Aufsatz

Gaj Trifković

Carnage in the Land of Three Rivers: The Syrmian Front 1944–1945

DOI 10.1515/mgzs-2016-0004

Abstract: The aim of this article will be to examine the operations of the Yugoslav Partisans and German armed forces in northern parts of Yugoslavia in late 1944 and early 1945. Since the summer of 1941, the communist-led guerrilla movement had conducted a massive guerrilla campaign against Axis forces, at the same time striving to build a regular army and thus gain recognition as a full-time member of the anti-Hitler coalition. The arrival of the Red Army and liberation of country's eastern parts in September and October 1944 secured material foundations for a creation of a regular field force. Whether this nascent army would be capable of defeating its retreating, but still dangerous German foe remained to be seen.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, Syrmia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Second World War, Partisans, Wehrmacht, front, operations, NOVJ

The fierce fighting in the flat, open terrain of the province of Syrmia¹ counted among the bloodiest of the whole war and left a lasting controversy about whether the Yugoslav Partisans should have pursued an active campaign on the so-called »Syrmian Front« in the first place. In the socialist Yugoslavia prior to the late 1970s, descriptions of operations on the Syrmian Front could usually be found in either general war histories or in unit histories; relevant Partisan documents were published in several volumes of the massive »Zbornik dokumenata i

1 Syrmia (Serbian: Srem; Croatian: Srijem) is the geographical region between the rivers Danube and Sava, stretching from Belgrade in the east to the line north of Vukovar-Bosna estuary in the west. The region consists of alluvial plains on the left bank of Sava and loess formations on the right bank of Danube with average elevation of 80–120 meters. Fruška Gora, the region's only mountain, is located in the northern part of the province (the highest peak is Crveni Čot at 539 meters). The wider area between Danube, Sava and Drava (including the province of Slavonia) is often viewed as a single entity in an anthropological and historical context.

Kontakt: Gaj Trifković, Austrian Center for Intelligence, Propaganda and Security Studies (ACIPSS), Karl-Franzens-Universität, Graz, E-Mail: trifkovg@gmail.com

podataka NOR-a« edition. The first (and the most important) dedicated monograph on the campaign, however, was published only in 1979. Generally speaking, Yugoslav works are a reliable source in terms of the purely operational aspects of the campaign (e.g. timeline, involved units, and troop movements). Their main flaws lie in inflated claims of enemy losses and a lack of a comprehensive, in-depth, and ideology-free analysis of one's own failures. The fall of Socialism in the early 1990s did little to rectify these shortcomings. On the contrary, the »new age« was marked by a drop of academic interest in the military aspects of the Second World War in former Yugoslavia. Worse still, the social change did not bring the depoliticisation of historiography, but rather ushered in an era of a new ideology (nationalism) and revisionism that accompanied it. In present-day Serbia, the discourse about the Sarmian Front is largely dominated by mass media, which – together with some professional historians – are offering biased and simplistic answers to this complex topic, sometimes bordering on conspiracy theories.² The course of events in Sarmia is largely unknown outside the former Yugoslavia. Prior to the early 2000s, very few historians from the West researched the military side of the conflict, preferring to focus on the politics behind it instead. The events on the Sarmian Front are usually mentioned only in passing, or a couple of paragraphs at best, and mostly from German perspective. Language barrier and difficulties in obtaining original Yugoslav documents also contributed to the lack of interest for this topic abroad.

This article will seek to redress this imbalance by providing a short description of the operations in Sarmia, followed by an analysis of the performance of the Partisan forces involved. As we shall see, there were compelling military reasons in favor of an active campaign as dictated by the dynamic of the Eastern Front and geographical and logistical issues. There can be no doubt, however, that both inner political considerations (showdown with domestic enemies) and rising tensions with the Western Allies over the disputed Italian-Slovene border played a significant part in the Yugoslav strategic planning. Ideological rigidity and mere reasons of prestige were responsible for much of the bloodshed. The Yugoslav leadership often failed to take into account the tremendous difficulties besetting their forces which at that time were going through a unique process of transformation into a regular army. Untrained men, inexperienced officers, lack of engineering equipment and armored vehicles, and total dependence on foreign sources for war materials are some of the reasons behind the extraordinary length and cost of the campaign.

² See for instance Radio Television of Serbia's show on the Sarmian Front titled »Sremski front: Srbija i pobjeda nad fašizmom«, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSXb9vvelYs (accessed 3 June 2015).

The road to Syrmia was a long and bloody one: few of the original 12000 Communist Party (KPJ) members who had served as the core of the Partisan movement in the summer of 1941 were still alive three years later. Nevertheless, through active campaigning, skillful exploitation of flaws in the German occupation system (most notably their support for the genocidal Ustasha regime in Croatia) and events abroad (surrender of Italy), as well as through pragmatic domestic (e.g. promises of social and ethnic equality) and foreign policies (securing material support from the Western Allies), the Partisans had emerged as the strongest Yugoslav faction by the late 1944. One of the key ingredients of their success lay in the regularization of the movement's military branch («People's Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia», NOVJ) which strengthened their inner cohesion and enabled the Partisans to gain the upper hand in their war against domestic enemies, and to stand up to foreign regulars in case of need. According to one German estimate from late September 1944, the NOVJ had some 102000 men serving in 43 divisions.³

The arrival of the Red Army to Eastern Serbia that same month represents one of the key events in the history of the Second World War in Yugoslavia. In little less than a month, units belonging to the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts (UFs), assisted by some 16 NOVJ divisions and one Bulgarian army, routed the German »Army Detachment Serbia« (AAS), cut their main line of communications to Greece in the Greater Morava Valley, and liberated the capital city of Belgrade. Josip Broz Tito, the head of the Communist-dominated National Committee, was now firmly in control of Yugoslavia's heartland with its rich natural resources and large population. Thousands of recruits now swelled the Partisan ranks, thus doubling the size of their divisions practically overnight. This new army was largely equipped by the Soviet Union: during his talks with Tito in Moscow in late September, Stalin promised arms for twelve rifle and two air divisions, as well as the know-how to use them.⁴ With the long-cherished dream of creating a modern field force nearly fulfilled, the Partisan Supreme Headquarters set its eyes on the still occupied western parts of the country.

At the end of the third week of October, the strategic situation in the South-East Europe was as follows: the 2nd UF, with its left wing in northern Yugoslavia, was preparing for an advance into Hungary. The 3rd UF, minus one corps still in

³ United States National Archives (NAW), Record Group 242, Microfilm series T-311, Roll 189, frames 000306-7, HGF, Estimate of strength of communist forces, 22 September 1944. The strength of local Partisan detachments, rear-services and other affiliated organizations is not included in this figure.

⁴ *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o oslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski instiut, 1949–1986), Volume II, Book 14, pp. 177–178, Tito to Supreme HQ, 29 September 1944.

the Morava Valley, was hurriedly redeploying the rest of its forces from Serbia proper to the area north of Belgrade. Once concentrated, the front would proceed west along the Danube, thus forming the extreme left flank of the Red Army's entire front reaching all the way to the Baltic. As the 3rd UF advanced deeper into Hungary, its left wing would become increasingly exposed to German attacks coming from across the great river and its tributary, the Drava. In order to avoid any such possibility, Tito agreed to deploy the bulk of the NOVJ forces from Belgrade to Syrmia. Their mission would be to advance through the Danube-Sava interfluvium, preferably keeping pace with the tempo of Soviet operations.⁵

However, the German Commander-in-Chief South East, Field-Marshal Maximilian von Weichs, could hardly contemplate an offensive across the Danube at the time – or anywhere else for that matter. The situation facing his two Army Groups (»Heeresgruppe«) E and F (HGE, HGF) was growing more critical by the day. The former was stretched between northern Greece and western Serbia, trying to force its way west through the Dinaric Alps and at the same time thwart Soviet, Yugoslav, and Bulgarian attempts to cut off its retreat. HGF, severely shaken by the losses recently incurred in Serbia, had two difficult tasks to perform. First, it had to keep the supply routes in Bosnia and Croatia free of guerrillas and secure the Drina Valley for the arrival of HGE. Second, it had to maintain a link to Army Group South in Hungary and provide flank protection to the southern anchor of the German Eastern Front.⁶ In light of these circumstances, Syrmia was thus of great strategic importance, and the Germans were warily awaiting the next enemy move in this area. One day after the Yugoslav capital had been lost, the diarist of the HGF wrote:

»The question is what the enemy will do after the fall of Belgrade. Cutting off the Syrmian pocket would be unpleasant but there are no particular indications for this. Deeply echeloned defense here makes quick evacuation possible.«⁷

The »deeply echeloned defense« the document referred to consisted of altogether six defensive lines fortified to a varying degree that stretched across Syrmia at irregular intervals. Army Group F planned to withdraw from eastern Syrmia as slowly as possible in order to buy more time for the completion of the main fortified line centered on the town of Šid.⁸ The second sentence reflected the fear that the enemy would strike westward towards the confluence of Drina and Sava,

⁵ Ibid., p. 309, Tito to Dapčević, 21 October 1944.

⁶ NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000778-80, HGF, Situation estimate on 1 November 1944.

⁷ NAW, T-311, Roll 191, 000242, HGF, War diary entry for 21 October 1944.

⁸ NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000675, HGF, HGF to Armed Forces High Command (OKW), 25 October 1944. Yugoslav sources often speak of seven »fortified lines«, but not all were fortified due to lack

cross the former to the north and, possibly in combination with a similar move along the Danube, perform a deep double envelopment of the leftovers of the AAS which had managed to escape from Belgrade.

