
STRIKING FORCE OF THE COLLABORATION. ALBANIAN-MUSLIM SS VOLUNTEER LEGION AND SELF-DEFENCE REGIMENT SANDŽAK (1943–1945)

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ABSTRACT: *The paper chronicles the history of two military formations within German armed forces, with the Muslims from Stara Raška being their backbone. The focus is on the SS legion, i.e. the reasons of its establishment and restructuring, and all events occurring between the two. The prosopographical study has also been given indicating the position of the Muslim legionaries from Stara Raška within the regional, social and economic context. The paper has been drawn up on the basis of the archival material kept in Military Archives, State Archives and the Archives of Yugoslavia, all being located in Belgrade, Historical Archive "Ras" in Novi Pazar, i.e. Federal Archives of Germany in Berlin.*

KEYWORDS: Muslims, Stara Raška, Germans, SS legion, Sjenica, Novi Pazar, Krempler, Meissner, recruits

In the course of the war in Yugoslavia, the occupation regimes engaged a great number of its citizens into the collaboration forces. Germans, for instance, were very agile in recruiting Muslims including, among others, those from the territory of Stara Raška/Sandžak. Within the forces of Waffen SS, Order Police (Ordnungspolizei/Orpo) and Wehrmacht, the Muslims were engaged in service as well. Among these formations, the one standing out was the Albanian-Muslim SS volunteer legion (Albanisch-muselmanische SS freiwilligen Legion/SS legion) and Self-defence regiment Sandžak (Selbstschutzen regiment Sandzak/SRS), but, nevertheless, they did not meet the ambitious expectations of Germans. The reasons for the said were of military, but also even more of political character, as it seems. It is understandable if we take into consideration that these formations emerged in the course of the war collapse of the Third Reich. Even besides that, the SS legion and SRS were established as numerous and well-armed forces, particularly taking into account that Muslim legionaries were among the best fighters that could be found in Stara Raška according to several indicators.

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Introduction

The relations between the Muslims from Stara Raška and Third Reich in the course of the Second World War were not simple, but were oscillating over time. Generally speaking, they could be divided into four phases. Starting from April 1941 until the first months of 1943, neither were these relations intensive, nor were they negligible. The second, more important phase, coincides with the period March-September 1943, when the two sides got to know each other better, became closer and made first agreements at the initiative of the Muslim elite on one side and the agents of Wehrmacht and SS on the other. The aim of these contacts was to strengthen the forces of the Muslim militia in Stara Raška after grave defeats they suffered from the units of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland (JVuO) at the beginning of 1943, i.e. to enable the Muslims to retaliate and protect themselves from the local Serbs. About 10.000 members of Muslim militias, therefore, in the course of the summer 1943, put themselves under the German command for the purpose of fighting against JVuO and National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (NOVJ). The success of the undertaking “Schwarz” significantly depended on the attitude of the Muslims.

The capitulation of Italy at the beginning of September initiated a new chapter of the war in the Balkans and consequently turned one more page in the German-Muslim relations. However, the confrontation with reality permeated with general destitution, administrative chaos and initial military weakness of Germans in Stara Raška started to erode their authority among Muslims which was stable until that moment. Muslim-German alliance faced a grave temptation. This was when SS officer Karl von Krempler stepped on the stage and with his “exceptional capabilities” managed to compensate for the majority of “gaps” in this bilateral relationship.

Precisely, by the end of 1943, he managed to gain the Muslim elite for the fight against the Partisans. Later, he put the populous formation of Muslim militia under his command, primarily in Sjenica and Bijelo Polje Counties, followed by the same action in other parts of Stara Raška. He managed to subordinate the local Chetnik units, and even to reconcile them with Muslim militias. Their later mutual fight against the NOVJ emanated from this alliance. Krempler developed huge spy network primarily relying on the Muslims. Without their intelligence preparation, any anti-guerrilla action in the territory of Stara Raška until the end of the war could not be imagined. Finally, he managed to administratively organize the entrusted territory, food supply, money transfer, court operation, etc.

Driven by Krempler’s successful communication with Muslims, the last phase of the interaction with them was initiated. It will span almost the entire 1944, and to be specific, it lasted until the liberation. It was characterized by the developed cooperation heading in two directions, not only at military level, but also at political, social, cultural and economic level. From the political point of view, the crown of this undertaking was the establishment of the “Muslim National Community” as the supreme collaboration body in Stara Raška (March 1944). It was followed by the establishment of jurisdiction

of SS and police leader (SS und Polizei Führer/SSPF), i.e. regional commander (Kreisskommandantur) for Stara Raška. Both functions were kept by Krempler himself.

On the other hand, it was the military cooperation which was the priority for Germans. The engagement of the Muslims from Stara Raška in the occupation forces was intensified in the course of 1944 at three levels. Thousands of members of Muslim militias, as well as the mobilized Muslim citizens, (in the first place those from Novi Pazar, Rožaje and Tutin) waged war against the Partisans side by side with the occupation units. Besides them, more important for our investigation are the Muslim units who, wearing the German uniform fought under Wehrmacht, SS and/or Order police. With no exemption, all mentioned Muslim forces mainly remained loyal to the Third Reich until the liberation, and the part of the manpower remained loyal to it even until the end of the Second World War in Europe.

Political manipulations regarding the establishment of the legion: Negotiations of SS and Wehrmacht

The roots of emergence of the Albanian-Muslim volunteer SS legion could be found in the first months of 1943. In order to provide safety for the Muslims from Stara Raška, the Main office of SS proposed the establishment of several detachments of police character in the course of April. Three regiments were mentioned comprising about 10.000–12.000 fighters who were deployed in German occupation zone, i.e. in the territory of Novi Pazar and Kosovska Mitrovica. It was expected that the presence of these forces was also going to increase the number of Muslim volunteers for the 13th SS division “Handschar” at the local level.¹ A significant fact is that in August, Abwehr approved the distribution of 4000 rifles for Muslims and Albanians from the county of Kosovska Mitrovica.² Finally, at the beginning of October 1943, the Main office of SS wrote that this region provided “perfect units” of SS containing about 12,000 to 15,000 Albanians and Muslims.³

The implementation of these plans into action was entrusted to the Temporary command of SS for the Southeast led by SS-obersturmbannführer Ernst Letsch. On 8 October, he met SS-hauptsturmführer Hermann in Vienna, as regards this issue. They mutually came upon the conclusion that there were between 6000–8000 non-uniformed Muslims and Albanians in the territory of Kosovska Mitrovica and Novi Pazar, as well as other parts of Stara Raška, armed with seized Italian arms and deployed in the fronts against NOVJ and JVuO. Two-thirds of this manpower were from the Italian occupation zone of Stara Raška, whereas the remaining part was from the German occupation zone. In fact, these were the members of Muslim militias who, after the capitulation of Italy, joined Germans. This manpower, however, was under the command of Wehrmacht i.e. the 2nd army that was opposed to their integration into the SS forces.

