

## **Muslim autonomism and the Partisan movement**

### **Abstract**

Following the establishment of the so-called 'Independent State of Croatia' in 1941, there emerged two Bosnian-oriented movements in opposition: the People's Liberation Movement under the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which in the form of the 'Partisans' waged a guerrilla resistance; and the conservative Muslim autonomists, who sought to collaborate with the Germans, Italians, Chetniks and/or Partisans against the Ustashas. Both movements were ultimately in favour of some form of Bosnian self-rule; both opposed the Ustasha attempt to assimilate the Muslims into the Croat nation, as well as the Chetnik attempt to exterminate the Muslims. Although the Partisans fought the Axis forces while the Muslim autonomists were collaborationist, nevertheless enough common ground existed to make cooperation possible between the two.

The Bosnian Partisan army was, in terms of its rank and file, overwhelmingly Serb until 1943, yet the Communist leadership was aware that it needed to attract Bosnian Croat and, particularly, Muslim support if it were to take power in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It found it could do this only through winning over elements of the Muslim autonomist resistance. As World War II progressed, Muslim politicians and militia commanders were attracted by the Partisan talk of a unified, self-governing Bosnia as the common homeland of Muslims, Serbs and Croats, while they were increasingly repelled by Axis brutality and collaboration with the Chetniks. Ultimately, during 1943 an important segment of the Muslim autonomist movement went over to the Partisans. This was of decisive importance in the Partisans' conquest of power in Bosnia-Herzegovina and their successful establishment of a Bosnian republic, and with it a Yugoslav Federation. The Muslim autonomist element was therefore a key component of the Yugoslav Revolution.

### **Key words**

Bosnia-Herzegovina, Yugoslavia, Croatia, Serbia, Communists, Partisans, Ustashas, Chetniks, Muslim autonomism, People's Liberation Movement, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy

### **Text**

The Axis assault on Yugoslavia in 1941 involved also an assault on Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Bosnian people. Bosnia was, without the consultation of its people or their representatives, incorporated into the Croatian fascist puppet-state, the so-called 'Independent State of Croatia' (NDH). Having already been twice dismembered under the Yugoslav kingdom, in 1929 and in 1939, Bosnia was now dismembered for the third time, as the NDH was territorially organised as twenty-two 'Great Župas' designed to obliterate the historic border between Bosnia and Croatia (seven of these administrative entities linked portions of Bosnia with portions of Croatia; the administrative centres of five of these were outside of Bosnia). The Ustashas, Croatian fascists, were installed in power in the NDH despite their minimal popular support among the Croatian and Bosnian populations; they subjected the Serb, Jewish and gypsy populations of Bosnia, as of Croatia, to genocide; they attempted forcibly to assimilate the Bosnian Muslims into the Croatian nation; and they

suppressed the Croat Peasant Party (HSS), to which most Croats had been loyal.<sup>1</sup> Although the Bosnian Croats were readier to support the Ustasha regime than Croats elsewhere, nevertheless, for the overwhelming majority of Bosnians, the establishment of the NDH was perceived as an act of oppression. Three principal movements of resistance to the NDH arose amongst the Bosnian population: the Communist-led People's Liberation Movement (NOP - 'Partisans'); the Great Serb Chetniks; and the Muslim autonomists, that together enjoyed the support of most of the Bosnian population. Two of these movements, the Partisans and the Muslim autonomists, were specifically Bosnian in their political orientation, in that they favoured some form of Bosnian autonomy or self-rule. Ultimately, sections of the Muslim autonomist movement would be incorporated into the NOP; the Communists took power in Bosnia with the assistance of key Muslim autonomist notables.

