

Why did the Special Operations Executive send aid to
Tito's communist Partisans?



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¹ Partisans marching through the liberated capital, Belgrade, in 1944
http://encarta.msn.com/media_461550929/Yugoslav_Partisans_Enter_Belgrade.html

Section A, Plan of the Investigation

This investigation will assess why the Special Operations Executive (SOE) chose Tito's communist partisans over the other resistance groups in Yugoslavia in sending military aid during the Axis occupation of 1941-45 and how valuable it was to the partisans in overcoming the Axis occupation, as well as combating the collaborating forces and Nationalist Chetniks.

Section B will summarise the situation in Yugoslavia and look at how the two main groups operated. In Section C I will look at the values and limitations of two sources, the first being a speech given by Tito (leader of the partisans) and the second being a letter on the British policy towards the partisans. Section D will address the question and Section E will conclude that the most important reasons the British supported the partisans was that they offered unity in an uncertain future and had the mass support and organisation needed to '*set Europe ablaze*'².

² Williams, H. Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans p7

Section B, Summary of evidence

On April 6th 1941 the war that had engulfed most of Europe was brought to Yugoslavia. A *coup* launched by several pro-British military officers on 27th March brought the pro-Axis government of Prince Paul down and with it the ferocity of Hitler and the Wehrmacht in ‘Operation Punishment’: the invasion of Yugoslavia.

The *coup* came about due to the pro-Axis stance of the Prince’s government and his signing, on the day before the *coup*, of the Tripartite pact, which would have brought Yugoslavia under German domination like Romania and Bulgaria. The signing of the pact was met with huge demonstrations of tens of thousands in Belgrade led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), who “*found it unthinkable to throw in their lot with the people they had fought against at such a great cost in the previous war*”³.

The name of the operation, as so often in Nazi thinking, was designed to show the power of the regime and the Wehrmacht, it also had a personal meaning to Hitler, who felt that he had been cheated out of an alliance with the Yugoslavs, their blockade of Romanian oil headed for Germany and causing him to divert his forces to the Balkans, instead of concentrating on Operation Barbarossa. It only took eleven days for the Axis forces to overrun Yugoslavia. The government was forced to flee to the Middle East whilst the Axis carved up the country, making it near to impossible to organise a resistance⁴ movement in order to combat the occupiers.

The first proper⁵ form of resistance came in the form of colonel Draza Mihailović’s Chetniks. This group was formed from the remains of the Royal Yugoslav Army and by the end of 1941 were numbering some 20,000. The SOE and the Yugoslav government in exile (YGE) favoured Mihailović, as he was an experienced commander who could rally enough support throughout Serbia to fight against the Axis. The YGE made Mihailović the supreme leader of resistance forces in

³ Williams, H. Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans p32

⁴ Churchill and the British wanted the new King and his ministers to stay in order to organise guerrilla activity, giving the SOE a foothold in the Balkans.

⁵ Mihailović’s Chetniks weren’t the first resistance group towards the occupying forces: there were Slovenian and Croat groups operating in minor sabotage against the Axis. However, these weren’t organised or equipped for extensive resistance.

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Yugoslavia and Minister of War in the YGE, giving him legitimate authority over the armed forces. From this position Mihailović, with the full support of the SOE, was in a perfect position to fight against the occupying forces. However, Mihailović was a Serb Nationalist and extremely anti-communist, which put him in direct opposition from the other powerful resistance movement, the CPY, led partisans and would lead to his fall from grace.

Josep Broz, better known as Tito, led the partisans and was also the General Secretary of the CPY. The CPY had been preparing for armed resistance against possible occupation since the war began: collecting weapons, gathering information on terrain and recruiting members and fighters. However due to the Nazi-Soviet⁶ pact still being in place and Tito's strong ties with Moscow, the CPY did not openly revolt until 22 June 1941 when the Germans attacked the USSR.

The CPY being a (banned) clandestine party before the war had already an established network of underground communications⁷ and were a highly organised and tight knit group⁸, which gave them a huge advantage and head start over the other resistance movements in the area. Tito, unlike Mihailović, knew that the only way to remove the Axis was by appealing to all the peoples of Yugoslavia: Serbians, Croatians, Slovenians, Bosnians, Macedonians and Muslims. Tito recruited fighters from all over Yugoslavia giving him mass support and creating an image of a united front against the occupier. This factor proved to be invaluable in removing the Axis and gaining British support.