¹ *The Waffen-SS. A European History*, ed. Jochen Bohler, Robert Gerwart, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 269.

² Bundesarchiv (BArch), RW 40/44, Krigsttagebuch, Komandierender General und Befehlshaber in Serbien, August 1943, 10.

³ Ibid, NS 19/1660, Anl(age) 5.

Letsch, therefore, asked his superiors whether Waffen SS was able to accept this manpower, provide uniforms to them and provide it, initially, with “10–12 SS fñhrrs, 100 SS-unterfñhrrs and 200 SS soldiers.” He proposed the establishment of two units – “SS volunteer detachment ‘Sandžak’” and “SS volunteer detachment ‘Kosovo’.” Later on, they would be unified into the “Albanian SS volunteer legion.” Salaries, food and social assistance should have been provided by the logistic headquarters of the SS for Serbia in Veliki Bečkerek. The length of service of the legionaries was going to be calculated starting from 25 September 1943, when SS legion in fact was established. On 11 October, the Main office of the SS responded positively to the Letsch’s claims, instructing him to cooperate with Higher SS and police leader of Serbia (Höhere SS- und Polizeifñhrer/HSSPF) General Meyszner.⁴

In the course of October, the command of the 2nd army came forward. At the occasion of addressing the German commander for the Southeast (Oberbefehlshaber Südost/OB Sudost), it marked the emergence of Muslim volunteer forces in Stara Raška as necessary, considering the need to protect the hinterland of the Adriatic Sea.⁵ “Different interests” of the army and SS, however, “prevented the emergence of such organization.” Apparently, two sides, finally made an agreement in the course of October, which can be seen in a letter of the 2nd army sent to the address of OB Sudost, general von Weichs. At that occasion, Wehrmacht offered concrete proposals, possibly including those resulting from the eventual delimitation of spheres of interest with SS.

Therefore, the process of creating the unit was to be carried out by the office of the HSSPF of Serbia, with the assistance of the headquarters of the Order Police in Berlin and the 5th SS Corps, which provided the personnel.⁶ Karl von Krempler, “a representative of Waffen SS” or more precisely “a delegate of the 5th mountain corps” was in charge of the process of recruiting, organization and training of the Muslims and Albanians from the territory of Stara Raška and the county of Kosovska Mitrovica. He was to act in compliance with the “specific instructions” of Heinrich Himmler or the Supreme command of Wehrmacht. In terms of tactics, Krempler was subordinated to the 21th mountain corps which intended to use Muslim legionaries for “fighting against gangs and for providing roads and supply.” Lastly, the command of the 2nd army was requiring Himmler’s written agreement that the 5th SS corps would not withdraw these troops outside Stara Raška and Kosovo.⁷

Here, it should be mentioned that SS and Wehrmacht also established similar forces engaging the autochthonous population in other areas of the Balkans – cen-

⁴ Ibid, dok. 2, 1–3; NARA, T-175, r(olna) 126, sn(imak) 194–195; Ibid, T-313, r. 488, sn. 000464; Franziska A. Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen SS. Von ‘Grosalbanien’ cur Division ‘Skenderbeg’*, (Padeborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2016), 183; Mario Verhas, Božidar Mikulčić, „Handžar.” *Borbeni put 13. SS gorske divizije. Borbeni put 21. SS divizije „Skenderbeg.” Borbeni put 23. SS divizije „Kama,”* (Zagreb: Despot Infinitus, 2018), 39.

⁵ NARA, T-313, r. 488, sn. 000464.

⁶ Bericht “Albanisch-muselmanische SS-Freiwilligen-Legion,” 25.09.1943 – 8.05.1944, 2. This report was given to us by the Russian historian Dmitri Frolov, to whom we would like to express our sincere thanks.

⁷ NARA, T-313, r. 488, sn. 000464, 000466–467.

tral Greece, Peloponnese, Epirus, Macedonia and North Albania. They included several tens of thousands of fighters.⁸

Apparently, the supreme command of SS basically accepted the proposals of the army, whereby they initiated the establishment of the Muslim and Albanian legionary troops. Krempler was informed on these decisions by general von Weichs.⁹ In December 1943, Gottlob Berger even pointed out to the Reichsführer Himmler the significance of Stara Raška as a recruiting base for Waffen SS, but also as the territory which required “specific attention” by SS, taking into consideration its geostrategic significance. It, to be exact, was the shortest link between the Muslims from Bosnia and those from Albania, i.e. of the both previously mentioned groups with Turkey, i.e. territorial bond between Serbia and Montenegro.¹⁰

Establishment of the SS legion

As it was typical for Krempler's war career,¹¹ he was agile in his devotion to development the SS legion. He sent his deputy SS- untersturmführer Klaus Masong as early as in the course of October to the county of Kosovska Mitrovica in order to obtain recruiting lists of all males aged from 16 to 45. Krempler achieved the agreement with the representatives of the Commander of the Order Police in Serbia (Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei/BdO) that the recruits aged from 18 to 28 should join the SS legion, whereas the remaining males should join the forces of the Order Police. Masong managed to organize the unit comprising from 300 to 550 legionaries in Novi Pazar and additional 1800 in Kosovska Mitrovica, Vučitrn and Podujevo.

Hereafter the seals and stamps were produced, the headquarters in Sjenica was organized and documentation keeping was initiated. Krempler signed the mentioned documentation in the capacity of the commander of the Albanian-Muslim SS volunteer legion.¹²

The backbone of the future SS legion was made up of the Muslims from Stara Raška, primarily of those from Sjenica County. It, also, was in its administrative centre where the recruiting committee was situated, with Krempler as the head of this organization. Germans had the intention to use the available forces of the Muslim militias for the new unit. They counted on about 6000 fighters who were deployed under Krempler's command along the wide arc from the middle part of the river Lim to the West, mountain Golija to the East, mountain Javor to the North and the boundaries with Albania to the South.

Total Muslim and Albanian military force was, according to the Krempler's idea, divided into three groups: “North” (having the seat in Sjenica), “Centre” (having the seat in Novi Pazar) and “South” (having the seat in Kosovska Mitrovica,

⁸ *The Waffen-SS. A European History...*, 111–112, 117.

⁹ BArch, RW 40/80, Krigsttagebuch, Militar Befehlshaber Sudost, September 1943, 27.

¹⁰ Franziska Anna Zaugg, *Rekrutierungen für die Waffen-SS in Südosteuropa. Ideen, Ideale und Realität einer Vielvölkerarmee*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 232.

¹¹ Milutin Živković, “Lord” of Stara Raška: War biography of SS-standartenführer Karl von Krempler (1939–1945), *Istorija 20. Veka*, 42, 2/2024, 318–329.

¹² NARA, T-313, r. 484, sn. 000272, 274–275, 296, 299.