The Ustasha regime not only attempted to assimilate the Muslims into the Croatian nation, but sought to marginalise the mainstream Muslim politicians in favour of a small minority of Muslim politicians of Croat-nationalist orientation, who had belonged to a break-away faction of the interwar 'Yugoslav Muslim Organisation' (JMO) that had gone over to the HSS. This faction, known as the 'Muslim Branch of the HSS', under the leadership of Ademaga Mešić, Hakiija Hadžić and Alija Šuljak, threatened the primacy of the leadership of the JMO, pushing the latter into opposition to the regime. Most Muslims, members of the elite and the ordinary people alike, were horrified by the Ustasha persecution of the Serbs. As the persecution generated a Serb rebellion which increasingly took the form of mass retributive slaughter of the Muslim population, Muslims widely came to view the Ustasha regime as a mortal threat to their own survival. The brutality of the Ustashes toward the Muslims themselves; the sectarian anti-Muslim chauvinism of many of the Catholic Croat Ustashes who dominated the administration in the localities; all helped to generate a powerful Muslim opposition to the regime.

It appears that in the summer of 1941, on an unknown date, the dominant figures in the JMO, Uzeir-aga Hadžihasanović and Džafer-beg Kulenović, summoned a meeting of their colleagues to formulate a Muslim strategy for survival. With Hadžihasanović's support, Kulenović would enter the NDH government to act as a counterweight to the Muslim Ustashes of the former Muslim Branch of the HSS. Hadžihasanović himself may also have encouraged other leading Muslims to join the Partisan and Chetnik movements, to provide the Muslims with a foot in each camp.<sup>2</sup> But this was just one dimension of the multi-faceted Muslim autonomist movement. Different Muslim factions, broadly in sympathy with one another and, perhaps, with some degree of coordination (it is not known precisely how much), would collaborate with different sides in the Yugoslav civil war, with the aim of ensuring Muslim survival. The most vocal manifestation of this movement was the 'Muslim resolutions' of September-December 1941, issued by members of the Muslim elites in Prijedor, Sarajevo, Mostar, Banja Luka, Bijeljina and Tuzla and protesting Ustasha persecution of the Serbs. A more concrete form of opposition was the formation of autonomous Muslim military forces, Muslim

soldiers and officers broke away from the NDH's armed forces, the Home Guard to form separate Muslim militias or legions which the Ustasha regime was forced to tolerate. This process reached its furthest extent in north-eastern Bosnia, under the leadership of Muhamed-aga Hadžiefendić of Tuzla, under whose leadership about five-thousand Muslim legionaries were mobilised as the 'Volunteer Home Guard Regiment' in an area stretching to Gračanica, Bosanski Šamac, Orasje, Bijeljina, Zvornik and Kladanj. Muslim militias were also established on a more modest scale in Sarajevo and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

The Muslim clergy's organisation 'El Hidaje' acted as a front behind which this activity could be organised. Other Muslim religious and cultural organisations were also involved. Former members of the Serb-oriented cultural society 'Gajret', suppressed by the Ustashas after they took power, were prominent in the campaign, but even members of Gajret's Croat-oriented counterpart 'Narodna Uzdanica' were frequently ready to support it. From August 1942, an umbrella organisation called 'National Salvation', led by Hadžihasanović and Mehmed Handžić, was formed to coordinate the Muslim autonomous campaign across Bosnia. Its foundation was catalysed by the Chetnik massacre of Muslim civilians at Foča in East Bosnia, which indicated the disaster to which the Ustasha regime was leading Bosnia and the Muslims.<sup>4</sup> On the fringes of the movement was the radical group 'Young Muslims', to which the young Alija Izetbegović belonged.