The Period of Partisan Initiative, October–December 1944

Ultimately, these apprehensions proved to be unfounded, as the Partisan leadership opted for a more modest approach: on 22 October 1944, the 12th (three divisions) and the 1st Proletarian Corps (PC) with one division, supported by five Soviet artillery regiments, began crossing the Sava at Belgrade and Obrenovac.⁹ The main task of the group crossing at Obrenovac was to strike north and sever the road and railway communications between Ruma and Zemun and cut off the main enemy unit in the area, the »Division Böttcher«.¹⁰ The Germans, however, would not oblige and retreated to the first and second defensive lines named »Brown« and »Green«. On 25 October 1944, the Soviet-Partisan forces attacked all along the front, with a main thrust aimed at the northern sector, where they hoped to outflank the lines with the help of local guerrilla units operating from the Fruška Mountain. Fearing encirclement, the Germans continued their fighting withdrawal before making a halt at Sremska Mitrovica on the 28th on Hitler's express order. For the next several days, the Partisans looked for a weak spot in

of time and resources. See for instance NAW, T-311, Roll 191, 000294, HGF, War diary entry for 6 November 1944.

⁹ *Zbornik*/I/8/524-526, 12th PC to 11th NOVJ Division [NOVJD], 21 October 1944. The overall command of both corps lay in the hands of the HQ of the 1st PC (CO: Peko Dapčević). Parts of the Soviet 73rd Guards and 236th Rifle Division (RD) took part in the initial phase of the fighting. On 31 October, all Soviet troops were withdrawn from Syrmia, except for 2–3 artillery regiments left behind to provide support to the NOVJ: Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation (TsAMO), Fond 243, Opis 2900, Document 870, pp. 77, 112, 3rd UF, War diary entries for 22 and 31 October 1944; TsAMO, f. 243, o. 2900, d. 882, pp. 18, 112, 3rd UF, War diary entries for 7 and 27 November 1944.

¹⁰ This was not a division in true sense of the word, but a collection of hastily formed battle groups (»Kampfgruppe«, KG), named after its commanding general, Karl Böttcher. On 24 October, two of its KGs had the total strength of about 3000 men, whereas the size of the third KG is unknown: NAW, T-501, Roll 257, 000232, AAS, AAS to 2nd Panzer Army [PA], 24 October 1944. The strength of German battle groups in Syrmia is very hard to determine as their composition changed constantly. According to Yugoslav historiography the division had about 15000 men after the fall of Belgrade: Ljubivoje Pajović, Dušan Uzelac, Milovan Dželebdžić, *Sremski front 1944–1945* (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1979), p. 22.

the German defenses, suffering an estimated 1200 casualties in the process. Although the »Yellow« line withstood all attacks up to this point, the mounting enemy pressure forced the HGF to issue another retreat order on the last day of October.¹¹ It was obvious, however, that the »Black« line, with its many deficiencies¹², could not be maintained for long and was ordered abandoned already five days later. In order to cover the evacuation and throw the Partisans off-balance, the Germans carried out a local counter-attack, codenamed »Draufgänger«. The operation was a success, and by 9 November, the Germans had taken up positions along the »Red« line, stretching from Sava to Danube.¹³

After almost three weeks of fighting, the two sides had fought each other to a standstill. In addition to heavy casualties and exhaustion, the tempo of NOVJ operations had been additionally slowed by continuous autumn rains which turned the terrain into a sea of mud. Although precise intelligence on enemy dispositions was sparse, one thing was clear: the Partisans were now facing a formidable defensive line consisting of trenches, prepared artillery and machine-gun emplacements, barbed-wire entanglements and elaborate mine fields. As any attack against these positions without adequate preparations seemed utterly futile, the Partisans went over to defense. The both sides used the respite to carry out reorganization and prepare for the next round of fighting.¹⁴

11 NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000708, HGF, HGF to 2nd Panzer Army (PA), 28 October 1944; Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 29–51; *Zbornik*/I/10/15, 12th PC to 1st PC, 1 November 1944.

12 The »Black line« was »not fortified [...] a temporary position, no obstacles, in northern part rugged, dominated by enemy-held heights«; NAW, T-311, Roll 194, 000825, HGF, Daily report for 5 November 1944.

13 Ibid., 000834, HGF to 2nd PA, 5 November 1944; NAW, T-315, Roll 1300, 000974-6, 117th JD, Order for operation »Draufgänger«, 6 November 1944; Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, RH 37/4835, 750th JR, War diary entry for 7 November 1944; Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 60–62.

14 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 66–68. On 11 November, HQ of the 118th JD took over from the now-dissolved Division Böttcher, and the responsibility for the Syrmian Front was delegated to the newly created »Corps Group Kübler«. The arrival of the HQ of the 118th JD did little to change the highly heterogeneous nature of the German units in Syrmia: subordinated units included four regimental staffs, eighteen complete battalions and fifteen additional companies, all from four different German divisions, independent security and garrison units, German-Croatian police, German police and Independent State of Croatia's (Nezavisna država Hrvatska, NDH) armed forces. As a typical German ad-hoc formation, it had infantry, artillery, engineer, anti-tank, air defense, and communications' units, making it capable of performing most battlefield tasks: NAW, T-315, Roll 1300, 000986-9, 117th JD, Divisional order no. 8 for the defense of position »Red«, 9 November 1944; *Zbornik*/XII/4/735-736, Activity report of Corps Group Kübler for the period 12 November to 12 December 1944.

The Syrmian Front 1944–1945

After the successful conclusion of the Batina-Apatin Operation on the Danube¹⁵, the Allies felt it was time to renew their offensive in Syrmia. Tito and Marshal Fyodor I. Tolbukhin of the 3rd Ukrainian Front met in Belgrade from 17 to 20 November 1944 and agreed the arrival of the first sizeable Soviet contingent to the province. The main task of the reinforced 68th Rifle Corps (RC) was twofold: to seize the southern bank of the Danube and thereby open the great river for supply shipping and to act as a flank cover for the Soviet troops advancing through southern Hungary. The precise details of the corps' employment were worked out with the HQ of the NOVJ's 1st PC. According to the plan, the corps would punch a hole in the northern sector around Ilok while the Partisans would make a frontal attack along the remainder of the front. In order to facilitate the Soviet breakthrough, special details of Soviet and Yugoslav troops would cross the Danube behind German lines. The timetable was ambitious: the spearheads were supposed to reach the line Vukovar-Vrbanja on the second day of the offensive and from there continue the pursuit to the west.¹⁶

One Soviet and three Partisan divisions commenced their attack on the morning of 3 December 1944 after a strong artillery and air preparation. In spite of desperate German resistance, the »Red« line was pierced in the north and in the center after two days of heavy fighting. Having no more reserves left, Corps Group »Kübler« asked and got permission from HGF to withdraw to the west. This was hardly an ideal solution because the »Nibelungen« line was longer and less fortified than the previous one and was already outflanked by a Soviet-Partisan landing on the Danube. The NOVJ followed closely after the retreating Germans, capturing the important towns of Šid and Tovarnik. By 10 December, the Soviets stood before Sotin, and the Partisans had reached the critically important Brčko-Vinkovci railway line at Otok, which was being used for bringing Axis reinforcements from Bosnia.¹⁷

At this point, the offensive began to lose steam, but the Allies were not ready to give in yet: on 12 December 1944, the 1st PC issued an order for the continuation of operations on the 14th. According to the plan, two Soviet and two Partisan divisions would attack on a ten kilometer wide front between Berak and Sotin

15 Klaus Schmider, Der jugoslawische Kriegsschauplatz (Januar 1943 bis Mai 1945). In: *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Band 8: Die Ostfront 1943/1944 – Die Krieg im Osten und an den Nebenfronten*. Edited by Karl-Heinz Frieser at the behest of Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2007), pp. 1057–1058.

16 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 88–90.

17 NAW, T-314, Roll 850, 001260-2, 34th AC, Activity report of Corps Group Kübler for the period 12 November to 12 December 1944; TsAMO, f. 961, o. 1, d. 63, pp. 134–138, 68th RC, War diary entries for 3–12 December 1944.

towards Vukovar; the remaining Partisan units would launch diversionary attacks on their sectors.¹⁸ This unimaginative plan, carried out largely by exhausted units against an alerted enemy failed to achieve anything but prolong the suffering in the front lines; all attacks were repulsed and the presence of fresh German reinforcements could already be felt. By 18 December 1944, after two weeks of bloody fighting, Partisan and Soviet forces on the Syrmian front had gone over to the defense.¹⁹

Not wanting to have a full (albeit exhausted) corps tied down in trench warfare on a front of secondary importance, the 3rd UF decided to withdraw all its units from Syrmia and replace them with the nominally strong 1st Bulgarian Army (six divisions with over 100 000 troops). Tito consequently ordered Dapčević on 17 December to make necessary amendments in his dispositions: Partisan units would forthwith be responsible for the section of the front south of the railway line Ruma-Vinkovci, the Bulgarians to the north of it.²⁰ These movements were supposed to be completed by the 22nd, in time to make yet another attempt against the »Green« line.²¹ The new offensive lasted for six days and ended in a clear defeat: two Bulgarian divisions were stopped dead in their tracks in the north; by 27 December, the German 34th Army Corps²² managed to relieve the garrison of Otok and push the Partisans back to their starting positions.²³ Heavy casualties and low morale of the troops compelled the HQ of the 1st Bulgarian Army (BA) to request the withdrawal from Syrmia and transfer to Hungary. As this coincided with Tito's wish to have the 12th PC back to Yugoslavia as soon as possible, on 28 December Tolbukhin gave the green light for the relief of the corps by the 1st BA.²⁴ On the last day of 1944, the 1st PC issued its own set of orders for the

18 *Zbornik*/I/10/426-428, 1st PC to subordinated divisions, 12 December 1944.

19 TsAMO, f. 961, o. 1, d. 63, pp. 140–141, 68th RC, War diary entries for 14–15 December 1944; Casualties of the 1st PC amounted to 1555 KIA, 3968 WIA and 113 MIA: Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), p. 131. The 68th RC lost 745 KIA, 1918 WIA and 50 MIA: TsAMO, f. 961, o. 1, d. 139, p. 5, Casualty return December 1944.

