

ALONG THE BORDERLINES:

Resistance and Collaboration as Transnational Movements in the Region of Sandžak and Kosovo, 1941-1944

*A lo largo de las fronteras: Resistencia y colaboración
como movimientos transnacionales
en la región de Sandžak y Kosovo, 1941-1944*

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Resumen: Tras la campaña de Hitler y Mussolini en los Balcanes en abril de 1941, surgieron diversos movimientos de resistencia en los territorios fronterizos de Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, Croacia, Albania, Bulgaria y Macedonia. Aunque se basaban en ideologías diferentes, una característica de estos movimientos seguía siendo la misma: a menudo estaban formados por combatientes transnacionales que actuaban de forma transfronteriza. Pero también surgieron movimientos de colaboración, que también presentaban rasgos transnacionales. Los ocupantes, los colaboradores y los resistentes se enfrentaron, por tanto, a una situación geográfica y socialmente desconcertante; a menudo, ni las fronteras ni las afiliaciones estaban claramente definidas. Dado que estos fenómenos aparecieron de forma condensada en la región de Sandžak y Kosovo, región fronteriza entre todos los estados mencionados, me centraré en esta parte del sureste de Europa en el siguiente artículo.

Palabras clave: Segunda guerra mundial, resistencia, colaboración, Balcanes.

Abstract: In the wake of Hitler and Mussolini's Balkan campaign in April 1941, various resistance movements emerged in the bordering territories of Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia. Though based on different ideologies, one characteristic of these movements remained the same: They often consisted of transnational fighters acting in a transboundary manner. But collaborative movements also emerged, which exhibited transnational traits, too. Occupiers and collaborators –as well as resisters– were therefore confronted with a situation that was both geographically and socially perplexing;

often neither borders nor affiliations were clearly defined. Because these phenomena appeared in a condensed way in the region of Sandžak and Kosovo border areas between all the above-mentioned states, I will focus on this part of Southeast Europe in the following article.

Keywords: Second world war, Resistance, Collaboration, Balkans.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this 100th issue of the *Jeronimo Zurita Journal of History* is to examine resistance and occupation in Southern Europe during World War II in a transnational perspective –of which Southeast Europe also has its share. After the Balkan campaign in the spring of 1941, in which Hitler saw an emergency solution and Mussolini, a stepping stone,¹ numerous resistance and collaboration movements developed in Southeastern Europe—especially in border regions whose demarcation lines had changed several times in the first half of the 20th century and remained partially disputed after the Balkan campaign. Even the Axis powers had trouble agreeing on them.² In these border areas between Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia we find the region of Sandžak and Kosovo. Since the borders in this region were particularly fluid in the first half of the 20th century, the phenomena of transnational movements and actors appeared in a condensed way and therefore emerging conflicts on a macro-, meso-, and micro level can be studied in a concentrated manner as if under a magnifying glass.

In the neighbouring historical regions of Sandžak and Kosovo, borders often changed politically but nevertheless remained as the boundary where Occidental and Oriental cultures met. The two regions were not only hotspots of extreme interethnic conflicts but also acted as transnational settings of various resistance and collaborative groups during the Second World War. Therefore, all three groups, occupiers, collaborators, and resisters were confronted with a situation that was both geographically and socially perplexing; often neither borders nor

¹ For detail on Mussolini's vision of a *spazio vitale* in Southeastern Europe see H. James Burgwyn, *L'impero sull'adriatico. Mussolini e la conquista della Jugoslavia 1941-1943*, (New York: Enigma Book 2005), 73-76.

² Schliep to Auswärtiges Amt, 3 August 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3. Consulate general Tirana, Pfeiffer to the German embassy in Rome, „notes on the situation in Albania“, 19 April 1941, PAAA, R28845, 31.

affiliations were clearly defined. Furthermore, a constant flow of refugees were crossing the lands looking for shelter and occasionally, joining ranks with the various resistance groups.

It is due to these circumstances that the two regions and their bordering territories form a unique case for historical investigation. How did the various movements develop before and during World War II? Who was who in this complex web of resistance, in occasionally collaborating and fully collaborating coalitions? And what were intentions and constraints of the actors of these transnational networks?

2. Sandžak and Kosovo as Border Regions from the Ottoman Empire to the Second World War

Since the time of the Roman Empire, the Sandžak and Kosovo region was known as a key geopolitical area acting as passage and toehold from the Adriatic Sea to the east, and from north to south, from Durrës to Niš, or from Skopje to Belgrade, for example.³ In Southeast Europe, borders were and still are wavering entities particularly in the region of Kosovo and the neighbouring Sandžak. Even today, they are known as border regions which stood and stand between Occidental and Oriental cultures, divided between, and nourished from Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Catholicism. The region has always been placed between the Great Power's spheres, in the past between the Byzantine Empire and the Italian Merchant Sea Powers and Crusaders, between the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and other Great Powers before and during World War I, between Germany, Italy, and the Allies during World War II and today between Russia, the European Union, and the United States.⁴

But often the historian must dig a little deeper, because although the connection between this area as a passage of great and local powers and flaring conflicts is obvious, the troubles of this region are often dismissed as purely Balkan disputes—with a side swipe at the genuine conflict culture in this area.⁵ Hence, local interests of various external

³ Peter Jordan, „Geopolitische Rolle Albaniens“, in *Albanien. Geographie, historische Anthropologie, Geschichte, Kultur, postkommunistische Transformation*, ed. Peter Jordan (Wien et al., Peter Lang, 2003), 79-80, 83-86. Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Kosovo. Kurze Geschichte einer zentralbalkanischen Landschaft* (Wien u. a.: Böhlau 2008), 47-48.

⁴ Peter Jordan, „Geopolitische Rolle Albaniens“, 81. It is therefore not surprising that all three power blocs want to expand or at least maintain their influence in this area as can be easily seen by the U.S. Camp Bondsteel in Ferizaj, the largest American military base on European soil, and the rumour on a covert Russian camp in neighboring Serbian Niš bear witness to the region's strategic importance.

⁵ Mark Mazower, *The Balkans. From the End of Byzantium to the Present Day*. London: Poenix 2000, 143-148. Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs, Massengewalt der Ustaše gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941-1945* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2013), 26-28.

powers during the last 120 years recede into the background. Today, the still smouldering conflict in the border regions appears as a purely local phenomenon between the Serbian and Kosovar states, whose borders are still not recognized by the Serbian side. Therefore, newspaper articles on current conflicts regularly feature stories on North Kosovo and Mitrovica in particular.⁶ The last major outbreak of violence after the war in 1998/99 took place in 2004 and was later ignited again and again in the region around the Mitrovica Bridge—which embodies the transnational character of this region like probably no other building. Many of the low-intensity conflicts still in Kosovo and neighbouring Sandžak are rooted in the events and aftermath of the Second World War and some of them even in the wars before (World War I and the Balkan Wars of 1912/1913). Because of the complex situation I give a short introduction of this region of ever-changing borderlines which should serve as a guide.

When Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović and his coalition army lost the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389 against Sultan Murad Hüdavendigâr, a new era began and Serbian princes became vassals of the Ottoman Empire. After the capture of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans established direct control by structuring conquered territory into new districts. Thus, Kosovo was integrated into the Ottoman Empire from 1455 to 1864 as part of the *elayet* of Rumelia, and then, from 1864 as Kosovo *vilayet*. “Elayet” and “vilayet” were labels for Ottoman administrative units, similar to the label “sandžak”. The *sandžak* which I will discuss was the Sandžak of Novi Pazar (1580-1872), a sub-district of the elayet of Bosnia. From 1877 onwards, the Sandžak of Novi Pazar was joined to the newly installed vilayet of Kosovo.⁷ After the Berlin Conference of 1878 another player arrived along with the Ottoman administration: In 1879 the Austro-Hungarian army invaded the region of Sandžak and remained there until 1908—rather as an observer than a rapid reaction force, but nevertheless as one of the contemporary Great Powers with corresponding claims to power in the region; accordingly, the Sandžak was redefined by the Habsburg administration.⁸

The First Balkan War in 1912 seemed to bring fundamental changes to the region, Albanian notables from southern Albania to Kosovo and Sandžak proclaimed an Albanian national state on 28 November 1912 in Vlorë. Many ethnic Albanians deserted from the Ottoman

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/30/world/europe/kosovo-serbia.html> (viewed on 8/10/2018).

⁷ Schmitt, *Kosovo*, 35, 70-71.

⁸ Tamara Scheer, “Minimale Kosten, absolut kein Blut”. Österreich-Ungarns Präsenz im Sandžak von Novipazar (1879-1908) (Frankfurt a.M., Peter Lang, 2013), 55.

army and supported the Balkan armies in their advance⁹ However, after the Balkan Wars, in the London Peace Conference of 1913 the Great Powers defined new borders according to their own interests: the Sandžak of Novi Pazar was divided. One part was attached to Montenegro, the other part, which was together with Kosovo, came under Serbian rule.¹⁰

In the short span between the wars, the region did not come to rest. It was a continuing theatre of Austro-Hungarian-Serbian conflicting interests and various insurgent groups. During the following years 1914 to 1918 the armies of the great and local powers, Austro-Hungarian, Germans, Bulgarian and Serbs, on the one hand, local elites and bands on the other hand, not only waged war, but committed terrible crimes against civilians.¹¹

When World War I ended, both Kosovo and the Sandžak became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (also known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). Inner conflicts simmered throughout the entire interwar period causing hundreds of deaths and thousands of displaced persons in the investigated region. Finally, a new era of external occupation was not long in coming to the Balkans: As early as April 1939, Benito Mussolini decided to take Albania as a kind of colony from which he could build on his dream of a *mare nostrum*, a sphere of Italian hegemony around the Adriatic Sea. Although his attack on Greece failed at the end of 1940, the Balkan campaign that he carried out together with Hitler –at least from the Italian perspective– must also be seen in this context.¹²

⁹ Austrian Report 18 October, 12 December and 20 December 1912, AT-OeStA/HHStA PA XII 417, Türkei Liasse XLV/6c. Generalstab Ev.B. Tagesberichte 1912, 28 November 1912, AT-OeStA/1912 Situationen am Balkan, Evidenz über den Balkankrieg, Generalstab Evidenzbüro KA 1.077.

¹⁰ Sabina P. Ramet, Realpolitik or Foreign Policy Surrealism: A Reconsideration of the Peace Treaties of Berlin (1878), London (1913), Versailles (1919), and Trianon (1920), War in the Balkans: Conflict and Diplomacy before World War I, (London. Bloomsbury 2020, ed. James Pettifer and Tom Buchanan, 29-30. Kenneth Morrison, Elizabeth Roberts, *The Sandžak. A History* (London: Hurst & Co. 2013), 89-90.

¹¹ See e.g. Daniel Marc Segesser, *Kriegsverbrechen? Die österreichisch-ungarischen Operationen des August 1914 in Serbien in Wahrnehmung und Vergleich*, in *Frontwechsel: Österreich-Ungarns „Großer Krieg“ im Vergleich* ed. Wolfram Dornik/Julia Walleczek-Fritz & Stefan Wedrac (Wien: Böhlau 2014). Andrej Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War 1914-1918* (London: Hurst & Co. 2007). Gumz, Jonathan E., *The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009).

¹² Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57-63. Burgwyn, *L'impero sull'adriatico*, 54-56.

3. The Balkan Campaign of the Axis Powers

In spring 1941, while planning Operation Barbarossa, Hitler and his *High Command of the Armed Forces* were informed about anti-German officers of the Yugoslav army revolting against the *Tripartite Pact* signed on 25 March 1941 between the Yugoslav government and the Axis powers. The revolting officers forced the cabinet of Dragiša Cvetković and Prince Paul Kara or ević to abdicate and crowned the underage Peter II king. Since Hitler desperately needed this flank protection for the upcoming attack on the Soviet Union, he felt compelled to attack breakaway Yugoslavia.¹³

On 6 April 1941, Hitler, supported by Italian and Hungarian troops, attacked Yugoslavia under the newly built government of General Dušan Simović. Shortly after the German Balkan campaign, German forces seized Serbia with its half of the Sandžak territory, and the northern part of Kosovo; its southern part and the bordering territories of Montenegro and Macedonia became part of *Greater Albania* which was under Italian control until September 1943. An eastern portion of Kosovo and Macedonia was annexed by Bulgaria, although the country itself did not participate in the campaign.¹⁴ The other half of the Sandžak came under Montenegrin rule, which was in fact ruled by Mussolini.¹⁵

Both Axis powers instrumentalized religion and ethnic affiliation while keeping their own interests in mind. With these tactics the Axis attempted to destabilise the Kosovo and Sandžak region in particular and hamper any contact and possible unification among the early Albanian and Serbian resistance movements. This strategy was alluded to by Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano in his diary: “Today, it should not come to mind that we concentrate on this problem. On the contrary, we have to subdue the Yugoslavs. But in the future, we have to create a significant pro-Kosovar policy. This will keep alive the irredentist problem in the Balkans, catch the attention of the Albanians, and symbolise a brandished dagger [plunged] into the back of Yugoslavia.”¹⁶ Already during the Balkan campaign, those who had been harassed in the previous years in the First Yugoslavia showed

¹³ Jozo Tomasević, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945, Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: University Press 2001), 47.

¹⁴ Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution*, 62-63, 138-168.

Franziska Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS, Von „Großalbanien“ zur Division „Skanderbeg“* (Paderborn, Schöningh Verlag, 2016), 74-77.

¹⁵ Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 99-103

¹⁶ Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries: 1939 1943 The Complete, Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo*, ed. Hugh Gibson (Safety Harbor: Simon Publications, 2001), 69 (21 April 1939). On the development of Albanian nationalism see Nathalie Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2006).

themselves ready to fight alongside the Italians and the Germans. For example, in the area studied here, there is evidence of franc-tireurs for the Balkan campaign in 1941, who moved between the borders, in Albania and the collapsing Yugoslavia.¹⁷

4. Early Resistance and Collaboration Movements

When we turn to the early resistance movements, we must be aware that the First Yugoslavia and Albania underwent very different developments in the period before World War II –but both had an impact on the region being closely investigated. While anti-German generals in Belgrade were putting down Hitler's vassals in March 1941, Albania had already been under Italian rule for two years and the so-called “fascistization” was in full swing– albeit not always successfully.¹⁸ The border regions of Sandžak and Kosovo thus already served at that time for the exchange of information between various political actors, as well as a practical zone to go underground, since it was hardly an accessible for outsiders.

