitated shifting the main focus of operations eastward and deploying a stronger strike group into Serbia.

Throughout the entire war, the Germans defended Serbia with exceptional determination, as it was located at the most strategically sensitive point in the Balkans.

Two vital geo-strategic corridors ran directly through Serbia: the Morava-Nišava and Morava-Vardar routes, which linked all Central European transport routes to the southeast. For the Germans, these were “lifelines” for their vision



Fearless fighters of the National Liberation Army and partisan detachments liberate the city street by street.

of global domination. By defending and keeping Serbia under control, the Germans safeguarded much of their strategic, economic and political advantages, which they had gained through their plundering of the Balkans. This explains their constant efforts to create and maintain a large number of quislings — Nedić, Ljotić, Mihailović, Pećanac and a host of other "*vojvodas*"* — who were the main pillars of German occupation in Serbia.

Throughout 1944, the Germans prepared to defend the Balkans with the aim of exploiting material resources, securing the Romanian front and protecting themselves from attacks from the south. For them, Serbia was a highly sensitive area, as it was in close proximity to the southern flank of the Eastern Front, and the liberation movement had grown significantly. The liberation of Serbia would jeopardize the withdrawal of German forces from the southern Balkans and open the way into the Danube lowlands. For this reason, the Germans carefully guarded Serbia and Belgrade, which was an important stronghold of German defence in the southeast. Additionally, by holding Serbia, they aimed to support their satellite collaborators — Nedić, Ljotić and Draža Mihailović — who, in this complex situation, provided them with valuable services

* Leaders (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

and were used for political manoeuvres.

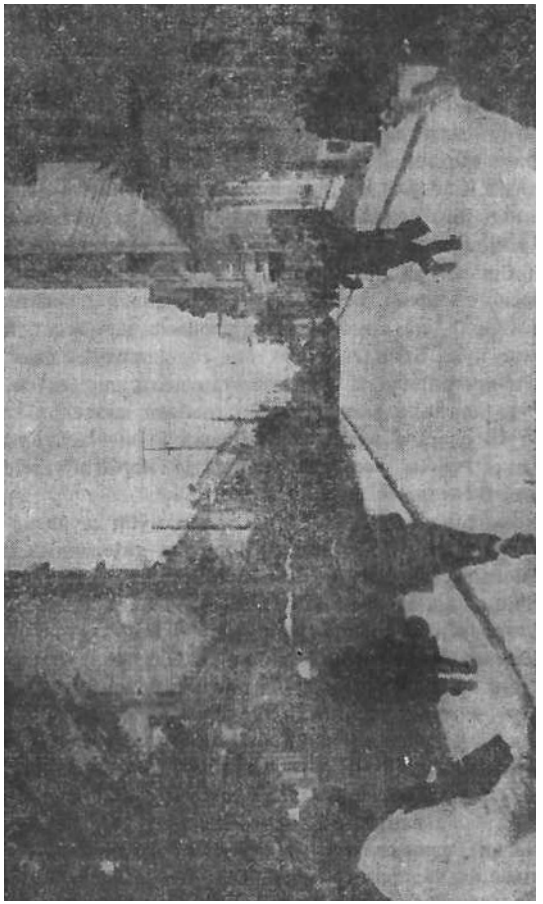
The Germans anticipated the entry of our main forces into Serbia and, as a result, organized a defensive line along the western borders, specifically on the Drina, West Morava and Ibar Rivers. The West Morava front was particularly well-organized and defended, as it was directly exposed to attacks from the Sandžak and Montenegro. However, this defensive cordon did not provide the Germans with sufficient security so they attempted to shift operations further west, engaging our main forces away from Serbia, in the Montenegro, Sandžak and Eastern Bosnia sectors. This was the reason behind the fierce battles in these regions in early summer 1944. Nevertheless, all enemy attempts to push us back from these key strongholds failed. By the end of July, we had assembled significant forces in this broad operational base, ready to launch a concentrated attack into Serbia.

The deployment of our forces was as follows: Right-flank group (2nd, 5th and 17th Divisions) in the Andrijevica-Berane-Kolašin sector; Central group (1st and 12th Corps — 1st, 6th, 16th and 36th Divisions) in the Pljevlja-Foča-Šavnik sector, and; Left-flank group (11th and 28th Divisions) in the Srebrenica-Vlasenica-Zvornik sector. Since the first two groups were relatively distant and had to cross difficult terrain, their initial

phase involved advancing to the Kopaonik-Golija-Zlatibor-Tara Mountain line, from which they would quickly launch an offensive.

The enemy learned about the concentration of our forces and, at the beginning of July, positioned two divisions (the SS "Skanderbeg" Division and the 1st Alpine Division) along the Peć-Kosovska Mitrovica-Raška line. Their goal was to prevent our forces from advancing into Serbia and to isolate the Serbian forces in the Morava region, which were already enduring a fierce enemy offensive. These Serbian forces, attacked from multiple directions, were in a critical situation.

By mid-July, the Skanderbeg Division launched an attack from Peć toward Andrijevica. Our right-flank strike group, operating from the Berane sector, launched a powerful counterattack, completely defeating the enemy and forcing them back toward Peć. Building on this success, the strike group quickly disengaged from the front, moved through Pešter, where it crushed the Albanian bands, and in fierce battles on the Ibar, broke through the defence of the 1st Alpine Division and Nedić-Chetnik forces. It then unexpectedly appeared on Kopaonik, in the rear of enemy forces advancing southward toward Toplica and Jablanica, in pursuit of the Serbian units. The arrival and aggressive action



Belgrade citizens rush to greet their liberators, the brave Red Army soldiers.

of this strike group shattered the enemy offensive in the Jablanica sector. Together with the newly-formed 13th and 14th Serbian Corps, a strong defensive position was secured in the Ibar and South Morava region.

At the end of July, the Germans launched another attack on the Sandžak, aiming to destroy our central group and prevent its breakthrough into Serbia. This time, the attack came from two directions: 1. The reorganized 1st Alpine and Skanderbeg Divisions advanced along the Raška-Sjenica-Prijepolje route, and; 2. The Prinz Eugen Division attacked along the Romanija-Goražde-Čajniče route. To avoid entangling the central group in direct frontal battles, which would waste precious time, the 2nd Montenegrin Corps was assigned to engage the enemy head-on in both sectors: In the Lim Valley, from Prijepolje upstream; and in the Drina Valley, from Goražde upstream, retreating toward Tara and Durmitor if necessary. Taking advantage of this, our central group (1st and 12th Corps) quickly manoeuvred northward. On the Lower Lim, it destroyed Nedić-Chetnik defensive positions, and along the Ivanjica-Čajetina-Vardište line, it broke through Bulgarian-German defences, securing control over Zlatibor and Tara Mountain. Thus, the German offensive collapsed completely. We outmanoeuverd the enemy and positioned our-

selves exactly where we had planned.

The 2nd Montenegrin Corps, after engaging the enemy on the flanks, creating time for the central group's breakthrough northward, gradually withdrew toward Durmitor and the Duga Gorge. In doing so, it tied down three German divisions — the 1st Alpine, Skanderbeg and Prinz Eugen Divisions — and drew them into the difficult terrain of Northern Montenegro. Later, these units struggled to extract themselves from this area before finally being redirected toward Serbia.

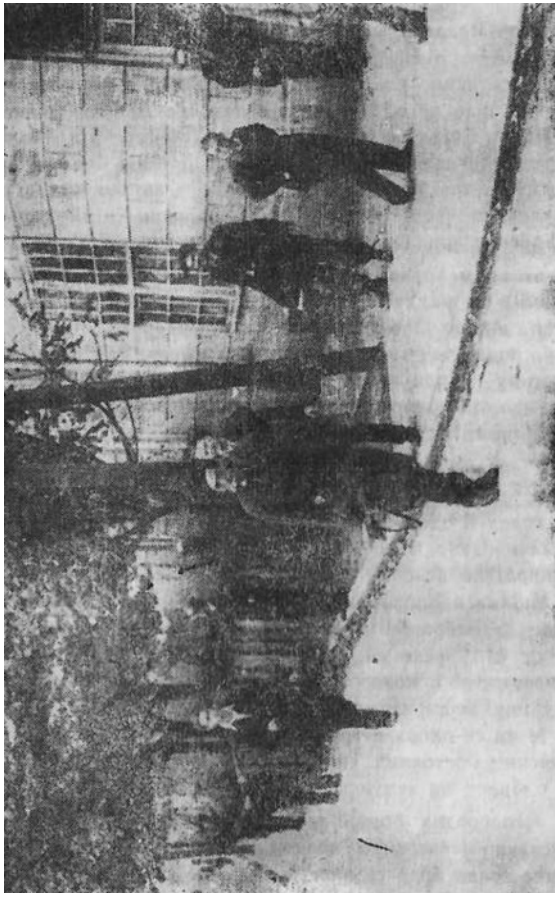
In the second half of August, our offensive groups were positioned for decisive action. The strongest central group, advancing from the Zlatibor-Tara Mountain sector, was the first to launch an attack, moving along the Užice-Valjevo axis. Its objective was to draw the bulk of enemy forces toward itself, easing the movement of the flanking manoeuvre groups, which needed to cross the West Morava and Drina Rivers. During its northeastward advance, this group captured Kosjerić, Bajina Bašta and Rogačica. Alarmed by this breakthrough, Nedić's, Ljotić's and Mihailović's forces — reinforced by the Germans — threw their strongest units against this group, including: the Serbian Volunteer Corps; the Corps Groups (Kolubara-Posavina, Belgrade and Assault groups); the "Royal Mountain

Guard," and; elements of the German "Brandenburg" motorized regiment. At that point, we launched an encircling manoeuvre with our flanking groups. However, the central group, which was sufficiently strong, boldly attacked the enemy, completely destroying them in the Jelova Gora-Medvednik-Suvobor sector. Pursuing the retreating enemy, our forces liberated Ljubovija, Pecka, Osečina, Valjevo, Ljig and Lajkovac.

The right-flank strike group, advancing from the West Morava Valley, engaged elements of the Prinz Eugen Division, which was relocating to Serbia. After fierce battles, it captured Gornji Milanovac, Vraćevšnica, Stragari, Lazarevac and Aranđelovac.

The left-flank group forced the Drina River under heavy fighting in the Zvornik sector, advanced to the Sokolska Planina-Gučevo mountain range, and, after linking up with elements of the central group, liberated Krupanj, Bela Crkva, Koviljača, Loznica and Lješnica after minor battles. This group also eliminated the remaining enemy units, which had been scattered and fleeing from our central group.

By late September, after long advances and battles, all three strike groups had secured the strategically vital geographic mass of Rudnik-Suvobor-Cer, along with all its key transportation hubs. At that point, the 1st Army Group was



In the liberated part of the city.

formed and prepared to launch an attack from this stronghold against the last remaining enemy forces in Serbia.

While the 1st Army Group advanced through Western Serbia and Šumadija toward Belgrade, the 2nd Army Group was formed with the task of securing the southern flank of the Belgrade Operation in the West Morava-Kragujevac sector. From this army group, the 14th Serbian Corps was redeployed from Jastrebac to Eastern Serbia, where, after intense battles with enemy and collaborationist forces, it linked up with units of the Red Army's 1st Army on the Danube on September 14.

As we can see, before the final battle for Belgrade, the entire collaborationist apparatus in Serbia had already been completely dismantled. Caught off guard by the rapid advance of our forces in Šumadija and the swift arrival of the Red Army on the Danube, the Germans hastily took defensive measures. Northern Serbia was now directly threatened. Its defence, divided into three sectors, was taken over by the Army Group Felber.

The eastern Timok sector was completely exposed (as it had already been liberated by the 14th Corps), prompting the Germans to deploy three divisions: 1. The 117th Division, arriving from Greece, was assigned to the Negotin sector; 2. The 1st Alpine Division took Zaječar, and; 3. The Prinz Eugen Division was positioned in Knjaževac-Pirot-Niš. These last two divisions, which had previously fought in the Sandžak offensive, were rushed into the Timok sector and thrown into battle directly from their marching columns. Under heavy pressure, the 14th Corps withdrew from the Timok Valley to the Carpathian Ridge, from where it coordinated with the Red Army troops during the Danube crossing and continued clearing the Morava Valley alongside them. The German defence in the Timok sector was also supported by Chetnik units from the Great Morava and Eastern Serbian "Corps Groups."

