
KOSTA PEĆANAC'S CHETNIKS IN OCCUPIED SERBIA 1941–1942

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ABSTRACT: *The subject of this article is Kosta Pećanac's Chetnik formations. At the beginning, the origin of the Chetniks and their role in the interwar period are explained. The main part of the work describes their activities on the territory of occupied Serbia under German occupation in 1941–1942. At the end, their disbandment and fate are described. The work was written on the basis of relevant literature and historical materials, mainly from the Military Archives.*

KEYWORDS: Chetniks, collaboration, Milan Nedić, Kosta Milovanović Pećanac, occupation, Serbia, World War Two, Third Reich

Origins

The appearance of the Chetniks is connected with the liberation struggle of the Serbian people against the Ottoman Empire on the territory of modern Macedonia. The term derives from the word "četa", which means a military unit with strength of one hundred men. Although the first Chetnik units were mentioned in the mid-19th century, their activities intensified after the Serbian-Ottoman Wars (1876–1878). Similarly to the Chetniks, the Bulgarians organized their own units called the "Komite" and the Greeks the "Andarta". At the beginning of the 20th century, and especially after the failure of the Ilinden uprising (1903), the activities of Chetniks in Macedonia intensified. After the introduction of the Young Turk regime in Turkey (1908), there was a temporary democratization and inclusion of Chetnik leaders in political processes. However, this state of affairs was short-lived. The new Ottoman regime began persecuting Chetnik leaders, killing many of them. As a result, the Chetniks rebelled again. With the establishment of the Balkan League (1912), which divided the spheres of interest on Macedonian territory, the activities of the Chetniks subsided, as did those of the Bulgarian and Greek units. In the Balkan Wars and World War I, Chetnik units took part in the fighting as a kind of vanguard of the regular troops, suffering heavy losses. In occupied

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Serbia, in the area of Toplica and Jablanica, Chetnik units organized an uprising against the Bulgarian occupiers in early 1917, but it was put down very cruelly.¹

After the liberation, in the newly created Yugoslav Kingdom, the Chetniks continued to cherish the memory of their struggle by founding associations. The first, founded as early as 1921, was the Association of Chetniks. In addition to old members, war veterans and all those who had supported “the struggle and the idea of liberation and unity”, new members could also join the association, but they could not be younger than 16 years old. The association was managed by the Central Administration, which consisted of a Main Board with 10 members and a Supervisory Board with 5 members. The chairman of the main board was also the president of the association. The first president was the physician Dr. Mihailo Šuškalović. The most numerous local committees of the Association were located in Toplica and Jablanica, in the area where the Toplica Uprising had taken place a few years earlier.²

Already in the middle of 1924 there was a split when two new associations were founded: the Association of Serbian Chetniks for the King and the Fatherland and the Association of Serbian Chetniks “Petar Mrkonjić”. These two associations merged as early as 1925 and founded the Association of Serbian Chetniks “Petar Mrkonjić” for the King and the Fatherland. At the head of this new association was the representative of the Radical People’s Party Puniša Račić. The background of the split was primarily political. While the Association of Chetniks was under the influence of the Yugoslav Democratic Party, the competing associations were under the influence of the Radical People’s Party. The split was also caused by different views on the character of the common state. While the leaders of the Association of Chetniks, Ilija Trifunović Birčanin and Kosta Milovanović Pećanac, were supporters of the idea of Unitarism, i.e. the unity of the Yugoslav nation, the rival association insisted on its Serbian identity.³

¹ Slobodan Stambolić i Dimitrije Trifunović, „Četnici“, u: *Vojna enciklopedija. 2 (Borda-Enc)* (Beograd: Redakcija Vojne enciklopedije, 1959), 318–320; Uroš Šešum, „Četnici u Prvom balkanskom ratu 1912. godine“, *Srpske studije*, no. 3, (2012), 63–82; Uroš S. Šešum, „Četnička organizacija u Skopskoj Crnoj Gori 1903–1908“, *Zbornik matice srpske za istoriju*, no. 93, (2016), 55–69; Jovan M. Jovanović, *Južna Srbija od kraja XVIII veka do oslobođenja* (Beograd: Kultura 1990); Vladimir Ilić, *Srpska četnička akcija 1903–1912* (Beograd: Ecolibri, 2006); Uroš Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija (1897–1908): oružana diplomatija* (novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2019); Aleksa Jovanović, „Četnički pokret u Južnoj Srbiji pod Turcima“, u: *Spomenica dvadesetpetogodišnjice oslobođenja Južne Srbije 1912–1937*. (Skoplje: Južna Srbija, 1937), 271–307; Milivoje Perović, *Toplički ustanak 1917*. (Beograd: Kultura 1988).

² Although the name of this association is more often mentioned in the literature as “Association of Chetniks for the Freedom and Honor of the Fatherland”, the statute of the Association of 1922 (Article 1) clearly states: “The name of the organization is: Association of Chetniks, and its seat is in Belgrade”. We believe that the mistake occurred because the official seal, in addition to the name, also contained the motto “For freedom and honor of the Fatherland” – *Pravila Udruženja Četnika* (Beograd: Udruženje četnika, 1922), 3–5; Nusret Šehić, *Četništvo u Bosni i Hercegovini (1918–1941)* (Sarajevo: Akademija nauka i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine, 1971); 55–57; Dobrosav Lj. Ilić, *Srpski četnički pokret: Kosta Pećanac, Draža Mihailović 1904–1944*. (Ruma: Grafampromet, 2006), 125–128.