20 *Zbornik*/II/14/424, Tito to Dapčević, 17 December 1944; Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 132–135.

21 *Zbornik*/I/10/512-515, 1st PC to subordinated divisions, 21 December 1944.

22 On 12 December 1944, Corps Group Kübler was dissolved and 34th AC (General Helmut Felmy), newly arrived from western Serbia, assumed command over German troops in Syrmia: NAW, T-311, Roll 184, Army Group E (HGE), Appendix 106 to war diary, Combat instructions to 34th AC, 12 December 1944.

23 NAW, T-311, Roll 185, HGE, Daily reports of HGE for 25–28 December 1944; Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 136–139.

24 Schmider, *Der jugoslawische Kriegsschauplatz* (see n. 15), p. 1059; *Russki Arkhiv: Velikaya otechestvennaya* (Moscow: Terra Publishing, 2000), Vol. XIV (3–2), p. 261, Tolbukhin to Kiselyev, 28 December 1944. 12th PC which at that time was deployed in Hungary, would become 3rd NOVJ

takeover of the former Bulgarian sector. Under the new arrangements, the 1st and 5th NOVJD were deployed from Sotin to the Bosut River, with the 11th in reserve around Tovarnik; from Bosut all the way to the edge of the impenetrable forests south of Otok stood the now dangerously overstretched 21st NOVJD.²⁵

The German counter-attack, January 1945

As the year 1944 drew to a close, the bulk of the HGE retreating from western Serbia and Montenegro had seemingly managed to overcome the Partisans, Bulgarians, and the Soviets, the rugged terrain and adverse weather, and was starting to arrive in the Drina Valley in force. Without stopping, units were speedily dispatched north in order to bolster the hard-pressed front in Syrmia and to build a new one along the Drava.²⁶ By the end of the month, three new divisions, the 11th Luftwaffe Field Division (LWFD), 297th Infantry Division (ID), and 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division »Prinz Eugen« (MD), were taking positions to the south of the Syrmian Front, with 41st Fortress Division (FD) concentrating further west around Brod. With these forces at hand, the German command could carry out the reorganization of fragmented units and, more importantly, contemplate a limited attack with the aim of neutralizing the Partisan threat to the railway line Brčko-Vinkovci.²⁷ On 3 January 1945, a German task force consisting of two reinforced regiments suddenly attacked the exposed 21st NOVJD and forced it into a headlong retreat to Bosut River.²⁸ Luckily for the Partisans, the ice was thick enough to support the weight of a man, and the

Army on 1 January 1945. On the same day, 1st PC was re-christened 1st Army, and units in Western Serbia and Eastern Bosnia became the Second.

25 *Zbornik*/1/10/564-565, 1st PC to subordinated divisions, 31 December 1944.

26 HGE had taken over the responsibility for the whole territory of the NDH in the first week of December 1944 with the exception of north-western Croatia: Schmider, *Der jugoslawische Kriegsschauplatz* (see n. 15), pp. 1057–1058.

27 NAW, T-311, Roll 184, HGE, Appendix 253 to war diary, Instructions for deployment of 41st FD on Syrmian Front, 31 december 1944; NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000445, HGF, Daily report of HGF for 31 December 1944; Otto Kumm, »Vorwärts Prinz Eugen!« *Die Geschichte der 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Division »Prinz Eugen«* (Dresden: Winkelried Verlag, 2007), pp. 351–352.

28 In older Yugoslav works (for instance in Pajović et al., *Sremski front* [see n. 10], p. 156), one can often find the claim that the swamps in Bosut Forests were frozen solid enough to support tanks, and that Germans used this to surprise and outflank the 21st NOVJD. In fact, the forests remained impenetrable for any larger body of troops (to say nothing of motorized equipment), and the Germans were counting precisely on this fact for flank protection: Kumm, *Vorwärts Prinz Eugen* (see n. 27), pp. 354–356; NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000839, HGF, Morning report of HGE for 12 January 1945. See also *Zbornik*/1/18/19-24, 21st NOVJD to 1st PC, 6 January 1945.

division eventually managed to avoid a wholesale destruction. Faced with increasing resistance (elements of the 1st and 6th PD) and dwindling ammunition stocks, the HGE gave up some ground and ended the attack, content with inflicting considerable casualties in men and equipment on the enemy.²⁹

The successful attack at Otok removed the immediate danger to the southern flank of the 34th AC, but the NOVJ was still in the possession of the »Nibelungen« line which had better defensive potential than the »Green«. HGE had therefore decided to conduct a much bigger operation, codenamed »Wintergewitter«, to recapture the former main line and deal a crippling blow to the Partisans. The plan envisaged the 7th SS MD and 117th JD achieving a breakthrough in the northern sector around Sotin and then racing to Tovarnik and Šid, thereby catching the bulk of the 1st NOVJ Army between themselves and the 41st FD attacking from the west.³⁰

The operation began on 17 January 1945. Despite heavy resistance and the presence of Soviet ground attack aircraft,³¹ German spearheads reached Tovarnik by the end of the day, forcing Dapčević to have his entire command fall back to the line Šarengrad-Nova Bapska-Berkasovo-Šid-Ilinci-Gradina.³² The Germans continued their attack on the 18th along the whole front. By the end of the day the 117th JD had wrestled the control of Nova Bapska and Berkasovo from the 21st and 5th NOVJD. The focal point of fighting lay at the center, where the 1st PD obstinately defended the town of Šid until dusk when it was finally forced to withdraw. Although the 1st NOVJ Army managed to evade the encirclement, the 34th AC was satisfied with the results of the operation so far, as some of its units advanced further than originally planned. The corps therefore decided to conduct a gradual

29 The 34th AC reported losing only 10 KIA and 34 WIA by the end of the second day of fighting: NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000793, HGF, Daily report of 34th AC for 4 January 1945. Yugoslav casualties amounted to 182 KIA, 308 WIA, and 315 MIA; losses in weapons included 15 anti-tank guns, 18 mortars, 160 machine guns and sub-machine guns and 20 anti-tank rifles: *Zbornik*/I/18/162, 1st NOVJ Army, War diary entry for 3 January 1945. For problems with ammunition supply see NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000799, HGF, Supplement to daily report of HGE for 4 January 1945.

30 NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000917, HGF, Supplement to daily report of HGE for 15 January 1945.

31 In September 1944, the Soviets agreed to Tito's request to lend two air divisions (the so-called »Group Vitruk«, named after its commander Andrey N. Vitruk) to serve as the core of the future NOVJ Air Force. Beside close support missions, these units were responsible for the training of Yugoslav personnel. On 17 January 1945, the first planes with mixed Soviet-Yugoslav crews took to the air above the Syrmian Front. »Group Vitruk« flew altogether 641 sorties from 17 to 23 January 1945 in support of the 1st NOVJ Army: Božo Lazarević, *Vazduhoplovstvo u Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1972), pp. 187–190, 232, 239.

32 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 171–181; NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000920-1, HGF, Supplement to daily report of HGE for 17 January 1945.

withdrawal as soon as the 41st FD had finished entrenching the new main defensive line running from Mohovo on the Danube across Lovas, Opatovac, Tovarnik, Ilinici to Batrovci on the Bosut River.³³ From 22 to 24 January, the Germans conducted a textbook example of fighting retreat, inflicting further heavy casualties on the pursuing Yugoslavs. On the 24th, the 1st Army cancelled its attack and ordered all units to dig in. The lines in Syrmia would remain static until April 1945.³⁴

The Yugoslav Offensive in Syrmia, April 1945

Whereas February and March 1945 saw little activity on the Syrmian Front itself, the adjacent sectors on the Drava and Drina Rivers saw much fighting as the Germans tried to stabilize their flanks in a series of operations, with varying degrees of success.³⁵ Due to the rapidly worsening situation in Hungary, in late March Hitler grudgingly agreed to the gradual evacuation of the entire area south of the line Doboj-Brčko (84 km SSW Vinkovci) and the abandonment of the Syrmian Front in favor of a more compact position running roughly to the east of the line Brod-Donji Miholjac (ca. 60 km W Vinkovci).³⁶ The German command

33 *Zbornik*/1/18/182-183, 1st NOVJ Army, War diary entry for 19 January 1945; NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000922, HGF, Morning report of HGE for 19 January 1945; *ibid.*, 000860, Evening report of HGE for 19 January 1945; Kumm, *Vorwärts Prinz Eugen* (see n. 27), pp. 361–362. The heavily wooded and swampy area between Bosut and Sava was a no-man's land; apart from patrols, neither side kept any troops there.

34 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 191–196. 1st Army's losses for the week between 17 and 24 January were 1532 KIA, 4668 WIA, and 1666 MIA (most of the latter were stragglers from the Italian Brigade): *ibid.*, p. 198. For comparison: the 1st Army had some 55000 men in early January: Dušan Samardžija, *11. krajiška NOU divizija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1987), p. 269. The Germans captured, among others, three guns, three mortars, 30 anti-tank guns, 18 anti-tank rifles and almost 1500 rifles and machine guns: NAW, T-311, Roll 189, 000922, HGF, German Plenipotentiary General in Croatia to NDH Ministry of Defense, 21 January 1945. Our only source on German casualties is the entry in the war diary of the OKW for 23 January 1945 which states that the 34th AC had suffered 188 KIA and 1047 WIA (NAW, T-77, Roll 1426, OKW, 000497). These rather low figures are partly confirmed by the post-war statements of some former members of the 7th SS MD who spoke of »modest casualties« and small number of wounded during this period: Arhiv oružanih snaga Beograd (AOS), German Documents (GD), Box 72, Folder 2, Document 18, p. 1, Statement of Dr. Gerd Montag, 15 July 1947; see also AOS, GD, 72/2/16/5, Statement of Fritz Gazzera, undated.