Officially, the resistance in Southeast Europe began with the setup and the first actions of the so-called *Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland*, better known as the *etnik*-movement under the command of the Yugoslav exile government in London in May 1941. The former Serbian officer, Dragoljub Draža Mihailovi, a genuine Serbian royalist, became the highest *etnik* commander. These actions were followed by similar operations of communist partisans from June 1941 onwards.¹⁹ However, during my visit to the Montenegrin State Archives in Cetinje, I came across a document which testifies organized resistance by groups described as peasants at the end of April 1941 already in the border territory of Montenegro. These groups, described by the Italians, paralysed telecommunications masts in prolonged actions and prevented their reconstruction by workers. This form of action and its duration required a certain degree of organisation that went far beyond a spontaneous expression of displeasure. In the neighbouring Kosovo region, too, the building of resistance must have begun earlier. As early as 1939, Fadil Hoxha, the future leader of communist resistance in Kosovo, travelled from Albania back to Kosovo (at that time still part of the First Yugoslavia) to build up a resistance movement against the Italian occupation.²⁰

¹⁷ Kollegger, *Albaniens Wiedergeburt* (Wien, Wiener Verlagsgesellschaft, 1942), 66.

¹⁸ Rodogno, *Nuovo ordine*, 318. Deutsches Generalkonsulat Tirana, Pfeiffer an Deutsche Gesandtschaft Rom, „Die Lage in Albanien“, 16 October 1941, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/7.

¹⁹ Hoare, Marko Attila, *Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia: The Partisans and the Chetniks 1941–1943* (New York: Oxford University Press 2006), 93-94.

²⁰ Malcolm, *Kosovo, A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 301.

Julian Amery, in his function as *Special Operations Executive* (SOE) liaison officer from 1941 to 1945 “variously associated with the Resistance Movements [sic] of the Balkans, and more especially with those of the South Slavs and the Albanians” also testifies in his memoirs that first attempts in the direction of an all-inclusive umbrella resistance organisation date back to 1940 when the British SOE tried to create a united front. This was exhausting work as Amery attests: “Nevertheless the work made progress. Our couriers passed from Kosovo [sic] into Albania, preaching the aims of the United Front among the tribal chiefs, and gathering political and military information. Soon we were in communication with Muharrem Bairaktar [sic], the lord of the Liuma [sic], who promised his support”.²¹ A remarkable fact is, that the famous Chetnik leader and former Yugoslav officer, Dragoljub Draža Mihailović himself established contact with Bajraktar, as they had known each other from earlier Belgrade times.²² Mihailović had also been stationed in Albania and on the Salonika front during the First World War. Muharrem Bajraktar on the other hand, coming from the Luma, a region in today northeastern Albania and southwestern Kosovo, had left Albania after a dispute with King Zogu and settled in Yugoslavia, where he met Mihailović in 1936. Such transnational experiences are very typical for this border region: The protagonists often knew each other, whether from their student days or other assignments abroad.

But collaboration with the Axis had also existed in certain states for a longer period. Relations between Serbia and Germany, for example, were characterized by mutual goodwill until March 1941: From the German point of view, Yugoslavia had been “an efficient trading partner of great value to the German war economy: wheat, corn, meat, fat, oilseeds, hemp, wood, bauxite, copper, lead, antimony, molybdenum, etc. were the war-economically valuable goods that Yugoslavia had to offer in the exchange of goods”.²³ The occupation of Albania by Italy in 1939 had also been preceded by close cooperation under the self-appointed King Zogu since 1924: Albanian foreign policy exhibited a clear and growing dependence on Italy.²⁴ This becomes visible in the First and Second Tirana Pacts of 1926 and 1927. On the one hand, Italy’s economic and military influence was further increased, while on the other hand, Albania’s independent foreign policy was curtailed.

²¹ Amery, *Sons of the Eagle*, 37.

²² Sundhaussen, *Geschichte Serbiens*, 320-322.

²³ Hermann Neubacher, *Sonderauftrag Südost, 1940–1945. Bericht eines fliegenden Diplomaten* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt 1956), 129.

²⁴ Massimo Borogno, *Tra Continuità e Incertezza. Italia e Albania (1914-1939). La strategia politico-militare dell’Italia in Albania fino all’Operazione “Oltre Mare Tirana”* (Mailand: Franco Angeli, 2007).

The First Tirana Pact, signed on 27 November 1926, was established for five years as a “friendship and security pact”; the Second Tirana Pact was now clearly defined as the “defense alliance” and extended to twenty years.²⁵

Amery’s claim “the Resistance Movement of the second [sic] World War will not lack their memorials.” proved to be wrong:²⁶ In Southeast Europe under Tito and Enver Hoxha only communist partisans were commemorated,²⁷ while the much more colourful and politically diverse network of different resistance factions –labelled as collaborators by the socialist regimes– was wiped out and alternating motives of collaborating with the Germans and the Italians and the will to fight them have never been considered in research.²⁸ Other resistance movements than the communists alone became known to the Western European public when Southeast European nationalist groups in the 1990s tried, as they do today, to exploit them for nationalist causes.²⁹

Until now, the actions and proceedings of resisters and collaborators were often viewed in a national perspective –this was because after the conclusion of World War II the old and new borders helped to confirm the old and new national states. However, resistance against Fascism and National Socialism in the Balkans was multifaceted and multinational in character, and much more than just a communist movement. In recent years, I have investigated different forms of collaboration with and resistance against the German and/or Italian occupiers in Southeast Europe, particularly in Kosovo and the bordering territories like the Sandžak. Many movements worked either entirely or partially together, and many fought against each other. Neverthe-

²⁵ Hubert Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration in Albanien 1939-1944* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 24. See also, Tönnies, *Sonderfall Albanien*, 384.

²⁶ Julian Amery, *Sons of the Eagle: A Study in Guerrilla War* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1948), VII.

²⁷ Until today, the discussion about World War II and the various resistance camps remains a highly delicate topic which influences the policies and politics of Southeast European countries. E.g. Sonja Biserko, “25 Years of ICTY. Facing the Past in Serbia and the Region”, in: *Suedosteuropa-Mitteilungen II* (2018), 56-67. Jože Pirjevec’s attempt to write Tito’s biography as complete as possible underlines the unabated charisma of the Yugoslav leader. Jože Pirjevec’s, *Tito i drugovi* (Belgrade, Laguna, 2014). E.g. of a bias publication on partisans: Miloslav Samardžić, *Saradnja partizana sa Nemcima, Ustašama i Albancima* (Kragujevac: Delphi 2006).

²⁸ One of the first publications to examine this complex network of often transnationally active individuals and groups is Hubert Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration in Albanien 1939-1944* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008).