³ John Paul Newman, “War Veterans, Fascism, and Para-Fascist Departures in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1918–1941”, *Fascism*, no. 6, (2017), 49–50; John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the*

After the establishment of the dictatorship in 1929, preceded by the political crisis of June 1928, all associations and parties with national characteristics were banned. At that time, the work of the Association of Chetniks and the Association of Serbian Chetniks “Petar Mrkonjić” for Freedom and Honor of the Fatherland, whose leader Puniša Račić triggered the crisis by shooting deputies of the Croatian Peasant Party in the Assembly, was also banned. However, the Association of Chetniks was allowed to operate again in 1930, and Ilija Trifunović Birčanin became chairman. The leadership of the organization was taken over by Kosta Milovanović Pećanac in 1932, after which the Association of Chetniks began to grow. Due to disagreements with Pećanac, in 1933 a group led by Ilija Trifunović Birčanin separated and founded the Association of Old Chetniks. The reason for the conflict in this situation was political, in addition to personal vanity. Pećanac supported the newly formed regime parties, and Trifunović's group was close to the Serbian civil parties, which were officially banned. As president of the Association, Kosta Pećanac saw the beginning of the World War Two in Yugoslavia in April 1941.⁴

Choosing sides (April – September 1941)

The attack of the Third Reich and its allies on the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941 was merciless. The Yugoslav army was unprepared for the attack and torn by national contradictions. This situation led to mass desertion and betrayal of many soldiers and officers who did not see Yugoslavia as their country. The government with the young King Peter retreated and, after the armistice (surrender) signed in Belgrade on April 17, fled first to Greece, then to Egypt and finally to London. Most of the army capitulated and fell into captivity. After the signing of the surrender the situation in Serbia under German occupation was largely peaceful.⁵

The surrender of the Yugoslav army and captivity were avoided by many of its members. Most simply tried to return to their homeland, unable to communicate. However, certain groups, dissatisfied and disappointed with the rapid collapse, began to gather and arm themselves. Among the population, such groups were called “forest people” or “foresters”. Members of the pre-war “Association of Chetniks” first appeared in the south of Serbia - in Toplica and Jablanica. The most of them did not surrender and remained active even after the capitulation was signed. Because of this continuity, they are referred to by some as “the first national armed formation in occupied Serbia”.⁶

Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building 1903–1945. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 104–108; N. Šehić, *op. cit.*, 57–68, 80–91.

⁴ N. Šehić, *op. cit.*, 92–94; J. P. Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War*, 214–216, 232–234.

⁵ Branko Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939–1945.* (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1992), 97–176; Velimir Terzić, *Jugoslavija u aprilskom ratu 1941.* (Titograd: Grafički zavod, 1963).

⁶ Momčilo Pavlović, Božica Mladenović, *Kosta Milovanović Pećanac 1879–1944. Biografija* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2003), 167–171; Momčilo Pavlović, Nemanja Mitrović, „Kosta Milovanović Pećanac i formiranje četničke organizacije na jugu Srbije 6. april – 27. avgust 1941. godine“, *Leskovački zbornik*, no. 61 (2021), 175–181.

In a letter from early February 1942, Chetnik Vojvoda Milorad Veličković mentions the circumstances under which members of the Chetnik organization were armed from military warehouses: “On April 4, 1941, Kosta Pećanac sent me a message from Belgrade that I should be waiting for him in Niš on April 6. We met in Niš on April 7. Vojvoda K. Pećanac brought the order of the Minister of Army and Navy str. pvt. adj. no. 3645, with which we went to the commander of the 5th Army and gave requirements on the basis of which we received suits, shoes, rifles, ammunition and bombs, as well as other needs for 600 people from the military warehouse in Niš. We drove all this to Beloljin. On the evening of April 8, we gave the Chetniks weapons, clothes and other things and divided them into three groups. The first group was sent in the direction of the old Serbian border to Prepolac. The second group went in the direction of Blaževo, and the third group went with us along the Toplica River in the direction of the village of Žuč-Merčez-Lukovo-Lukovska Banja until we came to Kopaonik Mountain at a place called Slepí Jelak. All three groups left Kuršumlíja, each in its own direction, at 4 a.m. on April 10 last year”.⁷

Kosta Milovanović Pećanac based his role and authority on the alleged order of the Minister of War and the Commander of the 5th Army District, who appointed him commander of all Chetnik detachments immediately before the German attack and ordered him to remain in the enemy’s rear to organize guerrilla warfare.⁸

In the second half of April 1941, Pećanac issued several orders appointing detachment commanders in southern Serbia. During this period, the activity of his units was reduced in the area of Kosanica, Toplica, Jablanica and on the outskirts of Kopaonik. In this area, these detachments contributed to the protection of the Serbian population from the terror of the Albanian and Bulgarian Komitas. It is estimated that Pećanac had 600 armed Chetniks at the end of the month.⁹

Because he enjoyed a high reputation among the Serbian population due to his participation in the Toplica Uprising and his activities in the interwar period, Pećanac was a person attracted by many professional officers who refused to surrender after the April disaster. These included Major Dragutin Keserović (near Kruševac), Lieutenant Colonel Milutin Radojević (the area between Stalać and Aleksinac), and General Ljubo Novaković, commander of the Komski Detachment of

⁷ Vojni arhiv (VA), Nedićeva arhiva (NdA), 20–2–35.

