

TWO VIEWS OF CIVIL

In a pair of interviews, two former Yugoslav nationals share their views



Editor's note: Built from the wreckage of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of World War I, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was created in 1918. As its original name suggests, the nation that would be renamed Yugoslavia in 1929 was an amalgam of various Balkan ethnic groups. Despite the efforts of many, the uneasy alliance of Serbians, Croats, Slovenians and others ensured the instability of the country when it was invaded by German troops in April 1941. In the wake of the German invasion, the ethnic tensions that had simmered for years just below the surface boiled over, and soon various partisan groups were fighting the Germans—and one another—for control of Yugoslavia.

To get a better picture of the confused and often brutal fighting, Colin Heaton talked with two veterans of what became the largest partisan war in Europe. Each fought on different sides of the struggle. The accounts of the fighting that they provided during interviews conducted in the mid-1980s reveal a good deal about a partisan conflict and bitter civil war that would eventually lead to increased ethnic tensions and the deaths of more than a million Yugoslavians.

LOTHAR PANKOSK

World War II: Where are you from originally?

Lothar Pankosk: I was born in October 1922 in a small village near Zagreb. My parents were Catholics from Sarajevo. They left because of the problems that were starting due to the Communists and the difficulty in finding work. My father was a skilled carpenter, and my mother was a piano teacher. I had only one sister, no brothers, and I was the oldest.

WWII: What was your military background?

Pankosk: I was in the Yugoslav national army, which at the time was a mixture of many different peoples from all over the country. We were not a country until after the end of the First World War, and everyone was thrown together. The military and especially the officer class was dominated by the Serbs and had always been that way. I trained as an artilleryman.

WWII: Did you see any action during the German invasion?

Pankosk: Yes. I had just finished training at age 18 when we

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WAR IN THE BALKANS

on the bloodiest partisan conflict of World War II. *Interviews by Colin D. Heaton*

MILO STAVIC

World War II: When and where were you born?

Milo Stavic: I was born in Belgrade on November 3, 1920.

WWII: What was your family like?

Stavic: My father was a schoolteacher, who taught English, as was my mother, who taught music. She was a classical pianist, a very good one. I had one sister who was killed in 1941 when the Germans bombed Belgrade.

WWII: What was your political position before and during the war?

Stavic: I was rather apolitical—not opposed to the monarchy or supportive of any particular party. I was young and in the university, so there was a lot of student political activity, but I was focused on my studies.