Podujevo and Vučitrn). Nevertheless, he had the effective command only over the group “North” which included exactly the mentioned 6000 fighters deployed at nine sectors.¹³ At the strategically significant positions, local militiamen were led by Germans from Wehrmacht and SS.

However, on 24 October, Krempler complained that the forces of the group “North” were “untrained and non-disciplined... poorly dressed and fed,” as well as that he had to alternate the half of fighters at every eight days so that they could go home and cultivate their estates. These forces were exhausted due to being on the front for a long time without being helped by Wehrmacht or Waffen SS. Taking all previously mentioned into account, Krempler was ordered to pick out and integrate the best members, around 40% of the total number, into the SS legion (2400 legionaries). As the requirement for the said, however, Krempler asked for three officers, 20 non-commissioned officers, around 1000 uniforms, food, money and equipment. Otherwise, he said that he was not going to be able to constitute the legion, since leaving out the best fighters would weaken the group “North.” In any case, by the end of October, Krempler designated the most competent fighters within “the group North” and left them there until receiving the response to his requirements.¹⁴

He arrived in the first half of November. Primarily, larger German forces were deployed in the surroundings of Sjenica, which boosted the moral of the Muslims. Even more important is that the Main Command of Waffen-SS told that he will be provided with 160 führers, unterführers and soldiers from the concentration camps in Croatia as the base for the officer cadre of the SS legion. Hereafter he was ordered to single out the selected fighters upon their arrival and to formally integrate them into the SS legion. Together with them, the best Muslim commanders should have been also elected from the group “North.” Those less able commanders were going to stay with the remaining part of the manpower in the background to serve as the reserve for the offensive SS legion. To take care of the roads and provide guards in the villages and towns.¹⁵

Be it as it may, days were passing, and the expected SS personnel did not arrive in Sjenica. Moreover, Krempler received the news that about 140 “SS members” arrived in Belgrade, but that they were kept there. When addressing the superiors in the middle of December, he asked resignedly whether it was a signal that the SS legion “was going to be disbanded.”¹⁶ Although he received the negative answer, we did not manage to determine when the mentioned SS manpower was sent to Krempler. Be it as it may, famous legionnaires from the group “North” actively participated in German operations against the Partisans in the course of December and what is even more important, remained out of reach of the communist propaganda.

All uncertainties were finally solved at the beginning of 1944. Precisely, OB Sudost informed the 2nd army on 28 February that one SS legion was going to be established in Stara Raška. General von Weichs, actually, only conveyed the words of HSSPF of Serbia General Meyszner that “2000 of men (*were*, M.Ž.) are envis-

¹³ NARA, T-313, r. 484, sn. 000293–294, 914.

¹⁴ Ibid, sn. 000295–296, 271.

¹⁵ Ibid, sn. 000911–912, 914.

¹⁶ Ibid, r. 488, sn. 000172, 175.

aged for the establishment of one Muslim legion.” The legion should have been organized “according to the same principles as SS-Bosnian division (*“Handschar,”* M.Z.), respectively, uniformed, equipped and supplied by Germans.” This was explicitly pointed out by Meyszner.¹⁷

At the end of April 1944, the SS legion underwent the “process of completion”, having the significant help of the Main office of Orpo in Berlin. In the field, as well as in the period during which the manpower was within Muslim militias, the legion was subordinated to the 2nd army in terms of functioning. However, the maintenance was now, partly or completely, overtaken by the structures of SS in the occupied Serbia.¹⁸ The legionary detachments from the headquarters from Sjenica were deployed around Stara Raška which can be seen in the example of town of Priboj. The unit positioned there was named “Albanian-Muslim SS volunteer legion – I company of Priboj.” There was one more troop in this town and each contained two platoons with Muslims being at the head of them. Not only Germans, but also Muslims were the members of the command of this unit.¹⁹ On the basis of other sources, we can see that SS legion also held the positions within Stara Raška, and to be specific, on Pester plateau and Javor mountain.²⁰

We notice that the establishment of the SS legion was not easy, what is logical taking into consideration disorganized military and political situation in the territory of Stara Raška at the time. A few problems slowed down its development. Primarily, the legion suffered the consequences of the constant clash between SS and Wehrmacht. When it comes to their standpoint, the very SS was not united. It seemed that its political and military structures in Serbia had different approach as regards this question. For instance, the fighters who primarily were designated for the SS legion were recruited by BdO Serbia in the course of October and November 1943.

Krempler drew attention to the violation of the reached agreements in two occasions, on 31 October and on 5 November. He complained that General Meyszner had ordered that the volunteers for the legion from the counties of Novi Pazar and Kosovska Mitrovica should be sent to the detachments of Auxiliary Police (*Hilfspolizei/Hipo*) beyond the established age limits. Meyszner had the idea of establishing two battalions, so he gathered all volunteers for the legion. Krempler was particularly resentful since BdO also took over the forces which he had already organized in Novi Pazar, Kosovska Mitrovica, Podujevo i Vučitrn.²¹ Not only that the BdO Serbia continued with the same practice, but also, in December, it also required the withdrawal of the already chosen legionaries from the group “North.” This time, Krempler addressed not only SS, but also military authorities, warning them that his “legionaries were not going to respect Hipo recruiting,” and that he was going to abandon the project of SS legion development.²²

¹⁷ BArch, RW 40/85, Anl. 85, 1; NARA, T-501, r. 256, sn. 000142; Zbornici NOR-a, t(om) XIII, knj(iga) 4, 138–139.

¹⁸ Henry L. de Zeng, The moslem militia and Legion of the Sandjak, *Ahis Europa*, 9/1996, 9–12.

¹⁹ Državni arhiv Srbije (DAS), Bezbednosno informativna agencija (BIA), I, Zb(irka) 266, f. Albansko-muslimanska SS dobrovoljačka legija, 2, 4–5.

²⁰ Vojni arhiv (VA), Nemačka arhiva (NA), kut(ija) 9, f(ascikla) 6, dok(ument) 42, 1.

²¹ NARA, T-313, r. 484, sn. 000272, 912.

²² Ibid, r. 488, sn. 000173.

The supreme command of SS had different plans as regards Krempler. When the mobilization for the 21st SS division “Skenderbeg” fell into crisis, Himmler demanded that the manpower for it should be found in other units of SS. In May 1944, the elected one was exactly the SS legion from Stara Raška, envisaged even by Himmler as “the main source of the manpower” for being integrated into the division “Skenderbeg.” In the Himmler’s order, English intelligence agency found the main reason for the legion restructuring.²³

On the other hand, from the commencement of work on its establishment, Germans confronted serious logistic problems. Krempler repeatedly complained that he did not have food, clothes, footwear and other necessities for the legionaries (they had “cold meals” and “torn footwear”), i.e. he needed personnel at several levels.²⁴ Due to the previously stated, Muslims started to abhor joining the SS legion. At the end of October 1943, Krempler, also wrote that there was concealed “grave distrust” towards SS among them, considering that the previous group of volunteers, even besides the given guarantees, was taken outside the Serbia within “Handschar” division. Besides that, the part of Hipo forces was sent to Šumadija, whereas the families of the Muslim soldiers of Wehrmacht had not yet received the social assistance.²⁵

The consequence of the political and military problems was the order to “re-structure” the SS legion into a regiment of police type, in the middle of March 1944. The unit was put under the jurisdiction of BdO Serbia, but its establishment was still to be awaited for several months.²⁶ In this way, all candidates for Waffen SS registered by Krempler in October 1943, found themselves under the command of the police structures of SS in the occupied Serbia.