35 Schmider, *Der jugoslawische Kriegsschauplatz* (see n. 15), pp. 1063–1064.

36 NAW, T-78, Roll 305, 6256070, OKH, OKW to HGE, 31 March 1945.

could only hope that these movements could be completed before the Yugoslavs started their spring offensive.

From 25 to 27 March 1945, Dapčević and his colleagues from the 2nd and 3rd Armies, Koča Popović and Kosta Nađ, attended a series of meetings with Tito in Belgrade in order to discuss the plan for the final offensive of the Yugoslav Army (official name since 1 March 1945) in Syrmia. Ultimately, it was decided to conduct the operation in three phases. The so-called »Bosnian Group« (two divisions and one tank battalion from the 1st Army and one division from the 2nd) would initially operate south of the Sava and clear the Sava-Drina triangle of enemy troops. This group would then capture the bridge at Brčko and strike north to Vinkovci. At the same time, two divisions and one cavalry brigade (»Bosut Group«), would advance between the rivers Spačva and Sava, and cut off the main enemy road communication linking Brčko and Vinkovci at Vrbanja. The main force, consisting of five divisions and two tank battalions of the 1st Army (»Northern Group«) would storm the northern end of the »Nibelungen« line with Vukovar and Vinkovci as their final objectives. The 3rd Army (three divisions) would cross the Drava at Valpovo and Osijek (50 and 30 km NW Vinkovci, respectively) and strike to Vinkovci or advance to Našice (60 km W Vinkovci), depending on the outcome of 1st Army's attack. The task of the 2nd Army (four divisions) was to exert pressure on the Bosna River valley and protect the left flank of the 1st Army. The third phase of the operation was reserved for the destruction of all German units caught to the east of Vinkovci. The entire operation was to last no more than twelve days.³⁷

The concentration of the »Bosnian Group« coincided with the withdrawal of the southern wing of the 34th AC to the so-called »Brčko Bridgehead«. Yugoslav

37 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 315–317. At the beginning of April, the 1st Yugoslav Army had 110 000 and the 3rd some 41 000 men with 355 and 175 guns, respectively: Mladenko Colić, *Pregled operacija na jugoslovenskom ratištu 1944–1945* (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1988), p. 352. The 2nd Tank Brigade (TB) attached to the 1st Army had about 55 tanks. Facing them was the 34th AC with three German divisions, one fortress brigade, two security regiments and KG »Geiger« made up of a number of police battalions. Yugoslav historiography claimed the corps was over 100 000 strong with 700 guns (ibid., p. 349), but this figure seems way too high even with the NDH units in the corps' area included. Given the weakened state of the 11th LWFD and the departure of the strong 117th JD for Hungary, it would be reasonable to assume that the 34th AC had at best about a third of this number (NDH troops not counted). One report from the eve of the Yugoslav offensive puts the corps' barrel strength at 73: The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), DEFE 3, Folder 567, page 126, Artillery situation Army Group Easy [sic] dated eleventh, 18 April 1945; the corps also had 81 heavy anti-tank guns and eleven assault guns: TNA, DEFE 3/569, pp. 316–317, Incomplete Charlie in Charlie South East tank and assault gun return as on fifth, 22 April 1945.

divisions followed closely behind, facing tough resistance by the German 22nd ID and heterogeneous but numerically strong collection of collaborationist troops. By the evening of 7 April, Yugoslav forces had captured Brčko, but the Germans managed to escape across the river; worst of all, their engineers blew up the crucial Sava Bridge at the last moment.³⁸ This, in turn, meant that the river had to be forded, and the »Bosnian Group« at the time had no bridging equipment. It took two full days (10–12 April) to assemble all infantry units on the northern bank. They went into action unsupported, because it took two more days to get the artillery and tanks across.³⁹

The »Bosut Group« started its operations on 3 April 1945. While one division was making diversionary attacks against the southern anchor of the main German defensive line around Batrovci and Lipovac, the remainder of the group crossed the swampy Bosut Forests and became embroiled in costly fighting for the villages astride the main railroad. As soon as the last elements of the 22nd ID passed to north and north-west, the German rear-guards disengaged and the Yugoslav units occupied Vrbanja without a fight on the 12th. The newly formed »Southern Group« of the 1st Army (5th, 6th, 11th and 17th Divisions) was badly behind schedule: the distance by air to the next objective, Otok, was approximately twenty kilometers, but the journey would take longer than usual because the units would have to traverse the Bosut Forests once more.⁴⁰

The slow advance of the »Bosut« and »Bosnian« groups had repeatedly changed the timetable of the entire 1st Army until the date of »the big push« was finally set for 12 April 1945. As before, the main point of effort would be in the northern sector on the approximately six kilometers-wide stretch of land between Novak-Bapska and Šarengrad. The 1st PD and 21st NOVJD would attack there, each supported by one battalion of the 2nd TB; after achieving a breakthrough, these units would advance west to the line Vukovar-Svinjarevci. The 48th NOVJD had a twin-task of supporting the drive west and rolling up the rest of the German line from the north. Further south, the 42nd NOVJD would frontally attack Tovarnik, and the 22nd NOVJD would cross the Bosut and assail the southern-most end of the

38 »Aus der Geschichte des Grenadier-Regiments Nr. 47; 40. Fortsetzung: Brcko-Übergang über die Save.« *Mitteilungsblatt für die Kameraden des ehem. Grenadier-Regiment Nr. 47*, 1, 11 January 1956, pp. 1–2.

39 Colić, *Pregled* (see n. 37), pp. 363–365; NAW, T-78, Roll 304, 6254610, OKH, Daily report West, 9 April 1945; *Zbornik*/XI/1/338, Southern Group of divisions of the 1st Yugoslav Army, War diary entry for 13 April 1945.

40 Samardžija, *11. Krajiška* (see n. 34), pp. 293–301; Friedrich-August von Metzsch, *Die Geschichte der 22. Infanterie-Division 1939–1945* (Kiel: Verlag Hans-Henning Podzun, 1952), pp. 84–85.

German front. Facing these Yugoslav units stood the heavily entrenched 41st ID reinforced with one fortress brigade, German-Arab and Northern Caucasus legionnaire battalions and some NDH units.⁴¹

At precisely 0445 hours, a barrage by some 150 guns heralded the beginning of a long-awaited offensive of the 1st Yugoslav Army on the Syrmian Front. The shells kept landing on the German forward positions for fifteen minutes, after which the fire was redirected to the second line. At 0500 hours, soldiers sprang from cover and raced towards the trenches held by three battalions of the 963rd Fortress Brigade which had replaced the 117th JD several days earlier. The attack must have appeared anticlimactic to the veterans of the earlier battles: stunned defenders offered little resistance, and in some places, the first German line was captured in less than ten minutes.⁴² Yugoslav units continued their westward advance with the support of some forty T-34/85 medium tanks and covered by an air umbrella provided by the 11th and 42nd Air Divisions. Within four hours, advance guard reached one brigade of the 21st NOVJD which had crossed the Danube at Opatovac the previous night. At the same time, other spearheads cut the Tovarnik-Vukovar road and encircled the enemy strongpoint at Lovas. By the late afternoon, the 1st PD had broken the resistance of the 606th Security Regiment and NDH forces and captured Vukovar. The 21st NOVJD had likewise fulfilled its daily objectives and took Svinjarevci.⁴³

The going in the south was much slower and a good deal bloodier. All attempts by the 42nd NOVJD to take heavily fortified Tovarnik failed, until the 48th NOVJD outflanked the town from the north using the breach created by the 1st and 21st Divisions. Finally, at about 1400 hours, the town was taken, and both Yugoslav divisions were now in a good position to strike west to Ilača and south to Ilinči, thereby rendering the position of the 41st ID untenable.⁴⁴ Help could not come too soon for the badly beleaguered 22nd NOVJD on the extreme left flank of the »Northern Group«. The initial advance across the Bosut and Spačva Rivers was halted by unexpectedly strong resistance and some Yugoslav units were

41 Colić, *Pregled* (see n. 37), pp. 351–352. For a detailed overview of the 41st ID's order of battle and dispositions see Erich Schmid-Richberg, *Der Endkampf auf dem Balkan: Die Operationen der Heeresgruppe E von Griechenland bis zu den Alpen* (Heidelberg: Kurt Vowinkel Verlag, 1955) p. 119, and *Zbornik*/XI/1/43, footnote 9.

42 The chief of staff of HGE, General Erich Schmidt-Richberg, later wrote that the Yugoslav offensive came not as »strategic«, but rather as a »tactical« surprise to the Germans (Schmidt-Richberg, *Der Endkampf* [see n. 41], pp. 120–121).

43 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 393–399.

44 Bora Mitrovski, *Petnaesti (makedonski) udarni korpus NOVJ* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1983), pp. 373–395.

nearly overrun by a series of German counter-attacks.⁴⁵ However, the rapidly worsening situation on the remainder of the front forced the 41st ID to call off further attacks and retire to the west.