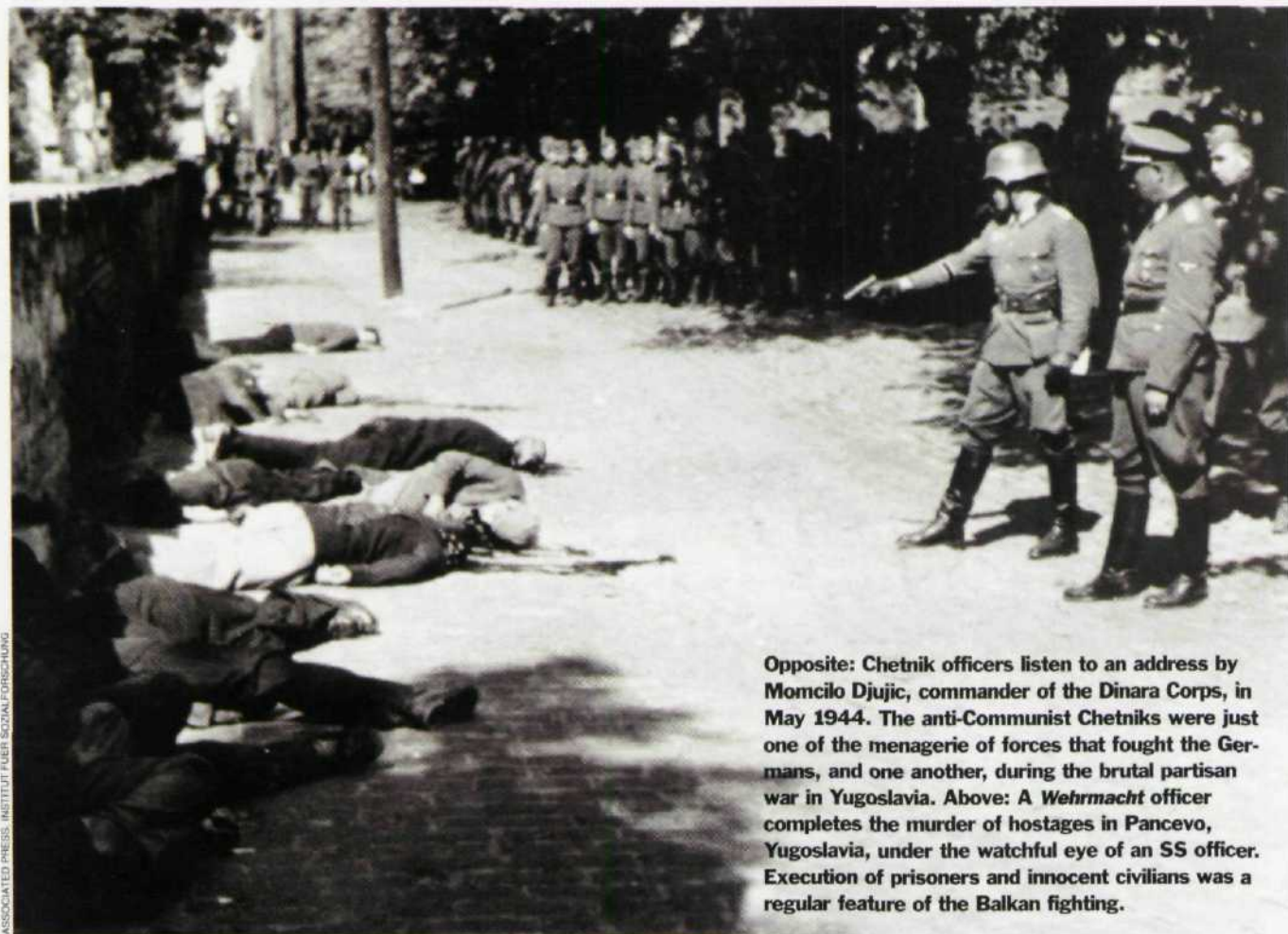
WWII: What were your ambitions?

Stavic: My father taught public school, and I learned English from him. He was educated in England when my grandparents moved there after the start of the First World War. He came back and married his childhood sweetheart, my mother. I wanted to be a professor of languages, since I was also trained in German and Russian. After the war I finished my university education, receiving a master's of philosophy degree, but I never went on to receive a doctorate. Marriage and children became the top priorities. I did teach in the schools.

WWII: What made you decide to become a partisan?

Stavic: Most of us who were nationalists wanted a Yugoslavia free of one-party domination. We were not all necessarily Communists. However, once the Germans invaded the country and

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Opposite: Chetnik officers listen to an address by Momcilo Djujic, commander of the Dinara Corps, in May 1944. The anti-Communist Chetniks were just one of the menagerie of forces that fought the Germans, and one another, during the brutal partisan war in Yugoslavia. **Above:** A Wehrmacht officer completes the murder of hostages in Pancevo, Yugoslavia, under the watchful eye of an SS officer. Execution of prisoners and innocent civilians was a regular feature of the Balkan fighting.

Right: An advertisement appearing in the Yugoslavian Fascist paper *Novo Vreme* offers a 100,000 gold mark reward for the capture, dead or alive, of either the "bandit" Dragoliub "Draja" Mihailovic (left) or the "murderer" Josip Broz Tito (right). Below: Mihailovic (left) was the war minister in the Yugoslav government-in-exile and a supporter of the Yugoslav monarchy. His opponent for the hearts and minds of the Yugoslav people was Tito (right), who led Communist partisans in opposition to both Mihailovic and the Germans (Right and below left: National Archives; Below right: Bettmann/CORBIS).