⁸ The original text of the order has not been found, but many writers from the emigration mention it, and Dragutin Keserović stated at the 1945 hearing that he had seen General Cukavac’s order to Pećanac to continue the Chetnik action. It is also mentioned in a letter from the text above. However, General Dušan Simović claimed that he could not remember giving this order. This question has not yet been conclusively settled in historiography. More in: M. Pavlović, B. Mladenović, *op. cit.*, 172–176. However, in the days before the German attack, there were definitely some agreements between the commander of the Strike (Chetnik) Command of the Yugoslav Army, General Mihailo Mihailović, and Pećanac. More in: Miloš Žikić, *Aprilski rat u Moravskoj banovini. Peta armija Jugoslovenske vojske u ratu 1941.* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2020), 108–110. About Strike (Chetnik) Command of the Yugoslav Army in: Aleksandar Životić, „Četničke jedinice Vojske Kraljevine Jugoslavije u Aprilskom ratu“, *Istorija 20. veka*, vol. 29, no. 1, (2011), 39–47.

⁹ The first orders included the appointment of engineer Krsta Mihajlović as commander of the Jablanica Chetnik detachment (April 19), reserve captain Maksim Đurović as commander of the Gornja Morava Chetnik detachment (April 20), Mihajlo Arsić as commander of the Medveđa Chetnik detachment (April 23) and others. M. Pavlović, B. Mladenović, *op. cit.*, 183–184.

the Yugoslav Army, who joined Pećanac and thus became the “Vojvoda of Šumadija”. Until the end of June, Pećanac himself stayed with a group of Chetniks mainly on Mount Sokolovica, in Jablanica and Kosanica. From this area, he tried to organize and expand his detachments by appointing vojvodas throughout the area inhabited by Serbs. Although hostile to the occupiers, he strictly ordered his detachments to refrain from actions against the Germans. The members of this organization were initially arrested and persecuted by the Germans and Bulgarians, who saw them as outlaws and a potential threat.¹⁰

In the report of the commander of the German 60th Infantry Division, General Friedrich-Georg Eberhardt, dated May 17, 1941, the Chetniks are mentioned: “In addition to this type of pure band of robbers, Serbian political fanatics have gathered in some places under the name of Chetniks. They try to mobilize the population against the German occupation forces by terror, i.e. to force the municipal presidents in non-Serbian governed areas to tolerate the Serbian people. The Chetniks want to present themselves as a large and broad-based organization. However, the fact that they dare to appear only in small, remote municipalities proves their real influence. In the public imagination, the Chetniks are surrounded by a far too large aureole, which is expressed above all in the fear of them. When dealing with armed gangs, it does not matter whether they are Chetniks or a simple gang of robbers. Those who are illegally under arms have already wasted their lives”.¹¹

On St. Vitus Day (Vidovdan), June 28, 1941, a great swearing-in ceremony was organized on the mountains of Sokolovica and Vidojevica, in Pločnik and other places. On this occasion, many new vojvodas were appointed and it was ordered that “German and Italian soldiers, as long as they behave courteously towards our people, must not be attacked or killed”. Violators of this order faced the death penalty.¹²

Despite some successes in combating the raids and terror of the Albanian Komitas, the Chetniks’ actions on the ground against the population expecting protection were often characterized by mistreatment, robbery, beatings and even murders. The memoirs of one of the witnesses of the events in the south of Serbia in the first months of the occupation, Miloš Mladenović, illustrate this vividly: “At home everyone was healthy, but not well, because at that time the Pećanac’s Chetniks went through all the villages looking for state equipment and weapons, moreover, they searched everything one by one and took everything they liked. Anyone who resisted this and refused to give anything away was beaten up like a dog... The Chetniks who came down from the headquarters were mostly refugees from Kosovo and Metohija, and everything they stole and looted they took to their newly founded houses or placed with their partners... It was difficult at that time to find a house owner whose house had not been robbed by Pećanac’s robbers”.¹³

¹⁰ Dragoljub Petrović, „Četnička organizacija Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji do početka oktobra 1941. godine“, *Vojnoistorijski glasnik*, no. 2, (1968), 178–184.

¹¹ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodno-oslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda. Tom 1. Knj. 1 (Borbe u Srbiji 1941. god.)* (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut Jugoslovenske armije, 1949), 333.

¹² VA, Nda, 33–13–3.