In light of the deep Yugoslav penetration in the north and increasing pressure in the center around Tovarnik, at about one o'clock in the afternoon of 12 April 1945, HGE ordered the retreat to the line covering Županja, Vinkovci and Osijek.⁴⁶ There was no question of holding this position for any longer period, because the line had already been outflanked. At dawn, elements of all three divisions of the 3rd Army began crossing the Drava between Sveti Đurađ (67 km NW Vinkovci) and Osijek, with two additional landings to the east of the city and across the Danube at Dalj (25 km NE Vinkovci).⁴⁷ Whereas the smaller landings could, to a large degree, be neutralized, there was little the Axis⁴⁸ could do to prevent the main Yugoslav force from establishing bridgeheads on the southern bank. By the end of the day, the 16th and 36th NOVJD linked up at Valpovo, creating a bridgehead of approximately eight kilometers in width and depth. The 51st NOVJD faced much heavier resistance on the outskirts of the strategically important city of Osijek and its bridgehead was therefore only two kilometers deep. The Germans intended to keep the two Yugoslav groups separated by using the 11th LWFD and 1st Cossack Division in hope that this would win enough time for the 22nd and 41st ID to complete their withdrawal.⁴⁹

On 13 April both Yugoslav armies continued their offensive on the entire front. In the course of the day, the 3rd Army managed to extend and link up its bridgeheads thereby creating a springboard for the attack on Osijek itself. The city was now endangered from the east as well by the 1st PD advancing from Vukovar (Osijek would fall one day later). The main task of the northern wing of the 1st Army was to capture Vinkovci. The garrison, which was made up primarily of NDH troops, could not withstand the combined pressure by two full Yugoslav divisions (21st and 48th) and the city was captured around 1800 hours. By then, however, the bag was largely empty: the sluggish advance of the 42nd and 22nd NOVJD from Bosut, and the equally slow march of the »Southern Group« to

45 Živojin Nikolić-Brka, *22. srpska divizija* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1972), pp. 431–441.

46 Schmidt-Richberg, *Der Endkampf* (see n. 41), p. 121; TNA, DEFE 3/568, p. 184, From day report Army Group Easy [sic] on twelfth, 20 April 1945.

47 Colić, *Pregled* (see n. 37), pp. 356, 359.

48 The Drava Front was held by the 11th LWFD, 606th Security Regiment and one Ustasha Brigade. This and other NDH forces along the Drava and on the Syrmian Front belonged to the 3rd and 12th Croatian Divisions: *ibid.*, p. 349, 357.

49 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 410–412; Schmidt-Richberg, *Der Endkampf* (see n. 41), pp. 121–122.

Vrbanja made it possible for the 34th AC to withdraw in relatively good order to the new main defensive line Sava-Đakovo-Našice-Donji Miholjac.⁵⁰

With the taking of Vinkovci, the Symian Front ceased to exist. In operational terms, the 1st Yugoslav Army had won a bloody, but clear-cut victory: at the cost of some 606 killed, 2200 wounded, and four missing, as well as four destroyed and seven damaged tanks, it had successfully stormed the strongly fortified German line in Syrmia and advanced thirty to forty kilometers in two days, netting an estimated 2000 prisoners and large quantities of equipment.⁵¹ In strategic terms, however, the offensive failed to deliver the desired results: the Germans managed to escape the trap, thus making any hopes for a quick advance to Zagreb and the country's western borders illusory. In the several remaining weeks of the war, the HGE would continue its slow retreat to the Austrian border, at the same

50 Colić, *Pregled* (see n. 37), pp. 356–358; NAW, T-78, Roll 304, 6254940, OKH, Daily report West, 14 April 1945.

51 Bojan Dimitrijević, Dragan Savić, *Oklopne jedinice na jugoslovenskom ratištu 1941–1945* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2011), pp. 357–358; *Zbornik/XI/1/324–325*, 1st Yugoslav Army to General Staff, 14 April 1945. Among else, the 1st Army captured three tanks, 440 machine guns, 2777 rifles, and 54 trucks in working order. Overall losses of the 1st Army for the period 3–13 April 1945 amounted to 1713 KIA, 5948 WIA and 53 MIA: Milovan Dželebdžić, *Druga jugoslovenska armija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1989), p. 327; the 3rd Army lost another 379 KIA, 1542 WIA, and 15 MIA from 11 to 16 April, at the same time capturing 21 guns, 92 mortars, 318 machine guns and over 2500 rifles (*Zbornik/XI/3/284*, 3rd Army to General Staff, 16 April 1945). These are preliminary reports and the Yugoslav losses were probably even higher. At the same time, both armies reported taking almost 6000 prisoners, as well as killing some 7000 enemy soldiers. Whereas the reported enemy KIA figure is almost certainly too high, the number of prisoners can be taken as true, especially as it is corroborated by the quantity of captured weapons. Yugoslav sources do not discern between German and collaborationist casualties, and we have very few relevant German documents for comparison. According to the office of Surgeon-General with the Armed Forces High Command, total losses of HGE from 1 to 10 April 1945 amounted to 346 KIA, 1161 WIA and 191 MIA, and 155 KIA, 960 WIA and 1939 MIA in the period from 11 to 20 April 1945, http://ww2stats.com/cas_ger_okh_dec45.html (accessed 18 June 2014). In light of the heavy fighting in Syrmia and Slavonia, and especially in northern Croatian littoral, Lika, and Western Bosnia, these figures seem improbably low. As for the German losses in Syrmia on 12–14 April 1945, we know that the 963rd Fortress Brigade alone lost two out of its three battalions (Schmidt-Richberg, *Der Endkampf* [see n. 41], p. 121; TNA, DEFE 3/568, p. 184, From day report of Army Group Easy [sic] on twelfth, 20 April 1945; these battalions had an average fighting strength of 300 at the eve of the Yugoslav offensive: TNA, DEFE 3/566, p. 14, Army Group Easy [sic] weekly strength return as of thirtyfirst [sic] March, 15 April 1945). According to one officer of the 41st ID, 1232nd Regiment and divisional artillery and anti-tank units also suffered »heavy casualties« in men and equipment: AOS, GD, 73/1/4/5, Statement of Major Werner Honeck, 12 July 1947.

time thwarting all Yugoslav attempts to bring about a decisive battle of annihilation.⁵²

The Performance of the Yugoslav Forces on the Syrmian Front

There is one question which should be answered before all else: why did the Yugoslav leadership keep the bulk of its forces in Syrmia and, all the difficulties notwithstanding, insist on achieving the breakthrough there regardless of the cost? First of all, the decision to deploy the NOVJ forces in Syrmia in late October 1944 was dictated in great part by the dynamic of the Eastern Front. The Soviets viewed their intervention in Yugoslavia as a side episode. They were eager to have their forces out of the country and deployed into southern Hungary as soon as possible. In these circumstances, the two NOVJ corps around Belgrade seemed ideally suited for advancing through Syrmia and providing protection to the southern flank of the 3rd UF. With little luck and some material aid, the hope was that the Partisans would be able to penetrate as far as Vukovar, thereby opening the Danube for Soviet river shipping. The Yugoslavs, for their part, had several good reasons to launch an active campaign in Syrmia. The Germans had to be pushed back from Belgrade as far as possible: there was a pervasive fear of a quick enemy dash to the capital which would inflict immeasurable political damage to the recently established Communist authorities there.⁵³ Furthermore, the axis from Belgrade across Syrmia and Slavonia to Zagreb seemed the most favorable in terms of geography (mostly flatlands and low hills) and communications (normal-gauge, largely double-tracked railway line) for any further westward advance.

If the first phase of the Syrmian campaign was determined largely by military considerations, it is difficult to say the same for the second. During the first months of 1945, the Germans were still offering stubborn resistance to Yugoslav operations in the interior of the country and along the Adriatic coast. At the same time, HGE was secretly sounding out the possibility of a gradual withdrawal from the country, promising all its heavy equipment in return. The Yugoslavs for their part kept demanding an immediate and unconditional surrender for two reasons:

⁵² For a brief overview of the operations in the last month of the war in Yugoslavia see Schmider, *Der jugoslawische Kriegsschauplatz* (see n. 15), pp. 1068–1070.

⁵³ Pavle Jakšić, *Nad uspomenu* (Belgrade: Rad, 1990), Vol. I, p. 349.

first, there was an overriding wish to not allow the Germans to escape unpunished for four years of an extraordinarily brutal occupation. Second, a surrender of an entire German army group would immeasurably raise the standing of the new Yugoslav government, both at home and abroad. Unsurprisingly, the talks failed to produce any results, but they had revealed that the HGE command was not unsympathetic to the idea of transforming itself into the nucleus of the future army of an independent Austria when the right time came.⁵⁴ The Yugoslavs feared that, if left unassailed, this powerful military formation would maintain its position in the country for as long as possible and then either surrender itself and the territory it controlled to the Western Allies, or simply become their auxiliary force.⁵⁵

In addition to the German unwillingness to lay down their arms, Tito was extremely anxious about the speed of the Anglo-American advance in Italy in light of the crisis over the Julian March and the city of Trieste. The British and the Americans were resolved to have this region remain a part of Italy as per provisions of the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920. On the other hand, the new Yugoslav government owed much of its popularity to promises of annexation of these lands, where Croats and Slovenes constituted the majority of the population, and was naturally keen to fulfill them. Tensions were only exacerbated by the British intervention in Greece in October 1944 and their tentative plans for landings in Istria.⁵⁶ Second, Belgrade was apprehensive regarding the large concentration of collaborationist forces in the western Yugoslav provinces, which were still holding out exclusively due to the German presence in the country. These forces were heterogeneous in nature (as in the cases of the Croatian Ustashes, Serbian Chetniks and *Zbor* militiamen, and the Slovene *Domobranci*), but united in their fierce anti-communism. It was no secret that all of these groups were hoping to switch sides at the very moment of German surrender and present a ready-made bridgehead for the Western Allies in case their friction with the Yugoslavs erupted into a full-blown war.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Gaj Trifković, *Making Deals with the Enemy: Partisan-German Contacts and Prisoner Exchanges in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945*. In: *Global War Studies* 10/2 (2013): pp. 6–37; esp. 35–36.

⁵⁵ For HGE's request for ammunition from the Allied HQ in Italy in early May 1945 see Jozo Tomsevic, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 753–754.

⁵⁶ Yugoslavia also had territorial claims over the southern parts of the Austrian province of Carinthia: Dr Dušan Biber, *Međunarodni položaj Jugoslavije u posljednjoj godini drugog svjetskog rata*. In: *Završne operacije za oslobođenje Jugoslavije: učesnici govore*. Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1986 [= *Za pobjedu i slobodu*, 9]) pp. 828–843.