PANKOSK

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were sent to support the defense of Belgrade, but we were too late. German troops had occupied the capital before we arrived in April 1941. The army surrendered [on April 17, 1941] and the [Josip Broz] Tito government went into the mountains, while the rest went into prisoner of war camps.

WWII: How did you begin fighting with the Germans?

Pankosk: I was in a POW camp in Austria when a German officer came around asking for volunteers, but I don't remember his name. There were perhaps 400 of us in this camp, mostly Croats, as we were segregated by ethnicity. I think that all but a couple of dozen joined, and we were released. We went to a training camp in Döberitz for six weeks, then deployed in Croatia. Our job was to act as an antipartisan auxiliary force, wearing German uniforms if assigned directly to German units; otherwise we wore distinctive civilian clothing. The Germans placed us under the command of a senior officer, and many of the men defected and went to join Colonel [later General] Draja [Dragoliub] Mihailovic's forces [the Chetniks], which were fighting Tito, as well as the Germans.

WWII: How did you feel fighting fellow Yugoslavs?

Pankosk: I personally had no problem with it, since I had witnessed what Tito's Communists had done to the churches and civilians in parts of the country. I personally believed that the Germans were a much lesser evil than Tito. Although we had fought against Tito's guerrillas as pro-Fascist guerrillas, we could [later] respect Tito for maintaining autonomy for Yugoslavia from all Soviet control. This showed the country that he cared about Yugoslavia rather than just the Communist Party. However, I do know that it was the activities of the Soviet military in Eastern Europe and the greedy Stalin who wanted to conquer as opposed to liberate nations. Those fears were proven accurate, as history has shown.

WWII: Weren't the Croats fearful of the German invasion as well?



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Врховни командни
помачких трупа у Србији



Pankosk: No, not at all. President [Ante] Pavelic had an understanding with Hitler, and Hitler made it quite clear that he had no interest in dominating and occupying Croatia, which he considered an ally. However, we, as ethnic Serbs and Bosnians, were initially opposed to the German invasion, and we Chetniks were nationalists who wanted a Yugoslavia of our own. When the Germans invaded and the war increased the division within our ethnic peoples, we soon learned that Tito was requesting support for his Communists from Russia. This was not what we wanted, since we knew that any Soviet assistance meant a possible Soviet government, or at least a Soviet-controlled government, and this was completely unacceptable. Our decision to fight with the Germans stemmed from our belief that we would cease to exist as nationalists if the Communists won. I have no



Left: German soldiers trudge down a rocky hillside in pursuit of Yugoslav partisans. *Wehrmacht* units operating in the Balkans often found that when they were forced to abandon their vehicles and move inland, their partisan opponents could easily outpace them. **Below:** Chetnik partisan leader Petar Bacovic (center, with legs crossed) rests with six of his compatriots. As the struggle for control of Yugoslavia became more and more confused, the Chetniks showed a willingness to fight either the Germans or Yugoslavian Communists.



regrets in my decision to fight the Titoists. I also fought them after the war, and went to Greece to fight the Communists there in their civil war, and I was not alone. It is ironic that historians discuss the genocide of the Jews and Serbs under German rule, yet they conveniently forget the millions killed by the Communists. People were killed who simply wanted to be free and determine their own destiny. We fought for our lives, our land and our people. Nothing else.

WWII: What was the greatest motivation in your fight, since you fought both the Germans and Tito's forces at various times?

Pankosk: Survival, and a country of our own. Tito's people would definitely kill us, while the Germans were concerned about our loyalty on occasion. We could usually count on good treatment.

WWII: How long did you fight with the Chetniks?

Pankosk: I was with the Chetniks for the entire war, from September 1941 until May 1945.

WWII: Were you involved in any of the major activities and operations?

Pankosk: Yes, Operation White in January 1943 and Operation Black in May 1943, as well as operating as a support unit during Operation *Rösselsprung*, the last great attempt to catch Tito and his headquarters staff in January 1944.

WWII: What was Operation White like?