At the end, the questions remaining are those regarding how Krempler was gathering the legionaries and what the real fighting power of the SS legion was. For recruiting the manpower, he relied on the local collaboration promoters among the leaders of the Muslim political, commercial and religious elite. According to the postwar testimony of one of the agitators in charge of gathering the manpower, Krempler signed an agreement with them on recruiting the Muslims for the SS legion, on which occasion also the “rulebook on mobilization” was adopted.²⁷ What is also mentioned is that a special conference was held in Sjenica in the autumn of 1943. Apparently, all “commanders of Muslim units established until that moment” attended it. One of the issues discussed was the establishment of the SS legion in Stara Raška.²⁸ The future legionaries were primarily coming from the County of Sjenica, and after suppressing the forces of the NOVJ at the end of 1943, they were coming from other parts of Stara Raška as well.²⁹

²³ Дмитри Фролов, *Под барјаком Скендербега. Албански добровољци на служби у СС трупама (1943–1944)*, (Београд: Чигоја, 2020), 114.

²⁴ NARA, T-313, r. 484, sn. 000272; Ibid, r. 488, sn. 000347.

²⁵ Ibid, r. 488, sn. 000347–348; Ibid, r. 484, sn. 000295.

²⁶ Ibid, T-311, sn. 134; BArch, R 19/322, dok. 194, 1.

²⁷ Istorijski arhiv Ras Novi Pazar (IARNP), fond 76, Okružni sud Novi Pazar (OSNP), inv(entarski)br(oj) 3, f. NSK 31/46, dok. Saslušanje Čamila Praševića, 15.02.1946, 1.

²⁸ DAS, BIA, I, Zb. 266, f. Albansko-muslimanska SS dobrovoljačka legija, 2.

²⁹ Isto, II, Zb. 63, kut. 7, dos(osije) br(oj) 626; Isto, dos. br. 644; Isto, dos. br. 646; Isto, kut. 8, dos. br. 593; Isto, dos. br. 594; Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), fond 110, Državna komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača (DKRZ), kut. 373, 351–370, 400–403, 494–498; Isto, kut. 698, 283–287.

Besides former members of the Muslim militia and new volunteers, the Muslim veterans from the special division “Brandenburg” joined the SS legion.³⁰ There are data stating that certain former members of the division “Handschar” ended in the ranks of the unit.³¹ Further on, the agents from Krempler’s headquarters in Sjenica joined the SS legion but in the capacity of the intelligence agents.³²

As regards the number of fighters within the SS legion, different sources provide contradictory information. Krempler himself presented a few estimations. At the beginning of October 1943, he wrote about 2000 and a month later, about 2400 legionaries. When he was ordered, at the same time, to gather the chosen manpower, he stated the number of 1300 “SS-members.”³³ On the other side, SS-oberfuhrer Richard Kaaserer, after the war, accused Krempler for falsifying the numbers, claiming that SS legion did not have more than 300 soldiers.³⁴ However, this statement is inseparable from the animosity felt between the two. More precise numbers were given by HSSPF of Serbia general Meyszner. Thus, he states the figure of about 800 up to at most 2000 men. Nevertheless, the question remaining open is how many legionaries were actually structured according to the standards of the Waffen SS. Namely, the numbers of registration documents of the legionaries from the archive of the SS logistics for the occupied Serbia (for receiving social assistance), range, roughly taken, between 44,300 and 45,400. It is likely Krempler’s estimation of 1300 legionaries. So, most likely, between 800 and 2000 Muslim members of SS legion.

Legion restructuring: Self-protection regiment Sandžak

The establishment of this unit represents the summary of the intentions of German regime to make the occupation administration in Stara Raška stable, to solve the issue of the efficient supply of the SS legion and increase the number of the forces composed of the local population under its command. As regards the SRS, we can find the equivalent with the East Europe. Namely, SS had already established the first self-protection units which were composed of the local Germans in the occupied Poland as early as in 1939. About 17.500 members of these forces were transferred in the course of 1940 to the command of HSSPF across Poland. The self-protection unit in the territory of Lublin, for example, became infamous because of its atrocities against the civilians.³⁵

A few units were composed of the local population in Riga and Kaunas. One unit guarded the concentration camp for Jews in the mentioned Lithuanian city. A part of the self-protection troops joined afterwards the infamous unit “Rollkomando Hamman”

³⁰ DAS, BIA, I, Zb. 175, f. Sjenica, 49; IARNP, fond 76, OSNP, inv. br. 3, f. NSK 29/46, dok. Saslušanje Mithada Čatovića, 25.04.1946, 1; *Nemačka obaveštajna služba u okupiranoj Jugoslaviji, opšti deo: Srbija, knj. IV (NOS)*, 1959, 903.

³¹ AJ, fond 110, DKRZ, kut. 148, inv. br. 9275, 17–45.

³² IARNP, fond 76, OSNP, inv. br. 3, f. NSK 39/46, dok. Naknadno saslušanje Mithada Čatovića, 1; DAS, BIA, II, Zb. 63, kut. 1, dos. br. 78; Isto, I, Zb. 175, f. Sjenica, 31–32.

³³ NARA, T-313, r. 483, sn. 001201; Ibid, r. 484, sn. 000911,914.

³⁴ AJ, fond 110, DKRZ, kut. 148, inv. br. 9275, 40.

³⁵ *The Waffen-SS. A European History...*, 21–23.

which only in the course of 1941 executed 130,000 Jews. The unit from Vilnius also became infamous due to similar actions in the territory of Belarus. In any case, all such detachments in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were put under direct command of Order Police or Waffen SS in the course of 1942. Their main tasks were fight against the Partisans and execution of Jews. Until the end of 1944, self-protection units, among others, filled the regional SS divisions.³⁶ Therefore, apart from being named as (self)protective, the formations of this type had little to do with (self)protection when it comes to their character.