¹³ Miloš Mladenović, *Lažni idoli i varljivi ideali* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2004), 69–74. However, Kosta Pećanac's Chetniks were not recognized as a military formation taking

Most of Pećanac's Chetniks were members of pre-war Chetnik associations, poor peasants and refugees from Kosovo, and there were very few professional military personnel, especially as far as officers were concerned. The movement had no political program or ideology and was inspired by the Chetnik fighting tradition of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For many, the motivation for joining was existential, in addition to patriotic motives, as members received food, cigarettes, and hygiene items, as well as modest financial compensation. The basic units were detachments, which varied greatly in size, with the smallest containing little more than 15 people. Larger detachments, which could include several hundred people, were usually divided into companies, with the obligatory staff company serving as the commander's bodyguard. Each detachment was headed by a vojvoda appointed by Kosta Pećanac. Vojvodas were named after the geographical area of origin or activity (Vrnjački, Kozjački, Suhoplaninski, Krajinski, Župski, Zviški...), and almost always their detachment bore the same name as them.¹⁴

The emergence of communist units on the ground was initially more often accompanied by cooperation than conflict with the Chetniks. Cooperation was realized in Toplica, where a meeting of Chetnik vojvodas and communist officials took place on August 23. On that occasion, it was agreed that they would act together in future actions, according to the principle of parity on the ground. A similar attempt was made in southern and northeastern Serbia.¹⁵

In mid-August, when the Germans were looking for a more authoritarian person to take over the office of the president of the "Serbian government" due to the spread of the uprising, the first contacts of people close to Dimitrije Ljotić with Pećanac took place.¹⁶ According to General Nedić's testimony before the Ozná investigators after the war, the Gestapo also contacted Pećanac at that time through Karl Kraus, the head of the German Security Police and Security Service in Belgrade.¹⁷ After these talks and the establishment of communications, Pećanac opened negotiations with the Germans on August 24 on Mount Bukulja near Arandjelovac.

the lead in crimes in any of the censuses of the State Commission formed by the new revolutionary authorities after World War II. The first census recorded 505 people who were victims of their crimes. This represented 0.77% of the total number of victims on the territory of Serbia without provinces. In the second count, 1,472 people died at the hands of Chetniks. In this case, it was 1.5% of the total number. More than half of the registered crimes were committed on the territory of Toplica district, where Kosta Pećanac's Chetniks had the strongest stronghold – Nebojša Stambolija, Boris Tomanić, „Kvantifikacija zločina četnika Koste Milovanovića Pećanca prema podacima Državne komisije za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača“, *Godišnjak za istraživanje genocida*, no. 13-1 (2021), 73–98.

¹⁴ Dragoljub Petrović, „Vojna organizacija četnika Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941/42. godine“, *Vojnoistorijski glasnik*, no. 3, (1969), 205–207.

¹⁵ D. Petrović, „Četnička organizacija Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji do početka oktobra 1941. godine“, 185–186.

¹⁶ The person who made contact was Zoran Vuković, a businessman from Niš. More about this in: Stanislav Krakov, *General Milan Nedić. Knjiga 1: Na oštrici noža* (Beograd: „Nikola Pašić“, 2008), 127–128.

¹⁷ VA, NdA, 1–7–16; D. Petrović, „Četnička organizacija Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji do početka oktobra 1941. godine“, 186–187.

Many of his commanders, about 200 Chetniks and some pre-war politicians also took part in these negotiations.¹⁸

The agreement with the Germans was signed on August 26, and a day later, on August 27, Pećanac issued the “Proclamation to My Dear People”, which was publicized on posters throughout the country. The gist of the text is his order to all “who are hiding in the forests and are not under my command” that they must “return to their homes and regular work within 8 days from the day of the proclamation”. Failure to comply with this order was punishable by death. In addition, the death penalty followed for all those who attempt to “damage and destroy state and self-governing institutions, railroads, bridges, roads, state buildings and private property, as well as everything belonging to the occupation authorities”. In addition, he called for all detachments formed without his consent to join the ranks of Chetniks under his command. Finally, the people are told that the Chetniks “will continue to be vigilant guardians of their traditions and the lamp of our freedom”.¹⁹

In the service of Germans and General Nedić (September 1941 – December 1942)

In accordance with the signed agreement with the Germans and the later verbal agreements with General Milan Nedić, who took office as President of the collaborationist Serbian government on August 29, the Liaison Headquarters was established in Belgrade, headed by the Vojvoda Rtanjski, Radomir Arsenijević. The task of this headquarters was to coordinate the action with the Main Chetnik headquarters in the field.²⁰

The publication of the “Proclamation” and the agreement with the Germans led to polarization in Pećanac’s detachments. The first clashes with the partisans broke out around September 7, when, according to German reports, they “successfully attacked a communist band in the mountains west of Lebane, inflicted considerable losses on it and seized 25,000 rounds of ammunition”. In the same report, the Feldkommandant in Niš, Colonel Karl Freiherr von Bothmer, states: “According to all the news available to us, it can be assumed that the Chetnik formations of Kosta Pećanac have adopted a completely loyal attitude toward the German occupation forces”.²¹

The next skirmish took place on September 17-18 near Blace, when the Chetniks attacked parts of the Jastrebac partisan detachment, and at the same time there was a conflict between the Chetniks of Andjelko Krajinski and the Majdanpek partisan detachment in the village of Rudna Glava near Majdanpek. At the end of September, the Chetniks who had remained loyal to Pećanac

¹⁸ VA, NdA, 33–13–44.

¹⁹ VA, NdA, 33–11–5; D. Petrović, „Četnička organizacija Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji do početka oktobra 1941. godine“, 185–186; Milan Borković, *Kontrarevolucija u Srbiji. Kvislinška uprava 1941–1944. Knjiga 1* (Beograd: Sloboda, 1979), 180–181.

²⁰ Borivoje Karapandžić, *Građanski rat u Srbiji 1941–1945*. (Beograd: nova iskra, 1993), 103–105.