The southern and southwestern sector — Kruševac-Mačak-Aranđelovac — was defended by the 34th German Corps, which included units from the 104th, 118th and 297th German Divisions, the "Russian Volunteer Corps," and Chetnik units from the Rasina-Toplica and Šumadija "Corps Groups."

The Belgrade sector, extending to the Obrenovac-Mladenovac-Smederevo line, was defended by a mixed force consisting of: the 92nd Motorized Brigade; the 2nd Brandenburg Regiment; the "Belgrade" Fortress Regiment; the 5th Police Regiment; a supplementary battalion from the Prinz Eugen Division; three territorial battalions;

the 38th Motorized Anti-Aircraft Regiment; seven artillery battalions, and; smaller detachments from the Serbian Volunteer Corps. Additionally, forces from the first two sectors were ordered to retreat and reinforce the defence of Belgrade after completing their initial tasks.

This was the situation before the launch of the coordinated attack by our forces and the Red Army units.

At the beginning of October, the 1st Army Group launched its offensive, advancing from the Rudnik-Cer line toward the Sava and Danube Rivers. After brief battles, it cleared Mačva and Posavina before regrouping along the Aranđelovac-Kosmaj-Obrenovac line, preparing to join the Red Army forces arriving from the east in the battle for Belgrade.

Thus, we have seen the operations of the western force, which was formed and launched in early summer 1944 from the central mountainous region of our country. Now, let's examine the actions of the eastern force.

At the end of August (August 20-31), a major military and political event took place on the southern Russian front. During the Iasi-Kishinev operation, the Red Army units shattered the German Balkan front, knocked fascist Romania and Bulgaria out of the war, and continued their rapid advance toward Hungary. South of the

The people enthusiastically greet Soviet tankers on the streets of Belgrade.

Danube, a Soviet force, primarily composed of motorized and mechanized units, was dispatched to assist us in the fight for Belgrade. After completing preparations, these forces began crossing the Danube at Đerdap on October 5.

When German forces became engaged in frontal battles along the Danube and Timok River line, a tank corps under the command of General Zhdanov launched an advance from the Vidin area on October 7. This corps moved through extremely difficult terrain, advancing along the Zaječar-Žagubica-Palanka-Topola-Mladenovac-Belgrade axis. With its rapid breakthrough, it shattered the enemy defence in the eastern sector of the Serbian operational area. The 1st Alpine and 117th Jager Divisions were forced northward toward the Danube, while the Prinz Eugen Division was pushed southward toward the Morava River. This opened the way for the tank corps, which, after brief battles, captured the strategic transport hub of Velika Plana on October 10, linking up with elements of the right flank of our 1st Army Group.

After short but intense battles near Mladenovac and the Ralja positions, the joint forces reached the outskirts of Avala on October 13. As the tank corps advanced, it forced German forces northward toward Požarevac, Smederevo and Grocka. To quickly neutralize the defence

of Belgrade, the tank corps coordinated with our infantry units, which completed the attack plan.

The defence of Belgrade was structured in three defensive lines: 1. A wide perimeter defence near Avala; 2. A narrower line at the city's approaches, and; 3. Fortifications within the city itself, with a main defensive ring at Kalemegdan and the railway station complex. Key flanking strongholds within the city included Čukarica, Tašmajdan and Karaburma. Additionally, all major buildings were prepared for defence. All defensive positions relied on the Sava and Danube rivers. The city could not be bypassed, and a frontal assault through the deepest part of enemy defences was necessary. The primary attack strategy was to split the city's defence in two and seize the Sava bridges, preventing the Germans from establishing a defensive position on the Zemun side.

The direct battle for the city began on October 14. Under heavy artillery fire and a powerful tank assault, Belgrade's outer defences fell quickly and our units pushed into the city. However, the defenders put up fierce resistance, forcing our forces to capture each stronghold one by one. This delayed progress, allowing German forces that had been pushed back toward the Danube (the 117th Jager and 1st Alpine Divisions) to regroup around Grocka and launch an attack along the

Smederevo road toward Mali Mokri Lug, aiming to link up with the city's defenders. Part of our forces had to be redirected eastward from the city, and the German attempt to break through was thwarted. The Germans then attempted to retreat south of Avala toward Obrenovac and across the Sava into Srem. They even managed to cut our Belgrade-Mladenovac supply lines near the village of Vrčin. There was a serious risk that these German forces would escape, and this had to be prevented. While smaller units continued fighting within the city, our stronger forces turned south, encircled the German grouping south of Avala and completely eliminated it, capturing or killing up to 15,000 enemy troops. Following this, the intense battle for the city resumed. During the advance through Belgrade, tanks and artillery units of the Red Army played a decisive role in destroying the strongest German fortifications. After this final assault, the combined forces liberated Belgrade on October 20 and crossed the Sava into Srem, where our 1st Army and elements of the Red Army continued the advance. During the immediate battles for Belgrade, more than 30,000 enemy troops were killed, wounded or captured, and a large quantity of military equipment was seized.

At the same time, Red Army units and our 2nd Army Group repelled all German attempts

to break through from the West Morava sector toward Belgrade via Kragujevac. They then liberated Kragujevac, Jagodina, Kruševac and Trstenik, finally stabilizing the front along the West Morava on the Kraljevo-Čačak line.

A portion of the forces from the 2nd Army Group, together with units of the Bulgarian Fatherland Front Army, liberated Niš, Leskovac and Prokuplje, and continued joint operations in Kosovo Polje. After this, units of the 2nd Army pushed further westward, south of the Sava River.

Summarizing the results of these operations, we arrive at the following conclusions:

1. With the destruction of Germany's powerful defensive positions in Romania, the Red Army decided the fate of the Balkan campaign. The final stage of this great victory was the Belgrade Operation.

During the Belgrade Operation, the main transportation artery of the Balkan Peninsula — Salonika-Belgrade-Budapest — was severed at its most critical point, the "throat of the Balkans" — Belgrade. This completely shattered the remaining German defensive system on the Balkans, resulting in the rapid withdrawal of German forces from southern Balkan regions. However, with the main communication route cut off, the entire German Balkan force — over 150,000 troops —

was pushed into the harsh mountainous terrain of Montenegro, the Sandžak and Bosnia, where it was met and annihilated in the mountain ravines by our National Liberation Army. Thus, the German command's hope of forming a compact strike group from these large forces to attack the southern flank of the 3rd Ukrainian Front was completely crushed.

2. The liberation of Belgrade marked a turning point in our war of liberation. Our Army established direct contact with the fraternal Red Army and received significant material support. As a result, all regions east of the Drava-Drina-Neretva line were quickly liberated. This enabled us to establish a strategic front for the first time, securing a stable operational base, which allowed us to fully utilize all available resources for the continuation of the war.

In partisan warfare, when our units were primarily equipped with light weaponry, the creation of rigid frontlines was disadvantageous for us and we avoided it. The enemy constantly sought to impose a fixed front where, with superior numbers and better-equipped forces, they could bring their full strength to bear against us. However, over time, the balance of power shifted — the enemy weakened while we grew stronger. By the time of the Belgrade Operation, we had gained military superiority over them. From that

point on, mountain paths became too narrow for us and mountains became impassable for heavy howitzers and tanks. The deployment of our large forces, now equipped with modern Soviet weaponry, required the use of communication routes, the establishment of supply lines and the securing of territory. This inevitably led to the formation of a stable front, which became a necessary and unavoidable development.

A stable front with a secure rear introduced new challenges in warfare. Previously, to avoid attacks from superior enemy forces, we often used flexible formations to exploit weak points on the flanks, in the rear or along the enemy's lines. Now, frontal battles became the norm, involving the breakthrough of deeply layered enemy defensive positions. This, in turn, required the concentration of large forces in relatively confined areas, leading to a new phase in our military organization — the formation of armies. From small partisan detachments, which were the initial core of the people's uprising, through brigades, divisions and corps, we had now built large military formations and full-scale armies. This marked the completion of the reorganization and full modernization of our National Liberation Army, which ultimately led to its renaming as the Yugoslav Army — a unified formation of all nations.

3. In our war of liberation, there was a con-

stant tendency to expand and maintain free territories, which were organized to support the liberation war as effectively as possible. Despite all our efforts, these territories remained unstable. The occupier constantly threatened them with attacks, altering their shape and often completely overrunning them, destroying our strongholds. However, with the establishment of a strategic front after the Belgrade Operation, a significant portion of national territory was fully secured and consolidated. This also led to the definitive establishment of central authority (the government of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia) and a systematic effort to organize governance at the local level, among the people, through National Liberation Committees.

The centre of the liberated territory was Belgrade. With Marshal Tito's arrival in Belgrade, a stable political centre was established, uniting all national forces for the complete liberation of our country from fascist tyranny. Thus, Belgrade became the capital of all our peoples — the capital of Democratic Federal Yugoslavia.

4. On our front in the Vardar Valley, the South Morava region and Kosovo Polje, the Army of the Bulgarian Fatherland Front fought alongside our units. In this struggle, the Bulgarian forces achieved notable successes and suffered significant sacrifices. This marked a decisive

turning point for Bulgaria, bringing it back into the great community of Slavic nations. Bulgaria had now chosen the path that aligned with its vital interests — brotherhood and unity with the peoples of Yugoslavia.

This brotherhood, forged in blood, would no longer allow our two nations to be drawn into fratricidal wars. The brotherhood of our nations is a key condition for stability in this region and should become the foundation for unity among all Balkan peoples.

5. The great Russian people have always been our hope and support. So it was this time as well. Faith in their strength and ultimate victory was a decisive factor in our long and difficult struggle. Beyond this great moral support, the Red Army directly provided us with immense assistance by making great efforts to liberate our peoples. For our liberation, they made invaluable sacrifices. With the capture of Romania, the gateway to the Pannonian Plain was opened, leading to the decisive operations of the Red Army, for which all forces had to be concentrated. And yet, they diverted part of their forces and, under fierce battles, forced the great river barrier of the Danube, broke through the Balkan and Carpathian ridges, all to help speed up our liberation. The joining of our two armies north and south of the Danube eased the extremely difficult conditions

of our struggle up to that point, which quickly brought major successes to our forces. The Red Army knew of the heroic fight of our peoples, they knew about our active battlefield, which, for four years, tied down significant enemy forces. And so, they selflessly extended a fraternal hand to us. On the sacred soil of our homeland, in Serbia, on the streets of Belgrade, in Srem, the fraternal blood of Soviet soldiers was shed. From our shared suffering and spilled blood, an enduring brotherhood and unity between our two Slavic nations has emerged. This is the only correct orientation in foreign policy, one that aligns with the centuries-old aspirations, cultural and historical development of our peoples. It is the only guarantee that our nations will be saved from national catastrophes, of which there have been far too many in our difficult history.

* * *

The formation of the Yugoslav Army is the culmination of a glorious historical era and the military development of our armed forces. It is highly significant that it emerged as a unified Yugoslav Army during the period of the final assault on fascist Germany, at a time when fascism was facing catastrophe. Its role is to complete the liberation of our country and to participate alongside other Allied armies in the liberation of

humanity from fascist tyranny. It stands as an equal factor in this great struggle of democratic nations. It has fulfilled its role, just as all the other armies of Allied countries, by taking up a strategic front between the Allied Pannonian and Italian forces. By doing so, it has secured international standing for its people. After this hard-won victory, it is now responsible for protecting the gains achieved through bloodshed and for ensuring the peaceful development and reconstruction of our country based on the very principles born out of the National Liberation War.