The decision on the establishment of SRS was brought by the head of the Order Police Alfred Wünnenberg on 9 May 1944. BdO Serbia received the task to establish one regiment containing four battalions, each having four companies and one pioneer platoon. The manpower was to include Germans and Muslim fighters from the SS legion. Only “Reichsdeutschers” should have joined the headquarters of regiment and headquarters of the battalions. Also, they were to fill the senior staff to the level of platoons, as well as the greatest part of administration.³⁷

For the needs of SRS, the central office of the Order Police from Berlin provided 46 police officers from various parts of the Third Reich (Berlin, Hanover, Nuremberg, Darmstadt, Vienna, etc.), as well as 200 non-commissioned officers and soldiers from the command in Ostrava. The manpower was ordered to arrive in Serbia until 25 May.³⁸ However, according to the data of the OB Sudost from August, development of SRS was still in progress.³⁹ On the other side, the date set to the greatest number of Muslims as the date of joining the unit was 27 June 1944.

The Lieutenant-colonel of the Order Police Mechow was appointed the commander of the regiment. He arrived from Berlin. Previously, he served at 16 SS police regiment. All the senior officers of the battalions and troops were also appointed,⁴⁰ but since there was a shortage of manpower, it is possible that not all of them assumed their designated duties.⁴¹

The manpower wore uniforms having the insignia of SS,⁴² which can be seen in the letter of the unit headquarters from the end of August 1944. It states that the collars with “SS runes /*sig runes*/” had been ordered and that they were going to arrive in the course of the subsequent month, whereas the delivery of epaulettes for the officers was expected in those days.⁴³ The centre for training of SRS members was located in Novi Pazar. According to the testimonies of its former fighters, the manpower was gathered or mobilized before July 1944, whereafter commenced military drill.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 24–25, 28–29, 35.

³⁷ BArch, R 19/326, dok. 125, 1–3; Bericht “Albanisch-muselmanische SS-Freiwilligen-Legion,” 25.09.1943 – 8.05.1944, 1.

³⁸ BArch, R 19/326, dok. 125, 6.

³⁹ NARA, T-78, r. 410, sn. 6378364.

⁴⁰ BArch, R 19/326, dok. 125, 3.

⁴¹ AJ, fond 110, DKRZ, kut. 373, 452, 474; DAS, BIA, II, Zb. 63, kut. 3, dos. br. 200, 10

⁴² The member of SRS Sadik Bistricic from Nova Varos testifies: “Uniforms were of SS... There were members who wore the insignia of SS with a skull on their caps, whereas I and many others did not wear it, but an ordinary uniform of Wehrmacht.” DAS, BIA, I, Zb. 270, 53, 55–56.

⁴³ VA, NA, kut. 32II, f. 6, dok. 4, 1.

This German project also confronted the problems which primarily referred to the shortage of manpower considering that in the summer of 1944 it became finally clear to the Muslim population that Germany could not win the war. When there were no more former members of the SS legion for SRS, taking into account that they joined SS division "Skenderbeg" or went back to militias, the volunteers were sought. Since recruiting did not fulfill the expectations, Germans turned to the manpower that had already served them. For the needs of SRS, certain fighters of Muslim militias were gathered, but they were not satisfied at all, since they were not accustomed to the strict organization.⁴⁴ They had more success with the fighters of the Hipo forces, but soon it also proved to be insufficient.⁴⁵

Therefore, for the first time, mobilization of the Muslims was initiated, often under coercion. This manner of recruiting manpower became even more frequent as the Second World War was approaching its ending. Entire regions were left without male population. In the middle of 1944, for example, as many as 97% of Germans from Banat were engaged at Wehrmacht, SS and police. For all those who avoided mobilization, "severe punishments" were envisaged.⁴⁶ As regards Stara Raška, the scope of mobilization was not even close to the same in Banat, and the punishments were not rigorous. However, this does not mean that mobilization was not executed.

By implementing it, German authorities repeatedly addressed the local Muslim elite for help. Its task was to perpetrate the agitation and intimidation, whereas the task of gathering the soldiers was entrusted to the Muslims who had already served in the occupation forces. We can see what the mobilization was like on the basis of the following examples. Local people from the Muslim village Ugao on Pester plateau remembered that Germans ordered the civil registry books to be sent to Sjenica. These registers were analyzed there and people were taken in the aftermath.⁴⁷ We can see what it was like on the basis of the post-war remembrances of the recruits. Imam from Sjenica, dressed in German uniform, came to a village on Pester and together with German gendarmerie commenced "forceful mobilization" of Muslims for "German army in the SS troops." In case that local Muslims managed to escape from the village, as per imam's order, their families were threatened with death. Upon the return of defectors, they were escorted to Novi Pazar under guard.⁴⁸ Their compatriots from the near Municipality of Budjevo brought an action against the one veteran of the SS legion. At the occasion of mobilization, he robbed and mistreated them.⁴⁹

Escaping from mobilization, Muslims from Novi Pazar went to Raska and some of its citizens managed to depict "the spirit of the times." According to the local teacher,

⁴⁴ DAS, BIA, I, Zb. 266, f. 1, 443–444; Isto, Zb. 271, f. 245; Isto, Zb. 271, f. 20, 81.

⁴⁵ Isto, II, Zb. 63, kut. 1, dos. br. 19; Isto, kut. 2, dos. br. 156; Isto, kut. 3, dos. br. 200; Isto, kut. 4, dos. br. 281; Isto, kut. 7, dos. br. 622; Isto, kut. 8, dos. br. 587; Isto, dos. br. 600; Isto, I, Zb. 266, f. 1, 237, 244, 443–444; AJ, fond 110, DKRZ, kut. 373, 432–436, 447–452, 785–791.

⁴⁶ *The Waffen-SS. A European History...*, 239.

⁴⁷ IARNP, fond 76, OKNP, inv. br. 7, f. K 52/47, dok. Zapisnik, 5.05.1947, 2; Isto, dok. Saslušanje Rustema Kurbaševićam 17.09.1946, 2.

⁴⁸ Isto, inv. br. 5, f. NSK 54/46, dok. Saslušanje Ramiza Asića, 20.05.1946, 1.

⁴⁹ Isto, inv. br. 3, f. NSK 33/46, dok. Optužba muslimana opštine Buđevske protiv Seferović Zaima, 1.

one “Turk from Novi Pazar” who found himself in the town of Raska in June 1944, told him as follows: “We are also afraid that they are going to kill us (*Germans*, M. Ž.)... They mobilize all of us, and since our people do not want to go with them, they threaten us.”⁵⁰ The Muslims from the nearby village Duga Poljana also complained that those who avoided mobilization were reported to German or Albanian gendarmerie “for being disobedient,” who, thereby, “caught and escorted them” into prison.⁵¹ Besides the said, the Muslims in Novi Pazar and Tutin area also fell under general, much greater temporary mobilization, which were declared by their leaders for the purpose of fighting against the Partisans.⁵²

Training of the members of SRS was carried out in the course of the summer of 1944, in August, or possibly in July. The part of the mobilized Muslims, nevertheless, sabotaged them, trying to find the suitable occasion for the escape. The reaction of Germans to these occurrences was surprisingly mild, possibly so as not to antagonize the Muslims who had been their allies for a long time.⁵³ In any case, it occurred that groups consisting of more than 100 recruits left the unit.⁵⁴

The project of SRS due to all previously stated facts did not give the expected results. Until August 1944, there were established 1st battalion including four companies, as well as the pioneer platoon and possibly a headquarters company. In order to fill the gaps, Police volunteer battalion “Montenegro” and Orpo gendarmerie having the centre in Sjenica were subordinated to the command of the regiment. According to the regulations of the BdO Serbia, the headquarters of SRS also assumed the responsibilities of the Regional command of the Order Police for Stara Raška in Sjenica, where it was actually situated.⁵⁵

In September, the first battalion of SRS was fully, or more probably partially, sent to the garrison service in Nova Varos. There, it was soon defeated by the Parti-

⁵⁰ Istorijски arhiv Kraljevo (IAK), fond 412, Lični fond Tihomira Đorđevića (TĐ), kut. 4, 3.06.1944, 1.

