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**BCMh Summer Conference 2009:
Workshop 3 – Small Wars in a Great War**

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French Resistance revisited

Dr Steffen Prauser

Report by Andy Grainger

Dr Prauser has viewed the changing perspectives on French resistance to the German occupation of France in three timeframes; the 1970s, 1970-1990 and from the 1990s:

1. 1970s. Gaullism versus Communism. Did all agree that 40 million people supported resistance even if they didn't take part?
2. 1970-1990. This period saw the death of Charles de Gaulle in 1970. Following the famous film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* by Marcel Ophüls (1969) there was much more discussion about collaboration. Robert Paxton's book on the subject is published in 1972¹.
3. 1990s onwards. The Resistance fighters are dying out and France opened the Second World War archives.

From 1940 mainland France was occupied by the Germans. Other than for intelligence purposes, the Free French were disinterested. Up until 1941 there were only 29 agents under Col Passy who was an engineer, therefore not a professional intelligence officer. For communication only very large and bulky radio sets were available.

How to become a resistant? The army was crushed and the church actually became more powerful. Trade Unions adapted. The political parties generally supported Pétain or disappeared.

- Individual initiatives - 'absurd refusal' [to collaborate] seems ridiculous.
- escape routes created for POWs and airmen
 - some gather intelligence
 - some appeal to morale using clandestine newspapers

During the last 15 years much new research has been done on the attitude to Vichy France. The population was mostly behind Pétain. Vichy is traditionally viewed as the enemy of the left, but not of many other groups. The Vichy Intelligence Service leads Vichy resistance; gathering intelligence against the Germans. Indeed some German spies were executed.

Communist resistance is a myth during 1940. The Communists negotiate with the Germans resulting in the Nazi-Soviet pact. The appeal is to the working classes to fraternise with the Germans; all workers together so to speak. The Communists do oppose Vichy but try to deal with the Germans as well.

¹ Paxton is best known for his 1972 book "Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944," in which he argued that Vichy collaboration with Germany was a voluntary program entered into by the Vichy government, not forced upon it by German pressure. This book is considered one of the pathbreaking works on France during the World War II Vichy era, whose thesis has earned respect amongst both American and French modern historians. http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Robert_Paxton



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But by 1941 a big change is taking place with German soldiers being killed. Up until November 1942 there are only limited numbers of people in the Resistance. That changes after 8 November when the Germans occupy the Zone Libre. Pétain and Vichy are discredited when Pétain fails to react. The fleet is scuttled, the empire lost and the Armistice Army is dissolved with some men and arms going over to the Resistance.

The Americans firstly backed Darlan and then Giraud who was a supporter of the Vichy government. De Gaulle was backed subsequently but by then he had an imperative to get domestic support. In the autumn of 1941, Jean Moulin (a prefect) went to London to meet de Gaulle who asked him to visit Resistance groups in France; he made two missions. The Resistance becomes united but attracts people that are too far to the right and left.

After November 1942, the Germans try to round up young men to work (Service Travail Obligatoire) but around 20,000 evade capture and run away to the hills and become the beginnings of the Maquis. By 1943 they are becoming a military problem; attacking police posts to capture weapons and clothing.

During 1943, diverse groups founded a newspaper or intelligence organisation resulting in a secret army and police force; recruiting police in prisons to build up intelligence and organise jail breaks. There are more SOE arms drops and sabotage. Around 1000 telegrams a day were received from France.

By 1944 there is still the problem of not enough weapons, the Maquis are hard to find and treason is a big problem. The only resistance group which was not betrayed was in Germany. The three open battles fought by the Maquis in 1944 at Glières (March), Mont Mouchet (May-June) and Vercors (June-July) were all disasters.

The real effectiveness of the Maquis was in:

- Intelligence – a factor but probably overemphasised.
- Escape routes for airmen
- Sabotage to the railway network although it is unclear how much was due to bombing as opposed to sabotage.

D-Day – telephone lines, blowing bridges, attacks on troops, but again unclear how effective this was.