²⁹ Best known is the example of the Četnik-movement which became a kind of synonym for new national movements. Therefore, today it is often seen as a monolithic bloc. Nevertheless, the various etnik formations acted in a very different way which lasted from resistance through to collaboration.

less, one aspect remained the same: Transnationality and the crossing of borders were the common threads of all resistance movements in this part of Southeast Europe.³⁰

5. Transnational Resistance and Collaborations Movements in Kosovo and Sandžak

The topography makes this zone a perfect landscape for guerrilla warfare: the region contains only poor roads, namely just dusty tracks unsuitable for tanks and artillery transport, dense forests, and the karst mountains which helped the partisans to build their networks and guerrilla systems.³¹ The dense web of diverse resistance groups in this region reveals that their distrust of the Germans was justifiable. The resistance force's ranks consisted of combatants from up to five Southeast European countries: *Greater Albania*, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina –which was part of the *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* (NDH) or the *Independent State of Croatia* (as it was called)– Montenegro, and Macedonia. In addition, they were supported by former Italian soldiers (particularly after September 1943), Turkomans who formerly fought in the German ranks, and they even gained support from German deserters.³²

The complexity and density of the various resistance groups compel me to explain each of them briefly. There were the Yugoslav Communist partisans, the Serbian and the Montenegrin ethnics (royalists), various Albanian and Kosovar Communist Partisan units, the Kosovar and the Albanian Nationalists, and the Albanian Royalists. After the invasion of the Axis powers in 1941, Sandžak and Kosovo were notorious for their increased traffic of anti-German and/or anti-Italian groups looking for contacts with other groups abroad,³³ as well as refugees (often Jewish ones) who were trying to reach *Old Albania*.³⁴ An order from the divisional commander of the SS division *Skanderbeg*,

³⁰ On the discussion of transnational history see: Michael G. Mueller and Cornelius Torp “Conceptualising transnational spaces in history”, *European Review of History –Revue européenne d’histoire*, V (2009), 609-617.

³¹ Hermann K. Frank, “Partisanenkampf in Albanien”, *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift* 120 (1954): 356-365.

³² For German and Russian fighters see Franziska Zaugg, Yakov Falkov et al., “Transnational guerrillas in the ‘shatter zones’ of the Balkans and Eastern Front”, in *Fighters Across Frontiers. Transnational Resistance in Europe 1936-48*, ed. Robert Gildea and Ismee Tames (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2020), 162-164. A collective volume from 2018 on former Italian soldiers in the Albanian and Montenegrin resistance shows the growing interest in different branches of Southeast European resistance movements: Lia Tosi (ed.), *Caro nemico. Soldati pistoiesi nella Resistenza in Albania e Montenegro 1943-1945* (Pisa, Edizione ETS, 2018).

³³ Amery, *Sons of the Eagle*, 37.

³⁴ Albert, Ramaj, “Rettung von Juden in Albanien”, *Ökumenisches Forum fuer Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, G2W, II (2007): 18. Sara Berger, Erwin Lewin, Sanela

August Schmidhuber, testifies the German assumption of the traffic's equal intensity in the opposite direction: "Many Communist and anti-German immigrants [were travelling] from Old Albania to the Kosovo territory". Therefore, Schmidhuber, one of the leading figures in German anti-partisan warfare in Kosovo and the Sandžak, ordered the arrest of every person who could not sufficiently explain their reason for travel or destination and they were to be brought into the concentration camp of Priština/Prishtina.³⁵ However, his orders were not very successful—he felt that in these border territories alliances were fragile constructions: Even those who promised to collaborate denied their support if the profit, material or immaterial, was not promising enough.³⁶ Several groups, leaders, and individuals swung back and forth between resistance and collaboration.³⁷

On 22 June 1941, a first communist partisan detachment was formed in Croatia and on 4 July, the *Communist Party of Yugoslavia* called for an armed uprising in all Yugoslav territories.³⁸ In May 1941, Mihailović and other former Yugoslav officers brought distinct advantages to the royalist *etnik* resistance movement: The units were provided with arms and enjoyed specialized training.³⁹ Before the German invasion, they had already made arms depots in the hilly karst and had even acquired ammunition and automatic weapons from the western Allies' airdrops.⁴⁰ Not very known, however, was that they also collaborated with Kosovar Nationalist groups in a transnational way as a German report of the „situation in Albania in May 1943“ outlines: This transnational collaboration in the border territories between Serbia and *Greater Albania* was seen as a “serious danger” because “the Albanians on the other side of the demarcation line highly supported the movement of general Draža Mihajlović”.⁴¹ Partial collaboration with the Germans towards the end of war made the *etniks* unreliable part-

Schmid, Maria Vassilikou, *Verfolgung und Ermordung der Juden 1933-1945, Besetztes Suedosteuropa und Italien*, Bd. 14, (Berlin: De Gruyter 2017), 83.

³⁵ Abschrift „Kontrolle des Ein- und Durchreiseverkehrs im Kosovogebiet“, Div. Kdr. Schmidhuber, 15 June 1944 (Anlage 10 zu DGA Nr. 3046/44 g.v. 6/23/1944), BArchF, RH 19-XI/9, 24. Find more detailed information about the concentration camp in Priština/Prishtina in: Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS*, 256-258 and in Berger/Lewin/Schmid/Vassilikou, *Verfolgung und Ermordung der Juden*, 84.

³⁶ „Zusammenfassender Bericht“ Schmidhuber, 2 October 1944, BArchF, RS 3-21/1, 3.

³⁷ On different motivations: Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration*, 49-50

³⁸ A Map with various *etniks* units in Sandžak and Montenegrin borderlands shows the large variety of different groups. Befehlshaber der Deutschen Truppen in Kroatien, Gen. Inf. Rudolf Lueters to German Wehrmacht-units, BArchF, RS 40/81, 124.

³⁹ Holm Sundhaussen, *Geschichte Serbiens, 19-21. Jahrhundert* (Wien et al.: Boehlau, 2007), 320-322.

⁴⁰ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS*, 164.

⁴¹ „Situation in Albania Mai 1943“, Auswertestelle Süd, 24 August 1944 signed by Chef der Heeresarchiv Oberstleutnant Neumeister, 31 August 1944, BArchF, RH 18/407.

ners for the western Allies.⁴² Since parts of the Serbian monarchists received weapons and ammunition from the Germans, the British let it be known via the Reuters news agency in June 1944 that they had ceased their support of the *etnik* units and would only support the communists.⁴³

Different branches of Albanian communist partisans were united in the so-called *Levizja Nacional Çlirimtare* (NLC), the communist *National Liberation Front* from 1942 onwards –this movement would eventually lead to the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha.⁴⁴ Obviously, the Communist movement in Northern Albania and Kosovo was moderate – the local societies lived in a strongly traditional manner and proved quite impregnable to fundamental communist values. A large section of the local elites therefore decided to collaborate with the German forces in the region, because they had promised to not touch their traditional rites and customs.⁴⁵ Fadil Hoxha was such a communist, and one of the best-known commanders in Kosovo –his unit included both Serbian and Albanian Kosovars. He was supported by Shefqet Peci, the commander of the third Albanian Communist division,⁴⁶ and later had a distinguished political career in Tito’s Yugoslavia.⁴⁷

Transnational assistance for the setup of communist resistance in Albania was provided by two Yugoslavs, Miladin Popović and Dušan Muĝoša, who joined early communist resistance Kosovo in 1941, and served as secretary in regional committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in Kosovo. They were sent to Albania in November 1941 to help building the Albanian Communist Party and to influence the Albanian Communists according to the will of the Yugoslav Communists.⁴⁸

Balli Kombëtar (“*balli*” meaning “brow” or “front” and “*kom-bëtar*” meaning “national” –was a nationalist umbrella organisation of

⁴² See more on *Četnik* movements in: Enver Redžić, *Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Second World War* (New York: Oxon, 2005), 119-163. E.g. of a *Četnik* group’s collaborating commitment: Leader of the National Serbian Irregular Troops in Bosnia to Ribbentrop, 24 March 1942, PAAA, R27531.