²¹ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije. Tom XII, knjiga 1 (Dokumenti nemačkog Rajha 1941)* (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1973), 379–380.

joined Nedić's armed units and fought with the partisan detachments on many places in southern Serbia.²²

On the other hand, a part of the Chetniks did not accept the agreement and maintained their anti-German attitude. In the area of Kruševac and its surroundings, the detachments of Dragutin Keserović and Milutin Radojević, as well as Nikola Kalabić in Valjevo region, joined the organization of Colonel Dragoljub Mihailović and continued the struggle against the occupiers. These differences also led to conflicts between those who refused to obey Pećanac and those who remained loyal to him. During the attack on Kruševac (September 23), carried out by the combined forces of Keserović's Chetniks and partisans, the Gočki Chetnik detachment, which remained under Pećanac's command, came to the aid of the Germans. Also in Western Serbia, the Chetniks of Mašan Djurović (Ibarski Chetnik Detachment), in Eastern Serbia of Leonida Plješković (Ujevački Chetnik Detachment), as well as General Ljubo Novaković continued to cooperate with the partisans.²³

In early October 1941, the Main Headquarters of all Chetnik detachments was located in Niš, and Vojvoda Timočki, Major Trifun Mikić, was appointed chief of staff. Kosta Pećanac held the title of commander, but he stayed in Niš occasionally. There was also a Chetnik battalion in Niš, which was the only one with the characteristics of a regular military unit. The battalion had a strength of about 200 men, including 15 officers and 22 non-commissioned officers, and the commander was Major Milutin Bukvić. In addition to the Main Headquarters, there was also the Mountain Headquarters, commanded by Kosta Pećanac. According to some German estimates, the number of Chetniks grew to 3,000 in early October.²⁴

The armament was very weak. The Chetnik detachment might have had a machine gun, but it lacked ammunition. The basic weapon of each Chetnik was a rifle, a dagger or a pistol, and sometimes a bomb. The uniform was mostly national, and some Chetniks also wore old Yugoslav uniforms. The shubara with cockade (a corpse head with crossed bones) was a fixed, recognizable part of the Chetnik uniform.²⁵

In late October and early November 1941, in addition to the Wehrmacht forces operating in northwestern Serbia, the armed forces of the "Serbian Government" conducted operations against insurgents throughout occupied Serbia. In

²² D. Petrović, „Četnička organizacija Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji do početka oktobra 1941. godine“, 198–200.

²³ Bojan B. Dimitrijević, *Vojska Nedićeve Srbije. Oružane snage Srpske vlade 1941–1945*. (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2011), 60. More about Chetniks under the command of Mašan Đurović and generally in southwestern Serbia in: Milutin Živković, *Stara Raška pod italijanskom okupacijom 1941–1943. Knjiga prva* (Beograd, Institut za savremenu istoriju; Catena mundi, 2020), 293–303; Milutin Živković, „Ratni put vojvode Suhoplaninskog Mašana Đurovića (1941–1943)“, *Leskovački zbornik*, no. 59, (2019), 305–324.

²⁴ D. Petrović, „Vojna organizacija četnika Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941/42. godine“, 207–208, 213; Jovan M. Zlatić, *Stradalaštvo srpskog naroda u Niškom ratnom okrugu (1941–1944). Knjiga III. Četnici vojvode Koste Milovanovića Pećanca* (Niš: Prosveta, 1995), 156–158.

²⁵ D. Petrović, „Vojna organizacija četnika Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941/42. godine“, 209–210.

eastern Serbia, the Great Morava Group of Armed Detachments under the command of Colonel Ljubo Babić was active, successfully fighting against the communist detachments around Petrovac, Požarevac and Veliko Gradište.²⁶

In southern Serbia, despite the signed agreement with the Germans on Bukulja, some of Kosta Pećanac's detachments were still behaving quite passively toward the partisans in early October. However, the partisan attack on Prokuplje (October 9) and the great conflict on the Pasjača Mountain (October 12–14) transformed the until then intolerant relations into open hostility.²⁷

The conflict that broke out at the beginning of November between the Chetniks of Mihailović (Ravna Gora) and the partisan units, splitting the insurgent forces, clearly showed the attitude of the Chetniks of Pećanac. They joined the fight against the communists wherever they were and fought together with armed, volunteer and gendarmerie units of the Serbian government. Wehrmacht reports from the first half of November tell of successful clashes between the "Serbian auxiliary police" and Partisan detachments in Šumadija, Pomoravlje, eastern Serbia and elsewhere.²⁸

Almost all the forces subordinated to General Nedić's government took part in the great German November offensive against the partisans, including about 3,500 Pećanac's Chetniks. These collaborationist forces were grouped in a military formation, the Šumadija Corps, under the command of Colonel Kosta Mušicki. The Chetniks distinguished themselves especially in the battles with the partisans in Požarevac in mid-November, in which six Chetnik detachments took part.²⁹

By the end of December 1941, occupied Serbia was mostly pacified, although according to German reports there were still smaller communist groups in western Serbia (in the area of Valjevo, Užice, Krupanj), southern Serbia (around Leskovac and Lebane) and eastern Serbia (near Veliko Gradište and Kladovo), as well as in Sandžak on the border between the German and Italian demarcation zones. Of General Mihailović's supporters, it is said that they are no longer fighting anywhere and that the "nationalist group of insurgents seems to have really disbanded", but also that they are "trying to hide in the Serbian gendarmerie and Kosta Pećanac's Chetnik units".³⁰

As many of Mihailović's units were legalized under Kosta Pećanac's Chetniks, this military formation grew greatly in numbers. By the end of December 1941, according to some estimates, there were up to 15,000 Chetniks in Pećanac's detachments, which made them the second strongest military formation in occupied Serbia, right after the German occupation forces.³¹

At the beginning of 1942, the security and intelligence service of the German occupation forces was reorganized in order to better control occupied Serbia.