- FFI do some safeguarding

- only five of 212 main towns were 'self-liberated' i.e. by resistance groups.

But the resistance had a strong social and political influence, particularly post war.

The resistance was active in counter propaganda. By 1944 de Gaulle is a voice whose authority is accepted and civil war is averted unlike in Greece or Yugoslavia. Social reform begins.



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International

France remained active in the war and avoided allied occupation afterwards; also becoming a great power in the UN Zone.



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Was Belarus a Partisan Republic?

Resistance and Cooperation by the Belarusian Population during the Nazi

Occupation of 1941 – 1944

Dr. Olga Baranova

During the Second World War many European countries suffered military occupation by Nazi Germany, but very few of them were as hard-hit as the republics of the western borderlands of the Soviet Union, especially Belarus. For Belarus war had disastrous consequences and the German occupation inflicted the most tremendous human and material losses in its history. Due to its geographical position Belarus experienced two movements of the front through its territory. By the time of the liberation in July 1944 the population of Belarus had diminished by 2.5 million people, a figure which corresponded to almost 30 percent of the pre-war population.² More people died from indirect effects of German rule as opposed to direct combat and executions, while the Jewish population of Belarus was almost wholly eliminated. The national economy was left in ruins: by 1945 the industrial capacity of the country was reduced to just 20 percent of its pre-war level, while agriculture and the cattle population was about 30 percent of the pre-war level.³ Most cities and towns, including the capital Minsk, and large regional centers such as Vitebsk, Brest, Grodno, Mogilev and Gomel, lay in ruins. Several thousand kilometers of railroads and bridges were completely destroyed due to enemy and partisan actions; entire villages were burned down as retaliation by the German occupiers during anti-partisan operations. An American observer, after six months of travel across Belarus, called it “the most devastated by war territory in the world.”⁴ Reflection on the tremendous scale of human losses and the disastrous destruction of the country’s economy during the war leads us to understand the importance of reconstructing the complete picture of events on the occupied territory of Belarus, and of reevaluating the experience of the

² It is difficult to establish the exact number of human losses in Belarus during the period of the Second World War. The standard claim of Soviet historiography was that one in four residents of Belarus perished during the war, and the figure of 2.2 million people killed in Belarus was officially accepted. This number included 1,409,225 civilians -“peaceful inhabitants” - and 810,091 military casualties including Soviet prisoners of war who perished in camps. These numbers appeared originally in the report of the Extraordinary Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the German Fascist Occupiers for 1944. See Ivan Kravchenko, *Nemetsko-fashistskij okkupatsionnyj rezhim v Belorussii*, in *Nemetsko-fashistskij okkupatsionnyj rezhim, 1941 – 1944 gg.*, Evgenij Boltin et al. (ed.). Moscow: Izd. Politicheskoy literatury, 1965, p. 63. Belarusian historian Alexej Litvin estimates the number of Belarussian losses at between 1,95 and 2 million people. This number includes Belarussians who perished on Belarussian territory both at the front and in the course of forced labor in Germany. See Anatol Litvin, *K voprosu o kolichestve ljudskih poter Belarusi v gody Velikoj Otechestvennoj voiny, 1941-1945 gg.* in *Belarus u XX stogodzi*, Yakov Basin (ed.) Minsk, 2002, pp. 136 - 137.

³ Polish historian Jerzy Turonek blames Soviet authorities as much as the Germans for the deliberate destruction of the Belarussian economy in the first weeks of the war. Turonek states that the greatest destruction of Belarussian industry occurred as a result of the evacuation to the east of machines and equipment, that the destruction of agriculture was the result of the Soviet scorched earth policy and that partisan activity led to the elimination of small enterprises and farms in the periphery. See Jerzy Turonek, *Belarus pad niametskaj akupatsiej*. Minsk, Belarus, 1993, p. 198.

⁴ *Belarus: A Country Study*, Helen Fedor (ed.), Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995 from <http://www.countrystudies.us/belarus/10.htm>. URL accessed on 13 March 2008.