The Muslim autonomists were anti-Ustasha, but they were not necessarily anti-Nazi or anti-Fascist. Thus, one faction of the movement led by Hadžihasanović himself sent the notorious memorandum to Hitler in November 1942, praising 'Our Fuehrer!', endorsing the Nazi policy toward the Jews, and requesting the removal of Bosnia from NDH rule and its establishment as an autonomous entity directly under the Reich.<sup>5</sup> In Hercegovina, the campaign for autonomous Muslim military forces took a pro-Chetnik form, with the formation of the Ismet Popovac's 'Muslim National Military Chetnik Organisation' which, as part of the general Chetnik policy, collaborated with the Italians. The Hercegovinian Muslim autonomist movement gave rise to an 'Action council for the autonomy of Bosnia-Hercegovina' under the former Mufti Omer Džabić, which sent a delegation to Rome to plead the Muslim autonomist cause. Finally, the Nazis attempted to appease Muslim autonomist sentiment by the formation of the '13<sup>th</sup> SS Volunteer Bosnian-Hercegovinian Division (Croatia)', better known as the Handschar Division, which had the support of part of the Muslim autonomist movement.<sup>6</sup>

The Communists, of course, viewed all such collaborators as enemies, and during the course of the war and after the Partisans executed several prominent Muslim collaborators, including Hadžiefendić and Popovac. But this was just one side of the coin. The Communists were prepared to collaborate with Muslim autonomists who were willing to assist the NOP, and to co-opt them into the movement. Communist and Partisan propaganda stressed support for the freedom and self-rule of Bosnia as the common homeland of Serbs, Croats and Muslims. Particularly as the Partisans in Bosnia definitely broke with the Chetniks during the spring of

1942, the Communists gave particular emphasis to the need to win the support of Muslims and Croats in Bosnia. Co-opting Muslim notables, including militia commanders and other prominent collaborators, was important as a way of reaching the Muslim masses. Unlike with the Serbs, who initially formed the overwhelming majority of the Bosnian Partisan rank-and-file, the Communists found that it was only with the aid of such Muslim notables that they were able to win mass support among ordinary Muslims. Furthermore, the NOP sought to capture Bosnian towns through infiltrating the local NDH armed forces and administration; with the aid of Muslim and Croat collaborators, particularly in the Home Guard and Muslim militia, the Partisans were able to capture towns much more easily. In November 1942, the Partisans won their greatest victory to date with the capture of Bihać, thanks in large part to the NOP's infiltration of the town's armed forces, police and administration.<sup>7</sup> It was in this predominantly Muslim town that the First Session of the 'Anti-fascist Council for the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia' (AVNOJ) was held, at which the Partisans established an all-Yugoslav legislature. The Partisans held Bihać, at the heart of their rebel 'state' that was informally known as the 'Bihać Republic', through the assistance of the eminent former JMO senator Nurija Pozderac, who was subsequently killed as a Partisan at the Battle of the Sutjeska.

Muslim hostility to the NDH and Axis order and sympathy for the NOP steadily rose during 1943 due to the increasing brutality of the occupiers and Ustashas toward the Muslim population, growing indications that the Axis was not winning the war, and above all due to the increasing Axis, in particular Italian collaboration with the Chetniks. The Italians, playing a game of divide-and-rule and unwilling to allow the NDH to consolidate itself, increasingly favoured the Chetniks over and above the Ustashas, while the Chetniks pursued a genocidal policy against the Muslim population. During the Chetnik 'March on Bosnia' in the early months of 1943, thousands of Muslim civilians were systematically slaughtered by the Chetniks acting under the Axis umbrella, particularly at Foča – all effectively with Italian acquiescence.<sup>8</sup> The Italian-Chetnik partnership was a motor generating Muslim support for the NOP.

As a result of NOP agitation, several key Muslim militia commanders in north-east Bosnia, defected with their troops to the Partisans in the spring of 1943, including Osman Gruhonjić, Enver Zaimović and Omer Gluhić – the last being Hadžiefendić's adjutant. These defectors helped further popularise the Partisans among the Muslim population of the region. However, the turning point came in the autumn of 1943, with the Italian capitulation to the Allies. The collapse created a power-vacuum in Bosnia that the Partisans were able to fill; they expanded massively, and for the first time, non-Serbs outnumbered Serbs among the Yugoslav Partisans as a whole. The clear evidence that the Axis powers were facing defeat made the Partisan option more attractive to the Muslim population. The Partisans further appealed to Muslim sensibilities by establishing the 16<sup>th</sup> Muslim Brigade in September 1943 as a specifically Muslim military unit.<sup>9</sup> However, the decisive factor bringing about a massive shift in Muslim support to the Partisans was the wide rumours, coming after years of Chetnik-Axis collaboration, that the Nazis were considering turning over East Bosnia to the Serbian Nazi-