Pankosk: It was a terrible series of running battles—they all were. During Operation White I was assigned to a unit supporting the [SS] *Prinz Eugen* Division, and both sides took heavy casualties at the Battle of the Neretva River. The SS unit had to basically abandon its armored support and use foot infantry, and that was a battle the partisans preferred. They knew the terrain better than the Germans, which was why they wanted us to help. We had better weapons and supplies, but the partisans could move faster and were elusive. The *Luftwaffe* bombed them from the air, blocking their escape routes while we outflanked them. We caught several hundred and a pitched night battle ensued, and the confusion cannot be underestimated. Many soldiers were apparently hit by friendly fire, and some of the Chetniks decided that it was better to attack alone and in their smaller groups. This infuriated the German commander, General [Artur] Phleps, and he ordered all auxiliary units to return to their staging areas. I am not sure what ever came of that.

WWII: I suppose that Operation Black was quite similar?

Pankosk: *Schwarz* [Black] was different. This was a mission designed solely to capture Tito, and we almost did at Kolasin. During the push there were over 100,000 German, Italian, Chetnik and other volunteers involved, and we apparently trapped over 25,000 of Tito's partisans. This erupted into the largest single battle of the entire war in Yugoslavia, I think. Tito still managed to escape, but he left thousands of dead and wounded behind. This was where I was wounded the only time during the war.

WWII: How were you wounded?

Pankosk: The Germans to our left flank were moving in under artillery fire, and we were to push in from the right, a double envelopment. We caught most of the enemy in a large defilade and fired down into the valley with mortars, machine guns, rifles—everything. After four hours we swept down into the valley to kill any survivors unless they were clearly surrendering, which was actually against standing orders. There were to be no prisoners taken, except Tito. Even though we were carrying photographs of Tito for identification purposes, it is unrealistic to expect men in battle to be looking into the face of every enemy to see if he was a certain person. This was crazy, and we decided that capturing someone, anyone, might increase our chances of locating him and his headquarters. This was also difficult be-



PHOTOS: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Top: Mihailovic (center) discusses the progress of his operations with two British liaison officers. For much of the war the British backed Mihailovic because he sought to restore the Yugoslavian royal family. They abandoned him at the end when it became clear that Tito was most likely to emerge victorious during the civil war. **Above:** A third player in the Yugoslav conflict was Ante Pavelic, the Croatian Fascist who led a puppet regime for Hitler.

cause, like a good partisan leader, Tito changed his headquarters all the time, maintaining mobility. Yet we did manage to kill thousands of his followers. I was rolling over dead partisans looking into their faces, although I did not need the photograph. One of the "corpses" I turned over fired a pistol into my shoulder, so I killed him. Unfortunately, at the end of the operation in March the German commander, General Leuthers, ordered all Chetnik units disarmed. They were going to take away all of our weapons because they did not trust us. Many Chetniks deserted after that, and that was when many of us, myself included, began fighting the Germans. Later we were able to patch things up somewhat, but neither side trusted the other very much.

WWII: When did you return to duty?

Pankosk: About three months later, after I healed. I was placed in a convalescent home on Lake Balaton in Hungary, a beautiful place.

WWII: Can you describe the *Rösselsprung* operation?

Pankosk: This was the January 1944 German mission led by [Otto] Skorzeny to finally capture Tito. SS and paratroops landed in gliders and parachutes near his cave headquarters. Tito was wounded, and the Germans exchanged heavy casualties with the partisans. We Chetniks were also involved, although independently, and were trying the same thing. The Germans would occasionally fire on Chetnik units once they were identified. This was what made General Mihailovic so angry, but he was able to negotiate a couple of truces. It was these activities that

would have him branded a traitor and later executed by Tito once the war was over. [Mihailovic was killed by Tito on July 17, 1946.] Many brave Germans died when they were trapped in the mouth of the cave where Tito was hiding, and the battle lasted for a couple of days. Once again I was back with the Germans, following a negotiation by Mihailovic and the German commander, and was assigned to *Prinz Eugen*. We were to relieve the trapped commandos on the mountain, but we had problems of our own and fought a lengthy battle, unable to get to the men in time.