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resistance movement as well as the motives and considerations of those who cooperated with the occupation authorities.

The Nazi occupation during the Second World War meant for the peoples of various European countries that they had to face the dilemma of whether to resist and oppose the German forces or to try to accommodate and cooperate (in some cases this cooperation took forms of collaboration) with the occupation authorities. For the population of the Republics of the western borderlands of the Soviet Union where the occupation was extremely brutal, where it was motivated not only by economic and geopolitical goals but also by racial ideology, the dilemma of resistance and cooperation was even more pronounced. During the occupation several nations were split, pitching resistance fighters against collaborators in internal conflicts, which profoundly affected post-war history, and, in many places such as the Baltic States and Ukraine to this day influences politics and remains the subject of bitter debate. The problem of how to behave toward an occupation force, or toward one's own regime when experienced as tyrannical, continues to be an acute one, and is worth being reevaluated.

The fact that by the end of the war the resistance movement in Belarus was the second-largest in Europe, after that of Tito in Yugoslavia, led the historian Gerald Reitlinger to remark that the history of Belarus under German occupation "must be sought in the annals of partisan warfare."⁵ However, in addition to the strong resistance, especially during the second stage of the war, there were Belarusian indigenous institutions, public organizations and some individuals: pre-war émigrés, indigenous nationalists and some other representatives of various, national, social and religious groups, who assisted the occupiers, some willingly on the bases of their political aspirations, others with a certain degree of reservation, in the implementation of the Nazi occupation policies. Reactions and responses of local Belarusian residents to the occupation, especially at the initial stage of the war, and their interaction with the German authorities, which took various forms and were expressed in different fields, is an important subjects of research.

In my research I distinguished three main categories of people who from different motives, interests and considerations interacted and cooperated with the German authorities on the occupied territory of Belarus. Nevertheless, this distinction remains purely theoretical and conditional since the motives and considerations of people were often much more complex, interconnected, interwoven and changing over times.

The first category includes Belarusian nationalists who were in open political opposition to Bolshevism and the Soviet regime, some of whom were representatives of the intelligentsia, members of counterrevolutionary parties, monarchists or officers of the White Army, who after the October Revolution and the Civil War in Russia had to emigrate and seek political asylum and later, during the German occupation, seized the opportunity to return to Belarus and to resume their political activities. Many Belarusian nationalist émigrés had never been Soviet citizens, for them this regime lacked legitimacy, and they never expressed their

⁵ Gerald Reitlinger, *The House Built on Sand*, New York: Viking, 1960, p. 155 cited in Leonid Rein, *Local Collaboration in the Execution of the Final Solution in Nazi-Occupied Belorussia*. \ Holocaust and Genocide Studies, V20 N3, Winter 2006, p. 382.



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allegiance to this state, therefore, these people can not be accused of “treason” with regard to the USSR or “betrayal of the motherland”, with which collaboration was often associated during the Soviet era. The aspirations of Belarusian nationalists were to obtain, with the help of the occupying authorities, a Belarusian independent state with its own government and armed forces. This category of people can be defined as unconditional political collaborators. It does not mean that they totally shared National-Socialist ideology, but they perceived the collaboration with Nazi Germany as the only way to obtain the independence of Belarus. Therefore, despite the fact that they were disappointed and disillusioned by the German occupations policies, their affiliation with the German authorities remained almost unchanged and unflinching from the beginning of the occupation to the end of the war.

