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SUICIDE AMONG MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN OCCUPIED SERBIA 1941–1944

Abstract: This paper analyses suicides among members of the People's Liberation Movement (*Narodnooslobodilački pokret*, NOP) during the Axis occupation of Serbia in the Second World War. We will identify different types of suicide, determine the motives behind them, and identify those that can be linked to some forms of self-sacrifice. In particular, we will consider whether suicides within the NOP were influenced not only by Communist ideology but also by national traditions in the Balkans and the circumstances of war.

Keywords: Second World War, People's Liberation Movement, Serbia, Partisans, NOP, communism, self-sacrifice, suicide, national tradition.

1. Introduction

In August 1942, as occupation forces hunted them, members of a Partisan detachment from the Toplica region in South Serbia divided themselves up into groups of ten and sought shelter in mountain dugouts where they had enough provisions to sustain themselves in the forest for some time. However, one wavering fighter left and informed the collaborationist forces of their whereabouts, who then went to the exact location of the dugout where the Communist Party commissar Nikodije 'Tatko' Stojanović was hiding with his group of fighters. During their attempted escape on August 13, 1942, one Partisan was killed, and seven of them, led by Commissar Stojanović, all committed suicide by shooting each other in the head and the heart at close range. Their mutilated corpses were later put

on display by the authorities in the nearby town of Prokuplje.[1] Nevertheless, legends were later spun regarding the teacher and Partisan commander Nikodije Stojanović. There were rumors he was still alive and leading Partisan detachments in another part of the country; his comrades made up songs about him.[2]

This event was not unique, and it may have originated from a practice of the People's Liberation Movement in Serbia (the Partisans/People's Liberation Movement, *Narodnooslobodilački pokret*, NOP). It can be considered a form of self-sacrifice, since their deaths were not planned. It represented a heroic acceptance of death and had positive moral effects, despite the Partisans taking steps they knew could lead to their deaths.[3] Cases like this have led some authors to argue that, when considering and defining suicide, it is necessary to distinguish acts of martyrdom and self-sacrifice from other cases of suicide. This is based on the claim that there are differences between the morally acceptable act of sacrifice and the calculated act of suicide, and between an unpremeditated death and one that is planned.[4]

Emile Durkheim's typology of suicides is based on the idea that different types of suicides reflect the (im)balance between societal cohesion and individuality.[5] Excessive societal cohesion leads to altruistic suicide, which is a consequence of minimal individualization combined with a sense of duty and honor.[6] According to Durkheim, optional altruistic suicide as a subtype of altruistic suicide is not considered a duty and is looked upon with approval from society.[7] Many of those who commit optional altruistic suicide are considered heroes or martyrs. These types of suicides are also referred to as heroic suicides.[8] Those who choose this kind of suicide are seen as heroes who have fallen during a struggle for the survival of the community and as means of providing protection from the dangers of war. A halo of untouchability is constructed around them and coupled with societal recognition. Heroic suicides are highly valued in all forms of patriotic mythology and represent the heroism of singular and exceptional personalities on whose cult the values and authority of the state and society are built. Those who choose this form of suicide become iconic characters and part of symbols and rituals.[9]

In this paper we will investigate cases of suicide among the Partisans in Serbia by studying their motives and how the Communist authorities viewed these suicides during and after the war. Special consideration will be given to the national tradition of guerrilla resistance and Communist ideology, and how they interacted. We will employ qualitative and quantitative analyses of archival documents pertaining to collaborationist and the occupational government's military and police reports. These historical sources were created

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1 Državni arhiv Srbije, Beograd, Zbirka dokumenata o NOR-u i revoluciji, Jast. O., 2. (DAS, Ž-23)

2 Stevanović 1969: 139.

3 Lombardo 2013: 74–79; Tolhurst 1990: 77–92.

4 Schroeder 2005: 17–30; Barry 2012, 9–10.

5 Durkheim 2002: 201.

6 These types of suicides are linked to modern armies. Modern armies are well suited to altruistic suicide through the way they are structured, which include a loss of personality, obeying orders without question, and a call to sacrifice for the people and state. Riemer 1998: 112.

7 Stack 2004: 11.

8 Durkheim 2002: 199.

9 Lučić-Todosić 2020: 1156.

at the time the suicides occurred. They dealt with these incidents bureaucratically and without considering the motives behind them or the nature of these acts. In contrast, reports created by the Partisan forces during the war were colored by ideological and revolutionary views of their comrades' suicides. The way the suicide was perceived in these reports passed through different stages of evolution, ranging from condemnation to approval and glorification.