WWII: How did the war end for you?

Pankosk: I was captured by British forces near the Adriatic while trying to escape a group of Tito's men who were hunting for us. We were out of ammunition, and so we decided to take our chances with the British. The officer we spoke with was very understanding of our desire not to be taken by the Communists, and he managed to quietly allow us to obtain German SS uniforms, which was not exactly a move in a better direction. All of the Germans were to be taken either to Czechoslovakia, Austria or Greece, and I went to Austria. There I managed to remove the SS insignia and eventually get a regular army tunic. I spoke German well enough and convinced the interrogators that I was half German and a conscript. I was out of the camp in six months and relocated to Germany. I only returned to Yugoslavia after Tito died in 1981, but I still have a home in Germany.

WWII: Did you ever meet Mihailovic?

Pankosk: Yes, several times, and I liked him as a professional soldier, but I don't think he had the requirements for politics and diplomacy that was necessary in that war. I was also concerned at his ability to shift allegiances to and from the Germans, but respected him for his constant refusal to relinquish his position toward Tito.

WWII: What about Ante Pavelic?

Pankosk: I never met Pavelic, but he was a hero to us, fighting as a politician to prevent the Communists from dominating Croatia, and he will always be remembered as a man who did whatever was necessary to get the job done.

WWII: Pavelic supported—and even ordered—the killings of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, including women and children. Even the German records confirmed this. What was your position on this methodology?

Pankosk: Tito had done the same to us, as well as the Bosnians, killing most of the Catholic and Orthodox clergy, so Pavelic retaliated in kind. Terrible things happen in war, and some tragedies occur. However, we were not the Germans and did not actively do the things against Jews and others, so I don't think that we should be placed in the same category.

WWII: What did you do after the war and your release?

Pankosk: I knew enough carpentry from working with my father, and there was much work and rebuilding after the war in Germany. As long as you were competent and came to work on time, few questions were asked if you spoke with an accent.

WWII: What do you think will happen to Yugoslavia now?

Pankosk: I think that it will tear itself apart again, since there is no unifying factor. Tito may have been a tyrant, but he kept the nation together and free from Moscow's influence, and even criticized their activities in 1956 in Hungary, 1968 in Czechoslovakia and the Afghanistan invasion. He was an outspoken critic, and for that he should be remembered as well as for his past evil deeds.

WWII: Do you have any regrets about the war and your role?

Pankosk: I regret that we were not granted independent status, which would have happened under a German victory. At least the Allies might have been more sensitive to the individual peoples, but politics is not always to the benefit of everyone. With Tito leaning toward the West, his neutrality was a guarantor of NATO and United Nations support. We will see if this remains the case, but I don't think so. □

STAVIC

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Belgrade fell in April 1941 we were forced into action, as Serbs were being killed by Croatian forces. It was this activity that created the great partisan movement, nothing else.

WWII: What was your function as a member of Tito's forces?

Stavic: I had several responsibilities, mostly in intelligence, and this was mainly due to my language skills. I read captured German documents, interrogated prisoners and translated communiqués from the Allies for Tito and the various field commanders. Later, in 1944, I was assigned as one of Tito's bodyguards.

WWII: Why was it that Tito wanted bodyguards in 1944?

Stavic: He always had them, but only two in 1941. It was after 1943 that Tito increased the number of his bodyguards. There were 12 in all when the Germans placed a bounty on Tito, and

in 1944 they began to send elite German units into the region to kidnap or kill him. There were four such missions, and all of them failed. The Germans did not have as good an intelligence network in Yugoslavia as they would have liked.

WWII: Why were you chosen?

Stavic: I was selected because Tito wanted an interpreter who was also trustworthy. By this time there were many SOE [Special Operations Executive] and OSS [Office of Strategic Service] personnel arriving to work with us, Russians too. Unfortunately, there were also several German agents and Chetnik impostors trying to get close to Tito, and these had to be screened carefully. This was my job. I would meet these people and speak with them, to protect Tito.

WWII: What was life like living in the mountains and fighting the enemy?