Probably the most notable Belarusian political collaborator was Ivan Ermachenko. His biography is very interesting. He was born in Borisov district, close to Minsk in Belarus, but then he moved to Russia. He was a monarchist and after graduating from the Senior Officers’ School in Moscow he served in the Russian Tsarist Army during the First World War. During the Civil War Ermachenko served as an adjutant in the White Army headed by General Wrangel and fought against Red Bolsheviks. In 1920 he fled to Constantinople where, on a commission from the government of the Belarusian People’s Republic (Belaruskaya Narodnaya Respublika BNR)⁶ he fulfilled the duties of consul general in the Balkans. In 1922, he moved to Czechoslovakia where he graduated from the medical department of Prague University and practiced as a surgeon. There, in Prague he started to participate in political activities in the Belarusian émigré community. From 1937 he became an active adherent of Belarusian national ideas and a supporter of Belarusian-German cooperation. He became a leader of the Prague filial of the Belarusian Self-Assistance Committee. At the beginning of the Nazi occupation, Ermachenko returned to Belarus and in October 1941 he was appointed head of the Belarusian People’s Self-Assistance (Belaruskaya Narodnaya Samapomasch BNS)⁷ in Minsk. In June 1942 Ermachenko became the chief speaker and adviser on Belarusian affairs to the Generalkommissar für Weißruthenien, Wilhelm Kube. In the spring of 1943 he was accused of illegal operations, arrested and dismissed by the German authorities from his positions. He returned to Prague, and after the Second World War he emigrated to the USA where he died in 1970.

Another important figure of Belarusian political collaboration was Radislav Ostrowsky (in Belarusian transcription - Radislau Astrousky). He was born in Slutsk district in Belarus, but moved to Russia and graduated from Saint Petersburg University. He returned to Belarus and in the period of the October Revolution he became an active political figure in Minsk, and in 1918 he became a Belarusian People’s Republic Minister of Education. During the Civil War

⁶ Belarusian People’s Republic BNR was proclaimed on 25 March of 1918 by a group of Belarusian nationalists under the German protectorate at the end of the First World War. Actually it was the first example of collaboration by Belarusian nationalists with the occupying German authorities in 1918, which set a precedent. However, after the withdrawal of the German troops the BNR collapsed under the onslaught of the Bolshevik army. In December 1918 Belarusian nationalists - members of BNR government fled from Minsk and took refuge first in Vilna and then headed west to Germany and Czechoslovakia where they formed a Belarusian government in exile, which they claimed represented the legitimate Belarusian state.

⁷ Belarusian People’s Self-Assistance BNS was a the public collaborationist organization created by Germans on 22 October 1941 that represented a kind of indigenous “advisory committee” to the Generalkommissar für Weißruthenien.



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he served in the White Army. From 1924 to 1936, Ostrowsky worked as the director of a high school in Vilna in Western Belarus that since 1921 became Polish territory. He was a member of the leadership of the Belarusian Peasants and Workers Party Hramada and a member of the Polish Parliament (*Sejm*) where he represented the Belarusian national minority in the Polish state. In 1926 he became an active member of the Communist Party of Western Belarus. In 1927 he was arrested by the Polish secret police and accused of being a Soviet agent. After his return to Eastern Belarus that was a part of the Soviet Union, he was arrested again and imprisoned this time as a Polish spy. Ostrowsky felt to be betrayed by both Poles and Soviets, and after his release he changed his political views and became a supporter of the idea of Belarusian cooperation with Nazi Germany. During the occupation of Belarus, Ostrowsky was appointed a mayor of Smolensk and in December 1943 he was elected as the President of the Belarusian Central Council (Belaruskaya Centralnaya Rada BCR). In July 1944 after the liberation of Belarus by Soviet troops he fled to Germany and from there he emigrated to the USA where he continued his political activity in the Belarusian emigrant community and died in 1976.⁸

After the war some Belarusian collaborators who emigrated to the USA and Canada wrote memoirs where they presented their version of the war events. In these writings they preferred to play down their participation in German atrocities highlighting instead their work to secure Belarusian national independence.

It is important to highlight that despite geographical proximity and similar historical development, the Belarusian case differed from those of the Baltic States and the Ukraine. Owing to the weakness of the Belarusian nationalist movement, which began to develop only at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as the low development of the local population's national consciousness, political collaboration in Belarus did not achieve such a scale of popular involvement as it did in Lithuania, Latvia or Western Ukraine.