⁵⁷ Milovan Djilas, *Wartime* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 441–442; Mitrovski, *Petnaesti (makedonski) korpus* (see n. 44), p. 339; NAW, T-78, Roll 476, 6459016, OKH, HGF, Evening report for 1 March 1945.

In late March 1945, Belgrade could do little to counter these potential threats. The only formation within striking distance from the border was the 4th Army with some 40–50 000 troops deployed in the northern Croatian littoral.⁵⁸ This army could not be expected to break the German defenses in the region, defeat the collaborationists and occupy the border in strength all by itself. Furthermore, its heavy weapons largely came from the Western Allies, who also provided the bulk of necessary supplies. Owing to tense relations with the latter, the army could have found itself virtually cut off at any given moment. Partisan units in Slovenia were still a relatively weak and lightly armed guerrilla force and did not present a serious deterrent to a possible intervention from abroad. The only way to nip the potential *Vendée* in the bud and add real weight to the Yugoslav claim to Julian March was to get the bulk of the army – still tied down in Syrmia – to the western borders as quickly as possible. This in turn could only be done by an immediate offensive against the German fortified line between the Danube and the Sava, despite the fact that the preparations were far from complete.

Defeating their hated, but respected foe in a set-piece battle became something of an obsession for the Yugoslavs, or at least for their political and military leadership. It was regarded as an ultimate test of maturity, proof that the army had mastered the art of regular warfare. Furthermore, a successful outcome of the operation would boost national pride by reinforcing the notion that the Yugoslav peoples had liberated themselves with little or no help from the outside. Tito was probably also thinking of the battle in terms of the party's standing with the Soviet Union. Stalin chided him once for the poor performance of the NOVJ and compared it unfavorably to the Bulgarian army – something the Yugoslav Communists were very sensitive about, given their long-standing animosity towards the Bulgarians. The Cominform Crisis of 1948 was still in the distant future, and victory in Syrmia would show Moscow that it could count on the Yugoslav armed forces in the insecure post-war world.⁵⁹

The campaign in Syrmia was undoubtedly the longest and bloodiest fought by the Yugoslav Partisans during the Second World War. It took almost six months and at least 13 000 killed⁶⁰ to cover the distance of some 140 kilometers

58 *Zbornik*/XI/4/70-71, Strength return of 4th Army, 31 March 1945.

59 Djilas, *Wartime* (see n. 57), pp. 436–437; Milan Šarac, »Ispovest generala Đoke Jovanića: smrt u Sremu«, *Nin*, 19 October 2003, electronic version available at: www.nin.co.rs/2000-10/19/14906.html (accessed 21 June 2014).

60 This figure includes only those who could be identified by name; in addition to 13 000 Yugoslav Partisans, over 1100 Soviet and 630 Bulgarian soldiers also fell on the Syrmian Front: Dragoljub Tmušić, *Sremski front: 23.X.1944–13.IV.1945* (Novi Sad: Dnevnik, 1987), p. 53. The losses suffered by the NOVJ/Yugoslav Army on the Drava, Slavonia and Eastern Bosnia are not included

between Belgrade and Vinkovci and open the road to Zagreb. The reason for such high cost in time and blood lay in the fact that the NOVJ was, for the first time, waging a fully regular campaign of the type their enemy excelled at. At least until April 1945, both the Soviets and the Germans had rightly questioned the ability of the Yugoslavs to hold a part of a front on their own, not to mention achieving any decisive success on the offensive. The NOVJ was still perceived as a force whose real strength lay in irregular tactics.⁶¹ Unlike in the neighboring Slavonia and Eastern Bosnia, the NOVJ units in Syrmia had a very limited opportunity to employ guerrilla tactics: turning the northern flank of the German front by using the cover provided by the Fruška Mountain in October–November 1944 constitutes practically the only such example. After that, confines of the operational area (the stretch of land between Danube and Sava) and the peculiarities of the countryside (flat, open terrain) meant that the Yugoslavs had to face the enemy head-on. Under these conditions, the heterogeneous but expertly led collection of German battle groups, fighting behind a series of strong defensive positions, proved to be more than a match for unexperienced and under-equipped Partisan forces.⁶² Even had the NOVJ had the chance to boost its capabilities by switching between regular and irregular tactics more often, it is highly unlikely that this approach would yield the kind of results the Partisans were after. Simply put, the war could not be won by ambushes and evasion maneuvers.

All said, it was little wonder that the NOVJ, consisting of untrained men led by officers with no knowledge of regular warfare, suffered such heavy casualties. In the beginning, the only tactic these troops could be reasonably expected to execute was a swift dash over no-man's land in order to overwhelm defenders by sheer weight of numbers. Inexperienced as they were, soldiers huddled under fire which made them even better target for machineguns and mortars. Mines were an especially feared weapon, as no Partisan, whether a conscript or veteran, had seen it employed on such a scale before. Since specialized equipment was not available for the better part of the campaign, some units improvised by driving cattle herds

in this figure. Unofficial estimates of the number of killed in Syrmia usually vary between 30 000 (Ljubodrag Đurić, *Sećanja na ljude i događaje*; Belgrade: Rad, 1988, p. 202) and 36 000 (Djilas, *Wartime* [see n. 57], p. 441; the latter figure includes casualties incurred in the operations of the 1st Army until the end of the war).

61 32. *divizija NOVJ* (Zagreb: Globus, 1988), p. 169; NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000455, HGF, Intelligence section, Enemy intentions in the west, 31 December 1944.

62 It is worthy of note that even the superbly equipped armies of the Western Allies sometimes had difficulties overcoming the ad-hoc German defenses based on the battle group concept which lay »at the heart of Germany's extraordinary fighting performance in the last year of the Second World War«: Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944–1945* (London, UK: Pan Books, 2005), pp. 24–25.

before them, hoping that the unfortunate animals would clear a path through the minefields.⁶³ »Tank scare« was widespread, as most men faced armored vehicles in the open for the first time. The 1st PC relied mostly on the Soviet anti-tank detachments for protection until they were withdrawn in late December 1944. Yugoslav units which replaced them still had neither adequate training nor experience to effectively counter the mass employment of armor by the Germans in their January attacks.⁶⁴ Casualties could have been lower had the Yugoslavs at least had any helmets. It appears that no one had thought of this unglamorous, but important piece of equipment when requesting military aid from the Soviets, and consequently the men had to endure artillery barrages with nothing else but the standard-issue »titovka« (Yugoslav forage cap) to protect their heads. Yet the biggest problem of the NOVJ lay in the fact that it had taken a long time before it learned the importance of digging in. Like helmets, shovels were not provided to units in Belgrade, and one high-ranking officer later candidly admitted that »we were not particularly interested in them«.⁶⁵ Entrenching was widely considered unmanly and not becoming of a soldier: some Vojvodina Partisans could at first not understand why the soldiers of the supposedly »heroic« Red Army were so persistent in digging foxholes; on one occasion, a Partisan unit charged an enemy strongpoint in Syrmia because »the men could not bear to stay in water-filled trenches any longer«.⁶⁶ It took many casualties and prolonged propaganda campaign under the motto »more sweat – less blood« until both officers and men finally acknowledged the necessity of being properly entrenched. By April 1945, the 1st Army had dug an estimated 600 kilometers of trenches in its area of responsibility.⁶⁷

Let us now examine the difficulties facing the NOVJ/Yugoslav Army in more detail. First of all, the NOVJ's officer corps, while well-versed in guerrilla tactics, had only limited knowledge of regular operations. This becomes apparent if we look at the biographies of leading commanders on both sides of the Syrmian Front on the eve of the German counter-attack in early January 1945. The commander of

63 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), p. 107; NAW, T-311, Roll 195, 000037, HGF, Intelligence section, Morning report for 3 December 1944.

64 Miloš Pajević, *Artiljerija u NOR* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1970), p. 421.

65 Milutin Morača, *Peta krajiška divizija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1985), p. 298.

66 Nikola Božić, *Rovovi i mostobrani: 8. vojvođanska brigada* (Novi Sad: Institut za istoriju, 1989), p. 302; *Zbornik*/1/10/123, 4th Serbian Brigade, War diary entry for 9 November 1944. Đoka Jovanić, the commander of the 6th PD, recalled how the soldiers of the newly-arrived 1st PD ridiculed his men for digging in: »Grave-diggers! Look at yourselves! What kind of fighters are you?« They laughed. I was thinking to myself, just wait a little and you will also be looking for shovels as soon as the fighting begins«: Šarac, »Ispovest generala Đoke Jovanića«: smrt u Sremu«, (see n. 59).