THE BATTLE FOR PLJEVLJA

— On the Third Anniversary —

The Battle for Pljevlja, a small town in the Sandžak, marks a significant moment in the Montenegrins' liberation war. It was preceded by a tumultuous period of six months of bloody fighting. The echo of those battles quickly spread beyond the borders of Montenegro and had no small influence in awakening resistance against the bloody conqueror. But that was not enough: Montenegrin arms sought battlefields even beyond the Montenegrin ravines and crags, amidst the sea of fascist tyranny that was suffocating our enslaved land.

Many patriots, outraged by the shameful betrayal of April 1941, headed toward Montenegro, believing that there had to be a frontline among the Montenegrins. Betrayal was the same everywhere — deep and bitter. There was no resistance and fascist hordes were pouring unchallenged through the homeland. But our peoples did not betray. One old Montenegrin woman, after the April catastrophe, was seen carrying five light machine guns into the mountains on a scrawny little horse. "The children gave them to me to take," she said. "They'll need them." (She had three sons — every one of them fell in the liberation war.)

On July 13, 1941, the Montenegrin Uprising broke out when Comrade Milovan Đilas brought Comrade Tito's order from Belgrade for armed resistance by the Montenegrins. On that day, Montenegro became the epicentre of a nationwide uprising — the site of major battles. Through a voice of vengeance, partisan Montenegro spoke — a Montenegro that future generations would praise and honour.

Everyone who could carry a rifle rose up, young and old alike. It was a natural consequence of the Montenegrins' refusal to accept betrayal. The honour of the people was at stake, and it could only be defended with weapons in hand. It was also a result of hatred toward the vile and cowardly Italian occupier who dishonoured our noble people. The pride of the Montenegrins had been deeply wounded.

It was the consequence of the great influence of the Party and the trust that the Montenegrin masses had in it which had led them into the sacred battle for the homeland. Montenegrins stood with our Party during the difficult struggle for the rights of the people throughout the entire 20 years of the old Yugoslavia — even when, like at Belvedere, the unarmed masses had to take up the fight against the regime's army, armed to the teeth. Now, the Party had secured entire stockpiles of weapons and ammunition — the same

ones Yugoslav generals, with their lined-up armies, had handed over to the German invaders.

Finally, it was the result of the deep and traditional love Montenegrins held for the reborn Slavic mother — Russia. Even though her name had not been allowed to be spoken over the past 20 years, the natural instinct of our people believed in her strength and power. The German attack on Russia did not frighten them — the people were convinced of her victory. It was a common occurrence that, during the most difficult battles, peasants would ask, "Does Russia know about our struggle?" — expressing their belief that, no matter how hard our fight was, with Russia's support, it must be victorious.

With these feelings, the Montenegrin masses, without any particular military formation or organization, bravely launched their attack. Montenegro roared under the weight of intense battle. It felt as if the entire land would be consumed in a terrible hurricane of fire. It was the people's wrath, surging like a flood upon the vile fascist intruders — grabbing them by the throat — and by the end of July, nearly all of Montenegro was liberated (except for Cetinje, Podgorica and Nikšić). We killed many Italians, captured 4,000 of them and seized a significant amount of war booty.

* * *

Through a sudden assault and the speed of our actions, we achieved major results. The lack of resistance in other sectors of the Balkans occupied by the Italians gave them the ability to direct significant forces against us — a full corps of four divisions, supported by considerable air power. After fierce fighting lasting a month and a half, by the end of August 1941 the enemy had managed to retake the garrisons in Montenegro, pushing our forces away from key routes and communications. During these battles, our military leadership was unable to solidify the military and organizational readiness of the popular masses. These forces were unwieldy, slow to manoeuvre and unable to deliver swift strikes at various points to spread the enemy thin across a broad area. As a result, our larger formations were forced into uneven battles, holding rigid fronts where the enemy — more numerous and better armed — had the advantage. And after the enemy broke through those fronts, the uprising rapidly weakened. A lull followed — lasting through September — which our leadership used to reorganize the units. But the enemy also used this break in the fighting. They brought massive amounts of ammunition and food into the garrisons and fortified the towns and transportation routes.

After the reorganization of the units, the

fighting in Montenegro began to take on a more dynamic character by the end of September. Communications were again cut, and the towns of Šavnik, Žabljak, Goransko, Vilusi, Velinja, Grahovo, Čevo and Mojkovac were liberated. Montenegrin shock battalions, led by the legendary hero Sava Kovačević, pushed deep into Herzegovina, reaching as far as Nevesinje, engaging in fierce battles to protect the Serbian population of those areas from Ustaša massacres. At Vjetrenik, a strong motorized column was destroyed — 500 Italians were captured or killed and 50 trucks were destroyed. Similar actions were carried out across all sectors of Montenegro, extending to Boka and Eastern Herzegovina. The enemy was pushed back into garrisons and was suffocating under the strikes of our units.

Through these actions, the fighting spirit once again spread among the masses. But even before that, in August and September, the uprising in Serbia had not only solidified but also intensified, achieving significant results. This gave a great boost to the revival and renewed strength of the uprising in Montenegro. In the important Serbian-Montenegrin region, our forces were on the rise. This needed to be used operationally and the forces organized and linked together. That is why, in mid-October, the Supreme Commander invited representatives of the General Staff for

The movement of the Montenegrin detachment and its battles in the Sandžak.

Montenegro, Boka and the Sandžak to Užice. At that meeting, Comrade Tito presented the operational idea of creating a strong base and stronghold in the region of the Sandžak — from which operations could be carried out in various directions depending on how the situation developed. This decision was explained by the following reasons:

1. Most of Serbia and Montenegro was free. These territories needed to be linked in order to give the uprising greater momentum and strength. This connection could only be achieved through the Sandžak.

2. For strategic and political reasons, the territory of Serbia was very important to the Germans. Meanwhile, the uprising there had taken on a larger scale. This was inspiring all our peoples towards a general armed uprising. The enemy could not remain indifferent — and already in October, it began deploying strong forces in Serbia against our Army. Nedić, Ljotić, Pećanac and Mihailović, through their betrayal and collaboration with the occupiers, further complicated our position in Serbia. This situation demanded the securing of a stronghold — one that could serve not only as a support for the Serbian forces but also as a base for launching offensive operations. The Sandžak was very well suited for this purpose. This referred to the entire

geographical area covering the middle and upper Drina, the Western Morava and the Ibar rivers. The mountainous terrain, forests, canyon-like river courses and the spacious landscape made it possible to mount a solid defence and allowed our larger units to remain there for extended periods. The central position of this region enabled rapid transitions into offensive operations and linking with other regions of our country, where uprisings were gradually developing — some faster, some more slowly.

3. In the exhausted regions of Montenegro, where the entire population had risen up to fight, it was necessary to supply both the Army and the civilians with food brought in from the Sandžak and Serbia. In addition, the Montenegrin operational group needed to be supported with weapons and ammunition from our Užice factory.

4. The occupier in Montenegro, gravely threatened, had withdrawn and entrenched itself in garrisons, from which it barely dared to emerge. We did not have heavy weapons to strike them. The fighting had taken on a static character, and our large forces were left underutilized. It was therefore necessary to free up those forces, give them manoeuvrability and broader military and political prospects. Operations in the Sandžak promised significant results. Comrade

Tito entrusted the details of these operations to the Main Staff for Montenegro.

Tito's idea of connecting the Serbian and Montenegrin forces and establishing a continuous liberated territory stirred enormous enthusiasm among our units and the people. Never had Montenegrins felt a stronger bond with the Serbs than at that moment. Admiration for the great successes of the Serbian partisans was genuine and all the greater because we were aware of various betrayals and speculations by the Serbian collaborators. After our own harsh battles, the burning of homes and the weakening of the uprising, a spark had flared up in Serbia — and from there, we in Montenegro drew new strength and inspiration. Serbia had come to our aid at the crucial hour. The capture of towns in Serbia was met on our side with celebratory salvos and cheerful humour: "Look what the *gedže** are up to now!" The feeling was so strong that we simply wanted to leap across the Sandžak and jump straight into Serbia. We were proud of what we had achieved in Montenegro — but we could see that what was happening in Serbia was bigger, much bigger than what we had done.

This also had an effect on the traitors in Montenegro — most of whom had gone into hiding.

* Colloquial Montenegrin term for Serbs.

For the planned operation, we were capable of mobilizing between 5,000 and 10,000 fighters. We considered just 4,000 to be sufficient — they were organized into a newly-formed brigade. The rest of the fighters were to be armed after the capture of enemy garrisons. We chose Pljevlja as the first target of attack. Pljevlja was the key — the gateway to the Sandžak — after which it would not be difficult to capture the remaining towns, especially those along the Lim River, located on the route toward Serbia. Pljevlja was an important transportation hub, and its fall would open up communications across the Sandžak — which was of great importance for the functioning and operations of our large operational group. The headquarters of the Italian division was located there and needed to be destroyed — after that, the remaining garrisons under its command would quickly fall. Pljevlja held a large stockpile of weapons, and by capturing it, we would have been able to arm many of our unarmed fighters. Our combat experience also played a role here. The Italian fascists were such cowards that they never once stood to fight hand-to-hand with our units, nor did they withstand being encircled.

At the end of November, a marching manoeuvre toward Pljevlja began — from all corners of Montenegro, even from the Montenegrin coast (Paštrovići, Boka, Konavlje). After twelve days,

it culminated in a concentrated attack on Pljevlja. It was a magnificent campaign — a triumph and a show of force. The people, who had once watched the retreat of the defeated and battered army after the occupation, now saw their own victorious Army marching forward. The movement stirred and energized all of Montenegro and the Sandžak. Entire clans followed and welcomed their battalions.

* * *

The Sandžak and the northeastern part of Montenegro were held by two Italian divisions, with a total strength of around 25,000 men. To this must be added the fact that the Muslim militia in the Sandžak was also hostile toward us. The entire sector was systematically connected, organized and fortified. In attacking Pljevlja, we had to allocate a significant portion of our forces to target enemy communication lines to prevent reinforcements from arriving. The battle therefore encompassed not just the town itself but a wide operational area. The town was surrounded by a single line of mines, reinforced with dug-in machine gun nests and trenches. Defensive positions were prepared within buildings. Immediate defence was organized into seven enclosed fortifications, linked by interlocking fire. The headquarters of the "Pusteria" Division was in Pl-

jevlja, with 5,000 soldiers, 36 cannons, 60 heavy mortars, 15 tanks, 340 automatic weapons and several searchlights.

We attacked the town during the night between November 30 and December 1, 1941. The plan was to simultaneously strike the outer defences and break into the town, disrupting the entire defensive system. The movement from starting positions — located up to eight kilometres from the town — was to begin at 10 p.m., with entry into the town expected around 2 a.m. on December 1.

Due to the way the movement was organized and the long march of our units, the enemy was alerted to our intentions. They even learned the exact hour of the attack, and all enemy troops had been deployed in their battle positions. We could hear the Italian fascists sounding the alarm. Our fighters, undeterred, descended into the town. In the Bistrica ravine, they were even singing — until their voices were replaced by the fierce sounds of assault as our units launched attacks at every point of the fortified camp. By 2 a.m. on December 1, the night battle had taken on an intense and violent character. It was a great battle — hand-to-hand, close combat. It felt like we were inside a fiery volcanic crater. In that chaos, the traditional fighting spirit of the Montenegrin came to the fore. Barehanded, he grabbed

the throat of the heavily armed enemy and did not let go from that bloody ground. Every soldier understood the importance of Pljevlja — the significance of the first and hardest battle of the Montenegrin detachment in its major campaign.