²⁶ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka...*, XII-1, 604–608.

²⁷ B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 117–118.

²⁸ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka...*, XII-1, 595–659.

²⁹ M. Borković, *op. cit.*, 220–224; B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 122–126.

³⁰ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka...*, XII-1, 795–796.

³¹ Dragoljub Petrović, „Četništvo Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941/42. godine“, *Istorijski glasnik*, no. 1–2, (1983), 86–87.

General Paul Bader was appointed Commanding General and Military Commander in Serbia, and General August Meyszner assumed the post of Senior Leader of the SS and the Police, and thus responsibility for all German police and intelligence services in occupied Serbia.³²

In line with the new changes, it was necessary to reorganize the collaborationist armed forces. Information about the new formation appeared in the daily press as early as early January, and the organization was implemented in February 1942. Although there were other ideas (Serbian National Guard, Serbian State Police), at meetings with the head of the collaborationist government, General Milan Nedić, it was agreed to call the new formation the Serbian State Guard.³³

With the formation of the Serbian State Guard, which included armed detachments and other formations under the command of the “Serbian government”, the members of the Chetnik and Volunteer detachments remained outside its composition. Although the intention was to unite these two formations within the framework of the SSG, this did not succeed at first for various reasons. The Volunteer detachments enjoyed greater confidence among the Germans as a military formation capable of successfully fighting both resistance movements, so their “softening up” into SSG, was not supported by the Germans. On the other hand, the non-inclusion of Pećanac’s Chetniks in the Serbian State Guard after its formation had as its main reason the character of the Chetnik units themselves. Although their mobility and acclimatization to operating in mountainous and difficult-to-access terrain were useful qualities, their indiscipline, stubbornness and disregard for hierarchy made them unsuitable for collective participation in the formation, which was a continuation of the gendarmerie and had the character of a police force whose members were to be barracked.³⁴

The need for stricter control of Kosta Pećanac’s Chetnik units was one of the conditions imposed by the German occupation authorities for the continued existence of this formation. As a result of German demands, especially from General August Meyszner, a meeting between Kosta Pećanac and Deputy Minister of Interior Cvetan Ceka Đorđević took place on April 3, 1942. According to the protocol of the meeting, it was agreed that the number of Chetnik detachments in five Bulgarian-occupied districts should be 100 Chetniks per district, i.e. a total of 3,500 Chetniks, and in the rest of Serbia another 5,245, i.e. a total of 8,745 Chetniks in occupied Serbia. Command in the Bulgarian-occupied districts was retained by Pećanac, but his headquarters received orders and instructions for action from the regional commander of SSG in Niš, who was to receive his orders directly from Nedić, with German control through a special office in Niš. Command in the other districts was to be assumed by the newly appointed

³² Muharem Kreso, *Njemačka okupaciona uprava u Beogradu 1941–1944*. (Beograd: Istorijski arhiv Beograda 1979), 179–180; Milan Koljanin, „Struktura i delovanje policije nacističke Nemačke u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941–1944“, *Istorija 20. veka*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2011), 151–152.

³³ B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 155–158; Nebojša Stambolija, *Srpska državna straža 1942–1944*. (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2021), 65–74; Nebojša Stambolija, „Serbian State Guard in Occupied Serbia 1942–1944“, *Istorija 20. veka*, vol. 40, no. 2, (2022), 323–344.

³⁴ B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 180–190.

district inspectors - vojvodas - who were to receive their orders directly from the Military Department in the Presidency of the Government. One of the positions of the protocol clearly speaks of the very widespread phenomenon of robbery carried out by the Chetniks, i.e. "people's debt" as it was euphemistically defined: "Under threat of the most severe penalties, the Chetnik headquarters of the Supreme Vojvoda Kosta Pećanac will prohibit the Chetnik detachments from borrowing money from the people in any form. To go so far in this matter as to order that a detachment be disbanded for lack of material, rather than allow it to be a burden on the people. What has been taken from the people must be repaid immediately".³⁵

The German occupation authorities were also involved in the reorganization of the Chetnik detachments. All members received identity cards that read in Serbian and German "Serbian Chetnik Command" (Serbisches Chetnik Commando) and the number of the detachment to which they belonged, which began with the letter "C". They were assigned areas which they were not allowed to leave without German permission, and all their missions had to be reported in advance to the German local commands. In addition, each detachment was to have a German liaison officer during military operations.³⁶

Despite all these measures taken by the Nedić government and the German occupation authorities to discipline and organize the Chetnik detachments and to keep the influence of the Ravna Gora movement away from them, the problems continued. These detachments continued to cause unrest, and the vojvodas did not respect the authority of the local commanders of the Serbian State Guard. Thus, in early May 1942, the Nedić government ordered the dissolution of the Chetnik Kosmaj detachment for indiscipline and sent the personnel home.³⁷ As early as mid-May 1942, General Paul Bader issued an order prohibiting the formation of new Chetnik detachments and the increase in their number.³⁸

Since there was a danger that General Meyszner would completely disband the Chetnik forces, conferences were organized in early June 1942. At these conferences it was agreed that each district would be assigned a vojvoda who would be responsible for "controlling the orders given, paying the dues, maintaining order and discipline, etc.", and on this occasion vojvodas were also appointed. It was also stipulated that "the Chetniks shall not exercise any administrative or police power, nor shall they have any supervision over the exercise of

³⁵ VA, NdA, 33–11–47; D. Petrović, „Četništvo Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941/42. godine“, 88–89.