quisling regime of Milan Nedić, who visited Hitler in this period in an attempt to persuade him to do just that. The Bosnian Chetnik movement, particularly in East Bosnia, had been closely linked to the Nedić regime since the early months of the war, and had been agitating since the spring of 1942 for East Bosnia's annexation to Serbia. This danger appeared very real to the East Bosnian Muslims who were on the receiving end of Chetnik massacres, often carried out with arms supplied from quisling Serbia.

A significant faction of the Muslim autonomist movement therefore defected to the Partisans in the autumn of 1943. The Partisans captured Tuzla in October, with the entire Tuzla Home Guard garrison headed by Colonel Sulejman Filipović defecting to them. The law professor Hamdija Ćemerlić, the land- and mine-owner Murat-beg Zaimović and the Tuzla Mufti Muhamed Šefket eff. Kurt were among the prominent Tuzla Muslims who joined the NOP at this time. Indeed, it was not only the Tuzla elite, but also the best part of its Croat and Serb counterparts which went over to the NOP in the autumn of 1943. At the same time, the Partisans' principal collaborators among the Tuzla Muslim elite, Filipović and Ćemerlić, belonged to a dissident pro-NOP circle of Muslim notables that stretched beyond Bosnia and that may have operated with Hadžihasanović's blessing prior to his death earlier that year. Its members included Hafiz Muhamed Pandža, a prominent Sarajevo cleric and one of the founders of the Handschar division, and Muhamed Sudžuka, the governor or Great Župan of the Great Župa of Pliva and Rama. Pandža had taken to the woods in the autumn of 1943 to form a 'Muslim Liberation Movement' modelled on the Partisans and dedicated to fighting the Ustashas and Chetniks, but was swiftly captured by the Partisans and joined them. Another prominent Muslim defector to the NOP at this time, who may or may not have belonged to the same circle, was Ismet Bektašević, a former member of the JMO General Council and parliamentary delegate for Srebrenica, who brought his militia over to the Partisans. Šefkija Behmen, the head of the Serb-oriented wing of the JMO, flirted with the NOP in this period but did not join.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, one of the most powerful Muslim militia leaders, the renegade Communist Huska Miljković of the Cazinska Krajina, brought his three-thousand-strong militia over to the Partisans in February 1944. Unlike in north-east Bosnia, where the defection of Muslim militias to, and mass influx of Muslims into the Partisans represented the flowering of a genuine popular revolutionary movement, the defection of Miljković's militia was the result of his personal decision alone, based on political calculations. It would require an extended period of Communist infiltration and indoctrination; the execution of pro-Ustasha elements in its ranks; the assassination of Miljković by pro-Ustasha elements and the suppression of a large-scale mutiny before Miljković's militiamen could be turned into disciplined Partisans; nevertheless, the defection of the best part of the militia proved to be permanent.<sup>11</sup>

The Bosnian Partisan guerrilla army was initially overwhelmingly Serb, formed from predominantly peasant Serbs who had taken up arms in response to the Ustasha genocide. The Communists had begun by

pursuing an essentially military strategy directed against the Ustashes, with the Chetniks as allies who were not properly differentiated from the Partisans themselves. The definite Partisan break with the Bosnian Chetniks in the spring of 1942 resulted in Bosnian Serb resistance to the NDH being definitely split between two movements. The Bosnian Partisans then increasingly evolved from an overwhelmingly Serb into a genuinely multinational army. With the events of late 1943 and early 1944, the realignment bore fruit, and the Bosnian Partisans now incorporated a portion of the Muslim autonomist movement.