The "Bijeli Pavle" Battalion captured the strong fortifications at Veliki and Mali Bogiševac, which dominated the area and the town. It then pushed into the northwestern part of the town, continuing intense fighting through the day. The Lovćen Battalion had one of the most difficult tasks — to break into the town and expand the battle from the centre. This elite battalion, under the command of the fearless fighter Pero Đetković — who later died a heroic death during the Fourth Offensive, leading the famed 3rd Shock Division — fully completed its mission. The battalion took control of an entire district in the town centre and supported the actions of other units throughout the day and into the next night. The Italians launched relentless counterattacks and shelled the district with devastating fire, but they were unable to dislodge the Lovćen Battalion, which only withdrew the following night after suffering heavy casualties. Countless Italian soldiers died before the iron wall of the Lovćen fighters. The Drobnjak-Uskoci Battalion from the west and the Jezersko-Šaran Battalion from the east broke into the town, capturing the power

station, church, new gymnasium, Grujić's inn and part of Trebovina. They fought hard throughout the day and into the following night. In these battles, the commander and political commissar of the Jezersko-Šaran Battalion — Dušan Obradović and Vuk Knežević — died heroic deaths. The "Peko Pavlović" Kom Battalion and the Zeta-Lješanska Battalion captured the fortifications of Pliješ, Golubinja, Sveta Trojica, part of Dolovi, and advanced to the outskirts of the town, where they continued the fight. The Piperi-Kuči and "Bajo Pivljanin" battalions engaged in fierce battles along the communication lines, preventing the enemy from breaking through and threatening our main group engaged in the Battle for Pljevlja. The Sandžak units were deployed along the communication lines and among the Montenegrin battalions. As locals familiar with the terrain and the town, they provided significant assistance and demonstrated high combat readiness.

The enemy in the garrison had been crushed. Of the seven main fortifications, only three remained (Stražica, Dolovi and Moćevac), while the rest of the defensive structures had also been captured, apart from a number of houses in the town. From these remaining strongholds, the enemy defended itself with a fight to the death. The enemy bombarded our lines with intense fire

— pre-sighted and coordinated — aided by the use of searchlights. This fire caused heavy casualties. After fierce fighting that lasted one full day and two nights, our units withdrew from the town, even though the majority of it had been in our hands and our fighters had danced the *kolo* in its streets. Just a bit more effort and the battle for the town could have ended in our favour.

The reasons for this outcome lie in the following:

The Montenegrin military leadership had, from the outset, tied the success of a large detachment — hastily formed and not yet solidified militarily — to one difficult operation: the storming of a town. Instead of leading the detachment into such a major battle gradually, through a series of smaller actions, we, relying on the bravery of our fighters — who truly displayed extraordinary heroism — placed that large unit before an extremely difficult task that it could not accomplish, despite persistent efforts. This once again confirms the principle that an army is not built overnight, but only through prolonged fighting and continuous action.

The detachment, after long and exhausting marches, had been thrown into a night attack on the town. And just when the final effort was needed, the strength was lacking, and we withdrew from the town spontaneously — not because the

enemy forced us to through any external action.

Our young officer cadre was unable to manage the truly difficult and complex night battle, and so, in decisive moments, they failed to capitalize on the gains our units had already achieved. The result was an uneven commitment of the units, which the enemy exploited by meeting individual echelons with concentrated fire.

We lacked heavy weapons and sufficient ammunition to strike enemy fortifications. The little heavy ammunition we had was quickly spent, leaving us with grenades and bayonets, which were not enough to break through the reinforced concrete bunkers — though a significant number of enemy troops were taken down even with those. We had greatly underestimated the enemy, their weaponry and fortifications, so our fighters were caught off guard by the resistance. The enemy had been surrounded and had nowhere to retreat. But this was not simply a matter of defending a small town — it was the defence of a large operational area, with its headquarters in Pljevlja, which, during the battle, was in fact hidden in a cellar.

In this battle — and in the fighting around Pljevlja — we suffered 353 killed, 545 wounded and 35 missing, while the enemy had 1,150 killed, 1,870 wounded, 900 captured and a large amount of military equipment destroyed.

However, this tactical failure did not break us. We continued the battle for the Sandžak, though under more difficult conditions. After fierce fighting in December, units of our detachment captured Rudo, Čajniče, Goražde, Ustikolina, Foča, Šehovići and several other enemy strongholds. After all of this, they linked up along the Lim River with the Serbian partisan detachments that had been pushed into this sector following the First Enemy Offensive. On December 22, 1941, drawing from elements of the Serbian and Montenegrin units, Comrade Tito formed the 1st Proletarian Brigade in Rudo — the first-born of our glorious Army. Its 1st and 2nd battalions consisted of fighters from the Montenegrin detachment. This stood as the greatest honour and recognition Comrade Tito could give to Montenegrin arms.

The struggle of the Montenegrin detachment should not be viewed solely through the tactical detail of the battle for the small town of Pljevlja — which, in my opinion, is glorious in and of itself — but rather through the operational idea that was achieved; through the series of battles for the Sandžak; through the position of that operational group in December 1941, when the Germans and collaborators had launched a fierce offensive to destroy the Serbian partisans, and; finally, through Comrade Tito's arrival in this

important operational area — at the tripoint. Looking at things from this perspective, we reach the following conclusions:

1. In these complex and difficult operations, at the beginning of our campaign, the great moral values of our fighters came to light. Political awareness and a sense of strength led them — nearly unarmed — into battle, far from home, to confront some of the best fascist troops and crush them decisively. These are the facts on which our military and political leadership based its future plans and decisions. On the other hand, the ability to resolve the difficult issues of supply, food and care for the wounded instilled trust in our leadership — and the fighters followed it with unmatched loyalty. Even today, three years later, we can rightfully say that the first battle of Montenegrin arms outside the borders of Montenegro was won.

2. Our presence in the Sandžak, where the uprising was still in its early stages, had a profoundly positive impact. We prevented the Chetnik-Ustaša massacres. The local masses, witnessing the justice of our struggle first-hand, were stirred. New fighters joined the ranks of the National Liberation Army. From that moment on, the Sandžak served as a bridge between our fighting forces in Serbia and those in the southern and southwestern parts of the country. Today, in this

sector — which for centuries had been neglected — we have an entire division of the Army.

3. Although we did not liberate all the towns, we nonetheless succeeded in breaking the enemy's defensive system in the Sandžak, taking control of important sections of territory, disrupting their command structure and transportation lines and forcing the enemy into the towns. The liberated territory expanded northward, which gave us freedom of movement and room to manoeuvre. In the area of the upper Drina, Neretva and Morača rivers, a strong territorial stronghold was secured.

4. The people of Montenegro, accustomed to our victories, were initially confused by the setback at Pljevlja, but that feeling lasted only a short time. Our losses and the failure stirred them deeply and ignited a renewed flame of vengeance. Less than 20 days after the battle, all the Montenegrin detachments were sending new battalions into the Sandžak.

During and especially after the Battle of Pljevlja, the role of the Montenegrin reactionary forces was revealed. The traitors saw that the entire population of Montenegro stood with the partisans so they tried to exploit our failure at Pljevlja. The Italians, feeling threatened in this region, supported the reactionaries with all their might. After our forces were pushed out of Serb-

ia, Draža Mihailović's agents began infiltrating Montenegro and the reactionary movement began to grow stronger. From that moment on, this became a new element in our war in Montenegro — one we had to take very seriously.

5. The battles of the Montenegrin detachment in the Sandžak took place during a time when the Serbian partisan forces were retreating under very heavy fighting from Užice across Zlatibor toward Uvac and Nova Varoš. The Montenegrin detachment engaged significant Italian forces, preventing them from reacting to the north and closing off the southern escape route of the Serbian group. This undoubtedly made it easier and faster for Serbian units to regroup and consolidate.

6. The course of events did not allow for the creation and unification of a Serbian-Montenegrin liberated territory. However, Serbian and Montenegrin forces did link up — and that came after a long and difficult period of fighting in Serbia, Montenegro and the Sandžak. What came together there had been tempered by harsh trials — it was the most conscious and most battle-hardened part of the Serbian people, ready to continue bearing the heavy burden of war across the entire country, fighting for the freedom of all our peoples. That was the core of the shock force which the Supreme Commander, Comrade Tito,

used to give new momentum to the uprising in other parts of our country. This connection would not have been possible — or at least not established so quickly — had it not been for the Battle of Pljevlja and the fighting in the Sandžak.

7. With Comrade Tito's arrival to this important operational area, the military-political situation was stabilized. This was reflected not only in the reorganization of our units, but also in the broader scope of our strategic planning and in a deeper understanding of partisan warfare. After the intense fighting of the first year of the war, this brought renewed momentum and striking power to our entire Army. Instead of large, disorganized units — which had been common in Montenegro — we adopted a system of light, mobile brigades. These brigades were better suited to move across the difficult terrain where we were mainly fighting at the time. This allowed operations to be transferred more quickly to distant sectors and made it easier to manoeuvre in front of a numerically superior enemy. From this stronghold, with this reorganized army, Marshal Tito launched the manoeuvre of its forces toward Bosanska Krajina.

8. Montenegro took up arms with courage on July 13, 1941 and made a great contribution to this magnificent liberation war. Montenegrins selflessly gave their lives not only for the free-

dom of Montenegro but for the freedom of all of Yugoslavia. As Comrade Mitar Bakić rightly said at a Montenegrin assembly, responding to certain malicious interpretations: "Montenegro has never been greater than it is today — and has never entered a state union with greater justification than it does today."

Glory to the fearless fighters who fell in the Battle for Pljevlja! In their example, future generations will learn what it means to love one's homeland and fight for the freedom and honour of their people.

1944

THE SIXTH ENEMY OFFENSIVE

The Sixth Offensive against the National Liberation Army began in mid-October 1943 — less than four months after the end of the Fifth Offensive, when the enemy's attempt to encircle and destroy our strike group at the tri-border area of Montenegro, Herzegovina and Bosnia had failed. In this short span of time, major events unfolded, in which our Army played the leading role. We must summarize these events in order to better understand the Sixth Offensive.

In two years of fierce battles — without any outside help and using weapons seized from the enemy — our Army killed 100,000 Italian fascists. These blows, combined with the strikes of the Allies, led fascist Italy to surrender in August 1943. At that point, the Germans rushed in from all directions with motorized divisions to occupy the territory and disarm the Italian Army. After intense fighting, our infantry stopped them, and the National Liberation Army liberated nearly the entire territory from Gevgelija to the Soča River — a length of over 700 km and a depth of up to 400 km. The Slovene Littoral, Istria and the Dalmatian islands — unjustly cut off from our living organism — were free. We became the guardians of the Adriatic, where our naval forces raised the blood-woven flag of freedom. Through

glorious and heroic struggle, Tito's Army paved the way to the major Allied powers.

With the liberation of new areas, a surge of new fighters poured into the ranks of our Army. The uprising spread to regions where it had previously only smouldered. Veteran units, hardened through battle, were replenished, and new brigades, divisions and corps began to form. The entire country was mobilizing new forces to fight against the hated fascism. Italian weapons and equipment fell into the hands of seasoned warriors who knew how to use them effectively. The Allies began supplying us with weapons and military material along the coast. Artillery divisions, tank battalions and motor columns raced toward the front lines. The Supreme Commander received the first liaison officers who had flown in from the front by plane.

Thus reinforced and armed, the entire Army launched powerful offensive operations. All communication lines running from the Drava and Sava river basins to Italy and the Adriatic were cut, while the Morava-Vardar routes were subjected to heavy attacks, effectively severing links with Albania and Greece, where the liberation movement — protected from the north by our forces — was establishing a strong foothold. Crosswise communication routes along the Sava, Drava and Danube were also under threat, weak-

ening connections with the eastern Balkans — Romania and Bulgaria — and making them thin and risky. In this situation, the Germans were unable to stabilize the Italian front or prevent the Allies from arming our Army across the Adriatic, fearing most of all a strike from our forces at their rear. In short, the entire German military structure in southeastern Europe had become rigid. The ability of German forces to manoeuvre in this theatre was severely limited. With the looming threat of a second front opening in Europe, Turkey's wavering stance, and growing fear in Bulgaria and Romania, the German position in the Balkans became even more precarious.

The position of the Axis satellites in Yugoslavia was desperate. The "Royal Army in the Homeland," created by Italian generals through bloody terror, suffering and repression of our people, had been crushed. When our troops entered the Western Morava basin, Nedić loudly cried, "Serbs to the rescue!" And when our units entered the outskirts of Zagreb, Pavelić's lieutenants began applying for passports to Switzerland. In other words, the satellite regimes were on the verge of collapse, which threatened the strongest occupation strongholds and bases in Yugoslavia.