The fact that in the course of its history a large proportion of the Belarusian population experienced frequent changes of sovereign and political regimes that were beyond its will and control significantly influenced the formation of political culture and political behavior in Belarusian society. The repressive policies of the Polish government regarding national minorities followed by the political upheavals and establishment of Soviet rule with its attendant collectivization, nationalization, repressions and deportations prevented the emergence of a true civil society in Belarus, producing instead a society indifferent to politics and almost unable to offer civic resistance. Belarusian people were required to accommodate themselves first to Polish rule and then to the Soviet regime without necessarily feeling any obligation or allegiance to these systems. Thus, it may not be too much to say that furthermore, under the German occupation, they were likely to accommodate themselves expressing the same "allegiance" to the German occupation authorities. Moreover, the prolonged crises in occupied society and the initial inability of the Soviet authorities to protect their own citizens led the population of the western borderlands of the Soviet Union to feel abandoned, which contributed to its alienation from the Soviet cause.

⁸ See Jerzy Turonek, *Belarus pad nyametskaj akupaciyaj* (Belarus under the German occupation) Minsk, 1993.



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The second category includes some Belarusians (especially from the western - former Polish-part of the country) who did not accept Soviet economic and cultural arrangements and hoped that the German occupation authorities would conduct more favorable policies. This group also included people who bore resentments against the Soviet regime: those who had lost family members, property and land during Stalin's deportations, various political repressions and the process of dekulakisation (dispossession of *kulaks*). These people can be defined as conditional cooperators: they supported the occupying power with a certain degree of reservation. Many of them aimed to improve their social and economic status in comparison with the previous regime, thus their attitudes towards the occupying power were shaped by the desire to gain revenge for the misdeeds of Soviet rule as well as pragmatic considerations and calculations of which authority would provide the better conditions.

The third group includes the great majority of the civilian population of Belarus, often women with children, old people or juveniles who were not mobilized and remained in the rear. These people simply wanted to survive the war, they feared for their own lives as well as the fate of their family members, friends and neighbors, and for them cooperation was often the choice that provided the best chance for survival. For civilian residents living on the territories under occupation, failure to obey, to carry out orders and to cooperate: to work for administration or in the enterprises opened by the Nazis or to produce food for the German Army, could entail swift and harsh reprisals, while for prisoners of war the alternative to military service in the interest of the occupying power was often starvation and suffering in POW camps. Intimidation and constraints were often the main tools used by both Germans and partisans to make people cooperate.

From the end of 1942 it became particularly difficult for civilian population to elaborate any successful survival strategy since many areas of Belarus had become so called 'twilight zones' where neither Germans nor partisans were dominant and could guarantee protection. The indigenous population was often caught up in the partisans' retributive measures against those who supported the Germans. Partisans intimidated the local population by killing local elders, policemen and civilians suspected of cooperation and by the threat of post-war retributions against those who fulfilled German orders and their families. While the Germans in their turn harshly punished those who were suspected of supporting the partisans; their retributions were swift and collective bringing costly reprisals upon a great number of innocent civilians.

The question may be raised whether this last group of people can be categorized as actual willing supporters of the occupation regime. British scholar Werner Rings in his analyses of different forms of collaboration in Western Europe, in order to describe this last category of people, provided the term "neutral collaboration".⁹ Nevertheless, if we define "collaboration" as a willing, deliberate cooperation, or activity undertaken out of conviction in the interest of the occupying power, the notion of "neutral collaboration", "forced collaboration" or "collaboration under constraint and duress" becomes a contradiction in terms. In a situation that was beyond people's control they merely sought to survive, and in pursuing this aim they

⁹ Werner Rings, *Life with the Enemy. Collaboration and Resistance in Hitler's Europe 1939 – 1945*, New York: Garden City, 1982, p. 5.



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were forced to obey and assist the occupying power without being willing cooperators or collaborators. The same approach and argumentation may be equally relevant and appropriate when we discuss the resistance activities. It is also mistaken to suggest that people, who gave their support to the partisans under duress or threat of retribution were real resistance fighters who provided their conscious and free support to the Soviet authority.