Stavic: Which enemy? We had nationalist and pro-monarchist Serbs, Croats, the Chetniks under Mihailovic, the Germans—



Above: Tito (center) plans operations against the Germans from one of the remote caves that he used in order to avoid detection by the enemy. **Left:** Yugoslav partisans carry a wounded comrade from the scene of fighting. He is lucky: Milo Stavic remembers that because of inadequate facilities, partisans were often forced to kill their wounded rather than allow them to fall into enemy hands.

the list was long. Life on the run was harsh. There was never enough food, although the people in the countryside would help us most of the time. If they did this and were caught by the Germans, they would be killed and their villages burned. The Germans used this tactic to eliminate assistance to us, which failed in total. We were always short of warm clothes and boots until the British and Russians began supplying us. Our units moved as entire families, even children moved with us to keep them out of the reach of the enemy. The women fought with us, and without them we could not have been as successful.

WWII: All of the brutality was not on the other side. Didn't Tito order killings?

Stavic: Yes, this is true. If you are investigating history you must look at both sides, and Tito made mistakes. When he realized that he was alienating much of the population, especially Catholics, he changed his tactics. This change in attitude would also carry over into the postwar politics when he was president. I think this was what made him a great leader—also the fact that he never bowed down to Stalin and the Communists in Moscow.

WWII: As an intelligence officer, what was your rank?

Stavic: I was made a captain and later promoted to major.

WWII: In addition to serving as one of Tito's bodyguards, you were also responsible for gathering intelligence, correct?

Stavic: Yes, especially [about] the unit commanders against whom we were engaged. There were some we wanted to kill more than others, especially the SS officers. The one German we almost had some respect for was General [Kurt] Zeitzler. He had tried to change the German methods against civilians, and this was a man we thought we could deal with at a later date. However, the man we wanted the most was Mihailovic, whom we considered a traitor. He was in command of the nationalist anti-Communists, and the British supported him at the expense of Tito because he supported bringing the monarchy back into the country when the war was over. This was unacceptable to Tito. He wanted no outside influence in the country, as he felt that was the cause for all of Yugoslavia's problems in the first place. Other officers we took an interest in were Maximilian *Freiherr* von Weichs zur Glon and Karl von Kremler. Weichs was the overall German commander and Kremler was an SS general who commanded the traitors from Bosnia and some Serbs, mostly Muslims. They were high on our list, as were others.

WWII: Did you ever plan kidnappings or assassinations of these men?

Stavic: We discussed these things and made plans, but it was very difficult to get close enough to any of these men. One of the most visible targets later in the war was Helmuth von Pannwitz, commander of an antipartisan Cossack unit in Yugoslavia in 1944-45. He was high on the list, and he was captured and handed over to the Soviets. There was no way to get close enough to him, since he always had giant bodyguards with swords who allowed no one to get close to him, not even German officers of higher rank. None of these plans worked.

WWII: Did the Germans ever try and capture Tito in force?

Stavic: Yes, several times. The most famous [operations] were what the Germans called White and Black, and the other was called *Rösselsprung*. We knew all about them through our intel-



Tito arrives to meet with representatives of King Peter's government on the island of Vis. He is closely followed by one of his bodyguards. As Axis efforts to capture the partisan leader intensified, he gradually increased the number of his personal guards from two to 12. One of those chosen to protect the self-appointed marshal was Stavic, who also served as a translator and intelligence officer.

ligence networks, except *Rösselsprung*, which was a complete surprise. The Germans learned from their mistakes—all that mattered was killing the opposition. One thing that both helped and hurt us was the constant struggle against the Chetniks, but then the Germans did not trust them either, and sometimes they fought each other. It was crazy—sometimes you could be in a fight against Germans, then Chetniks may attack either you or the Germans, then we may be fighting Chetniks, and the Germans show up looking for them, find us all, then it was a melee. You had to be there.

WWII: What was Tito like as a man?