67 Pajović et al., *Sremski front* (see n. 10), pp. 161, 244.

the German 34th AC, as well as two out of his three divisional commanders were veterans of World War One; the third had been on active service since 1939 and rose through the ranks to become a general; all had at least one year of experience in leading formations of the size now entrusted to them. On the NOVJ side, the situation was entirely different: the 1st Army's commander had held the rank of lieutenant in the Spanish Republican Army; out of his five divisional commanders, two were junior officers in the Yugoslav Royal Army, one was an NCO, and two were mere privates. None of these men, with the exception of Dapčević, had any experience in handling formations of more than 5000 men prior to November 1944.⁶⁸

The problem of qualified command cadre was further exacerbated by extraordinarily high casualty rates among officers and NCOs. To give a few examples: the 38th NOVJD (the 2nd Army) had forty killed and over a hundred wounded officers and NCOs in January 1945 alone; the 8th Vojvodina Brigade (the 3rd Army) lost forty percent of its command cadre during the fighting on the Drava in mid-March of the same year; the 11th NOVJD (the 1st Army) lost two out of its four brigade commanders on 7 April 1945.⁶⁹ The Partisans took a pragmatic approach in the attempt to offset the losses. In addition to promoting the bravest and most able soldiers to command positions, the NOVJ frequently employed former royal officers in staff duties. Likewise, Yugoslav nationals who had learned military skills in German formations were a welcome asset and were, if proven loyal, often made NCOs.⁷⁰

The propensity of the ranking personnel to lead their men into battle gun in hand, once viewed as an admirable virtue, was now under Soviet influence being branded by the pejorative term »Partizanština« (roughly »doing things the Partisan way«). Communist Party (KPJ) organizations within the army had the task of rooting out the old habits inherited from the days of guerrilla army, including informality, sloppy paperwork and unsoldierly conduct.⁷¹ Soon, however, due to

68 See the entries for Hellmuth Felmy and Wolfgang Hauser, www.geocities.com/~orion47/ (accessed 22 June 2014); for August Wittmann and Otto Kumm see www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/Index-O1.htm (accessed 22 June 2014). For Yugoslav commanders, see the entries for Peko Dapčević, Đoko Jovanić, Miloje Milojević, Milutin Morača, in *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije* (Belgrade: Mladost, 1975), unpaginated; for Vaso Jovanović see *Vojna enciklopedija*, Vol. IV (Belgrade: Izdanje redakcije vojne enciklopedije, 1972), p. 76; for Miloš Šiljegović see Đuro Milinović, Drago Karasijević, *11. krajiška NOU brigada* (Bosanska Gradiška: N/A, 1982), p. 430.

69 Dželebdžić, *Druga jugoslovenska armija* (see n. 51), p. 220; Božić, *Rovovi* (see n. 66), p. 582; Samardžija, *11. Krajiška* (see n. 34), p. 300.

70 *Zbornik/IV/32/182*, 28th NOVJD to 2nd Army, 6 January 1945; *Zbornik/IX/8/210*, Monthly report of Communist Party organization with 38th NOVJD for December 1944, 14 January 1945.

71 *Zbornik/II/15/62*, Central Committee of the KPJ to all central, regional, area and divisional committees, 15 January 1945; *Zbornik/IX/9/89*, Report of KPJ organization with 11th NOVJD, 5 March 1945.

dogmatism and burning desire to mimic the Red Army in all things military, the suppression of »Partizanština« also began to target positive experiences learned during four years of insurgency, like self-initiative of field commanders and tactical flexibility. As a result, commanders on divisional and even brigade level preferred conducting all their business from the comparative safety of their far-off headquarters (»uštabljivanje«), at the same time insisting on immediate fulfillment of orders, regardless of conditions and consequences.⁷² This approach had cost the NOVJ/Yugoslav Army dearly, as it usually resulted in poor coordination and rigid adherence to a pre-planned pattern of attacks which the Germans had little trouble in fending off.⁷³

The story of the NOVJ's intelligence effort on the Syrmian Front and adjoining sectors is one of unqualified failure. Lack of experienced cadre and irregular exchange of information between staffs and intelligence-gathering bodies meant that the NOVJ/Yugoslav Army was largely operating »in the dark« as far as enemy intentions and dispositions were concerned. For instance, the 1st PC had no data on the strength of the »Yellow« line which resulted in heavy casualties in fighting around Sremska Mitrovica in late October and early November 1944. On the eve of the December offensive, the Soviet 68th RC found out that the distance to enemy trenches was no less than five times greater than originally reported by the Partisans. The German attack at Otok on 3 January 1945, which achieved full surprise, failed to stir the 1st Army into paying more attention to enemy troop movements. Consequently, Tito went ahead with his visit to the front on 16 January totally oblivious to the looming danger which materialized itself only one day later in the form of the operation »Wintergewitter«. Only on 25 January 1945 did the Supreme HQ issue instructions on proper handling of intelligence tasks in conditions of regular warfare.⁷⁴

72 Prior to the liberation of Serbia in late 1944, the Partisans would generally cancel an attack or retreat from a defensive position as soon as the enemy pressure became too strong in order to conserve manpower. The changing attitude of NOVJ commanders to casualties is best illustrated by two entries from the personal diary of Koča Popović.: in late 1942 he criticized the chief of staff of the Supreme HQ (a professional soldier of the former Royal Army) for being »insensitive to a man's physical condition«; in early 1945, he wrote: »Oversensitivity to losses is now out of place—it hampers proper work and [eventually] makes losses even higher«: *Koča Popović-Beleške uz ratovanje*, ed. Miloš Vuksanović (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1988), pp. 64, 306, diary entries for 28 October 1942 and 22 February 1945.

73 Gligo Mandić, *17. istočnobosanska NOU divizija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1976), p. 296; *Koča Popović-Beleške* (see n. 72), pp. 304–306, diary entry for 22 February 1945.

74 Milovan Dželebdžić, *Obaveštajna služba u Narodnooslobodilačkom ratu 1941–1945*. (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1987), pp. 221–223, 45; TsAMO, f. 961, o. 1, d. 63, p. 134, 68th RC, War diary entry for 2 December 1944.

The NOVJ/Yugoslav Army had one clear advantage over its German foe and that was numerical superiority. Serbia, with its large population, now became the main source of manpower: from early November 1944 to late January 1945, some 280 000 persons were conscripted into the army. As a result, the strength of an average Partisan division increased abruptly from approximately 3000 to 10 000 men. In words of Koča Popović, however, countless difficulties besetting the army in this period meant that the actual fighting strength corresponded to »less than ten percent« of its numerical strength.⁷⁵ Huge influx of new conscripts, vast majority of who were »untrained peasant youths and schoolboys«,⁷⁶ diluted the cohesion and fighting prowess of old Partisan units which also had to provide the command cadre for the newly raised formations.⁷⁷

There was little time for training during the early phase of the campaign. The 1st PC attempted to rotate units as frequently as possible, but the pace of operations in Syrmia would allow them several weeks of rest at best. Only after comparative peace had set in in late January 1945 could the Yugoslavs devote more attention to this all-important issue. The first thing to do was to provide enlisted men with four-week basic training (invariably including »political lectures«) and organize short courses for NCOs and officers. Anticipating the upcoming offensive, by late March the curriculum was expanded to include

75 Dželebdžić, *Druga jugoslovenska armija* (see n. 51), pp. 226, 173.

76 Djilas, *Wartime* (see n. 57), p. 442. The notion, popular with some authors and daily media in Serbia to this day, that thousands of young men from »bourgeoisie« and conservative peasant families were deliberately sacrificed to German machineguns in Syrmia by the Communists in order to »punish« Serbia for its alleged anti-communism is not supported by primary sources. Serbia provided most soldiers for the Syrmian Front simply because of its proximity to the front and the fact that its manpower potential was still relatively intact, unlike that of the traditional Partisan strongholds in Bosnia and Croatia. The conscription affected all able-bodied men, regardless of whether they came from Partisan or Chetnik villages, or the big cities. Furthermore, it appears that the Partisan cause still had a strong appeal amongst the youth: Seventeen year-old Dragoslav Dimitrijević-Beli was one of some twenty youngsters serving with the 21st NOVJD on the Syrmian Front who at one point refused to be mustered out on grounds of young age; he did not want to part from his comrades and his beloved »Brno« light machine gun. Beli and the others were eventually allowed to stay within the ranks, but were re-assigned to escort duties behind the front line (private communication from Dragoslav Dimitrijević-Beli, 10 July 2015). One German report from early 1945 stated that the number of volunteers in some units of the »Serbian Army« (2nd NOVJ Army) was »astoundingly high«: Karl Hnilicka, *Das Ende auf dem Balkan: Die militärische Räumung Jugoslawiens durch die deutsche Wehrmacht 1944/45* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1970), p. 361.

77 *Zbornik*/IV/32/313, 27th NOVJD to 3rd NOVJC, 15 January 1945; Nikola Anić, Sekula Joksimović, Mirko Gutić, *Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije: pregled razvoja oružanih snaga Narodnooslobodilačkog pokreta 1941–1945*. (Belgrade: Vojnoistorijski institut, 1982), p. 398.

storming of fortified lines, combined arms operations and tactics of pursuit. Not forgetting the German penchant for armor, soldiers were taught tank-fighting techniques in live exercises with captured enemy vehicles.⁷⁸ Due to the fact that the 1st Army's area of responsibility was intersected by several rivers and the swampy terrain of the Bosut forest area, special emphasis was laid on the creation of an effective engineering arm: in addition to the already existing engineer battalions at divisional level, an independent engineer brigade was formed in early March 1945.⁷⁹ Apart from bridging and construction tasks, the sappers' main effort was directed at mastering the intricacies of German minefields, an essential prerequisite for any offensive in Syria.

Soviet influence on the Yugoslav army's organization and training deserves a special mention. As we have seen, Stalin was very forthcoming in complying with the Partisans' request for material aid and technical assistance: they were considered politically reliable and, if properly equipped and trained, could prove militarily useful as well. The quantity and the quality of Soviet help compared favorably to that of the Western Allies, who were often accused of handing out obsolete weapons and supplies »by the spoonful« and conditioning them with demands of political concessions. Indeed, the Partisan leadership suspected that the British in fact did not wish to see the NOVJ transformed into a regular force, and were therefore delaying their deliveries of modern equipment and training of Yugoslav airmen. With an alternative source of assistance secured, Tito »took all of his money and placed the bet on his other ally«, at the same time hardening his stance towards the British.⁸⁰

The Red Army was revered by the Partisans, not solely because of ideological ties or Pan-Slavism, but also because of its combat record and vast experience. The Yugoslavs were therefore happy to have Soviet personnel in their midst. In addition to the staff attached to the General Staff in Belgrade, each Yugoslav army HQ was provided with a liaison, and each division armed with USSR-made weapons with a small team of instructors (the same went for independent artillery and communications units). Their continuous presence with units in the field was especially important in light of the fact that the Yugoslav specialist schools had begun to open only in early 1945 and it took them months to turn out first graduates. The curriculum at these schools was based entirely on Russian litera-

78 *Zbornik*/1/10/263-264, 12th Krajina Brigade, War diary entries for 1–11 November 1944; *Zbornik*/1/18/88, 1st PD, War diary entry for 14 January 1945; *ibid.*, pp. 156–157, 5th NOVJD to subordinated units, 31 January 1945; *ibid.*, p. 460, 21st NOVJD, War diary entry for 26 March 1945; Morača, *Peta krajiška divizija* (see n. 65), p. 325.