⁵¹ IARNP, fond 76, OKNP, inv. br. 14, f. K 147/48, dok. Zapisnik o saslušanju Uzeira Ljaljića, 30.03.1947, 2.

⁵² There were at least three gatherings of the manpower of this type – in spring, summer and autumn of 1944. In May, gendarmes and militiamen of Hipo mobilized 600–800 Muslims from Novi Pazar “by gathering them in the streets, houses and stores and by arresting them.” Wealthy Muslim families tried to repurchase themselves with the poorer in order that they send their family members to the front instead of them. In August 1944, about 2000 Muslim fighters from County of Dezevo (Novi Pazar) were gathered. Their fighting spirit was weak. These were the troops who waged the war together with German forces under the Muslim commanders, but not within them as the members of the SS legion or SRS. Therefore, these mobilizations should not be confused with the one for SRS. Isto, fond 284, Zb. hronika, referat M. Radovića, „Hronika Novog Pazara u NOB-i“, III, 566, 568; IAK, fond 412, TĐ, kut. 4, 17.05.1944, 1–2.

⁵³ DAS, BIA, II, Zb. 171, 22; IARNP, fond 76, OKNP, inv. br. 5, f. NSK 25/46, dok. Saslušanje Ramiza Asića, 20.05.1946, 1.

⁵⁴ The most interesting case is the escape of the larger group of recruits who were natives from Polimlje. Jusuf Turkmanovic briefly says: “The group I escaped with had about 100 people and we escaped in the middle of the day.” His fellow soldier Husein Kadribasic gives more precise description. Namely, when they started to run from the base, German “non-commissioned officers and staff sergeants,” who “trained” them, stopped them and even “took them to the commander of the camp, but neither he managed to deter them.” DAS, BIA, I, Zb. 266, f. 1, 237, 444.

⁵⁵ NARA, T-78, r. 410, sn. 63788364.

sans in the first days of the same month according to what its members said.⁵⁶ There are more versions about further destiny of SRS. Certain foreign, as well as certain domestic authors, state that the fighters of “Police regiment Sandžak” as they call it, defended Sjenica from the Partisans in mid-October 1944. After one more defeat, they began to disperse. According to this version, in the course of November, “a few hundreds of them” with one of the well-known commanders of the Muslim militia (Sulejman Pačariz), dressed in German uniforms, “well-armed and properly organized,” withdrew to Sarajevo. There, they became the part of the armed forces in the Independent State of Croatia.⁵⁷

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that in the course of October-November, 18 German officers and non-commissioned officers of SRS really withdrew from Sjenica towards Grac.⁵⁸ Also, the military post number of the regiment headquarters ceased to be used on November 9, 1944, and was abolished in March of the following year.⁵⁹ Yugoslav security service disposed of the data that in Sarajevo, Muslim “militia was formed of all disbanded parts which had arrived” from Stara Raška, at the end of 1944 or at the beginning of 1945.⁶⁰ Finally, we have information from the State Commission for War Crimes of Serbia that some parts of the “Sandžak Regiment” committed crimes in the villages along the Nova Varos-Priboj road during November-December.⁶¹

On the other side, there remain a few perplexities. The first one is that in the course of our research so far, we have not found any confirmation that the mentioned Sulejman Pačariz was the member of this regiment. In the same way, Ustasha press called Muslim defectors as “militiamen” and registered the first such group as soon as Bairam, which in 1944 was celebrated at the end of September.⁶² The next question is why the members of SRS were not deployed in other German police units? Where did so many defectors come from having into mind that SRS had only one battalion? Basically, our opinion is that Pačariz’s group predominantly consisted of the members of various detachments of Muslim militias from Stara Raška, but it is possible that there also were members of SRS among them.

Even though SRS was officially a regiment, only one new battalion was formed within it. In case we take into consideration the standards of Orpo and Wehrmacht, with its four companies (and pioneer platoon), SRS consisted of between 600–700 people, also including German personnel. Nevertheless, what remains as an open question is the

⁵⁶ IARNP, fond 76, OKNP, inv. br. 1, f. NSK 11/46, dok. Saslušanje M. Čatovića, 3.

⁵⁷ Upon arrival to Sarajevo, Pačariz receives the rank of (lieutenant) colonel and the authorization to mobilize the Muslims from Stara Raška into a separate unit, so called “Sandžak battalion.” In the spring 1945, this unit fought together with Germans against the Partisans, in the surroundings of Sarajevo. Some of them were killed there, others were imprisoned and shot and one group escaped to Sisak where they were classified as the members of the 30th regiment of the 18th Croatian assault division. Allegedly, they withdrew to Austria with this unit. Henry L. de Zeng, op. cit., 14; Željko Karaula, *Prilog za biografiju vođe muslimanske milicije u Sandžaku Sulejmana Pačariza (1895–1945?)*, *ALMANAH – Časopis za proučavanje, prezentaciju i zaštitu kulturno-istorijske baštine Bošnjaka/Muslimana*, 91–92, 2023, 108–109.

⁵⁸ BArch, R 19/322, dok. 216, 1–3.

⁵⁹ Bericht “Albanisch-muselmanische SS-Freivilligen-Legion,” 25.09.1943 – 8.05.1944, 3.

⁶⁰ DAS, BIA, I, Zb. 266, f. Albansko-muslimanska SS dobrovoljačka legija, 4.

⁶¹ Ibid, G-25, ZKRZ, kut. 103, zl. br. 13.581, 1–3.

⁶² *Sarajevski novi list*, 26.09.1944, 3; *Sarajevski novi list*, 27.02.1945, 1.

number of the Muslims from Stara Raška among them. Berlin singled out about 200 members of Orpo for the regiment. Also, there were 2000 provided rifles, i.e. 1340 kits for cleaning weapons for the fighters.⁶³ The General Mei, who was the commander of BdO Serbia, also presented the information referring to SRS. After the war, he testified that three battalions consisting of “500 people each” were “gradually” formed within the regiment which “underwent certain period of training.”⁶⁴ This testimonial opens up the possibility that another battalion was established in the autumn 1944, within SRS. For example, the 4st battalion had a headquarters and a military post number.⁶⁵ But this is the question which is going to be left to the future investigations to confirm.

