

Anti-Axis Resistance in Southeastern Europe, 1940–1944: Forms and Varieties. Edited by John Paul Newman, Ljubinka Škodrić, and Rade Ristanović. Leiden: Brill–Schöningh, 2023. 377 pp.

After World War II, anti-fascism became a widely accepted core concept in the political arena and was used by scholars as an interpretative framework for any kind of resistance that had taken place during the war. In Western Europe, instances of resistance were magnified and instances of collaboration were veiled, while on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain a narrative of communist or Soviet salvation dominated for decades. This latter master narrative was about the anti-fascist struggle allegedly led by the communist party. After 1989, this ideological interpretation was sidelined. Since then, scholars have tended to use the terms “anti-Nazi” or “anti-German.”

The editors of *Anti-Axis Resistance in Southeastern Europe, 1940–1944. Forms and Varieties*, published by Brill in 2023, have introduced an even more sophisticated concept to which they refer as “anti-Axis.” Unfortunately, they have not offered an explanation of this conceptual novelty. Therefore, the reader is compelled to assume that “anti-Axis,” a term which may come from military history and the history of international relations, refers to all instances of resistance against the Axis powers.

Editors John Paul Newman, Ljubinka Škodrić, and Rade Ristanović organized the book into three sections and eighteen chapters. In line with current trends, they claim to provide the missing “comparative and transnational reflection” (p.3) on resistance in Southeastern Europe during World War II. Most of the chapters of the volume, however, focus on one country or territory in particular and for the most part analyze the events in a national framework rather than from a genuinely comparative perspective, which would have focused, for instance, on issues such as partisan war, political protests, life savings, etc. and thus would have made it possible and necessary to cover and compare the whole region. With one exception, the chapters also do not focus on the transnational character of their subject. They would have done better, perhaps, to have considered the model offered by the 2020 volume *Fighters across frontiers. Transnational resistance in Europe, 1936–48*, edited by Robert Gildea and Ismee Tames and published by Manchester University Press. Admittedly, considering the power of nationalism in the multiethnic region of Southeastern Europe, the authors cannot be blamed for having chosen a traditional method of analysis.

According to Olivier Wieviorka, a prominent scholar in the field and the author of the first part of the introduction, resistance is a conscious, risky, and altruistic act which involves transgressions of the law, and it does “not belong to the register of opinion” (p.9). Unfortunately, it is not clear that writing (or publishing), for example, could be considered part of this definition of resistance, and thus it remains unclear how the contributors to this volume would approach the wide field of intellectual resistance.

Wieviorka lists a few factors that played an important role in resistance, both in Western Europe and Eastern Europe. These factors included the individual dimension (which puts the concept of historical agency on the stage), historical experiences with invaders and the culture of protest, international connections of internal resistance forces, and the moral dilemmas concerning reprisals. With regard to the Balkans, Wieviorka emphasizes that this region was never important enough for the Allies to intervene. Thus, “the Anglo-Americans hoped above all that their resistance would pin the Axis forces—no more” (p.17).

In the second part of the introduction the editors draw the reader’s attention to Southeastern Europe. They mark the place of the often mythologized, centuries-long local anti-imperial, revolutionary struggles and emphasize the heritage of the “anti-occupational resistance of the First World War” (p.22). Newman, Škodrić, and Ristanović also underline that the process of decolonization in the Balkans was not fully complete in 1918. Thus, independent struggles and the violent traditions of guerilla combat were successfully intertwined with modern political ideologies, such as fascism and communism in the interwar period. This was partly why, in July 1941, only three months after the occupation of Yugoslavia by the German army, there was a wide-ranging armed uprising against the invaders. The authors give a brief overview of the main resistance forces in the region between 1941 and 1945, noting that while the Yugoslav Partisan Army was one of the strongest resistance organizations in occupied Europe, none of the “resistance movements had the strength to overcome the occupier and liberate their country independently” (p.31) had it not been for the military assistance of the Allies.

The first section of the book bears the title “Conditions and circumstances of the armed resistance.” This chapter deals exclusively with Yugoslavia. First, contributor Aleksandar Životić examines relations between the USSR and the Yugoslav resistance movements in 1941–1942. He points out the confusion that the German invasion caused in Moscow. Životić underlines that, “despite repeated requests until the end of 1943, there was no direct Soviet military support for

the partisan movements” (p.62). In the next chapter, Blaž Torkar summarizes US policy toward the Yugoslav resistance in 1941–1945. Torkar explains how and why the Allies reevaluated the royalist movement in 1942–1943 and started to support Tito’s partisans instead of the chetniks. An important consideration in making this decision was that Mihailović occasionally collaborated with the Germans and the Nedić administration. Nevertheless, the next chapter illustrates brilliantly that collaboration, cooperation, and resistance cannot always be sharply differentiated. While the Serbian State Guard was rightly considered a committed collaborator auxiliary force of the Nedić regime, Nebojša Stambolija, another contributor to the volume, demonstrates the manners of cooperation between the Guard and the chetniks. The latter legalized themselves by joining the detachments of Nedić, “but they were still secretly under Mihailović’s command” (p.92). However, after the Allies turned away from Mihailović, the Guard and the chetniks formed a common “anti-communist front” (p.97) against “the only true enemy” (p.99), the partisans. The next chapter deals with the national components of the losses suffered by Yugoslav partisans at the hands of the Ustaša state, followed by a study examining relations between Russian émigrés and the resistance in Yugoslavia. According to the author, Milana Živanović, some émigrés considered Hitler’s military successes an opportunity to destroy communism, which was an argument for them to collaborate after 1941, while others thought that the Third Reich posed a threat for their homeland, thus they decided to resist. Overall, “a few hundred Russian emigrants fought in the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia from 1941 until 1945” (p.138).