The topic of suicide has not been specifically addressed in the post-war Yugoslav and Serbian historiography of the Second World War or other periods of political history, and was instead viewed only in passing within the wider context of warfare. One notable exception is the interpretation of Partisan self-sacrifice and heroic suicide by Vladimir Dedijer, a writer and one of the leading members of the Communist movement. He addressed this issue in a speech he gave when he joined the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. At that time, he was already known as a biographer of Josip Broz Tito, a university professor, a human rights activist, and a member of the Russel Tribunal, as well as a Communist Party dissident and a man who had lost two sons—one to suicide and another whose official cause of death had been reexamined. As a member of the Communist movement and a participant in the Partisan struggle, Dedijer also had a personal motive for adding ideological elements to his observations of this issue. He depicted the Partisan struggle in Yugoslavia as an authentic revolution with a special code of struggle, and tried to attribute heroic qualities to its participants, especially when they voluntarily took their own lives after finding themselves in hopeless situations. According to his interpretation, this kind of act represented 'the highest form of revolutionary self-sacrifice.'[10]

According to Dedijer, heroic suicide is an action undertaken by a revolutionary when the revolutionary movement suffers collapse, yet the revolutionary does not wish to see his hopes collapse. He thus gives up his life for the goals of the revolution and fights on until he is killed. Suicide occurs in the moments of battle when resistance can no longer be offered. By denying or passing over certain episodes in the national history related to heroic suicides, Dedijer tried to present the Partisans as something exceptional, a new breed of people ready to sacrifice themselves not for national ideals, but for the Communist Party and the revolution. In contrast, the idea and practice of heroic self-sacrifice often appears in Serbian national tradition and history, as well as in the state politics and daily life in which future Communist fighters and Partisans came of age. The combination of these two discourses influenced a large number of Partisans' suicides that occurred when the Partisans found themselves in hopeless situations. They can be interpreted as heroic suicides or self-sacrifice, which we have attempted to identify and examine. Suicides of Partisan women are a specific category within this group. We also singled out an additional category that could fall under that of fatalistic suicides that resulted from a fear of judgment by the Communist Party.

2. Suicide in Serbian National Tradition and History

There are a number of known individual and collective examples of suicide among soldiers and civilians in early modern and contemporary Serbian history that have been interpreted as examples of martyrdom and death in glory rather than as acts of destruction

[10] Dedijer 1983.

or self-destruction. In exceptional circumstances, suicide can be interpreted in the national tradition as an elevated act of laying down one's life for the defense of dignity, both personal and national. In epic poetry, suicide in combat with an enemy is referred to as 'dying honorably.'[11] The Serbian Orthodox Church treats suicide as a mortal sin against God, but differentiates suicide from self-sacrifice.[12]

The glorification of military heroism and death in the nineteenth-century Serbian state created a positive view of sacrifice for the homeland. The warrior model of socialization elevated the act of suffering death and formed the belief that dying for the homeland was an expression of pride and honor.[13] In the early nineteenth century, when an uprising broke out in Serbia against several centuries of Ottoman rule, Stevan Sinđelić, one of the renowned rebel leaders, found himself in a hopeless situation during a battle. He then fired into a gunpowder storage room, blowing up himself, his soldiers, and a large number of enemy soldiers. The memory of this act was nurtured by both the state authorities and by popular tradition and memory. Stevan Sinđelić's death was sung about in numerous songs, and city squares, streets, football clubs, and restaurants were named after him. The unveiling of a monument to Stevan Sinđelić in 1938, was a significant event that future fighters from Serbia in the Second World War would have been familiar with through the media or may even have witnessed in person.[14]

Participants in the Second World War from Serbia would most likely have encountered examples of heroic suicide in school books and daily newspapers in the early years of elementary school.[15] Additionally, during their early childhood and among their closest family members, they would have been introduced to a popular tradition in which the most essential elements included the Kosovo myth and descriptions the Serbian prince Lazar choosing 'the heavenly kingdom over the earthly' just before the famous battle with the Ottomans in 1389, and his most loyal knight sacrificing himself by feigning surrender to the Ottomans before killing the Sultan. In twentieth-century history, the members of *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia) were held up as examples of self-sacrifice, and in particular Bogdan Žerajić, who carried out an assassination attempt in 1910 against the governor of Bosnia and Herzegovina, General Marijan Varešanin, after which he took his own life. Gavrilo Princip viewed him as a role model, and before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, he laid flowers on Žerajić's grave. The conspirators who claimed the life of Franz Ferdinand and his wife were also equipped with poison, which some of them used unsuccessfully.