⁴³ Junker to Neubacher and Generalkonsulat Tirana, 21 June 1944, PAAA R27305.

⁴⁴ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS*, 67-68.

⁴⁵ The local Albanian elites of Kosovo and Sandžak were for example assembled in the “Second League of Prizren” and the “Committee for the Liberation of Kosovo”. For the protection of traditional rights and customs see e.g. Sauberzweig, 13. SS-Division, Abt. VI Tgb.Nr. 21/44 geh., Divisions-Sonderbefehl „Betr: Stellung der Imame innerhalb der Division“, 8 March 1944, BArchB, NS 19/2601, 247.

⁴⁶ Secret “Report Albanian Minority in Yugoslavia”, 7 January 1953, CIA-RDP82-00457R014500140002-8, 4.

⁴⁷ Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosovo*, Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2004, 130-131.

⁴⁸ Cf. Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosovo*, 219-220. Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration*, 77.

anti-Italian, sometimes anti-German, and often anti-Communist Albanian magnates and clan chiefs. This organisation was active in Kosovo and northern Albania as well. Known persons who were part of *Balli Kombëtar* included individuals such as Midhat Frashëri and Muharrem Bajraktari. Essentially, these Albanian nationalist bands did not maintain any kind of pro-German attitudes and changed sides only after the Communists turned against them in 1943.⁴⁹ So the previously mentioned Bajraktari, from the Albanian-Kosovar border region Luma, who belonged to the very early allies of the English, but later supported the Germans, after the break of the collaboration with the Communists.⁵⁰ Therefore, a confusing situation ensued: The Germans supported the “National Bands” –along with some select members of the *Balli Kombëtar*– who fought against the Italians, the communist and/or the *etniks*. The Germans even recruited some of them for their own units such as the SS *Skanderbeg* or the *Handschar* division.⁵¹ Other parts of the umbrella organisation *Balli Kombëtar* remained in the resistance camp until the end of war. However, they remained undecided about whether they should attack the Germans until summer 1944 –when the German downfall was clearly foreseeable. But by then, it was too late. The western Allies– namely the British SOE liaison officers, Edmund “Trotsky” Davies, Neil “Billy” Mac Lean and Julian Amery –restricted their supplies exclusively to the Communist partisans. Another political resistance movement included the royalist *Legaliteti*, or so-called Zogist fraction, named for their support of the former Albanian King Ahmed Zogu, but they were not very active in the studied area. Finally, there were others without affiliation, like Gani Kreyziu from Kosovo. He and his group resisted the occupiers, the Communists, and the Zogist fraction.⁵²

In the *Sandžak* –as opposed to Kosovo– the Yugoslav Communist partisan movement proved more influential. Small cells were executing acts of sabotage. For example, Rifat ‘Tršo’ Burdžović built up an umbrella organisation called the “District Committee of the Communist Party in the Sandžak” consisting of a few cells in Bijelo Polje, Novi Pazar, Priboj, and Plievlja. He came in contact with Communist ideas for the first time in 1933 during his studies in Belgrade. There, he joi-

⁴⁹ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime*, 73-74.

⁵⁰ Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration*, 182-183, 210.

⁵¹ George Lepre, *Himmler’s Bosnian Division: The Waffen-SS Handschar Division, 1943-1945* (Atglen, Schiffer 1997).

⁵² Secret Report “Albanian Minority in Yugoslavia”, 7 January 1953, CIA-RDP82-00457R014500140002-8, 4. Amery, *Sons of the Eagle*, 36. On this changed support instruction Captain A.C. Simcox wrote „We have let the Nationalists of Albania down. [...] Especially Gani Kreyziu who has fought well and is sacrificing more than any communist“. Quotation after Roderick Bailey, *The Wildest Province. SOE in the Land of the Eagle* (London, Vintage, 2009), 297.

ned a group of young Communists, and immediately returned to the Sandžak soon after the German invasion in April 1941.⁵³ In summer 1941, Communist partisan movements in Sandžak were consolidated into the *People's Liberation Movement/Narodno Oslobodila ki Pokret* (NOP) and the *Zemaljsko Antifašisti ko Vijeće Narodnog Oslobodjenja Sanžaka* (ZAVNOS) under the flag of the KPJ. As in Kosovo and the Sandžak, not all inhabitants endorsed the Communists; some perceived them as part of the oppressive former Serbian state. Indiscriminate reprisals of the Communist partisans against real or alleged collaborators drove many inhabitants to the *etnik* partisan movement.⁵⁴

All these parties had their specific intentions, which included establishing a particular political system after the war, and all were looking for allies. This also led to transnational exchange on a meso level: The Albanian communists found supporters in the stronger neighbouring communist partisans who were under the leadership of Jozip Broz Tito. During the summer of 1941, the *Yugoslav Communist Party* sent the two members mentioned above, Muğoša and Popović, to help build the *Albanian Communist Party*. However, the Albanian communists had to deal with the intention of “big brother” to create a *Greater Yugoslavia* after the war—which meant a *Smaller Albania* without Kosovo for the Albanians. Muğoša and Popović played an important role later: Attempts to build an all-in-one umbrella resistance organisation consisting of communists, diverse nationalist groups of the *Balli Kombëtar* and the *Legaliteti*—as planned and mentioned by Davies—in 1943 finally failed due to the question of if a greater Albanian state with Kosovo or the inclusion of Kosovo into a new Yugoslavia after the war.⁵⁵

Various attempts of the different leaders and groups were made to share their knowledge and troops and to create a united front against the invaders. Proof of this can be found from the conferences of Peza in 1942, the conference of Mukje in August 1943, and the conference of Labinot in September 1943. Despite the transnational support, as previously mentioned, the project of an umbrella organisation between Communist, Nationalist, and Royalist partisans failed first due to the question of a *Greater Albania* (or a *Smaller Albania* without Kosovo) but also due to the question of the post-war political state structure. After Labinot, the atmosphere completely changed when the communists officially declared the nationalists as enemies of the state.⁵⁶

⁵³ Morrison, Roberts, *The Sandžak*, 107-108.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 111-112.

⁵⁵ Tönnies, Sonderfall Albanien, 455. Zaugg, Albanische Muslime, 74.