Let us go further. The right wing of our Army crossed the Vardar and extended assistance to the fraternal Bulgarian people. There, units

began to form to fight against the fascist yoke. Our units from Vojvodina pushed into Romania, while those from the Drava Valley advanced into Hungary and Austria. Meanwhile, across the Soča, a wide corridor was established to connect with the partisan forces of Northern Italy. Thus, our National Liberation Army gave momentum and support to the rise and spread of popular uprisings across the Balkans and in neighbouring countries. It became a magnetic force and a strong link for uniting all oppressed peoples in the struggle against fascism. In other words, the southern flank of Hitler's Reich was dangerously exposed. The fire was approaching the vital centres of Hitlerite Germany.

In conclusion: positioned along the major transport arteries of the Balkans, our Army was tying the hands of the German command, preventing it from manoeuvring its troops. With its presence on the Adriatic, it formed a solid right flank for the Allied armies, blocking the creation of German air bases for operations against the Allies on the Italian front. There was a growing threat that Yugoslavia could become a hotbed for the spread of a nationwide uprising in neighbouring countries. In other words, our Army posed a threat of striking at the southern, exposed flank of the German Army. Despite the advance of the Red Army from the east and the Anglo-Amer-

icans from the south, the German command assessed our Army as the most dangerous factor at that moment — a force that had been shaking the foundations of "Fortress Europe" for three years. The Germans attempted to resolve the situation with swift raids along certain directions, but these tricks failed. This is why they launched the sixth — and likely the last major — offensive against the National Liberation Army.

The enemy's plan: Unlike the first five offensives, in the sixth the enemy did not attempt to destroy our Army using an "encirclement strategy." The Germans knew that our Army could not be encircled even when the free territory was a small, isolated island and the forces significantly smaller. Now, the Germans faced a large and well-armed army with substantial combat experience, and the free territory covered nearly three-quarters of Yugoslavia. Though rigid and formulaic, they understood that such an Army could not be trapped in a "pocket," so they devised the following plan:

To weaken the striking power of the National Liberation Army: To this end, the enemy aimed to use strong armoured and motorized units to rapidly break through and seize key communication lines, destroy the bases of the National Liberation Army, and split its forces into isolated groups, which would then be driven into the

mountains and gradually crushed. The Germans, in short, sought to prevent manoeuvring by our forces through rapid occupation of communication routes — pushing them into mountainous areas where, cut off from supplies and exposed to attacks from aviation and specialized mountain units, they would lose their offensive strength. In addition, through these swift advances, the Germans intended to sever our Army from the coastal bases through which the Allies supplied us with materiel. Recognizing their military shortcomings, the Germans incorporated into their operational plan the looting of all essential resources and the burning of all villages within the area of operations. In this way, they sought to place our Army in an untenable economic position.

Plan of the Supreme Command: Two plans were considered:

a) To use major natural obstacles, accept a frontal battle, and prevent or delay for as long as possible the enemy's advance across liberated territory. This plan could only be accepted as part of the broader development of Allied strategy — to secure landing operations along the coast or, more generally, to gain time for other manoeuvres. However, such a situation did not exist. Moreover, this plan required the engagement of strong — nearly all — forces along a defensive

arc of varying size near the coast. That would have led to heavy frontal fighting, demanding high ammunition consumption, constant food supplies, evacuation of the wounded and so on. In the event of a front-line breakthrough, the enemy could quickly penetrate with motorized units and disorganize the rear, leaving our slower forces exposed on the defensive line. For these reasons, the Supreme Command implemented a second, more flexible plan.

b) By combining the actions of widely and deeply distributed autonomous operational groups, the aim was to deliver constant strikes against the enemy along extended lines of operation, creating conditions for a counteroffensive. In this way, the plan would disrupt the enemy's intent for rapid penetration and avoid the blows of the enemy's superior technical weapons. Small frontal screens, using natural obstacles and sabotaged infrastructure, were meant only to create the conditions for the deployment of manoeuvrable forces against the enemy's flanks, sides and rear. In short, the plan carried an offensive character with the intent to seize the initiative from the enemy at the right moment.

This plan avoided the concentration of large forces in specific sectors — something dangerous when the enemy possessed faster and technically superior resources. Certain sectors of free

territory served as strongholds, some even fortified. A solid connection was established between various operational zones — even across large rivers, which had been a serious challenge in earlier operations. This significantly improved manoeuvring conditions for our forces. Troops from one sector could intervene in support of neighbouring units by attacking enemy bases in the rear. By pushing successive battles deeper into the territory, the enemy lost time and became increasingly exhausted.

Implementation of the Plans: In the Sixth Offensive, the troops of the 2nd German Armoured Army — part of Field Marshal von Weichs' Balkan group — took part, along with elements of the Italian group under General Kesselring. Around 25 German divisions participated, not counting the satellite forces of Rupnik, Pavelić, Nedić and Mihailović, who were the usual accomplices in such operations.

At the beginning of the offensive, the Germans first aimed to destroy our flanking groups in Slovenia and Macedonia. The Slovenian operational group was tightening the throat of the Italian front along the line: Tarvisio-Jesenice-Vrhnika. The Germans pulled three divisions from the Italian front (the 71st, 199th and the armoured "Hermann Goring" division) and launched them against the 9th Corps, which was

holding the Soča and Vipava area. After stubborn fighting, the 9th Corps, by mid-November, left weaker units on the coastal front and moved across the Dolomites and Upper Carniola toward the communication lines in the Ljubljanica and Sava valleys — in the Vrhnika-Ljubljana-Jesenice sector. In doing so, it secured the northern flank of the 7th Corps, which had begun fighting this offensive group in early November in the Vrhnika-Rakek-Rijeka sector. In these battles, the Germans failed to achieve quick successes, so they deployed two additional divisions (the 367th and 162nd) along the directions: Zagreb-Novo Mesto and Ljubljana-Kočevje. Meanwhile, the "Hermann Goring" armoured division advanced to Rijeka, reached the Upper Kupa area and enveloped the 7th Corps forces from the south. With this manoeuvre, the 7th Corps was pushed off the communication lines, and fighting spread into the mountainous areas, lasting for more than a month. During that time, the 9th Corps returned to the communication lines in the Soča and Vipava valleys, liberating a significant portion of the Littoral. Units of the 11th Corps from Gorski Kotar and the 4th Corps from Žumberak moved into Inner and Lower Carniola. This allowed the 7th Corps an easier transition into a counteroffensive, during which almost the entire Ljubljana province was liberated and the re-

maining German garrisons in Kočevje and Novo Mesto were encircled. At the end of this operation, the Corps executed a manoeuvre, sending part of its forces across the Sava into the enemy's rear — into Styria.

The Macedonian operational group, by October, had liberated a substantial area between the Vardar, Crna Reka and Drim rivers, establishing contact across the Drim with the Albanian partisans. Against this group, the Germans launched an offensive from Albania and Greece (the 100th Infantry Division and the 1st Alpine Division). After battles along the Drim, around Gostivar and Brod, the group moved toward the communication lines in the Vardar Valley, destroyed them and avoided encirclement.

The battles of the Slovenian and Macedonian operational groups were of great importance. Not only did these groups withstand the enemy's initial surprise attacks, but they also inflicted heavy losses in both personnel and equipment. Offering resilient resistance, they held the enemy back for more than a month and a half, allowing the forces in other sectors to prepare and receive the enemy according to the previously developed plan. As the offensive progressed, these operational groups continued to engage alongside the rest of the forces.

By the end of November, the offensive had

shifted to the operational areas of Lika, Banija and Kordun on one side, and the Sandžak and Eastern Bosnia on the other. In these regions — which posed a threat to the German-collaborationist bases in Zagreb and Belgrade — the enemy concentrated strong forces.

The enemy intended to cut off Lika, Banija and Kordun from Bosanska Krajina, and launched a two-pronged attack: from the Kupa Valley — Sušak (using the 371st, 392nd, 199th and 1st Cavalry Divisions) and from the Una Valley — Knin (with the 373rd and 144th Infantry Divisions). Fierce battles ensued with the units of the 4th and 11th Corps, lasting over two months. The 4th Corps was pushed back from the Una all the way to the Slunj-Kladuša-Dragotinja line. It then launched a counteroffensive, crushing the 1st Cossack and 371st Divisions, reaching the Kupa River and liberating the heavily fortified Garrison of Glina in the process. It then returned to the Una front, where its covering detachments had been holding back the enemy, and drove the 373rd Division back to its initial garrisons on the Una. The 373rd Division was unable to carry out a strong offensive in Banija, in part because the 5th Corps had threatened its bases in the Una Valley — from which it could not afford to stray. During this time, the 9th Corps, surrounded from three sides — Sušak, Ogulin and Gospić —

engaged in combat in Gorski Kotar, Lika and the Littoral. Despite heavy losses, the Germans managed to break through from Ogulin and Gospić toward Senj, but were able to hold only the communication lines. During these battles, the 18th Division of the 7th Corps struck the enemy's rear in Gorski Kotar, while the 19th Division of the 8th Corps continually threatened the Knin-Gospić communication route, where the 114th German Infantry Division operated. The actions of these units significantly eased the pressure on the 9th Corps.

While the fighting was ongoing in the Krka, Kupa and Una areas, the 10th Zagreb Corps launched a strong offensive in Zagorje and against the Sava communication network, providing significant support to our forces operating south of the Sava.

The Sandžak and Eastern Bosnia were encircled by the enemy from the Drina and Ibar valleys (the 1st Alpine Division with the 92nd Motorized Grenadier Regiment and the 181st Division), the Sava Valley (the 187th and 1st Volunteer Divisions), the Bosna Valley (the 5th Motorized and 369th Divisions) and the Sarajevo-Foča sector (the "Prinz Eugen" Division). The forces of the 2nd Corps held the enemy east of the Lim River for a long time. However, in a sudden raid, the Germans managed to capture

an undamaged bridge over the swollen Lim in Prijepolje, allowing them to advance rapidly — one column via Pljevlja toward Goražde, the other via Priboj toward Višegrad. At that point, the 5th Division assumed a reconnaissance and covering role, retreating along the Višegrad-Rogatica-Olovo route while offering fierce resistance along the Lim and Drina rivers. Taking advantage of this, the 2nd Corps launched a counteroffensive from its flanking positions. The northern wing of the Corps cleared the Lim Valley all the way to Prijepolje and captured Nova Varoš and Ivanjica; the southern wing pushed offensively toward the Morava Valley and the Montenegrin coast. The 29th Division liberated Ljubinje and Lastva and fought fierce battles in Herzegovina that significantly contributed to the broader struggle in Bosnia. During the fighting in the Sandžak, the South Morava Operational Group, linked with forces from Metohija, Kosovo and Macedonia, launched heavy strikes on the Morava-Vardar railway, repelled the Bulgarian offensive and crushed the Chetnik bands of Draža Mihailović that had been collaborating with the Bulgarian troops.

In December, operations shifted to Eastern Bosnia, where the enemy had concentrated its forces most densely. The fighting lasted more than a month and a half. Units of the 3rd Corps, the

5th and 16th Divisions, and the 1st South Morava Brigade inflicted massive losses on the enemy. The battles at Han Pijesak, Ozren, Zvijezda and the Krivaja Valley can be compared to the heroic feats of the Fourth and Fifth Offensives. All units in the sector then launched a counteroffensive. In harsh winter conditions, the 5th Division carried out a brilliant manoeuvre across Zvijezda and Konjuh, broke through the enemy encirclement at Glasinac, destroyed the Pale-Višegrad supply line, and liberated Goražde, Foča and Kalinovik. The 3rd Corps units, the 16th Division and the 1st South Morava Brigade routed the enemy on Ozren, Konjuh, Zvijezda, Trebava and Majevica, and liberated Posavina, Semberija and Birač — essentially regaining all territory held before the offensive.