³⁶ B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 151–153; Jozo Tomasevich, *Četnici u Drugom svjetskom ratu 1941–1945*. (Zagreb: Liber, 1979), 184. Detachment numbers started with C-40 and that was the designation for Torlački Chetnik detachment, Dobrički was C-62, Resavski C-68, Mačvanski C-87, etc. (VA, NdA, 1–2/2–19).

³⁷ VA, NdA, 2–4–73. Lieutenant Colonel Radovan Kusovac, who visited the Kosmaj Chetnik detachment, stated in his report, among other things, that "The Kosmaj Chetnik detachment, commanded by the vojvoda's deputy, active cavalry sergeant Jova Stanković, represents a gang without any order or discipline. The Chetniks are locals and live in their own houses, do nothing and receive a salary..."

³⁸ B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 153–154.

this service. The exercise of this service is entrusted to the administrative and police authorities”.³⁹

The problems with Kosta Pećanac's Chetnik units could not be solved even after these meetings. Because of their independent actions, indiscipline, connection with the Mihailović's units and their activity outside the borders of occupied Serbia, the German occupation authorities put constant pressure on the Serbian collaborationist government to disband them. In June 1942, the Germans began disbandment campaign on their own when the commanders of the Jelica and Zablaće Chetnik detachments were disarmed and arrested in Kraljevo. Germans insisted on the complete disbandment of the Chetnik detachments during the summer of 1942, but General Nedić opposed this and demanded that their disarmament and the time at which it should take place be decided by his government.⁴⁰ However, the occupation authorities continued their campaign, and in July and August 1942 six Chetnik detachments with a strength of about 1,800 Chetniks were disarmed and disbanded.⁴¹

In mid-September, General Meyszner instructed Dragi Jovanović, commander of Serbian State Security, that by the end of the month the “Chetnik command with all Chetnik detachments of Kosta Pećanac” should be removed from the supply of the “Serbian State Guard and transferred to the supply of another state treasury”.⁴²

From September 1942, the disarmament of the Chetniks began, which was carried out by the Nedić government in various ways. By order of the Commanding General and Commander in Serbia, Paul Bader, the Chetnik units were reduced by 50% by mid-November. Finally, at the meeting between Nedić and the Chetnik vojvodas in Belgrade on December 5-6, they were ordered to disarm and disband all Chetnik detachments by December 15. This was followed by Kosta Pećanac's proclamation demanding the disbanding of all Chetnik detachments and the execution of the order of the General Nedić. This was carried out very quickly and without much resistance, so much so that Nedić praised the Chetniks for the “disciplined execution of his order” in a proclamation dated December 24.⁴³

³⁹ VA, NdA, 1–2/2–26; *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda. Tom I, knjiga 21 (Borbe u Srbiji 1941–1944 – Dokumenti kvislinških jedinica i ustanova)*. Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1965, 279–281.

⁴⁰ B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 202–203; Goran Davidović, Miloš Timotijević, *Zatamnjena prošlost. Istorija ravnogoraca čačanskog kraja. Knjiga 2. Slepa mržnja i krvava osveta – okupacija i građanski rat 1942–1943*. (Čačak: Međuopštinski istorijski arhiv, 2003), 159.

⁴¹ M. Borković, *op. cit.*, 301–303. At a meeting with the German commander of the Southeast on August 29, 1942, Nedić commented on the disarmament of the Chetniks: “The government would be grateful if the question of disbanding the Chetnik units and the time of disbanding were left to itself. We believe that the Chetniks, faced with the threat of disbandment, would flee to the forests and mountains in the summer, and that late autumn would be the right time for this, when the grain harvest is almost over and, on the other hand, the coming snowfalls, etc., would hinder their escape to the forests”.

⁴² VA, NdA, 1A–2–23.

⁴³ J. Zlatić, *op. cit.*, 307–312; D. Petrović, „Vojna organizacija četnika Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941/42. godine“, 205–214; D. Petrović, „Četništvo Koste Pećanca u okupiranoj Srbiji 1941/42. godine“, 94–97.