The second section provides a detailed picture of the Yugoslav, Greek, Albanian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, and Slovenian resistance movements. Contributor Gaj Trifković begins this section by offering a clear overview of the strategies used by the partisans and the German strategies in Yugoslavia. The German forces reacted to the partisan revolt with harsh reprisals. After they were unable to annihilate partisan corps in a crucial battle, they started to adopt key elements of partisan warfare and cooperated with the chetniks against the communists. As was the case in Yugoslavia, the Greek resistance had a nationalist and a (more powerful) communist organization, and both organizations were aided by the British. Contributor Stratos N. Dordanas explains the issue from the perspective of the ways in which the invaders collected information from the locals. Here too, the Germans turned to the ancient policy of divide and conquer, and they fanned “the conflict between the rival Greek resistance forces” (p.176), causing regional chaos and planting the seeds of civil war.

As a special case, Albania was occupied (first) not by the Third Reich but by fascist Italy almost half a year before the outbreak of World War II. Contributor Marenglen Kasmi therefore applies the old concept of “anti-Fascism” (p.188). Albania was another example of the rivalry between the communist and nationalist resistance forces. The non-communist Albanian Balli Kombëtar organization (the National Front), which was set up by the children of wealthy bey families, sought to restore “free and ethnic Albania” (p.194), mostly without fighting for freedom but rather simply waiting for the defeat of the Axis powers. After the German occupation of Albania in 1943, rather than taking part in the liberation of the country, Balli Kombëtar chose to collaborate. Credit went to the communists, as Albania was one of the few countries that “were liberated by its own forces” (p.208), Kasmi notes, thus contradicting the editors, at least on this point.

Unlike Albania, Macedonia (which was part of Yugoslavia) suffered a double invasion at the same time and was partitioned between Bulgaria and Italy in April 1941. The Macedonian and Slovenian case studies illustrate how resistance could be intertwined with nation building. Moreover, the latter (Slovenian) chapter focuses on the representation of violence by exploring the propaganda used by the resisters and the invaders in the doubly-occupied Slovenian territory, thus offering a contribution which is relevant to the history of violence and media studies. The Bulgarian resistance is explained in the book from the perspective of power using the contemporary sources made by the pro-Axis Bulgarian Army. It is worth mentioning here that the Bulgarian case was unique in the sense that locals fought each other, without foreign forces actually having invaded the country.

The third section of the book, which is on unarmed resistance, is the shortest. Barnabas Balint begins the discussion with an excellent study on “Tiyul,” which was a method of rescuing Jews across the Hungarian-Romanian border in 1944. Balint convincingly argues that this illegal network, ran by Zionists, organized in nationalist countries, and supported by paid local smugglers, was “simultaneously local, national, and transnational” (p.281). Nonviolent resistance was present among the Serbian middle class as well, although in contrast with the heroic partisan struggles, it “remained unnoticed and forgotten” (p.305), as Nataša Milićević writes in her chapter. Unarmed resistance here could take the form of evading mandatory labor services, protecting persecuted individuals, listening to banned radio stations, refusing to speak German, or forms of “escapism” (p.302). In the Independent State of Croatia, the forms of everyday resistance

were found in urban centers. Nevertheless, some of the examples listed by contributor Rory Yeomans are problematic and do not meet Olivier Wiewiorka's aforementioned definition. For instance, it is not entirely clear how complaints written to the city authorities or an "unsigned letter from a group of housewives to the editorial board of *Hrvatski list*" (p.319) could be interpreted as acts of resistance. The examples set by the rule breakers, the "nightwalkers" (p.320), which seem reminiscent of the counterculture of Swingjugend in Nazi Germany, are more convincing. "Young, sexually independent women, prostitutes, the inebriated, and vagrants" (p.322) did not want to change their lifestyles in the Ustaša state either.

The last chapter of the volume discusses the illegal (Baptist, Adventist, Nazarenes, etc.) religious activity in the Nazi-allied state of Romania, where the Orthodox Church held sway. The alleged "sectarians" held clandestine meetings, distributed secret literature, and tried to gain legal status. Here, the argument that "petitions" (p.342) constituted a form of resistance also does not seem convincing. As potential communists, the members of these small religious communities were persecuted by the state, but this kind of persecution was not "unique" (p.347) from an international perspective.

The volume ends with a short postface which draws attention to the complexity of the subject. The editors' task certainly was not easy. They worked together with seventeen authors and several institutes from different countries on a topic which plays a role in memory politics in Southeastern Europe. It is therefore understandable that some inconsistencies and minor errors can be found in the text. One regrettable example of this is the misspelling of Olivier Wiewiorka's last name, which is given as "Wiewiorka" (p.V; p.7). The chapter by Stratos N. Dordanas begins a long citation but without giving the source (p.164). Similarly problematic is the case of Endre Ságvári, who is identified as a "leader of the youth section of the anti-Fascist People's Front" (p.269), though there was no such organization in Hungary. In some cases, obvious biases and mistakes have not been weeded out of the texts. For example, the contention that Macedonia "from the beginning until the end of the war, was at the center of attention on both warring sides" (p.209) is hardly convincing, much as one would hardly find persuasive the assertion that "the second phase of [sic] Second World War on the European battlefield began in the second half of 1944" (p.221).

However, in sum, despite the problems and mistakes noted above, the volume is a significant contribution to the history of resistance in World War II.

The chapters are based on the relevant national and international secondary literature and also on a vast array of primary sources. It contains a useful index, and a list of abbreviations helps the reader navigate between the organizations and names, which is essential for such a data-rich book. The authors and editors guide the reader through a particularly complex milieu, showing the many faces of resistance in Southeastern Europe.

Ákos Bartha
HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities
bartha.akos@abtk.hu