While battles were still ongoing in other sectors, the Germans began preparing an offensive against Bosanska Krajina and Central Bosnia, aiming to encircle these areas from all sides. In the Lower Vrbas and Sana valleys, they built a strong staging base. In early December, they launched an offensive from the Imotski-Knin line (the 118th and 264th Divisions) toward Bugojno and Glamoč, seeking to disrupt operational links between our neighbouring sectors. By drawing our forces southward in this sector, the enemy also aimed to ease the manoeuvring of its eastern and

northern troops, who were otherwise hindered by rough terrain. However, the southern enemy group was halted after 20 days of fierce fighting by units of the 8th Corps and the 1st Corps. They suffered heavy losses and were stopped along the Duvno-Šujica-Livno line. This allowed the formation of a strong strike group composed of units from the 5th Corps (with smaller elements from the 1st and 6th Corps), which launched an attack in late December on the Banja Luka-Gradiška-Kostajnica-Novi-Bihać-Prijedor sector. The goal of this operation was to destroy this key stronghold, where the enemy had amassed war equipment and supplies for the offensive, to disrupt the plans of an already exhausted opponent, and to support the transition of units in Eastern Bosnia into a counteroffensive. The manoeuvre succeeded. A large quantity of enemy military equipment was captured and destroyed, and major strongholds in Banja Luka and Gradiška were eliminated. Communications along the Sana and Una valleys all the way to Bihać were completely destroyed. Frightened by this action, the enemy hastily improvised a new offensive in this sector. From the Novska area toward Banja Luka, it deployed the 114th Motorized Division — which had been en route to Italy — and the 92nd Motorized Grenadier Regiment. From the Derventa-Doboj-Sarajevo-Konjic line, it sent

the 1st Volunteer, 1st Alpine, 369th and parts of the "Prinz Eugen" Division. The offensive began on January 5, 1944. An attempt by the southern group to resume its offensive from the Duvno-Livno line was thwarted. Likewise, the Una group — weakened and trapped within its own garrisons under constant attacks from the 5th Corps — was unable to mobilize. Thus, the offensive in this sector turned into a frontal movement. Near Čađavica, the 4th Division, after several days of fighting, crushed a German column. In 15 days of combat in the Mrkonjić-Mliništa sector, the 6th Division inflicted significant losses on the 114th Division, the 92nd Motorized Regiment and parts of the 1st Alpine Division. The 11th Division, by drawing strong enemy forces from Central Bosnia toward itself, enabled the 1st Division to carry out a bold and skillful manoeuvre from the Jajce-Travnik sector, striking at the enemy's flank from the western slopes of Vlašić, relieving the 11th Division and together liberating Central Bosnia. The 10th Division, operating in the Prozor area, defeated elements of the "Prinz Eugen" Division and pushed them back toward the Neretva River.

Throughout the entire Sixth Enemy Offensive, the units of the 6th Corps and the General Staff of Vojvodina attacked and destroyed key transportation routes in the Sava, Drava and

Danube valleys, thereby supporting the troops in other sectors while also repelling several local enemy offensives on their own.

Conclusion:

1. In this offensive, the Germans not only failed to achieve their objectives, but they also exposed their major weaknesses and shortcomings — poor combat effectiveness of their multi-ethnic troops, widespread desertions, inadequate food and clothing, and their inability to operate off major communication lines. Even along the communication lines themselves, they encountered such difficulties that they managed to overcome them only at the cost of massive casualties. They had counted on a swift success, yet after four months of offensive — from mid-October to mid-February — they barely managed to seize a narrow coastal strip and maintain control over a few inland-bound routes from the coast. It should be noted that winter conditions, which should have favoured the technically superior German forces, were on their side.

Despite their numbers, German forces became scattered across broad fronts of our battlefields, and encountering fierce resistance from our troops, their momentum gradually collapsed. Their final phase in Central Bosnia and Bosanska Krajina was utterly exhausted. They barely held on to their winter garrisons, which they now

cling to desperately. During the course of the offensive itself, they were forced into a defensive posture in several sectors, and ultimately, they were compelled to adopt a defensive stance across the entire Yugoslav front.

2. This offensive clearly highlighted the role and significance of our Army within the framework of Allied strategy. While the fascists were retreating in both the East and in Italy, the German command was forced to commit substantial forces against our Army. And not only that. Our Army was confronting over 700,000 German and satellite troops in Yugoslavia — forces the fascists would have readily deployed elsewhere had we not been holding them in place. It is clear what such a force — or even significantly fewer — would have meant for the already endangered German fronts on the Bug River and in Italy. Rightfully so, for every step forward taken by the Allies on the battlefields, our fighters feel they have made their own contribution — in blood and sweat. With the opening of the Second Front in Europe and the Red Army's advance across the Carpathians, we can already anticipate just how fierce our Army's role will be for the fascists and their satellites in the Balkans.

3. Although the fighting occurred across separate sectors, the core operational strategy was carried out correctly. It was precisely this disper-

sal of forces that allowed our young command leadership to fully exercise initiative and implement manoeuvre combinations that successfully linked all forces operationally.

While the enemy attacked one sector, the forces in a neighbouring sector would envelop them — and the enemy consistently found themselves caught in a double ring of fire.

Therefore, our unit-level command, through its adaptability in the field, its ability to assess the combat situation and its decisiveness, has — for the sixth time — passed the test of the brutal school of war and proved itself worthy of leading the great National Liberation Army.

4. The units of the National Liberation Army have passed the test with distinction. Through their endurance, heroism, striking power and manoeuvring ability, they have proven capable of securing victory and ensuring that the people reap the gains of this bloody struggle. And not only that. As part of the great Allied coalition — on the left flank of the Red Army — our Army is ready to launch the assault on the bloodthirsty fascist monster, for which there is no fate left but death.

February 1944

THE SEVENTH ENEMY OFFENSIVE

The Sixth Offensive concluded after a four-month-long campaign, at the end of January 1944, and ended in failure for the Germans. Not only did they fail to destroy our Army, but it emerged from the offensive even stronger — with three additional corps (the 9th, 10th and 11th) — and enriched with new combat experience gained while fighting an enemy armed to the teeth with modern military technology. Moreover, our Army retained control over a large territory and even expanded it after the offensive, securing a continuous area from the Prekosočje Hills to the Strumica River. Of particular note is the Serbian free territory in the Morava region.

Following the offensive, the German command did not gain freedom of action — instead, it found itself facing new difficulties. The main enemy bases in the rear were under threat. The few remaining communication routes still in use by the enemy were under heavy attack and had become virtually unusable. The occupying troops stationed along the Adriatic, cut off from their hinterland, found themselves in a difficult position. And more than that — the entire German military apparatus in southeastern Europe had become rigid, its freedom of movement

paralysed, as our National Liberation Army was tightening the noose around the entire theatre along the Drava-Sava-Danube line.

The occupier saw our Army as an increasing threat. With the adoption of the historic AVNOJ decisions and the formation of the National Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia, led by Marshal Tito, a new wave of fighters began joining the National Liberation Army. Following the successful conclusion of the 1943-44 winter campaign — and with the arrival of spring — recruitment rapidly increased. Recognizing the true significance of our Army at last, the Allies began sending more military supplies, which made it possible to mobilize even more fighters. As the general situation evolved, our struggle began to inspire armed resistance among neighbouring peoples — particularly among the Bulgarians and Hungarians. Our Army provided broad support to Bulgarian and Hungarian anti-fascist units. In doing so, the Balkan front expanded, and the fire of war crept closer to the vital centres of Hitlerite Germany. The moment of joint Allied strikes against fascist Germany was also drawing near. Our Army, positioned as a link between the Allied Carpathian and Italian groupings, represented the greatest threat to the exposed southern flank of the German forces — a flank hanging in the air. All of this deeply alarmed the Germans,

and therefore they launched the Seventh Offensive against the National Liberation Army. This offensive was a continuation of the sixth, following the regrouping and reinforcement of German troops and resources.

The Enemy's Plan: Through the first six offensives, all German plans to destroy our fighting forces had failed. Thus, in this Seventh Offensive, they changed tactics — forming strong groups composed of motorized and mountain divisions. With these strike groups and garrison forces, supported by strong aviation, they launched attacks on specific sectors, aiming to gradually destroy our units and disrupt life in the affected areas. The flaws in this German tactic were clear: the shortage and weakness of the German forces, which led them to try to establish superiority in only selected sectors of our front. On the vast battlefield we controlled, the enemy's strike groups were subjected to intense attacks, and even before the offensive concluded, they were losing their striking power. Our units retained full freedom to manoeuvre and strike at the enemy's rear — especially targeting their staging bases and weakened sectors. The Germans conducted their operations according to rigid templates, well-known to our command, which meant that initiative and freedom of action remained in the hands of our forces. Our com-

mand always had enough time to gather intelligence and take countermeasures.

For the Seventh Offensive, the German High Command deployed the troops of the Balkan *Armeegruppe F* under Field Marshal von Weichs, a significant portion of the Italian group under General von Kesselring, and all Bulgarian and other satellite forces operating in Yugoslavia.

Plan of the Supreme Command: The strategy was not to group forces together, but rather to deploy them broadly and deeply across operational zones — to weaken the enemy and inflict as many losses as possible in manpower and equipment, and then transition into a general counter-offensive.

Conduct of Operations: The Seventh Offensive began in the first days of April and lasted until the end of June. It can be divided into three phases, although not strictly separated in time. The first phase involved the operational sectors: a) the Serbian-Macedonian sector, and; b) the Slovene-Istrian sector. The second phase included the operational sectors: a) Montenegro, the Sandžak, Herzegovina and Eastern Bosnia (for brevity, we'll refer to this as the Drina-Neretva sector), and; b) Lika, Banija, Kordun, Zagorje, Slavonia and Srem (which we'll call the Sava-Kupa sector). The third phase covered the operational sector of Central and Western Bosnia and

Dalmatia (the Krajina-Dinaric sector), and began on May 25 with an airborne assault on the Supreme Headquarters in Drvar.

First Phase: The German command was deeply concerned by the growing strength of our forces and the development of operations in the Serbian-Macedonian and Slovene-Istrian operational zones. Our forces in these areas were threatening three active German fronts: the Carpathian, the Italian and the Greek. On the Yugoslav front itself, these flanking operational groups had isolated the occupying forces in the Adriatic and Sava Basin regions, restricting their ability to manoeuvre more broadly.

These flanking sectors were direct support bases for the liberation forces in neighbouring countries, where — under the influence of our struggle — liberation movements had begun to emerge. Lacking the strength to launch a simultaneous offensive across our entire front, the Germans first attacked these two flanking operational zones. Their primary objective was to cut off links and prevent any support from our forces to neighbouring liberation movements. They especially sought to sever the connection between our and Bulgarian units along the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border, where military cooperation had been established.

In the offensive on the Serbian–Macedonian

operational area, over 190,000 enemy soldiers took part, with numerous artillery pieces, tanks and strong air support (including one German Alpine Division, a Schutzpolizei Division, the 3rd and 4th Brandenburg Motorized Regiments, the 20th Regiment of the 13th SS Division, elements of the SS "Skanderbeg" Division, the 1st and 2nd Bulgarian Cavalry Regiments, Bulgarian divisions: 7, 14, 15, 17, 22, 24, 27 and 122, Nedić's "Serbian Volunteer Corps" and Draža Mihailović's Chetniks). The staging bases for this offensive were: the Breganica River Valley, Kyustendil, the Timok Valley, Požarevac, the Great and Western Morava, the Ibar River, the Lepenac River, Skopje and the Crna Reka — with the enemy's troops advancing in a concentric movement, aiming to drive our units toward the South Morava and destroy them there.

Scattered battles broke out across a wide area. A portion of the Kosmet (Kosovo-Metohija), Macedonian and Bulgarian forces was forced to retreat toward the South Morava and Vlasina sector, where the enemy was tightening the encirclement. Our forces found themselves in a difficult situation. Guided by the developments in this area, as well as in the Drina-Zeta operational zone — where the enemy had already begun its offensive — the Supreme Command took the following measures:

1. The existing Serbian forces in this sector — detachments and brigades — were to be formed into solid military units: divisions. From these divisions, as well as the Kosovo-Metohija, Macedonian and Bulgarian forces (the "Vasil Levski" and "Hristo Botev" brigades), a strong strike group was to be formed to break the enemy's encirclement and transition into a counter-offensive.