In this respect it becomes important to evaluate the degree of coercion and actual willingness, the lack of positive alternatives and the kind of service that was provided in the interest of the occupying power. Nevertheless, it is not always easy to trace the true motivation behind the person's choice to cooperate with the occupying authorities. There were cases when individuals accepted high positions in the local administration appointed by the Germans (village elders, mayors, policemen, members of *Judenrat*, and so on) with the intention of protecting "their own people", of saving the community from destruction and were simultaneously secretly providing aid and information to the resistance.

However, one should also assume that in many cases the motivation behind the cooperation of some local Belarusians with the German occupation authorities was determined by a rational choice or pure opportunism and did not have anything to do with nationalistic aspirations, disaffection with pre-war Soviet rule or direct constraints and intimidation. For the denunciation of Jews, the Germans offered material rewards such as land or part of a confiscated Jewish property, while service in the auxiliary police could provide social advancement and improvement of one's economic situation. Thus we might assume that in many cases the choice of cooperation was not a matter of attitudes towards the occupying power or the Soviet regime, but more concerned the intentions of individuals, which were changing over the time.

It's important to mention that the potential for cooperation varied between different social age and religious groups in Belarusian society. For example the upper-class peasantry, the older generation that remembered Tsarist times and religious believers were less attached to the Soviet regime than urban population, industrial workers and the younger generation, especially those Komsomol members and atheists who were educated on Soviet slogans and thus often were strong supporters of the Soviet side.

The facts relating to cooperation between Soviet citizens and the German invaders were largely neglected and hidden for ideological reasons during the Soviet era. Whilst doggedly prosecuting and punishing those suspected of "collaboration" as traitors in the post-war period, the Soviet government was reluctant to acknowledge publicly that this war-time phenomenon took place on Soviet territories during the occupation. It refused to divulge the real scale of this movement and to openly analyze its origins and meaning or, even if the issue was cursorily mentioned, it sought to diminish the significance of this phenomenon.

Probably the only work of the Soviet period that took collaboration as a central subject is the book by Belarusian historian W. Romanowskiy's "*Saudzelniki u zlachynstvah*" (Accomplices in Committing the Crimes) published in 1964. The author analyses the activity and structure of collaborationist public organizations such as *Belaruskaya Narodnaya Samapomasch* (the Belarusian People Self-Assistance), *Belaruskaya Rada Daveru* (the Belarusian Trust Council)



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and *Belaruskaya Centralnaya Rada* (the Belarusian Central Council), and special attention is dedicated to the activity of Belarusian nationalists during the period of occupation and to their post-war fates.¹⁰ Although the author managed to collect important factual material on the activity of Belarusian political and administrative collaborators, according to ideological dogmas, he subjected everything connected to these activities to annihilating criticism without trying to understand the motives and real reasons for the behavior of those who were working for the German authorities.

At the same time the issue of “collaboration” was equally a source of embarrassment for émigré historians, often former supporters of the German cause, who in their writings, for understandable reasons, preferred to play down the facts of participation of their compatriots and companions-in-arms in German atrocities, highlighting instead their work to secure national independence whilst stressing the limited alternatives that were available to them.