79 Anić et al., *Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije* (see n. 77), p. 505.

80 Vladimir Velebit, *Sećanja* (Zagreb: Globus, 1983), pp. 319–321.

ture, as well as experiences from the Eastern Front; at least 20 Soviet infantry officers were employed as teachers.⁸¹ The process of sovietisation of the Yugoslav army reached its peak in the early spring, when divisions were reorganized along the Red Army pattern (sacrificing a fourth of their strength for increased firepower and mobility) and were even re-branded as »rifle«. The reorganization, however, could be only partially completed by the time for the April offensive.⁸²

Soviet learnings were increasingly felt in disciplinary measures as well. Prior to late 1944, the Partisans were proud of their superior *esprit-de-corps*, which they thought had rested primarily on voluntary discipline and a highly developed sense of belonging to the only true »people's army« in the country. If the KPJ army cells' meetings (there was one in every company) or the highly developed propaganda failed to produce the desired effect on the morale and discipline, commanders would then resort to punishment. This very often included a brief court-martial followed by an execution, even for petty offences. The combination of simple, idealistic rules of conduct and a swift application of justice in cases of infringement appealed to the rank and file of relatively small Partisan units, most of whom were volunteers. The mass mobilization which followed the liberation of Serbia changed all this. Vast majority of new recruits knew little about the war or the Partisan ideals. Indeed, many of them had heard of Communists only through the Axis propaganda, and some had even served in various anti-communist formations. The increasing size of units, lack of experienced cadre, and the pace of operations in Syrmia led to the neglect of »party work,« widely believed to be the main instrument for maintaining inner cohesion and morale. Heavy casualties and miserable living conditions on the front, especially during the early phase of the campaign, resulted in breakdown of discipline; many cases of maltreatment of civilians in the province led one high-ranking political commissar to exclaim that the Partisans »had become a professional [i.e. mercenary] army«. ⁸³ Worse still, the NOVJ's combat potential was slowly eroding due to mass desertions, self-inflicted wounds and even outright mutinies.⁸⁴ Following the Soviet recipe,

⁸¹ Morača, *Peta krajiška divizija* (see n. 65), pp. 298, 334; Dželebdžić, *Druga jugoslovenska armija* (see n. 51), p. 208. For details on the number and tasks of Soviet personel see Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fond 664, opis 2, document 384, pp. 109–111, State Defense Committee (GKO), Order No. 6575ss, 22 September 1944; *ibid.*, f. 664, o. 1, d. 370, pp. 180–182, GKO, Appendix 16 to order no. 7527ss, 10 February 1945.

⁸² *Zbornik/II/10/278-284*, General Staff to artillery, communications' and engineers' sections, 25 March 1945; Anić et al., *Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije* (see n. 77), pp. 489–494.

⁸³ *Zbornik/IX/7/619-622*, 1st PC to 28th NOVJD, 25 November 1944.

⁸⁴ *Koča Popović-Beleške* (see n. 72), pp. 304–306, diary entry for 22 February 1945; *Zbornik/II/14/441-442*, Supreme HQ to all subordinate units, 25 December 1944. The best known instance of insubordination occurred in Macedonia in late 1944, when certain units refused to go to the

the penal companies were formed at brigade level in December 1944, followed by penal battalions at army level in March 1945. Like in the Red Army, these units were sent on the most dangerous missions and were nearly wiped out in the process.⁸⁵ The opposing side had no such problems and the fact, that the German soldiers feared Yugoslav captivity more than death, contributed substantially to the Wehrmacht's undiminishing fighting spirit during the last months of the war.

All three Yugoslav armies were equipped with a mixture of Soviet, Allied, and captured Axis weapons, and this naturally caused logistical problems. The Soviet weaponry began arriving right after the liberation of Belgrade, but it took another six months to refit all units of the 1st Army. Due to poor organization, units repeatedly received new weapons only days before going into action. As a result, soldiers had no time to learn how to use them to their full potential.⁸⁶ As there was no domestic production, the NOVJ was almost totally dependent on its allies for ammunition shipments.⁸⁷ That this could pose a serious problem is evident from the following examples. At the beginning of November 1944, the 21st NOVJD had to store its seven British mortars (out of altogether twelve available) because it had not received any shells for them in two months. One battalion of the 3rd Vojvodina Brigade was ordered to partake in the landing at Opatovac in early December 1944 despite the fact that one hundred of its men had only ninety rounds each for their Italian rifles; when the ammunition ran out, the soldiers panicked and

Syrmian Front: Svetozar Vukmanović-Tempo, *Revolucija koja teče-memoari* (Belgrade: Komunist, 1971), Vol. II, pp. 5–6.

85 www.vojska.net/hrv/drugi-svjetski-rat/jugoslavija/bataljun/disciplinski/ (accessed 22 June 2014); Bogdan Bosiočić, *21. slavonska udarna brigada* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1981), p. 264. Yugoslav historiography offers scant details on these so-called »Disciplinary Battalions«. It is known that the 1st Army had at least two such units, one of which was employed in the southern sector of the Syrmian Front on 12 April 1945. This unit was apparently dissolved five days later, while the other one continued to exist for a while longer: Mitrovski, *Petnaesti (makedonski) korpus* (see n. 44), p. 371; *Zbornik/XI/1/479*, 22nd NOVJD, War diary entry for 17 April 1945; *ibid.*, p. 580, 22nd NOVJD, War diary entry for 21 April 1945. According to one survivor, battalions had to be dissolved due to heavy casualties: Angelina Marković, »Apsurdi Sremskog fronta«, *Politika*, 12 April 2003, electronic version available at: <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/sorabia/conversations/topics/39691> (accessed 22 June 2014).

86 For instances of last-minute arms deliveries see Isidor Đuković, *Druga šumadijska-21. srpska brigada* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1982), p. 379; Dragoljub Ž. Mirčetić-Duško, *Dvadesettreća srpska brigada* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1989), p. 85–86; Nikola Mraović, *Peta vojvodanska brigada* (Novi Sad: IZS, 1985), p. 328.

87 Nikola Anić, Korpusi i divizije Narodnooslobodilačke vojske u vreme reorganizacije Narodnooslobodilačke vojske u Jugoslovensku armiju. In: *Armije u strategijskoj koncepciji NOR i revolucije: učesnici govore* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1986 [= Za pobjedu i slobodu, 6]) p. 318; Private communication from Milan Milanović, 11 April 2014.

fled.⁸⁸ Shortages persisted until the end of the campaign: the brevity of the Yugoslav barrage on the morning of 12 April 1945 was caused less by design than by the fact that the 1st Army had a very limited stock of artillery ammunition.⁸⁹

In the end, it turned out that the 1st Army needed respite more than anything else. During the quiet period on the Strymian Front between late January and early April 1945, the units were brought up to strength, rested and trained in the use of their new equipment. Whereas it is true that the army enjoyed overwhelming superiority by the time the great offensive began (five Yugoslav to one-and-a-half German divisions), the breakthrough was not achieved by the sheer weight of numbers alone. Artillery preparation was short but effective, owing to detailed reconnaissance of enemy firing positions; Yugoslav air-crews had likewise given a good account of themselves by providing close air-support to ground troops; German minefields, which had thwarted so many attacks in the past, were largely rendered ineffective by tireless engineering efforts; sappers had also dug approach trenches to within 150–200 meters of the enemy lines in order to provide the advancing infantry with as much cover as possible.⁹⁰ Regardless of this obvious improvement, the ambitious intention to encircle the entire German 34th AC in Strymia was clearly beyond the army's capabilities at the time. The plan called for forcing of two major rivers and a swift strike into the enemy rear (partly through heavily forested terrain) despite the fact that one pincer arm (the 3rd Army) had no tanks, and the other (the 1st Army) had no adequate bridging equipment. Even more striking is the fact that the Yugoslavs went ahead with it although they had no mobile reserves standing ready to exploit gaps in the German defenses, as all three tank battalions and the single cavalry brigade were relegated to infantry-support role. Basically, the Yugoslav Army attempted to conduct a World War Two operation with the means and tactics of World War One.

88 *Zbornik*/I/10/68, 21st NOVJD to 1st PC, 4 November 1944; Nikola Božić, *Treća vojvođanska NOU brigada* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 1980), p. 381.

89 Pajević, *Artillerija u NOR* (see n. 64), p. 540. The Soviets were also slow in delivering spare parts and summer-grade motor oil for the 2nd TB which seriously diminished its effectiveness during the advance to Zagreb in late April and early May 1945: Dimitrijević & Savić, *Oklopne jedinice* (see n. 51), p. 359. The same goes for the Yugoslav Air Force: for instance, the 42nd Air Division's formation strength was 120 machines. On 12 April 1945, however, this number was reduced to 76, out of which only 37 were serviceable: Predrag Pejić, *42. vazduhoplovna divizija* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1991), p. 140.

90 Pajević, *Artillerija u NOR* (see n. 64), p. 540; *Zbornik*/XI/1/114, 21st NOVJD, War diary entry for 26 March 1945; Morača, *Peta krajiška divizija* (see n. 65), p. 324; Mitrovski, *Petnaesti (makedonski) korpus* (see n. 44), p. 355.