Using the heroic suicides of Serbian guerrilla fighters, it is possible to trace a line stretching from the early twentieth century to the end of the Second World War. Aside from a number of individual cases, there are several recorded cases of group suicide within the Serbian Chetnik (guerrilla) movement against the Ottoman Empire in Macedonia. In a battle at Četirci in May 1904, the Chetnik leader Anđelko Aleksić also committed suicide along

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11 Stefanović Karadžić 1958: 487.

12 Rakićević 2016: 147–151.

13 Pešić 1994: 58.

14 Petrović 2010: 292.

15 The textbook for the fourth grade of primary school in the Kingdom of Serbia contained a short story called "New Sinđelićes' in which an example of collective suicide is described. *Srpska čitanka za IV razred osnovnih škola u Kraljevini Srbiji* 2010: 118.

with several other Chetniks. The description of this battle and its later interpretation in literature may have served as an example of self-sacrifice during a struggle against an enemy.[16] Something similar was repeated at the battle on the Kitka ridge near the Kozjak mountain in May 1905: Five Serbian Chetniks were recorded as blowing themselves up with a bomb after being surrounded by Ottoman forces during the battle.[17] In January 1906, several Chetniks also killed each other in the village of Čelopek.[18]

There are also records of suicide during the First World War, and in particular the self-sacrifice of guerrilla fighters during the Toplica Uprising in Serbia against the Bulgarian occupation forces in 1917. Some of the leaders of the uprising took their own lives in what Durkheim typology would consider heroic suicide. Examples include the fates of Kosta Vojinović, Dimitrije Begović, and others.[19] During the interwar period, these cases were highlighted in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in public life and educational materials as examples of heroism and sacrifice for one's own people, and were meant to inspire the younger generation.

3. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the Interwar Period

After the First World War, the fear of Communist revolutions led many European countries to ban Communist organizations. This was the case in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, where fear of revolutionary activities in Russia and Hungary, along significant electoral successes and terrorist activity, led to a ban on the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (*Komunistička partija Jugoslavije*, KPJ) in 1921.[20] Communists were perceived as enemies of the established order and were closely monitored. This practice increased their revolutionary fervor and created conditions for the strengthening of dogmatic factions within the KPJ. Another consequence of this persecution was increased fanaticism among Communist Party members, who often offered resistance during arrest, even in impossible and hopeless situations.[21]

Due to frequent arrests, on several occasions the KPJ issued instructions to its members about how to behave during arrest, while in police detention, and when appearing in court. The first instance was an article in the Communist Party newspaper *Proleter* called 'On conspiracy and conduct with police and in court.' In this article, party activists were told to follow Lenin's position that no one should admit to being a member of the Communist Party either to the police or in court or give any statement to the police, and that in court, the accused should defend the party's policies and program. According to the same instructions, Communists who were arrested were expected to hide the party organization but not the party's political line, which they had to popularize and conduct themselves according to its

[16] "The Turks charge at them to capture them, yet despite being heavily wounded, they shoot several soldiers around them, then press the revolvers against their foreheads and pull the trigger, taking their own lives, but they do not surrender to the Turks alive.' Simić 2013: 169–173.

[17] Ibid., 187–188.

[18] Ibid., 211–213.

[19] Mladenović 2017: 78.

[20] Gligorijević 2010: 88.

[21] Dobrivojević 2006: 257–258.

spirit. Personal defense was secondary.[22] Members of the Communist Party were warned that they must be prepared to face possible torture and suffering after their arrest, they must keep a cool head and persevere, and that it was better to be killed than accept a compromise with the police to reveal the Communist organization and their comrades.