The main themes of the Soviet historiography were the partisan movement and the degree of popular support for the Soviet war effort, the inhumanity of the occupying German forces, the heroism of the Soviet people, the leading role of the Communist Party organisations in the struggle against the invader. In this respect the terminology that was used by Soviet historiography to describe the war is very revealing. The Soviet government played strongly on the patriotic theme: for example the war was called the Great Patriotic War. The famous Soviet three-volume work on the war prepared by the Academy of Science of the BSSR was entitled “*Vsenarodnaya borba v Belorussii protiv nemetsko-fashistskih zahvatchikov v gody Velikoj Otechestvennoj voiny*” (The All-People’s Struggle in Belorussia against the German–Fascist Invaders during the Great Patriotic War), while the book by the head of the Central Headquarters of the Partisans’ Movement, Ponkrat Ponomarenko, has a similar title “*Vsenarodnaya borba v tylu nemetsko-fashistskih zahvatchikov*” (The Popular Struggle in the Rear of the German–Fascist Occupiers). The terms “popular” or “all-people’s” struggle stress the notion of the common interests of all peoples of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Government and the Communist Party in this combined struggle against the foreign invader. On the other hand, the terms “fascist occupiers” or “German invaders” raise the expectation that the only response could have been opposition and resistance. The Soviet historiography that was selective and served clear propaganda purposes, attempted to stress the popular support of the partisans and to present the struggle entirely as a “people’s war”.

According to the accounts of Soviet historiography the resistance movement, led in a masterly fashion by the Communist Party, was a genuine all-people struggle against the invader wholeheartedly supported by the entire civilian population of the occupied territories from the first days of the invasion. The studies by American historian John Armstrong and British scholar Alexander Hill, however, provide a counter argument and assert that during the first months of the war the small dispersed partisan units, hastily established before the Soviet retreat, encountered serious problems with provisions, armament and ammunition, did not draw significantly on local recruitment and, moreover, in some areas their activities even provoked hostile reactions from the civilian population.¹¹

¹⁰ W. Romanowskiy. *Saudzelniki u zlachynstvah*, Minsk, 1964.



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Thus the question may be raised whether the struggle which emerged in Belarus during the Nazi occupation had elements of a “people’s war”, where the population took an active part in the struggle against the invader, or whether it had more elements of conventional war, where the resistance was led and supported by the Soviet government and Party without strong involvement by the local population.

After the analyses of a wide range of documents it becomes evident that at least initially, there was no basis for the idea of a “people’s war” in Belarus for several reasons. The disaffection of several social and ethnic groups with pre-war Soviet rule contributed to the fact that during the first months of the war the local Belarusian population not only offered very limited resistance to the invader, but, especially in the western part of Belarus, even greeted the German troops and celebrated liberation from Bolshevik oppression. Another reason for the relatively friendly reception accorded to the German troops by the local Belarusian population was the positive memories of the previous German occupation in 1917, during the First World War, when the Germans not only behaved correctly towards the indigenous population but also supported and patronized several national projects. Moreover, this unwillingness to resist could be explained also by the initial shock, confusion, inertia and in the majority of cases practical inability to fight the armed invader. On the one hand the type of warfare practised by the Germans, the ruthless control imposed on the occupied area and swift reprisals made a popular-based resistance movement almost impossible. In addition, the evacuation eastward of the most pro-Soviet elements – party officials – during the first months of the war meant that there was little base around which a popular war of resistance could be organized. Therefore, what emerged in Belarus was a partisan struggle which initially derived its support not from the people so much as from the Soviet government, and was sponsored by the Soviet state and Party, to which the population then gave their support as the war progressed.

Moreover, my research questions not only the Soviet presentation of the development of the resistance movement, but also the motives why people joined it. It acknowledges the fact that from 1943 onwards Belarus, indeed became in the end to all intents and purposes a “partisan republic,” but it raises the question whether the growth of the resistance movement in the second stage of the war was a consequence of the rise of Soviet patriotism and ideological enthusiasm or simply the result of the negative experience with the German occupation authorities, who failed to satisfy popular grievances in the rear, rational choice, people’s pragmatic calculations of who would win the war and the threat of post-war retributions? The German cruelty, physical abuse, the brutal methods of anti-partisan warfare, which included collective reprisals and the burning of entire villages with civilians, the atrocities of the *SD Einsatzgruppen* against Jews, extensive requisitioning of provisions for German troops, accompanied by the pillaging of the local population, the compulsory recruitment and transfer of young Belarusians to Germany as forced labor instilled terror in the civilian population and were fundamental to causing the change in attitude towards the Germans from friendliness or neutrality to hostility.