Who were the Muslim legionaries? Prosopographical study

Muslim members of the SS legion and SRS were coming from all areas of Stara Raška. However, the greatest number of them was from Sjenica and the surroundings, somewhat more than 40%. Almost the same number of fighters was, for instance, from the Counties of Pljevlja,⁶⁶ Priboj and Prijepolje together (Chart 1). It is understandable if we take into consideration that Muslim militias were numerous in the county of Sjenica, i.e. that they were the first to put themselves under the command of Germans. As regards the relation village-town, the majority of legionaries were coming from rural areas. Only 38% percent were town dwellers (Chart 2). The refugees whose native villages were destroyed in the period before recruiting were also in towns, but, however, we treated them as rural population. The deployment of recruits on the basis of their places of birth can be seen in the Chart no. 3.

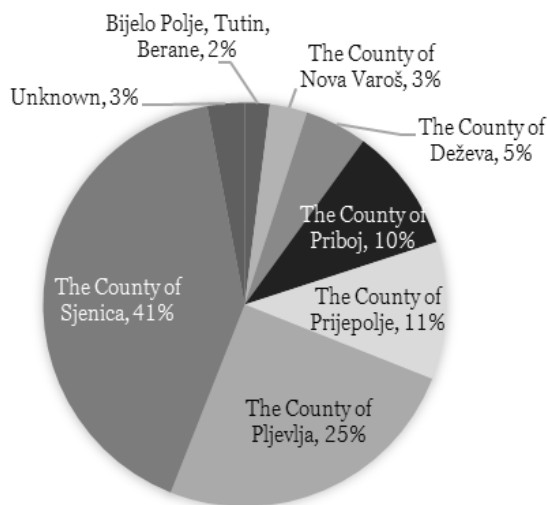


Chart 1: Origin of recruits as per the counties of Stara Raška

⁶³ BArch, R 19/326, dok. 125, 7.

⁶⁴ VA, NA, kut. 32, f. 8, dok. 4, 2.

⁶⁵ Bericht “Albanisch-muselmanische SS-Freivilligen-Legion,” 25.09.1943 – 8.05.1944, 3.

⁶⁶ We expect the results of the latest research, which will probably increase the number of Muslims belonging to the SS Legion from this County.

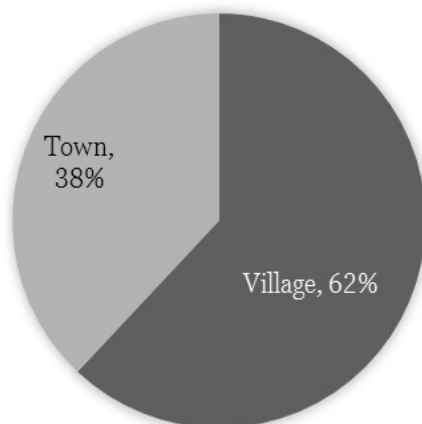


Chart 2: Origin of recruits village-town

Although the supreme command of SS sought the manpower for the legion in their prime, those aged between 15 and 35, it was sometimes different in practice. Many recruits were older than it was envisaged, particularly when it comes to the upper limit. It is worth mentioning that the oldest legionary was 60 years old. On the other side, the youngest ones were of the same age as his grandchildren. As many as four members of Stara Raška SS legion were barely 15 years old. However, Krempler managed to fulfill the standards up to a certain extent, whereby 3/4 of legionaries were within the required age frame, whereas another 20% were under 43 years old (Chart 4).

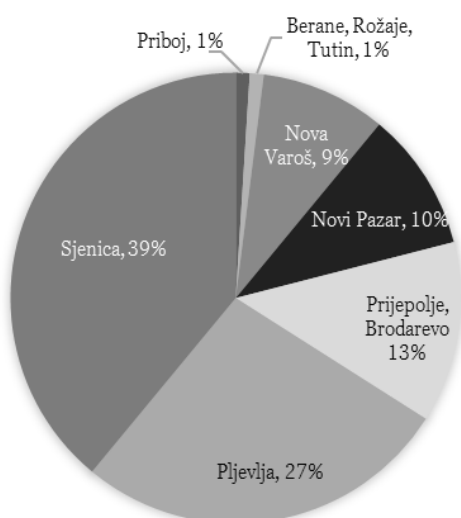


Chart 3: Origin of recruits living in towns

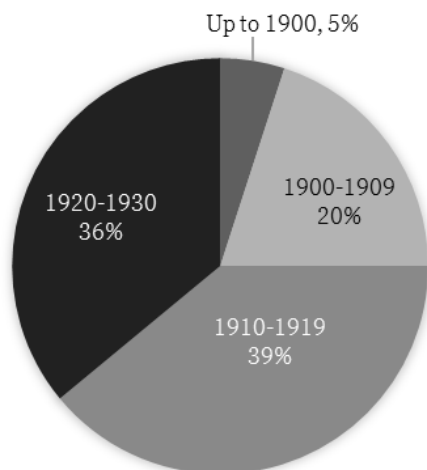


Chart 4: Age of Muslim recruits

As regards the social cross-section of Muslim recruits, it appears as follows: the majority of recruits were farmers, but they did not constitute an absolute majority. In contrast to their 41%, craftsmen, traders, workers and Muslim militiamen made up 55% of the manpower. The least number of recruits were intellectuals, only 4%. Only a few municipality officials, pupils and students, and one law graduate were among them (Chart 5).

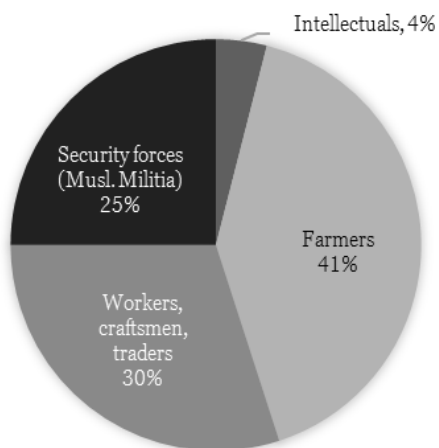


Chart 5: Social status of Muslim recruits

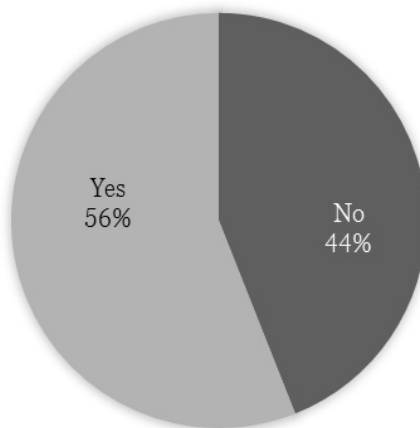


Chart 6: Recruits who had income Before joining German forces (besides the income obtained Working at their estates)

More than half of Muslims earned certain type of income while wearing German uniforms, besides the income they obtained working at their own estates (Chart 6). Hence, it can be assumed that they had full time employment or casual one. Chart no. 7 shows that average earnings were satisfying, taking into account general circumstances in Serbia.⁶⁷ The least monthly salary was 1000, and the greatest was 13.000 Dinars. More than 3/4 legionaries, however, was earning more than 5000, whereas 20% was earning even more than 10.000 Dinars. The main reason for the previously said can be found in good salaries that the members of Muslim militia received as early as in the course of the Italian occupation.