There is nothing in these party directives about how to conduct oneself in front of the enemy that suggests Communists should commit suicide if they find themselves in a hopeless situation. However, even during the prewar period some prominent Communists used suicide to save themselves from pain and suffering and to save the party from being uncovered by the police. Milovan Đilas, a young Communist (and later member of the KPJ Politburo), attempted suicide in prison in 1933 by stabbing himself in the chest with a knife. Dido Demajo, a painter and active Communist, slit his wrists in an interrogation prison with glass from a broken lightbulb.[23] Resistance and suicide during detainment were the cause of death for several Communists in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but there were also suspicions that the police attributed suicide to Communists who died from torture during interrogation in order to hide their brutality.[24] There were also tragic cases in which suicide was motivated by introspection and a guilty conscience for having cooperated with the police. One of these occurred in May 1940 when a local party organizational secretary,[25] who was also a sister of a Communist named Ivan Kalapiš, hanged herself in the bathroom of the Belgrade City Administration building after exposing her brother and his ties to the KPJ during her interrogation.[26] Others saw suicide as weakness, as is evidenced by the Communist assassins of the Yugoslav Minister of Interior in 1921. When their comrades suggested that someone should perhaps consider suicide after an assassination attempt, they responded that an assassin is 'a fighter, a revolutionary who has risen up against the violence of the bourgeoisie, not some desperado who shoots a minister and then himself.' They believed it was more dignified for a Communist to either die in a clash with the police or to survive and then publicly defy the enemy.[27] On the other hand, Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, one of the most popular and most widely known literary works among Yugoslav revolutionaries, stated that revolutionaries should fight until their last breath, but if defeat is evident, the possibility of suicide was also described as a heroic act.[28]

The fighting spirit of the Communists was based on their firm faith in and absolute loyalty to their revolutionary goals, for which they were prepared to sacrifice anything, including their lives. In the 1930s as it gained more followers, particularly among the youth, the KPJ was reorganized with a strong party infrastructure. The party leadership was taken over by a younger and more modern generation of Communists, who cultivated a strong belief in the creation of a new society they planned to achieve with the support of the party organization, in which a strict code of values and behavior, ideological dedication,

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22 *Proleter* 1968, 659–660.
23 Dedijer 1984: 353.
24 Nikolić 2015: 63.
25 Istorijski arhiv Beograda, Beograd, Zbirka dokumenata Bezbednosno-informativne agencije, XIII-1, Nikola Gubarev. (IAB, BIA)
26 IAB, BIA, I-1, Boško Bećarević.
27 Nikolić 2000: 83.
28 Ostrovski 1978: 196.

willingness to sacrifice, and puritanism was also cultivated.[29] Fanaticism among Communists was further encouraged through party instructions and celebrated in party publications in which it was emphasized that, 'our comrades' conduct while presenting themselves openly and unselfishly as Communists serves as a shining and powerful example, adds to the authority of our organization, and revolutionizes the working masses.'[30]

Unlike revolutionary practice, in the Soviet Union, in the interwar period there was a widespread belief that in a Communist society there would be no murders or suicides. Suicide was seen as a bourgeois act of self-leniency, yet the Bolsheviks were confronted with a need to explain occurrences of suicide in Communist society. Party explanations often characterized suicide as a violation of collective rules and an expression of weakness, pessimism, and egoism.[31]

At the start of the German attack on the Soviet Union, morale among the Red Army soldiers on the frontlines became a very sensitive and important issue due to suspicions that a considerable number of captured Soviet soldiers had deserted and fled to the German side because they disagreed with Communist ideology.[32] By June and July 1941, the Soviet authorities had envisaged punitive measures for the families of officers and soldiers who were captured. Although there were threats of death sentences for family members of prominent military figures who allowed themselves to be captured, in practice their families were mainly sentenced to exile or imprisonment in camps.[33] These measures and a string of other similar steps, along with spreading rumors that the Germans killed captured Soviet soldiers, helped encourage soldiers to fight to the death. Numerous cases of self-sacrifice and demonstrations of suicidal heroism among Soviet soldiers were recorded.[34]

On the other hand, among the German armed forces, the number of suicides grew as the prospect of Nazi defeat became increasingly apparent. An epidemic of anomic suicides of military and political figures, as well as civilians, swept Germany in 1945 as the Nazi world collapsed all around. These suicides were particularly common in eastern parts of Germany where the fear of advancing Soviet troops, which had been carefully stoked by Nazi propaganda in the past, led to numerous suicides. [35]

4. Suicides in Hopeless Situations

During the Second World War, the first recorded suicides in Serbia appear during the short Yugoslav–German April War of 1941. There are several recorded cases of military personnel, and Yugoslav Army officers in particular, who took their own lives before or after

[29] Čalić 2013: 158.