Stavic: He was not so much the enigma the Western Allies made him out to be. He was ruthless when he had to be, but that is the same for all great leaders. Tito had many enemies and was always in danger, so he believed that to remove his enemies first was the best course of action. Sometimes he ordered killings, which he believed were necessary. But I know he made mistakes. He changed his methods, especially once the population began



A Yugoslav partisan unit of men and women marches to a mine and sabotage class run by the British on the island of Vis. They are equipped with British uniforms. Women played a vital role in the partisan war in Yugoslavia and fought side by side with their male comrades. Stavic later remarked that "without them we could not have been as successful."

responding to the Germans and Croats who were rebuilding churches and allowing the schools to remain open. These were powerful facts that he could not ignore, so he did the same thing. The difference is that even after the war when he was president he still allowed these parts of society to function. This is what kept the country together—his power and his genius. He was a ladies' man, that is true, but he still loved his family. Tito was not an evil man like Hitler and Stalin. He was a man of great compassion, but also a man with a large ego. But then again how many celebrities are not the same?

WWII: Describe the worst battle you were in.

Stavic: For me personally, it would have to be both the Battle of Neretva, during what the Germans called Operation White, and later during *Rösselsprung*, when German gliders and paratroopers landed at the cave where Tito held his field headquarters. The Neretva fight lasted for hours, and many were killed on both sides, but the Germans had the worst of it. Dozens died in the fight, which stretched from the cave down to the village two miles away. We won a great victory over Mihailovic then. During *Rösselsprung* our job was to keep the Germans at bay until Tito, Milovan Djilas and others could escape out the back. The bodies began piling up, and it was not until the following day that the Germans began to withdraw. That was the worst fight against the Germans. There were several fights with the Chetniks. One time we were caught in the Drina Valley and had to fight our way up and out of the killing zone. This was in 1943, and until 1944 we did not have much in the way of heavy weapons. We lost hundreds in this fight, and the enemy casualties were not counted. I remember two units we fought, the SS Divisions *Prinz Eugen* and *Handschar*, which were known because of the prisoners we took. The German SS men were better fighters, but the traitors in the SS were ruthless, killing prisoners always.

WWII: Did you ever kill your prisoners?

Stavic: I must admit that, yes, we did on occasion shoot prisoners, those who were badly wounded, or those that we could not transport because it would have slowed us up and compromised our unit. But we also shot our own people when they were

badly wounded. It was understood that if you were terribly wounded your chances were not good. We did not have great medical facilities, and carrying wounded was difficult. It was a tragic reality and part of the war. I make no excuses, but I do have regrets.

WWII: In your opinion, what was a positive result of the war in Yugoslavia?

Stavic: We had our own country again, free of both Western and Soviet domination and led by a man who could keep the nation together. Once Tito died things began to get a little shaky, and now we have all kinds of problems. Old ethnic rivalries are flaring up again, and this will serve no purpose. I think the future will prove very difficult, but only time will tell.

Although Tito was able to unite his country and to ensure its relative independence from Moscow, following his death in 1981 the ethnic tensions that both Pankosk and Stavic feared reemerged. In the 1990s the Yugoslav republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina separated from the country and were recognized as independent states. The remaining regions of Montenegro and Serbia reorganized themselves as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in April 1992. Following his seizure of power, President Slobodan Milosevic supported various military efforts to unite ethnic Serbs into a greater Serbia. As part of this campaign, Milosevic's forces began the forced expulsion—and later mass murder—of ethnic Albanians living in Kosovo. In response, NATO carried out a massive bombing campaign against Serbian forces and later stationed troops in Kosovo. Milosevic was deposed in 2000 and is currently on trial at the International Criminal Court for the Former Republic of Yugoslavia in The Hague for crimes against humanity. In 2001, following Vojislav Kostunica's assumption of power, Yugoslavia was readmitted to the United Nations. Unfortunately, neither Pankosk nor Stavic lived to see his country emerge from the second civil war. Pankosk died in 1988 and Stavic died in one of Milosevic's prisons. □

Colin D. Heaton is a history professor and writes frequently for *World War II Magazine*. For further reading, see his book *German Anti-Partisan Warfare in Europe, 1939-1945*.