The daily press published Nedić's statement on the dissolution of the Chetniks: "To all vojvodas, company commanders and Chetniks. After the formation of a regular armed state force entrusted with guarding the personal and material security of Serbian citizens, I, in agreement with Vojvoda Kosta Pećanac, issued an order to all Chetnik detachments in Serbia to disarm and demobilize. They all understood this order of mine correctly, like true Serbs, and carried it out in perfect order. Such a rare, disciplined execution of my order, which would be quite difficult for Chetniks even on normal occasions, considering their traditions, represents in today's situation not only a rare example of self-sacrifice and high national consciousness, but also a convincing proof that my word and the Serbian Government's directives have unanimous resonance and understanding among the broadest sections of the population. I cannot pass over this rarely patriotic execution of my orders by my dear Chetniks without publicly praising them on behalf of the fatherland. Long live my vojvodas, company commanders and Chetniks".⁴⁴

Aftermath

The dissolution of Kosta Pećanac's Chetnik detachments did not mean demobilization and homecoming for all of them. As early as April 1942, members of the Kozjak Chetnik detachment joined the border guard detachments of the Mitrovica district, while the Chetniks of the Brvenica Chetnik detachment joined the border guard in Lebane. Officers also joined the Serbian State Guard for the most part.⁴⁵

The Chetniks of the Sava Chetnik Detachment mostly joined the Serbian Volunteer Corps, and the commander of this detachment, Captain Vuk Vlahović, became commander of the Fifth Battalion, which was officially established on March 19, 1943.⁴⁶

Some were arrested by the Germans and taken to prison camps. At the end of October 1942, the Germans disarmed a large part of the personnel of the Ljubić, Zablacé, Srem-Banat and Jelica Chetnik detachments and sent them to captivity in Germany.⁴⁷

A part left the detachments and went home. They later emerge as members of the village guards, a kind of local auxiliary militia used in pursuit of partisan detachments. The vast majority of these village militias joined the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland in the later stages of the war, especially in the Toplica and Jablanica areas.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Milan Đ. Nedić, „Visoka nacionalna svest četnika“, *novo vreme*, December 25–26, 1942, 3.

⁴⁵ At the end of July 1943, the Chief of the Main Staff of the Chetnik detachments, Lieutenant Colonel Vasilije Vasić, was appointed commander of the Serbian Guard, a small unit whose task was to provide security for General Nedić and members of the "National Salvation Government". VA, Nda, 144–1–44; VA, Nda, 145–5–15.

⁴⁶ Slaviša Perić, *Srpski dobrovoljački korpus 1941–1945*. (Beograd: Slaviša Perić, 2018), 154–156.

⁴⁷ B. Dimitrijević, *op. cit.*, 204.

⁴⁸ Kosta Nikolić, *Istorija Ravnogorskog pokreta. Knjiga druga: Srbija pod okupacijom* (Beograd, Zavod za udžbenike, 2013), 13, 52; M. Mladenović, *op. cit.*, 188–190.

Kosta Pećanac himself, after the dissolution of his detachments, moved with a personal security of 100 Chetniks to Soko Banja, where he lived and received some kind of appanage from the Nedić government. At the end of May 1944, he was liquidated in Soko Banja by members of the Deligrad Corps on the orders of General Dragoljub Mihailović.⁴⁹

In post-war Yugoslavia, Pećanac and his Chetnik detachments were described in an extremely negative context. In popular depictions and films, almost no distinction was made between Kosta Pećanac's and Dragoljub Mihailović's organizations, with the clear intention of discrediting the Ravna Gora Movement.

⁴⁹ M. Pavlović, B. Mladenović, *op. cit.*, 307–308. In addition to Pećanac, some of his former vojvodas also suffered a similar fate and were liquidated by members of the Ravna Gora movement: Mašan Đurović (Suhoplaninski), Božidar Čosović (Javorski) and Damjan Tešmanović (Loznički) – Nemanja Dević, *Za partiju i Tita. Partizanski pokret u Srbiji 1941–1944*. (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2021), 303.

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KOSTA PEĆANAC'S CHETNIKS IN OCCUPIED SERBIA 1941–1942

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Summary

The Chetniks of Kosta Pećanac are a military formation that experienced the greatest turning point during the occupation. In the tradition of the Serbian wars of liberation, they played a positive role in the defense of the Serbian people in the territory of southeastern Serbia against the incursions of Albanian and Bulgarian gangs during the first days of the occupation. Towards the German occupation forces they behaved in a hostile but passive manner. However, the emergence of other resistance movements led to an agreement with the Germans at the end of August 1941 and the establishment of open collaboration. This decision led to the separation of some commanders who did not support this agreement, such as General Novaković, Lieutenant Colonel Radojević and Major Keserović. With the suppression of the uprising in western Serbia at the end of 1941, the Pećanac's Chetniks experienced their apparent peak and became the most numerous military formation after the occupation units. This increase in numbers was illusory, however, as many of the newly arrived Chetniks were in fact still members of General Mihailović's organization, seeking temporary refuge from German repression. With the creation of the Serbian State Guard, which was to become General Nedić's main military formation for the pacification of Serbia, Kosta Pećanac's Chetniks lost their importance. Their unreliability, arbitrariness, indiscipline, disregard for hierarchy, and also open robbery of the population made them an element of disorder rather than order. For these reasons, General Nedić, but much more so the Germans, made attempts to disarm and disband this military formation since the spring of 1942. This process ended in December 1942, when General Nedić announced in the press that they had been disbanded and thanked them for their past service. Kosta Pećanac himself settled in Sokobanja with personal protection. In May 1944, he was liquidated by members of the Ravna Gora organization on the orders of General Mihailović himself.

KEYWORDS: Chetniks, collaboration, Milan Nedić, Kosta Milovanović Pećanac, occupation, Serbia, World War Two, Third Reich

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