[30] Dobrivojević 2006: 258.

[31] Pinnow 2009: 207. Suicide was treated in a similar manner in Nazi Germany and in the period before the Second World War. Goeschel 2009: 169.

[32] Although there are no precise figures for 1941, more than three million Soviet soldiers are estimated to have been captured, while in 1942, when more precise records were kept of those defecting and deserting, a total of 1,653,000 Soviet soldiers were captured. Edele 2017: 23.

[33] This fate befell the wife of Stalin's captured son. Ibid., 43.

[34] Merridale 2005: 185.

[35] Huber 2019: 93.

combat with German forces. The most explicit case of heroic suicide occurred on April 17, 1941, in Boka Kotorska, when two naval officers committed suicide by blowing up a naval destroyer to avoid surrendering it to the Italian navy.[36] The motive behind these types of suicides was most often to preserve military dignity and personal integrity at a time of complete disarray and the collapse of the army and the state.[37]

The defeat of the Yugoslav state and the Nazi occupation led to the creation of a resistance movement in Serbia and a subsequent uprising in the middle of 1941. The significant support among the population for the uprising was strongly influenced by the initial cooperation between the national and Royalist resistance movement (the Chetniks/Ravna Gora Movement, or the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland: *Jugoslovenska vojska u otadžbini*, JVuO), under the command of Colonel Dragoljub Draža Mihailović,[38] and the Partisan resistance movement, led by members of the KPJ and its secretary, Josip Broz Tito, as its supreme commander.[39] Despite attempts at cooperation, by November 1941 the differences between these two movements had created a split, which then erupted into a brutal civil war.[40] Finding themselves threatened by their ideologically rivals and countrymen, many members of both movements took their own lives, most often using pistols or bombs.

For prominent Communists, the occupation of Serbia and the beginning of the uprising meant they were no longer accountable to the party forums simply for themselves and small illegal cells. Now, as Partisan commanders, they were responsible for the fates of entire companies of dozens or even several hundred fighters. Cases of suicide during combat among Serbian Partisans were noted during the first clashes, becoming more frequent during the retreat of the uprising in the autumn of 1941. Some of the Partisan leaders ended their lives through acts of suicide, in part because of their sense of responsibility to their fighters for the failure of the uprising, but also in order to avoid being captured alive by the enemy. Among the first of these was a company commander from Mačva Detachment who killed himself in August 1941, after being heavily wounded and suffering defeat.[41] By the end of 1941, two more prominent members of the same detachment also took their own lives.[42] During the fall of the free territory, the commanders of two towns in western Serbia where Partisans had gained a strong foothold—Čačak (Milenko Nikšić) and Užice (Vukola Dabić)—also took their own lives. The suicides took place not only at the epicenter of the uprising in western Serbia, but also among members of the resistance units in the east of Serbia, of whom one was the secretary of the local party organization, a lawyer named Aleksa Markišić.[43]

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36 *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije*: 1975.

37 Dević, 2015: 39.

38 Nikolić 2014: 54–56; Avakumović 1969: 15; *Knjiga o Draži* 1956: 53–55; Nikolić, Dimitrijević 2011: 147–148, 151.

39 Petranović 1984: 424–425; Glišić, Miljanić 1994, 25; Pavlović 2009: 25.

40 Nikolić 1999: 139–140; Glišić 1986: 113.

41 Parmaković 1973: 263–266.

42 Ibid., 469–470; *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije* 1982: 45.

43 Vladimir Dedijer, who was a close friend, noted his impression of Markišić's suicide, which could apply to other Communist officials: "According to my deepest conviction not due to fear of torture, but to prevent the enemy from gloating in having captured a living Aleksa Markišić.' Dedijer 1983: 253. DAS, Centralni komitet Saveza komunista Srbije (Đ-2), PKS-4.

After the 1941 uprising was crushed, part of the Partisan forces, along with the movement's most prominent figures, retreated outside the borders of occupied Serbia. The remaining Partisan forces were hunted down by the occupying and collaborationist military forces. These Partisan fighters were also on hostile terms with the Ravna Gora Movement and viewed with suspicion by the local population, which feared reprisals. These were the circumstances under which three more prominent Partisan leaders committed suicide (Milivoje Manić Albanta, Ivan Muker, and Kosta Stamenković) in March 1942.