⁵⁶ Zaugg, Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS, 72-73.

Even if opposing groups fought each other bitterly after autumn 1943, the main opponents of all these partisan units between 1939 and 1943 were the Italian army and the *Milizia Fascista Albanese*, and from 1941 to 1944, various German *Wehrmachts*-divisions, and units of German *Waffen-SS* and *Polizei*. Only a few months after the invasion, in summer 1939, the Italians under Governor Jacomoni created the *Milizia Fascista Albanese (MFA)*, the Albanian wing of the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale (MVSN)*, better known as the infamous *Camicie Nere*. They were spurred on by the Italians to fight against their “ethnic enemies” and fought in the Italian campaign against Greece in late 1940 and from April 1941 onwards in the borderland of Kosovo and Sandžak against Orthodox Serbs and Montenegrins.⁵⁷ When caught by partisans, they were often massacred in unusually cruel ways as revenge for war crimes they had committed.⁵⁸

In 1942, only one year after the German invasion of the region, the Germans created the so-called *Albanisch Muselmanischer Selbstschutz*—Albanian Muslim Self Defence units which consisted of Albanian Muslims in the Sandžak region and Northern Kosovo.⁵⁹ As the name *Selbstschutz* states, these unit was officially promoted as protection against *etniks* and communist partisans in the borderlands. A similar function was held by the *Albanesische Gendarmerie* in the Sandžak. In early 1943, the *Waffen-SS* began its recruitment for the 13th *Waffen-Mountain-Division* of the SS *Handschar* not only in Bosnia-Herzegovina but in Sandžak as well. One year later, in spring 1944, the 21st *Waffen-Mountain-Division* of the SS *Skanderbeg* was formed almost entirely from Sandžak and Kosovo inhabitants. The German recruitment efforts of locals for the *Waffen-SS* were strongly linked to another umbrella organisation, the Second League of Prizren. This organisation was a right-wing, traditional, and anti-Serbian organisation made up of clan chiefs and representatives of Kosovo and former Kosovo irredenta-followers.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the Germans supported the

⁵⁷ Kollegger, *Albaniens Wiedergeburt*, 60-61, 65. Festschrift zum 19. Jahrestag der MVSN, ACS, SPD CO, b. 847, fasc. 500.020/II, 65.

⁵⁸ Note „Situation in Montenegro“ von Scheiger, 3 January 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3.

⁵⁹ Some of them were ethnically mixed. The prior aim to join a “self defence”-unit was to defend the own land, property and family. Morrison, Roberts, *The Sandžak*, 107.

⁶⁰ Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosovo*, 251. For further information about the newer history of southeastern European *Waffen-SS* units see Franziska Zaugg and Jacek Andrzej Młynarczyk, (eds.), *Ost- und Seudosteuropaeer in der Waffen-SS. Kulturelle Aspekte und historischer Kontext*, special volume in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft VII/ VIII* (2017). Xavier Bougarel, Korb Alexander, Stefan Petke, Franziska Zaugg, “Muslim SS Units in the Balkans and the Soviet Union”, in *The Waffen-SS. A European History*, ed. Jochen Böhrer, Robert Gerwarth (Oxford, University Press 2016), 252-283.

anti-Italian resistance from 1941 to September 1943 in this territory and the bordering *New Albania* (the Middle and South Kosovo) in order to create an unstable situation not only for communist partisans and *etniki*, but also for the Italians since they were seen as rivals, too. Towns and villages near the German-Italian demarcation line in Sandžak and Kosovo like Mitrovica, Novi Pazar, Priština/Prishtina, or Vu itrn/Vushtrri therefore became consecutive “hot spots” of violence, turntables of diverse resistance groups and refugees, and early centres of Nazi recruitment.⁶¹

However, in terms of recruitment and persecution of the Orthodox and Jewish populations, the main Nazi collaborators also had a transnational background and worked across borders. In autumn 1941 on his roundtrip through Kosovo and the Sandžak region, *Volkstumsreferent* Feninger stated that on the Italian side of the demarcation line, the Albanians forced the Serbian and Montenegrin settlers to leave by burning down their houses and even entire villages. He registered a huge number of Serbian and Montenegrin refugees on the streets trying to cross the border. However, on the other side of the demarcation line, the zone between Mitrovica and Novi Pazar was so fiercely embattled that he had to make a detour over Peja/Peć and Rozhaja/Rožaje where he was escorted by *Wehrmacht* soldiers.⁶²

Among those responsible for the deportation of tens of thousands of Serbs were three protagonists whose origin as well as actions appear in a transnational framework. Xhafer Deva, Rexhep Mitrovica, and Bedri Pejani all of whom were born in the investigated region (Mitrovica and Vu itrn/Vushtrri) when it still belonged to the Ottoman Empire. During their lives, they changed state affiliation five times until 1941. After 1941, according to their places of origin, they would have joined Serbia under German military rule, but decided in a transnational way to pursue politics in *Greater Albania*. After the Italian defeat, their great hour had come: After *Greater Albania* also came under German rule in September 1943, they rose to the highest government elite: Xhafer Deva as Minister of the Interior, Rexhep Mitrovica as Prime Minister. At the same time, however, the three were also leaders in the aforementioned Second League of Prizren, a nationalist association in the Kosovo region. All the three of them were among those responsible for the deportation of tens of thousands of Serbs and the recruitment of ethnic Albanians of the Sandžak and Kosovo region as

⁶¹ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS*, 177-192. On refugees who fled from Kosovo to Montenegrin territories under Italian control after the 1941's invasion see: Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 139.

⁶² Volkstumsreferent Dr. Feninger beim Bevollmächtigten des AA in Belgrad, report »über die Reise in das Arnautengebiet von Kosovska Mitrovica und Novi Pazar«, 15-26 October 1941, PAAA, R261153, 32, 53.

well as other bordering territories into German Waffen-SS units and auxiliary troops.⁶³

6. Shades and Grades of the Resistance and Collaboration Movements

The fact that the resisters who collaborated with the British liaison officers and fought the Germans were of a colourful political mixture is supported by Amery in his memoirs: “We marched northwards through the afternoon; a rabble army of Zogist tribesmen, *Ballist* irregulars, and Turkoman deserters.”⁶⁴ Through the historiography of both socialist states –Yugoslavia under Tito and Albania under Enver Hoxha– only Communist partisans were seen as true resisters. In some Serbian publications, the opinion is still held that all *Ballists* collaborated with the Germans.⁶⁵ But this is not the case, as can be proven. Not only some *Ballist* irregulars, but also the leaders of the *Balli Kombëtar*, like Midhat Frasheri and the Zogist Abaz Kupi joined the British mission.⁶⁶ Similar evidence of an early mixed resistance act can be found in the 13 July Uprising in Montenegro and the Montenegrin part of Sandžak. Initiated by the KPJ, this action was a genuinely popular uprising, supported by former officers of the Yugoslav army. During this early rebellion in summer 1941, some Sandžak towns were briefly liberated as well, such as Bijelo Polje, Berane, and Andrijevića. However, after the suppression of the uprising, political rivalry among the various resistance groups returned and civil war broke out.⁶⁷

All shades of social background were represented in the resistance: Some of the leaders graduated from university and had previous international experiences, like Rifat Burdžović or Muharrem Bajraktari. Some were farmers without any education, incapable of reading or writing. Some were wealthy or descended from an old influential noble family like Gani Kryeziu, and others were poor.⁶⁸

The same can be said for the groups that collaborated with the occupiers. The leaders often came from wealthy and influential families and had usually studied abroad; for example, Xhafer Deva or Rexhep

⁶³ Zauĝg, *Albanische Muslime*, 76, 92, 143-148, 312. Elsie suggests that alone in Pejanis tenure as president of the “Second League of Prizren” about 40.000 Serbs were deported from Kosovo. Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosovo*, 252.