2. A strike group from the Sandžak (the 2nd and 5th Divisions) was to be sent across the Morava into Western Serbia and Šumadija, driving a wedge between these two enemy groups, threatening their vulnerable points and staging bases, and drawing off some of the forces that were heavily pressuring the neighbouring operational zones.

Two months of fighting broke out across the entire Serbian-Macedonian operational area. The renowned 2nd Serbian and 5th Krajina Divisions set off from the Sandžak, crossed the Lim River in the Rudo-Prijepolje sector, and crushed Nedić's 5th Regiment, the 3rd Motorized Brandenburg Regiment and Draža's so-called "Zlatibor Corps." On the Ibar, in Studenica and Dragačevo, they defeated the 24th Bulgarian Division, Nedić's 2nd, 3rd and 4th Regiments, and Draža's so-called Javor, Ravna Gora and Požega Corps. After that, this group

skilfully shifted direction, crossed the Western Morava in the Čačak-Užice sector, and via Suvobor, Povlen and Maljen, appeared near Valjevo. This swift advance by our forces surprised the Germans and struck at the heart of the traitors Nedić and Mihailović, who cried out in alarm: "Serbs to the rescue!" The occupier was forced to redeploy forces from both the Serbian and Drina-Zeta operational zones against this group (the 4th Brandenburg Regiment, the 22nd and 24th Bulgarian Divisions, elements of the Schutzpolizei Division, the remnants of Nedić's Volunteer Corps, the Russian Volunteer Corps and Draža's so-called Pocerska, Valjevska, 1st and 2nd Ravna Gora, Požega Corps and the Mountain Guard). Fierce battles began on Povlen, Maljen and Suvobor — the same ground where, in 1914, the famous Battle of Kolubara was fought, where the Serbian Army achieved one of its most glorious victories against the German invaders. And once again, on this historic battlefield (for the second time — the first being in autumn 1941), our units defeated the occupiers and Serbian Brankovićs — Nedić and Mihailović. While these battles were being fought in Western Serbia, our Morava Operational Group (and later the Drina-Zeta Group — the 3rd and 2nd Corps) launched an offensive.

Macedonian units began an offensive from

the Vranje-Kumanovo-Skopje sector and captured Kriva Feja and Kratovo, where they crushed the Bulgarian occupiers and then pushed toward the Central and Lower Vardar. After fierce battles in the Trn sector, Bulgarian partisan units advanced toward Kyustendil and Sofia. The 23rd Serbian Division captured Babušnica, then turned northward, routed the German mercenary forces on Ozren, and continued operations toward the Lower Timok. The Serbian 21st, 22nd, 24th and 25th Divisions, along with Kosovo-Metohija units, defeated the enemy in the Skopska Crna Gora, Jablanica and Toplica sectors, cleared the Kopaonik area and extended operations into Kosovo and Metohija and the Western and Great Morava River basins.

Conclusion:

1. In this offensive at the tri-border area of Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria, coordination and blood-forged combat unity were achieved between the Serbian, Macedonian and Bulgarian peoples. This is a major contribution to the continued success of the liberation struggle in the Balkans.

2. With the formation of five Serbian divisions, the growth of numerous partisan detachments, and the ever-increasing influx of new fighters, the struggle once again spread and flared up across the sacred and unyielding soil of

Serbia — the land where Tito began the first battles against fascist tyranny, where the first shock brigades were formed, which sowed every inch of Yugoslav soil with the lives of their fighters and soaked it in their blood in the pursuit of freedom, unity and brotherhood for our peoples, and for the hope of a better future for generations to come.

The expansion of fighting in Serbia will greatly ease operations for our units in other sectors of the Yugoslav front and will provide the Supreme Headquarters with broader tactical and strategic options.

3. The traitorous bands of Nedić, Ljotić and Draža Mihailović — created by German generals and Gestapo agents through crimes, bloodshed and the suffering of the Serbian people — have been defeated and no longer represent any military force. Only the pitiful remnants of these butchers and murderers still hide within German formations. The Serbian people welcomed their divisions with joy, offered them every kind of support and responded with the mobilization of new forces for the National Liberation Army. Neither bloody terror, nor suffering, nor hardship could extinguish the spirit of freedom and the centuries-old traditions of the Serbian people.

* * *

The Slovene–Istrian operational area is of primary importance. It serves as a barrier dividing the Balkan and Italian fronts. From this area — specifically from Trieste and Rijeka — the shortest and most vulnerable operational route for the enemy leads toward Vienna. Due to its strategic value, this sector has been constantly subjected to attacks by large enemy forces. This time, the offensive involved troops from the Italian group under General Kesselring (the 178th Mountain Rifle Division, the 188th and 236th Grenadier Divisions, the 287th and 256th Infantry Divisions, parts of the 171st Division, the 13th and 14th Divisions, and all the White Guard bands under General Rupnik). Fighting broke out across the entire sector — from the Soča to the Sutla rivers, and from the Drava to the Kupa. The enemy suffered heavy losses, including a catastrophe at the hands of the 7th Corps near Žužemberk and Trebnje, and in the Savinja Valley by units of the Styrian Operational Zone. Our forces held their strongholds firmly, secured connections with the partisan forces of northern Italy, and extended support to small groups of Austrian patriots across the Drava.

Second Phase: A) The units of the Drina-Zeta operational area severed the enemy's links with Albania and Serbia, and threatened the communication network in the Neretva, Bosna and

Sava river valleys. This area served as a springboard for our forces to enter Serbia — a region of primary strategic and political importance to the enemy due to its central geographical position in the Balkans. Fearing a breakthrough, Hitler aimed to preserve the crumbling regimes of his vassals: Nedić, Ljotić and Mihailović. Moreover, he even sought to strengthen their position by annexing Montenegro to "Nedić's Serbia." As in the Sixth Offensive, this area was once again exposed to fierce enemy attacks.

Strong enemy forces launched an offensive in Eastern Bosnia, encircling it from all directions (the 100th German Infantry Division, the 13th SS Division, parts of the "Prinz Eugen" Division, elements of the 1st Russian Volunteer Corps, Nedić's groups, two Ustaša and three Mountain Brigades, Ustaša militia, and Draža Mihailović's so-called Sarajevo and Majevica Chetnik Corps). In prolonged fighting, our forces achieved victories at Glasinac, near Vlasenica, Kladanj, and along the Krivaja River, until finally, the heroic 16th Vojvodina Division defeated the 13th SS Division in the Majevica sector, capturing significant war trophies. Thus, the Germans failed to clear Eastern Bosnia or to establish the strong Sava bridgehead at Majevica-Semberija for which they had fought so hard.

The 2nd Corps came under attack from

significantly superior enemy forces advancing from Vrmoša, Peć, Rožaje, Pljevlja, and from the Neretva and Zeta valleys (German: 181st Division, 169th Division, 3rd and 4th Brandenburg Motorized Regiments, parts of the 369th Division; Nedić's 5th Regiment, 5th Schutzpolizei Regiment, the Muslim militia from Pešter and the Chetnik bands of Draža Mihailović). The 2nd Corps Headquarters made a sound military decision. Faced with overwhelming enemy numbers, it could not defend the entire liberated territory with a thinly stretched and dispersed formation. Therefore, small reconnaissance and covering units were left in front of the enemy, while the main force was concentrated in the Mojkovac-Kolašin-Mateševo-Trešnjevik area, positioned for action along internal operational routes. The most dangerous group was the one advancing from Prijepolje and Pljevlja. Peko Dapčević struck this group with all available forces and crushed it entirely at historic Mojkovac. In 1915, it was at Mojkovac that the Montenegrin Army secured the retreat of the brotherly Serbian Army. Now, at Mojkovac, the Montenegrins prevented the annexation of Montenegro to the so-called "Nedić's Serbia," refusing entry to the betrayers and outcasts of Serbia into the free Montenegrin land. Other enemy groups were then gradually defeated at Trešnjevik, Veternik, Kuči and near

Nikšić, after which the previously held territory was liberated once again. During this time, our 29th Division achieved several brilliant victories near Trebinje, Bileća, Gacko and Nevesinje. As previously mentioned, the strike group led by Colonel Morača (2nd and 5th Divisions), which had earlier been transferred into the enemy's rear toward Valjevo, significantly supported and eased the operations of the 3rd Corps, and especially the 2nd Corps.

Conclusion:

1. The plan to unite Serbian and Montenegrin collaborationist forces was prevented — and those forces were successively defeated.

2. The Drina-Zeta operational area firmly remained in our hands, serving as an important central geographic and strategic pivot, from which our command maintained freedom of action in all directions. This pivot has gained even greater significance now that it is connected, via the Ibar and Kopaonik, with the Serbian free territory.

B) The units of the Sava–Kupa operational zone cut off all enemy connections from the northern Croatian Littoral and Bosnia leading toward Zagreb, while the Belgrade-Zagreb communication network was subjected to heavy strikes. The connection across the Drava River with occupied Hungary was extremely weak. Our strongholds

— Gorski Kotar, Žumberak and Zagorje — disrupted the link between the German groupings of von Weichs and Kesselring.

Across this entire area, the Germans simultaneously launched an offensive (the 392nd Division, 373rd Division, 42nd Mountain Division, 5th Motorized Division, 173rd Reserve Division, 230th Division, 96th Mountain Division, 1st Cossack Division, 1st Mountain Reserve Regiment, 28th SS Regiment, 121st Mountain Regiment, 607th Garrison Regiment, and all of Pavelić's Ustaša and Domobran units). At first, the enemy managed to seize control of all communication routes in Lika, while in Banija and Kordun, Žumberak, Zagorje, Bilo Gora and Pruska Gora, they suffered a clear defeat. In the second half of June, our units captured Krbavsko and Bijelo Polje in Lika. In this way, all strongholds remained in our hands. The enemy failed to dislodge us from any sector of this area.

Third Phase. Thus, the enemy suffered defeat in all four operational areas, while the central and geographically rugged Krajina-Dinaric operational area remained firmly in the hands of our Army. All mountain passes along the Dinaric ridge and all routes leading inland from the coast were under our control. The units in this region served as a dagger in the back of the large German forces deployed along the Adriatic coast.

To salvage some success from this completely failed offensive, Hitler devised a gangster-style attack on the Supreme Headquarters of the National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia — aiming to capture or kill Marshal Tito. With this, Hitler hoped to achieve the following:

1. By destroying the unified military and political leadership of the National Liberation Movement in Yugoslavia, Hitler aimed to erase in one stroke all the achievements of that magnificent struggle. He needed this to maintain morale within his army, which had been declining due to the heavy losses in Yugoslavia, as well as to preserve political prestige abroad and among his increasingly shaken satellites. After all, what kind of power was Hitler's — the one that had conquered so many European nations — if he could not, even after three years, defeat the so-called "bands" in Yugoslavia?

2. To create chaos and panic within our command structure, and in doing so, eliminate — on the eve of the opening of the Second Front in Europe — a dangerous army in the Balkans, one that for three years had been shaking the walls of "Fortress Europe."

3. To undermine our reputation and present us abroad and to the Allies as an unserious leadership.

Because of this, Hitler sent high-ranking military figures to Knin to oversee the operation personally — an operation in which he placed great hope. Taking part in this offensive were units from the "Der Fuhrer" airborne group, the 11th Airborne Division, all the units of the 15th and 5th SS Alpine Corps, reinforced with the 92nd Motorized Regiment, the 1st and 2nd Brandenburg Motorized Regiments, an armoured battalion from the 2nd Panzer Army, and all Ustaša, Domobran and Chetnik bands in the area. The plan was to destroy the leadership of the National Liberation Army through an airborne assault, and then — using a dense encirclement — trap and eliminate the disorganized units in the Krajina-Dinaric sector. The staging bases for the offensive were: Mostar-Sarajevo-Banja Luka-Bihać-Srb-Knin-Imotski, from which concentric troop movements toward the Srnetica Mountain were to be launched.