When the SOE first started operations in Yugoslavia they looked directly to Mihailović and the Chetniks to provide them with a strong, united resistance movement who would combat the Axis in the Balkans as well as holding together the multi-ethnic Yugoslavia. Mihailović was deeply nationalistic and was determined to

⁶ The Nazi-Soviet pact allied Nazi Germany and the USSR. Stalin, not wanting to upset the tender relationship of the two states ordered all communist parties under German occupation not to attack the German occupying forces.

⁷ West R, [Tito and the Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia: And the Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia](#) p16

⁸ It should be pointed out that Tito was heavily influenced by Leninism and modelled the CPY on the Bolshevik party; this proved to be a main factor in the CPY's victory.

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rid his country of all occupying forces, whilst exacting revenge on the Croats⁹, eliminating the partisans and reinforcing Serbian rule. These were not aims shared by Britain or the SOE, as the latter three would no doubt unleash civil war in Yugoslavia making an already fragile situation worse and Britain didn't have enough resources to stop or arbitrate a civil war. From 1941-1943 the Chetniks received money and arms from Britain via the SOE and were able to achieve some, though minor, victories over the occupying forces. However, SOE agents attached to the Chetniks soon sent back reports of how Mihailović was beginning to regard the partisans "*as his most immediate and dangerous enemy*"^{10,11}.

Meanwhile SOE had started sending agents to the partisans as advisers due to the partisans numerous victories and effectiveness of fighting against the Axis, it was at this point that the SOE started to get wind of Mihailović's collaborations with the Germans for weapons to fight the partisans. SOE opinion on Mihailović began to sway and eventually resulted in the decision made by the 'Big Three', led by an enthusiastic Churchill, at the Teheran Conference "*that the Yugoslav partisans should receive the greatest possible support in order to mystify and mislead the enemy*"¹².

⁹ After the invasion the Croats collaborated with the Axis powers and set up the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). This was a puppet regime under the fascist Ante Pavelić and his vicious Ustasha group.

¹⁰ Djilas M, Tito: The Story from Inside p91

¹¹ It should be noted at this point that from late 1941 to mid 1942, the Chetniks and partisans had worked loosely together in clearing the occupying forces from Western Serbia under the guidance of the SOE.

¹² Williams, H. Parachutes, Patriots and Partisans p187

Section C, Evaluation of sources.

Source 1.

“Peoples of Yugoslavia: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins, Macedonians and others! Now is the time, the hour has struck to rise like one man, in the battle against the invaders and hirelings, killers of our peoples. Do not falter in the face of any enemy terror. Answer terror with savage blows at the most vital points of the Fascist occupation bandits. Destroy everything – everything that is of use to the Fascist invaders. Do not let our railways carry equipment and other things that serve the Fascist hordes in their struggle against the Soviet Union. Workers, Peasants, Citizens, and Youth of Yugoslavia...to battle against the Fascist occupation hordes who are striving to dominate the whole world.”

Speech made by Tito on 4th of July 1941, calling on the people of Yugoslavia to fight against the occupying forces

The purpose of this speech was to incite the population into revolting against the Axis occupying forces¹³. Tito here is trying to encourage the many different ethnic groups and social classes of Yugoslavia to forget whatever differences they may have and to unite together as “*one man*” against the occupiers.

This is a very valuable source as it shows us Tito’s pan-ethnic¹⁴ views that would prove to be a major deciding factor of the Allies in giving support and supplies to the partisans. The source also shows Tito’s commitment to communism as it was given just over a week after the invasion of the USSR¹⁵. However, the speech in itself does show some drawbacks and asks some questions about Tito’s commitments. One of these being why did he have to wait several months until the attack of the Soviet Union had begun to declare a revolt against Axis occupation if he was so concerned about keeping the country united. An answer is that Tito was a devout communist who was under strict orders from Moscow and also he needed the help of the Comintern in terms of supplies and communications. Despite this I believe this to be a

¹³ Tito also wanted the Yugoslavs to begin destroying anything that the Axis could use against the Yugoslavians and their war against the Soviet Union. Until the breach in policy in 1945, Tito always held the Soviet Union in high regard and was primarily instigating the guerrilla war to help the Soviet Union.