It was the dual character of the Bosnian Partisan movement that enabled it to take power in Bosnia. From the autumn of 1943, the Bosnian Partisan army was approximately two-thirds Serb and one-third Muslim and Croat. During the war as a whole, the Bosnian Partisans were approximately 64% Serb, 23% Muslim, 9% Croat and 3% 'Yugoslav'.<sup>12</sup> It was the predominantly-Serb Bosnian Partisan units that formed the military muscle of the Bosnian NOP. But at the political level, the Partisans' ability to take over the country depended on their ability to win the support of Bosnians of all nationalities and to defuse the resistance of the NDH and Muslim-quisling armed forces, and in this the Muslim notables in Partisan ranks played a key role. In the interwar period, the Bosnian Serbs had fractured into different political groups, partly along class lines. As members of the apparently dominant group of the Yugoslav kingdom, Bosnian Serbs were more ready to reject their 'national' leaders and support class-based parties – the League of Farmers and even the Communists. Muslims and Croats, by contrast, each came together to support overwhelmingly a single party – the JMO and HSS respectively.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in World War II, Communists found they could recruit Bosnian Serbs en masse to the Partisans directly, but could recruit Muslims en masse only with the assistance of credible members of the Muslim elite. As the Muslims were the dominant nationality in the Bosnian towns, the Muslim autonomist element within the Partisans proved to be a key element of the revolution.

The Communist seizure of power across all Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1945, while simultaneously preserving its multinational character and avoiding the decimation of any of the Bosnian nationalities, was possible because of the heterogeneous character of the NOP. Partisan support among Bosnian Croats was weakest, so the Communists worked through a break-away pro-NOP faction of the HSS to attract them, in a way they did not do with the Muslims and the JMO, or with the Serbs and the Serb parties. The Partisan capture of Derventa, Doboje, Mostar, Sarajevo, Zenica and (albeit initially unsuccessfully) Banja Luka in 1944-45 occurred in each case with the support of a powerful underground NOP that infiltrated and neutralised the NDH's armed forces, provided the Partisans with key military information and reassured the local population.<sup>14</sup> Had this not been the case, the Partisan seizure of power in Bosnia would have taken the form of a war of annihilation against the non-Serb population of Bosnia; the slaughter of vast numbers of Muslim and Croat quisling troops and the civilians who supported them, and the mass exodus of the Muslim and Croat civilian populations. In this revolutionary project, the establishment of Bosnia as a republic within the Yugoslav Federation, by the congresses of AVNOJ and of the 'Country Anti-fascist Council of the People's Liberation

of Bosnia-Herzegovina' in 1943-44, was a necessary means of winning the support of all Bosnians, particularly the Muslims. Bosnia was the seat of the Partisan supreme command for the best part of the war; securing the support of the Muslim population was necessary if Bosnia was to be used as a springboard for the liberation of Serbia, which finally happened in the autumn of 1944.

The partnership between the Communists and the Muslim autonomists was not an easy one, however. Almost all the Communists- most prominent Muslim autonomist allies clashed with them at one stage or another: Hasan Miljković, Mayor of Velika Kladuša, had collaborated with the Communists in 1942 but broke with them early on; Pozderac's relations with them were at times very strained, though his early death makes it unclear how their relationship would have developed; Bektašević returned to collaboration with the Germans and was executed by the Partisans; Pandić returned to collaboration and received a long prison-term after the war; Sudžuka was purged from the government for pursuing his own line and thereafter remained permanently out of favour; Čemerlić, it appears, likewise came close to falling from grace. The wartime alliance then became increasingly strained after the war ended.<sup>15</sup> Many members of the Young Muslims fought as Partisans, but after the war, as the Communist regime became less tolerant of expressions of the Muslim national and religious identity, the Young Muslims came to express one faction of Muslim opposition to the regime. The alliance between the Communists and Muslim autonomists effectively lasted only as long as the common goal remained to be achieved: the liberation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and its establishment as a republic.