⁶⁴ Amery, *Sons of the Eagle*, 289.

⁶⁵ Cf. Bojan Đokić, “Balisti kao sinonim za albanske zloćine na Kosovu i Metohiji 1941–1945. godine: Prilog stradanju srpskog stanovništva”, in *Godišnjak za istraživanje genocida IX* (2017), 75-94.

⁶⁶ Amery, *Sons of the Eagle*, 286-289.

⁶⁷ Morrison, Roberts, *The Sandžak*, 108-111.

⁶⁸ Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosovo*, 169-170.

Mitrovica. At the crew level, on the other hand, it was not uncommon for men to be unable to read and write and to sign up for service in the Waffen SS or an affiliated unit with three crosses.⁶⁹

The male and female quota differed drastically—in Communist organisations in Kosovo women were represented, too.⁷⁰ In mainly Muslim Nationalist units only men fought for they were rooted in the patriarchal traditions.⁷¹ Women were also occasionally found in *etnik* formations.⁷²

7. Targets, Defence, and Disobedience

Popular targets among all resistance groups were infrastructural installations like railways, telecommunication infrastructure, or companies which were involved in the war economy and in this region spread over four states. Hence, the newly recruited SS *Skanderbeg* division had the task of protecting these elements against partisans: First, the route from Skopje to Mitrovica and Belgrade, and from Peć/Pejë towards Montenegro.⁷³ However, regional connections were also targets of the Partisans, for example the mountain pass road near Đakovica/Gjakova.⁷⁴ Second, the protection of chrome ore mines in Đakovica/Gjakova and Kukës and other important objects like the Trepça/Trepća mines near Mitrovica, which fell into the hands of Tito's Partisans in the last months of the war.⁷⁵ Third, these tasks should help to maintain “peace and order in the inner Kosovo“ and secure these bordering territories, including Kosovo and Sandžak region.⁷⁶ As a result of this policy, the detention of 510 “Jews, communists and band helpers” in Kosovo from end of May to July 1944 were reported.⁷⁷

The German operations against the communist partisans of the Albanian communist *National Liberation Front* and against Tito's partisans in these territories began in 1943 with some degree of success,⁷⁸ but eventually failed. The historian Klaus Schmider wrote that these failures especially against the units under Tito's command were even

⁶⁹ For example Ukić, Alija, AJ, F 110, DK, Box F730/J782.

⁷⁰ Letter Neubacher to Auswärtiges Amt, z. Hd. Ribbentrop 22 October 1944, PAAA, R27772, 3.

⁷¹ Amery, *Sons of the Eagle*, 273-274.

⁷² Female Chetnik fighter, BArchF, N756_149b.

⁷³ Letter Kopf to Leopold Stütz, 28 May 1964, BArchF, N 756/182a.

⁷⁴ Prisoner report Schrader, VA HEM.OK.BOJCKA, 72A/1a/34, 2.

⁷⁵ Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosovo*, 274.

⁷⁶ Report Schmidhuber, 31 May 1944, BArchF, RH 19 XI/9.

⁷⁷ „Report of the situation“ Gen.Kdo. XXI. Geb.AK, 13 July 1944, NARA, T314/664, 227. Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS*, 255.

⁷⁸ For example the winter offensive 1943/44, cf. Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration*, 199.

more remarkable because the partisans were not locals.⁷⁹ A military report of the *OB Suedost* (Supreme Command Southeast) from autumn 1944 proves that the Germans were well-informed of the strength and composition of every group.⁸⁰ One last major German anti-partisan operation in the investigated region was the Operation *Draufgaenger* (Daredevil) between 18 and 28 July 1944. The aim of the operation was to destroy the base of Tito partisans in Berane in the Montenegrin Sandžak and regain the initiative for the further course of the war.⁸¹ In the Operation *Draufgaenger* against the partisans in summer 1944, Schmidhuber complained that the terrain was very difficult, the battles hard, and the troops were forced daily to overcome enormous physical strain due to altitude differences which varied between 800 and 1000 meters.⁸²

In the summer of 1944, the tide had finally turned: The persecutors became more and more as the persecuted. The partisans, once called bandits by the Germans, had grown into a well-trained army as August Schmidhuber, the commander of the Waffen-SS division “Skanderbeg” documented: “The enemy in the operation ‘Draufgaenger’ were no longer bandits in the previous sense, but homogenous, well-armed, well-trained units in English uniforms, and remarkably well-led. At the machine guns, the enemy was far superior to our troops. The training level and the combat value of these bandits had proved to be surprisingly good. Troops and command have to be put on an equal footing with a fully-fledged regular European army.”⁸³

8. Shifting Loyalties

Adapting one’s loyalties to current circumstances was nothing new in this region of the Balkans. Eva Anne Frantz investigated, circumstances which led to a changing loyalty for the period of the late Ottoman Empire in Kosovo region.⁸⁴ Jovo Miladinović proves conflicting loyalties for the afterwar period of World War I in his article on local communities in the region of Mitrovica.⁸⁵ Thus, although for

⁷⁹ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, 547.

⁸⁰ Report “Entwicklung der militärischen Lage in Albanien im Herbst 1944”, *OB Suedost*, name unreadable, undatiert, BArchF, RW 40/116a.

⁸¹ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, 505.

⁸² Combat report of the operation “Draufgaenger” vom 18-28 July 1944, Schmidhuber, Lagebeurteilung 22 July 1944, NARA, T314/664, 283.

⁸³ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, 505.

⁸⁴ Eva Anne Frantz, „Violence and Its Impact on Loyalty and Identity Formation in Late Ottoman Kosovo: Muslims and Christians in a Period of Reform and Transformation1“, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* IV (2009): 455.