¹¹ See John A. Armstrong, *Soviet partisans in World War II*. Madison, the University of Wisconsin Press, 1964 and Alexander Hill, *The War Behind the Eastern Front. The Soviet Partisan Movement in North –West Russia, 1941 – 1944*, Frank Cass, London, 2005.



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Other key factors underlying the massive transition from collaboration to resistance and the dramatic increase in the size of partisan units at the end of 1943 were firstly the clear understanding that the Germans were losing the war and were desperately seeking to remove what they could in human and material terms from the occupied territory; secondly there was no doubt that the Soviet regime would be victorious and thirdly, responding to the Soviet propaganda that offered amnesty for those who willingly joined the resistance, many reevaluated their previous considerations and realized that by going over to the partisans they probably could redeem themselves, avoid post-war retributions and improve their life chances.



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“Let them slaughter each other”? German and Italian Army Collaboration with the Chetniks in the Independent State of Croatia

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After the *Wehrmacht* had defeated Yugoslavia in a *Blitzkrieg*, the Axis powers partitioned it and occupied most of its territory. They furthermore created the so called “*Independent State of Croatia*” (NDH). That puppet Croatian state consisted of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and was governed by the fascist Ustasha but the Independent State of Croatia relied on the protection of Italy and more important of Germany for the whole time of its existence. Officially it was allied with the Axis, but Germany and Italy divided it into their spheres of influence: Germany received the northern part and Italy the southern part with the Adriatic coast. Both parts were subsequently occupied by the respective armies. After the Italian army surrendered on September 8, 1943 the Germans extended their occupation to former Italian territory. Although stationed in an allied state, the occupiers faced two different resistance groups threatening them as well as the Croatian state: communist Partisans and nationalist Chetniks. However, The Chetniks soon started to collaborate with the occupiers thus slowly transforming themselves from resistance to a collaboration movement.

The main factors for this transformation lay in the nature of the Chetnik movement and in the existence of Partisans with whom they competed for power in post-war Yugoslavia. The aims of the Chetniks regarding the collaboration were clear: receiving as many weapons, ammunition and provisions as possible and protecting the Serbian population. Thus for Chetniks it was a tactical cooperation which should have provided them with better chances for establishing their order after the war.

A comparison of Italian and German reasons for and against cooperation with Chetniks reveals some substantial differences. Besides any animosities against and sympathies for the Serbs, there were different political and military reasons. The German and Italian armies approached the situation in completely different ways and thus developed two distinctive strategies towards the Chetniks. Whilst the Germans tended to look for all-embracing answers to the resistance threat posed by the Partisans and Chetniks equally, the Italians preferred partial solutions and cooperated with the Chetniks from the start. This only changed after the Italian surrender, when the German troops were exhausted by guerrilla warfare, discouraged by previous operations that were now seen as ineffective and felt the loss of German dominance in the war. Then a real collaboration with the Chetniks started.

Furthermore, the self-image of German and Italian commanders was different. German commanders distinguished sharply between military and political objectives. They were encouraged to act independently on the battlefield, but when it came to political decisions – and the collaboration with Chetniks was also a highly political decision – a chain of command bound everyone from Hitler and the High Command of the Armed Forces in Berlin to the smallest unit stationed in Croatia. On the other hand Italian commanders in Croatia who were



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also making political decisions acted quite independently regarding the orders from the High Command in Rome.

Finally, collaboration with the Chetniks was dictated by German and Italian interests towards the “Independent State of Croatia”. Germany was in a need of a stable Croatian state in order economically to exploit the region. For a long time, its representatives supported the Croatian government in trying to stabilise it. The Italian commanders acted in an opposite way. As Croatia was regarded as Italy’s ‘*vital space*’ Italians were interested in a weak Croatian state. Having the same objectives made it easier for Italian commanders to establish cooperation with the Chetniks, who were fighting not only against the Partisans but also for Serbian interests against the NDH. And for the same reason Chetniks sought collaboration with the Italians more than with Germans.