## **Summary**

Following the establishment of the so-called 'Independent State of Croatia' in 1941, there emerged two Bosnian-oriented movements in opposition: the People's Liberation Movement under the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which in the form of the 'Partisans' waged a guerrilla resistance; and the conservative Muslim autonomists, who sought to collaborate with the Germans, Italians, Chetniks and/or Partisans against the Ustashas. Both movements were ultimately in favour of some form of Bosnian self-rule; both opposed the Ustasha attempt to assimilate the Muslims into the Croat nation, as well as the Chetnik attempt to exterminate the Muslims. Although the Partisans fought the Axis forces while the Muslim autonomists were collaborationist, nevertheless enough common ground existed to make cooperation possible between the two.

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Muslim autonomist resistance. As World War II progressed, Muslim politicians and militia commanders were attracted by the Partisan talk of a unified, self-governing Bosnia as the common homeland of Muslims, Serbs and Croats, while they were increasingly repelled by Axis brutality and collaboration with the Chetniks. Ultimately, during 1943 an important segment of the Muslim autonomist movement went over to the Partisans. This was of decisive importance in the Partisans' conquest of power in Bosnia-Herzegovina and their successful establishment of a Bosnian republic, and with it a Yugoslav Federation. The Muslim autonomist element was therefore a key component of the Yugoslav Revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Ustashas, see Jozo Tomasevich, War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001; Fikreta Jelić-Butić, Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska 1941-1945, Sveučilišna naknada Liber, Zagreb, 1978; Bogdan Krizman, NDH između Hitlera i Mussolinija, Globus, Zagreb, 1980; Tomislav Dulić, Utopias of Nation: Local Mass Killings in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Uppsala University, Stockholm, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Istorija građanskih stranaka u Jugoslaviji, SUP, Belgrade, 1952, vol. 2, pp. 112-114.

<sup>3</sup> Marko Attila Hoare, The History of Bosnia: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day, Saqi, London, 2007, pp. 267-273.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Dedijer and Antun Miletić, eds, Genocid nad Muslimanima, 1941-1945: Zbornik dokumenata i svjedočenja, Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1990, pp. 205-209; Šaćir Filandra, Bošnjačka politika u XX. stoljeću, Sejtarija, Sarajevo, pp. 166-169.

<sup>5</sup> Dedijer and Miletić, pp. 250-264.

<sup>6</sup> See George Lepre, Himmler's Bosnian Division: The Waffen SS Handschar Division 1943-1945, Schiffer Military History, Atglen, 1997; Enver Redžić, Muslimansko autonomaštvo i 13. SS divizija, Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Marko Attila Hoare, Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia: The Partisans and the Chetniks, 1941-1943, Oxford University Press, London, 2006, pp. 309-316.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 330-332.

<sup>9</sup> Muhidin Begić, 'Borbeni put 16. Muslimanske brigade', in Istočna Bosna u NOB, 1941-1945: Sjećanje učesnike, vol. 2, Vojnoizdavački zavod, Belgrade, 1971, p. 294.

<sup>10</sup> Branko Petranović, 'Sednica CK KPJ od 16. do 18. oktobra 1943 i saziv AVNOJ-a', in AVNOJ i savremenost, Oslobođenje, Sarajevo, 1984, pp. 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> See Šukrija Bijedić, Ratne slike iz Cazinske Krajine, hronika iz NOB u Cazinskoj Krajini, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Svjetlost,

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<sup>12</sup> *Bilten*, Savezni Zavod za Statistiku, Belgrade, no. 1174 (April), reproduced in Leonard Cohen and Paul Warwick, Political Cohesion in a Fragile Mosaic: The Yugoslav Experience, Westview Press, Boulder, 1983, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Hoare, The History of Bosnia, p. 184.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301-307.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.