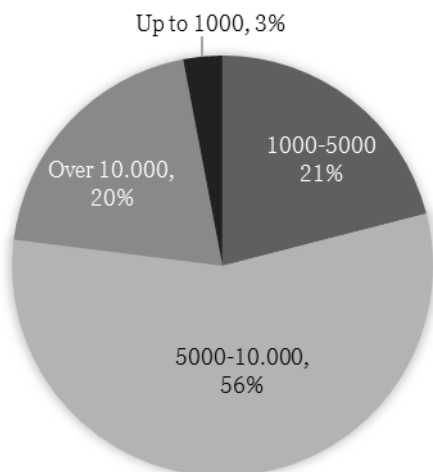


Chart 7: Average income of recruits who had incomes before joining German forces (except for those obtained working at their estates)

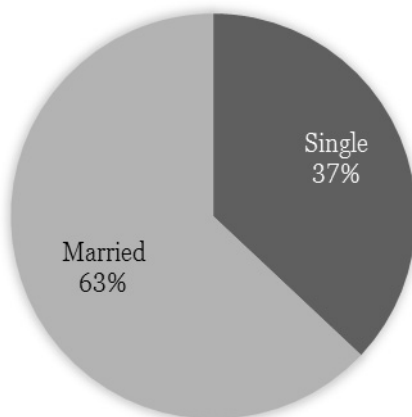


Chart 8: Marital status of the recruits

⁶⁷ In 1944, the captain of the Serbian state guard had the income of 4593, lieutenant 4022, sergeant 2700, guard 2200 Dinars, etc. Небојша Стамболија, *Српска државна стража 1942–1944*, (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2021), 355, 364.

The collected data provide us with the opportunity to peek into the private lives of the recruits. Namely, more than 60% were married and there also were children in more than 80% marriages (Chart 8). However, the number of children was significant – 2.9 per family. Only few legionaries, therefore, married in the course of his service.

It is worth mentioning that legionaries were coming from multi-member families. More than 60% lived under the same roof with four to 10 relatives. Certain families had even more than 10 members (at most 21), although there also were cooperatives among them (Chart 9). On average, families providing the fighters for the Waffen SS consisted of almost six members (5.7).

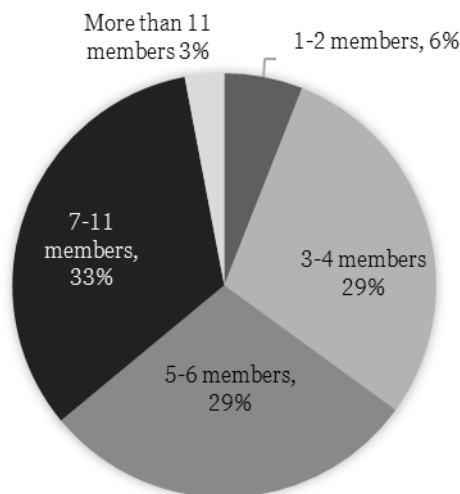


Chart 9: Number of members in the families of the recruits

* * *

The fight for the prestige between German army, SS and(or) Ministry of Foreign Affairs which was going on within the Third Reich, frequently spilled over the occupied territories as well. We could see that Serbia was no exemption. One of the projects affected by that conflict was also the Albanian-Muslim SS volunteer legion. Its development underwent, therefore, a challenging political path between the unreal expectations and pressure imposed by the supreme command of the SS and the resistance offered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the army. Therefore, the figure of 10.000 and even more fighters remained “dead letter.” Without capability of Karl von Kremler, who fairly well managed to reconcile the interests of the army, SS and Muslim elite on the spot, neither the aforementioned several thousands of legionaries from Stara Raška would have been engaged.

However, it cannot be said that the SS legion and, to a lesser extent SRS, did not represent a significant armed force, at least within the local frame. Their essential part consisted of tough fighters, who, thanks to better armament, support of the occupying forces and, in the first place, leadership skills of Germans who commanded them, finally achieved full fighting potential. Neither forced mobilization

for SRS, nor the failure of the concrete project could overshadow the fact that they had become good enough that SS considered them as one of the main solutions for reinforcement of the Waffen SS (21. division "Skenderbeg").

These men were mainly in their prime, i.e. in their full physical strength. The majority of them came from towns or areas in the interior of Stara Raška which were not struck by greater destruction until then, whereby many of them were financially independent. These, possibly, were, some of the criteria on which Kremppler insisted at the occasion of electing the manpower. As we could see, legionaries had significant support in their families which, as a rule, consisted of their wives and children (as well as numerous relatives), which strengthened their moral and utterly boosted their fighting spirit.

Therefore, there are conclusions to be drawn. Although the SS legion and SRS did not meet all expectations of Germans, the process of inclusion of the Muslims from Stara Raška into their armed forces did not fail and therefore, this is a significant issue within more comprehensive topic referring to the collaboration with the occupation authorities in the territory of Yugoslavia, in the course of the Second World War.

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STRIKING FORCE OF THE COLLABORATION.
ALBANISCH-MUSELMANISCHE SS FREIWILLIGEN LEGION
AND SELBSTSCHUTZEN REGIMENT SANDŽAK (1943–1945)

Milutin Živković, PhD*

Summary

The engagement of Muslims from Stara Raška with German armed forces in the course of the Second World War is almost "terra incognita" topic, at least with respect to domestic historiography. This article is, actually, an attempt to make a further step as regards the investigation of this topic. Our intention was to reconstruct the process of the SS legion establishment, its restructuring into the unit of police type, i.e. the destiny of the fighters who made it, on the basis of the original documentation and less available literature. The development process of the SS legion and SRS was analyzed through the constant conflict between the SS and the army, as well as through the local (disorganized) political, administrative, military, economic and other opportunities. The role of Karl von Krempler is particularly pointed out. The study on the legionaries from Stara Raška would not be complete without the analysis of their origin, social affiliation, economic power, etc. and the inspection of the personal data of several hundreds of Muslim fighters made it possible for us.

KEYWORDS: Muslims, Stara Raška, Germans, legion, Sjenica, Novi Pazar, Krempler, Meissner, recruits

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