¹⁴ http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/resistance_movement_in_yugoslavi.htm

¹⁵ The partisans needed time to arrange their forces.

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useful source in showing the appeal of the partisans and the reasons behind their SOE backing.

Source 2.

“...By dividing Yugoslavia into areas and recognising certain political elements as predominant in those districts we should be taking the first step towards breaking up the unity of the country which it is our policy to maintain. The principal change in policy with which I hope you will agree is that we are now recommending that the Communist Partisans and the Croat guerrillas should henceforth receive our military support.” Part of a letter sent from Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary during the war, to Churchill.

The letter describes Britain's new policy towards Yugoslavia and more importantly the partisans. The purpose of this source is to inform Churchill on what the Foreign Office believes to be the new and best course of action in Yugoslavia. This is a very valuable source as it is an official document concerning official British policy and comes directly from the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister. It shows how similar British aims were to those of Tito, mainly in maintaining the unity of Yugoslavia, and how despite ideological differences the two (Britain and the CPY) could work together and aid one another to fight against the common enemy. However this cannot and should not be seen as a great British sympathy towards the partisan cause. Britain¹⁶ and the SOE saw the partisans as a convenience in the fight against the Axis powers, the fact that they were communist was irrelevant towards the end of the war when the partisans were inflicting heavy casualties on the Axis in the Balkans; helping the Soviet Union in the East

¹⁶ Churchill and Eden were staunchly conservative, imperialist and anti-communist.

Section D, Analysis

So why did the SOE send aid to the partisans? The main reasons are that the partisans had strong and wide based support that appealed to all the peoples of Yugoslavia; therefore they offered the best hope of a united Yugoslavia after the war. The size of the partisans fighting force, by 1943, far exceeded that of the Chetniks and their bravery and victories under intense Axis fire, namely the SS 'Prince Eugen' Mountain division, brought them a huge amount of respect and fighting credibility from not only the allies, notably the SOE, but from the Germans aswell.

A German communication that was intercepted by British intelligence officers stated that the partisans were worthy opponents who time and time again had escaped Axis forces. The message was soon passed on to the SOE who, along with reports sent from agents in the field in the Balkans, brought the change in British policy that is stated in the second source. The British who were reluctant to actively support a communist group, sent numerous agents into partisan territory in order to assess the strength and motives of the partisans. This topic is a good indication of how dramatic the Second World War really was and how desperate times called for desperate measures. It probably seemed absurd to Churchill¹⁷ before the war that he would help communists, yet the power of Hitler seemed set to destroy Europe and the Empire.

Possibly the main factor of the change in British policy, when Churchill openly declared support and supplies for the partisans, was when Mihailović started to negotiate with the Axis. Mihailović could not see past his anti-communist, pro-Serbian attitude and had begun to attack partisan forces. This angered the British as it meant the Chetniks were no longer concentrating their forces, and British weapons, on the Germans. The ability of the partisans to fight in a sense a two front war against both the Axis and the Chetniks brought even more respect and support from SOE that would finally result the huge amounts of aid sent and the victory of removing Axis forces in 1945.

¹⁷ A true Briton, staunchly conservative, would never form an alliance or lend aid to a left wing or even a communist force.

Section E, Conclusion

It is possible to come to the conclusion that without the aid of the SOE, the partisans may not have survived the war. With the Germans becoming increasingly closer to destroying them as a fighting force, the bounty upon Tito's head and the betrayal of the Chetniks the partisans could have been broken anytime between 1942-45. The SOE, thanks to the work of several hardworking agents, managed to switch allegiances just in time before their only chance to retain the unity of Yugoslavia and avoid civil war, which would have no doubt spread to countries surrounding Yugoslavia. The SOE managed to provide important supplies and weapons; including an air force, tanks, artillery and guns. The partisans almost single handedly defeated the occupying forces and forced them out of the country before the Red Army could get there. The fact that two states ideologically opposed could work together in order to combat a greater evil shows either the desperation or the comradeship that occurs during war.

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