The offensive began on May 25 at 5 a.m. with a heavy bombing of Drvar and an airborne assault. Simultaneously, motorized and mechanized columns launched attacks from all the previously mentioned garrisons. The most characteristic feature of this entire operation was the airborne landing in Drvar. The Germans had used various permitted and prohibited methods of warfare against us — including even chem-

ical weapons — although they had not yet used them against the other Allies. But this was the first time an airborne assault was used against our forces. During this war, Hitler had previously carried out airborne assaults — seizing Holland, Belgium and Crete with their help. However, this airborne assault was unlike any of those. According to prisoners' statements, the paratrooper units were made up of disgraced officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers from Hitler's Army. This military criminal scum, whose unit bore the name "Der Fuhrer," was given the opportunity to redeem itself through this operation. These executioners were to atone for their bloodlust with even more bloodshed — having received direct orders from Hitler himself to kill everything and everyone they encountered. Their goal was to capture Marshal Tito alive, and each soldier was issued a photograph of the Marshal. Draža Mihailović's Chetniks had "perfected their warcraft" to such a degree that even in this special operation, some took part — a few were tasked with guiding the Germans to Marshal Tito's command post (the journalist Pribićević reported seeing one such Chetnik, and our fighters killed three of them). Another defining feature of this operation was the massive use of aviation. Officers from the Allied military missions told us that in two and a half years of war

on their own front, they had never seen aviation used so intensively, both in number of aircraft and frequency of flights. However, aviation did not accompany the full course of operations in this sector and had no significant impact on the pace of the offensive's conclusion. Its role was to assist in the destruction of the Supreme Headquarters, to cut off communication and to disorganize the rear. Considering that not a single German plane could be seen on the front lines during the Allied offensive in Italy, this operation clearly demonstrates just how much importance Hitler placed on it.

We had no combat unit stationed in Drvar. We knew the enemy was preparing an offensive on this sector, so we had deployed all our troops to the front. This was a regular occurrence in our style of warfare. Every individual — fighter and commander alike — had to be ready at any moment to engage in battle. In other words, we always had to be prepared to find a way out of any situation and turn it to our advantage. This time, victory was achieved thanks to the deep love for our Supreme Commander, the combat experience and courage of our fighters, and the initiative of our command staff. As paratroopers and gliders began landing in Drvar, the accompanying battalion and the officer school of the Supreme Headquarters immediately joined

the fight. The staff of the 6th Division withdrew the 3rd Lika Brigade from the Lapac front and rushed with it to Drvar. The 8th Corps sent a Dalmatian battalion from Tičevo. Three quarters of the enemy paratroopers were destroyed. After two days of fighting, German motorized units entered Drvar. Without this support, the remainder of the German airborne force would have been completely wiped out.

Fierce fighting then continued across the entire Krajina-Dinaric sector. All of the enemy's attempts to encircle our units and trap them in a ring failed. Once again, it was proven that our infantry brigades were faster than German motorization. We always managed to strike the enemy first — then reposition ourselves to a more favourable position for delivering the next blow. After intense battles at Tičevo, Jadovnik, Trubar, Ripac, Ribnik, Sitnica and Mlinište, the entire territory was liberated — except for Drvar and Petrovac.

General Conclusion:

1. The Germans failed to destroy our military and political leadership. Thus, their attempt turned into a major military and political defeat for Hitler. We were the first to successfully repel Hitler in an airborne operation. This, on one hand, speaks to the weakness of the Hitlerite "machine" — all the more so since this operation

also concerned prestige — and on the other hand, to the strength and striking power of our Army. Due to the failure and heavy losses in this offensive, Hitler was forced to resort to the lie that he had captured Marshal Tito. This clearly reflects the increasingly shaky state of his position.

2. While fighting our Army, Hitler claimed he was fighting against bandits. And even though he had already carried out six major offensives against us — which went far beyond ordinary "skirmishes" and "cleansing operations" — it was in this Seventh Offensive that he most contradicted himself. He used every tool of modern warfare: tanks, aviation, airborne assaults, deployed large forces and personally concerned himself with the outcome of the operation, entrusting it to the most capable military "minds." Yet even so, his Seventh Offensive collapsed in the face of our resistance. After this offensive ended, his position only continued to deteriorate.

3. Hitler and his command once again contradicted themselves on another front. They studied the tactics and strategy of our Army so thoroughly that they had already changed their approach to fighting us four times: First: the method of encirclement — the system of "pockets," "cauldrons" and "Cannae" strategies aimed at the destruction of our entire Army; Second: the encirclement of individual operational sec-

tors; Third: offensive operations by strike groups, based on fortified positions and strongholds, carried out across all areas to sever connections, destroy our bases, break up our forces, conduct reconnaissance, etc., and; Fourth: the formation of powerful operational groups from motorized and mountain divisions, which, with support from garrison troops, transferred operations from one area to another. The German command was constantly searching for methods and means to destroy us — in other words, to remove from the battlefield a dangerous, active fighting force. This, in itself, clearly shows how our military strength continuously grew — that we had our own way of waging war, our own tactics and strategy that surpassed the enemy's. It also proves that the leadership of our Army consistently anticipated enemy methods and intentions in time, always found appropriate countermeasures, and successfully led our forces through all these major battles.

4. While the German front in Italy was collapsing and the Allies were beginning landings in the West, Hitler was forced, during this Seventh Offensive against the so-called "bandits" in Yugoslavia, to deploy no fewer than 18 German operational divisions, 9 Bulgarian divisions and all the satellite forces. In doing so, he suffered the following losses: around 20,500 killed; 6,500

captured, and; 16,000 wounded. Captured war materiel included: 96 cannons; 19 tanks; 3 aircraft; 80 trucks; 110 motorcycles; 500 automatic weapons; 16,000 rifles; over 60 wagon loads of various ammunition; over 100 wagon loads of food; large quantities of medical supplies and communications equipment; 800 horses, and; 15 watercraft. Destroyed enemy materiel included: 175 cannons; 230 mortars; 108 tanks; 37 aircraft; 1,400 trucks; over 900 automatic weapons; 94 locomotives; 700 railcars; 96 watercraft, and; large amounts of ammunition, fuel, food and other supplies. The growth of our Army, the broadening of the front, weapons received from the Allies, favourable spring weather and the enemy's move out of fortifications into open terrain — all these factors contributed to the powerful blow we dealt the enemy. And that is not all. The German divisions, when decimated and forced to withdraw from the land of a poorly armed people fighting for freedom, emerge demoralized and incapable of offering strong resistance. All of this speaks volumes about the strength of our Army, its importance within Allied strategy and its role in the further development of military events in Europe.

5. Hitler had promised his frightened vassals in Yugoslavia that he would deal with us, and that by doing so, their position would be secured. He

had already begun a new division of the Yugoslav lands. But together with them, he suffered defeat. With this, all hopes and illusions of those traitors were shattered. Their ranks are falling apart, while the striking power of our Army continues to grow. So, on this front as well, Hitler suffered a defeat — and his position only worsened.

6. After this offensive, the international reputation of our struggle rose even higher, and the true strength of our Army was recognized. The entire global public followed the development of the Seventh Offensive with great interest, in which large German forces participated, equipped with all modern military technology. This offensive further strengthened our ties with the Allies. Never before had the Allies provided us with such abundant support as during this period. Our units at the front lines received medical supplies, ammunition and food. Allied aviation directly supported our operations, strafing enemy columns and bombing enemy bases and strongholds. On this front as well, Hitler suffered a complete failure.

7. Through these difficult battles, our Army was reinforced with five new divisions in the important Serbian operational area, and the ranks of other units were significantly replenished with new fighters. In the face of the German offensive, everyone capable took up arms and joined

our units. This proves that after this offensive, we became stronger and further consolidated our military and political front from within. On this front too, Hitler suffered defeat.

8. For a full three years, the fighting here has raged with full intensity, without pause or rest. These battles, at their most intense moments — when enemy forces and resources were most concentrated against us — took on the character of major offensives, even if they did not all begin as such. Therefore, there will be no pause after this Seventh Offensive — nor can there be. Yugoslavia is an active front — one that connects with the Allied Carpathian and Italian groupings, a front positioned along the Balkan-Pannonian corridor, a route of critical sensitivity for Hitler, both militarily and politically. Strengthening our front by shifting operations from Italy to its upper section (Trieste-Gorizia-Jesenice), or possibly through an Allied landing on our soil, would place Germany in a critical situation. It is because of the great military and political significance of this theatre of war that the ongoing three years of combat and so many major offensives against our National Liberation Army can be understood. After the Seventh Offensive, our Army seized the initiative, and Hitler has been forced once again to bring in fresh reinforcements, including from Greece. Thus, the fighting on our front is becom-

ing ever more intense and is entering its decisive phase.

9. Finally, our Army, having drawn upon the inexhaustible strength of our peoples, who have triumphed in this great war of liberation, is ready — under the command of its founder, Marshal Tito — to honourably carry out its mission of liberation, to secure for its people the gains of this hard and bloody struggle, and to participate alongside the Allied armies in the liberation of humanity from fascist tyranny.

July 1944

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jovanović, Arso R. (1907-1948) — Yugoslav general, strategist and first Chief of the Supreme Headquarters of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (NOVJ). Born in Zavala near Podgorica, he grew up amid the hardships of the Balkan and First World Wars, shaped by the patriotism and suffering of his blind father, a veteran of the Battle of Mojkovac who later died from his wounds. Educated in Podgorica and the Belgrade Military Academy, he graduated among the top of his class (1928), served with distinction in the Takovo Regiment and authored *Tactics of the Infantry Battalion* (1939), a respected prewar manual. By 1941 he was a highly educated General Staff officer in the Yugoslav Army.

Refusing capitulation after the April War, Jovanović returned to Montenegro, joined the July 13 Uprising, and was soon appointed commander of its forces and chief of staff of the Montenegrin partisan headquarters. His military professionalism made him indispensable to the Communist-led movement; by December 1941, Tito appointed him Chief of the Supreme Headquarters of the partisan forces, a post he held through the war. He organized the transformation of guerrilla detachments into brigades, planned the attack on Pljevlja (1941) and led key operational

developments during 1942-43, including the creation of the Proletarian Brigades and early corps formations. Though retroactively criticized for tactical setbacks, his leadership was recognized by his contemporaries as foundational in creating the regular NOVJ army.

As Chief of Staff, Jovanović was the principal architect of the NOVJ's organization, training and strategy, personally directing operations across Yugoslavia. He represented the Partisans in negotiations with Allied missions, notably British officers Fitzroy Maclean and William Deakin, and Soviet Generals Korneyev and Gorshkov. Decorated with the Soviet Orders of Suvorov and Kutuzov (First Class), he was promoted to Major General in 1943 and later to Colonel General. Jovanović met with Stalin in January 1945 and secured vital materiel aid from the Soviet Union. He led the Yugoslav delegation in 1945 negotiations with the Allies over Trieste and the Julian March, where his firmness preserved Istria for Yugoslavia.

Postwar, Jovanović became Chief of the General Staff of the Yugoslav Army, overseeing its reorganization and education system. A former royal officer within a revolutionary army, he advocated professional autonomy and resisted excessive doctrinal influence. Removed from his post in 1945, he later studied at the Voroshilov Academy

in Moscow. His disappearance in August 1948, amid the Tito-Stalin split, was officially reported as a death during an alleged armed attempt to cross the Yugoslav-Romanian border near Vršac. However, contemporary research and eyewitness testimony indicate it was likely a political liquidation ordered — or at least approved — by the highest state and party authorities, including Josip Broz Tito, and his burial place remains unknown. Remembered as the most professional soldier of the partisan movement, he became, in the words of historian Branko Petranović, a "victim of ideological conformity" and one of the most tragic figures of Yugoslav history.

Proof