⁸⁵ Jovo Miladinović, “‘Justice’ or an Orchestrated Trial? The Lifeworld of Ferhad Bey Drağa, the Lawsuit against Him, and the Local Communities in Mitrovica in the late 1920s” in Powershifts, Practices and

World War II many hope to have clear attributions to the camp of Resisters or Collaborators, such shifting and changing loyalties can be perceived for this period as well. In an area with constantly changing borders and authorities, where transnational experiences were part of the everyday life, new and old national borders played a subordinate role in deciding which group to join. Rather, people looked to which group was nearby and could offer them the most protection, armament, or training.⁸⁶ This fact was already clear to the actors of that time: SS *Brigadeführer* and Major General of the Waffen-SS Ernst Fick wrote quite openly about the compulsion to act that made Muslims in the above-mentioned border regions “voluntarily” join the ranks of the Waffen-SS: “The Mohamedans, who were generally fought by Cetniks [sic] and Ustashes, go in part inevitably to the Freiw[illige] Verbände of the SS or the Partisans, in order not to continue to be murdered by Ustashes, Cetniks [sic] and Partisans”.⁸⁷

As the approaching end became apparent, desertions increased rapidly, the path leading to national gangs that did not collaborate with Germany, to the Yugoslav or Albanian communist partisans; again, often in a transnational manner. Already in Operation *Draufgaenger* in July 1944 more than 400 German troops deserted, mainly ethnic Albanians, and defected to the partisans.⁸⁸ In addition, in early autumn 1944 another event revealed the weaknesses of the German occupiers. On their way back to the “Reich” while crossing the borderlands of *Greater Albania* and entering Kosovo, a convoy of German women was attacked by communist partisans, probably commanded by Fadil Hoxha. 22 of the 40 German women who were attacked, died and some were taken hostage for ransom. The single-minded national allies of the Germans did not help them but rather behaved passively. The attack of the communist partisans as well as the passivity of former German allies can be seen as an act of retaliation, for the hanging of several Kosovar women of the Communist resistance by Schmidhuber’s men in August 1944. Hoxha demanded gold for the women’s freedom, the release of Communist prisoners, as well as the release of the British general Davies.⁸⁹

The German Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS were increasingly tangled up in a three-front-running battle, particularly in the Kosovo region:

Memories of Violence in the Balkans, ed. Franziska Zaugg and Jovo Miladinović, special issue, *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies* VI (2021), 19-50.

⁸⁶ Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs*, 87.

⁸⁷ SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS Ernst Fick an Himmler, 16 March 1944, BArehB, NS 19/2601, 82.

⁸⁸ Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg*, 506.

⁸⁹ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS*, 273-274. Mitteilung Schliep (in Kitzbühel) über AA an Neubacher, 22 October 1944, PAAA, Handakten Botschafter Ritter, R27772.

Yugoslav partisans from Montenegrin Sandžak and Kosovo, Albanian communists mostly from the South and from the territory east of Priština/Prishtina a Bulgarian-Macedonian communist unit.⁹⁰ In the bordering territory of Kosovo, in Tetovo-Gostivar, in September 1944, 1,000 men of the SS *Skanderbeg* Division, most of them from Sandžak and Kosovo, deserted to the Communist partisans in a single day.⁹¹ However, the decision of other factions, like the *Balli Kombëtar* and *Zogist* movements, to fight the invaders came too late. The Communist won this interim battle when General Davies, shortly before his capture, proclaimed exclusive support for the communist partisans.⁹²

In this complex puzzle of shifting loyalties, we can make the distinction between individual and group as the only constant. For in the partially traditional societies in the region under study, it was not always an individual decision that led to support for one side or the other –like Nir Krasniqi who, as an ethnic Albanian, had served in the Yugoslav army in the spring of 1941 and had thus become a German prisoner of war. He was given the opportunity to come out of captivity to serve with the SS *Skanderbeg* division in the border area between Kosovo (as part of *Greater Albania*), Serbia, and Montenegro. He himself stayed until the end; others deserted at the first opportunity.⁹³

Often, however, it was not an individual decision, but a clan chief who decided for the whole group –the tribe– as seen in the case of Muharrem Bajraktari, for example. With Bajraktari it comes back to the very beginning of the article, because his clan area, the Luma, had also been divided by the Great Powers between Albania and Serbia already in 1913. A transnational approach and changing loyalties were therefore not a novelty for him, but part of everyday life. There are many examples of such changes. Historian Hubert Neuwirth also emphasizes that the decision to collaborate or to resist one of the occupying powers was often not only an ideological-political decision, but that family and clan components could also be decisive. With this behaviour, which was difficult for Western Europeans to understand in its vicissitude, the inhabitants of the investigated region unsettled not only the Italians, but later also the Germans and the British.⁹⁴ According to him, every conceivable combination of attitudes or intentions was possible, which could trigger the decision to collaborate with the Italians and/or the Germans or to fight them. He distinguishes ten different combinations and confirms that behaviour could change

⁹⁰ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS*, 259.

⁹¹ „Zusammenfassender Bericht“ Schmidhuber, 10/2/1944, BArchF, RS 3-21/1, 7.

⁹² Fischer, Bernd J., *Albania at War, 1939–1945* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), 204.

⁹³ Interview with Tush Mark Ndou (conducted by Franziska Zaugg), 7 June 2017.

⁹⁴ Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration*, 20-21, 31-38, 82.

depending on how the political situation developed for the individual group.⁹⁵

9. Conclusion

The resistance movements of Sandžak and Kosovo as well as the groups collaborating with the occupying forces help us understand, in a concentrated form, the complexities and various shades of grey of resistance and collaboration in World War II. They had to cope with three dimensions of conflict: the Second World War as a global conflict; the partisan war against the Fascist and Nazi invaders as a transnational clash; and a local civil war. At all levels it was a war that was also waged against civilians, and at the lowest level also against own neighbours. The interests at a macro-, meso-, and micro level differed greatly in some cases and ultimately threatened the co-existence of the local population. This situation emerged because international powers, both the Axis and the Allies, had their own interests in the Balkans, which only partially coincided with those of local powers, states such as Serbia, the NDH Croatia, *Greater Albania* or local elites such as clan chiefs and urban notables. While in the case of the great powers it were rather geostrategic thoughts and the search for human and mineral resources that guided their actions, local elites harboured very concrete plans of what their country should look like after the Second World War. These motivations shaped the specific action on the ground by recruiting certain population groups for military purposes.

Those who suffered most were the local population, especially children, the elderly, and women, who had little mobility and no means of arming themselves. The complex, multi-faceted puzzle of diverse groups and the decision to join one side or the other needs to be viewed against this background. This means that the motives, such as the threat from other armed groups or a precarious economic situation, must be considered just as much or even more as political conviction.

In most cases, alliances were often made in a short-term sense –meaning that even unlikely bonds between *etnik* formations and nationalist Muslims were possible. Borders did not play a role in these decisions– first, because borders in the studied region would change occasionally, second, because borderlines in the dense nature were neither constantly guarded and thus not necessarily perceived, and last but not least, because the people concerned did not choose their groups according to national patterns, but often according to ethnic affiliations as well as due to the proximity and the potential of a group to protect, arm and train them.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 31-32.

Transnational experiences were thus not the exception, but a facet of everyday life in the Sandžak region and Kosovo. The ascertained attempts of divergent resistance factions to build and consolidate multilateral alliances against one threat, namely the German and Italian oppressors, prove their basic understanding for concentration of force. But here, too, the British SOE, as the arm of an international power, supported the resistance with knowledge, training and armament. We find failure of the creation of such umbrella organizations mainly at the meso-level, namely the local elites. For all these groups pursued long-term political, ideological, or personal aims as well—especially relating to the future borders and the political system after the war. And in their planned post-war orders, transnational orientation and exchange was neither justified nor welcome.

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