In addition to the Partisans hunted down in the field, members of illegal Communist Party organizations in urban areas were also targets of persecution. Partisans committed suicide using bombs or guns, but records indicate several of these Communists took poison or hanged themselves. In another example, after being arrested and tortured, a doctor who had been working with the Partisans managed to escape from the police and committed suicide by jumping through the window of a tall building.[44]

Partisans and Communists who were captured often destroyed their personal documents while in custody because of the risk of their family members being persecuted. There were even incidents recorded of people shooting themselves in the head to destroy their faces and prevent them from being identified.[45] A leader of a Partisan unit in Banat (Vojvodina) shot himself in the head but survived, wounded and blind. The Germans tortured him, but he gave nothing away. He was allegedly buried in the sand and left there to die.[46]

Often the corpses of Partisans who committed suicide would be displayed in squares or other public places in an attempt by the occupational government to demoralize the public and undermine its faith in the resistance, and also to degrade the dead and prevent any doubts from about their actual death or rumors of their survival from spreading.

A large number of suicides occurred in southeast Serbia. In the area controlled by the regional KPJ committee for Niš, there were fifteen recorded suicides of Communists and KPJ officials during the war.[47] This may also have been related to the story of Stevan Sinđelić, who had come from this region and where the memory of his heroic suicide had been carefully nurtured. Two strong examples of this are a group suicide led by Kosta Stamenković, an old Communist from Leskovac,[48] and the previously mentioned group suicide led by the commissar of the Toplica Partisan detachment, Nikodije 'Tatko' Stojanović. There is also the death of the KPJ secretary who was hiding with two female Partisan fighters in the Niš region in April 1944. When they were discovered, all three committed suicide. The choice to die in this manner in the same town where Stevan Sinđelić heroically died strongly suggests a connection to Serbian liberation traditions.[49]

There were also cases that were not direct examples of suicide but could be classified as such. Two examples of this involve smaller groups of Partisans who decided to fight to the death after they had been surrounded. The first is a detailed account from the

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44 Begović 1989: 61.

45 Dedijer 1983: 263.

46 *Narodni heroji Jugoslavije* 1982: 62.

47 Mirčetić 1977: 234–235.

48 When he was discovered by Serbian collaborationist forces in March 1942, Kosta Stamenković refused to surrender. Instead, he detonated a bomb, killing himself, his daughter, and two female Partisan fighters.

49 Dedijer 1983: 254–255.

collaborationist government about the deaths of a group of Partisans in eastern Serbia on June 15, 1943. Surrounded in a house by numerically superior forces, they rejected calls for their surrender, and instead opted to fight for several hours while singing Partisan songs and the Internationale. In the end, all five Partisans were killed.[50] The second took place in Western Serbia in March 1944, but in this case six Partisans died, while another six managed to break free.[51] The dead were hailed by Partisan propaganda outlets for their heroic death, and their exploits were glorified.

Mass suicides were common during the battles Partisans fought outside the borders of occupied Serbia. In his recollections of the war, Vladimir Dedijer mentions that during one of the more the dramatic moments during Battle of Sutjeska in 1943, Milovan Đilas, a member of the KPJ leadership, proposed that the seventy members of the Communist leadership who were near him commit mass suicide.[52] Several suicides were also recorded as occurring on June 13, 1943, one of the battle's crucial days, by both soldiers and commanders, and particularly by those who had been wounded and were unable to move or take part in the battle.[53] In Serbia, a similar case was recorded in December 1943 during the Battle of Prijepolje, when several fighters of the 1st Šumadija Brigade committed suicide. When they realized they were surrounded, some the brigade leaders shot themselves in the head and several fighters drowned themselves in the river Lim.[54]

5. Suicide among Partisan Women

Women were a minority in the ranks of the Partisans in comparison to men, so the large number of suicides committed by female Partisan fighters is particularly noticeable.[55] Although women were active in the Communist organization and Partisan detachments, it was not until 1942 that women were permitted and encouraged to join Partisan units.[56] These women became a favorite target for enemy propaganda, which presented female Partisan fighters as immoral, promiscuous, brutal, and cruel. Widespread acceptance of such propaganda legitimized the sexual abuse of captured Partisan women, which made them particularly vulnerable[57] and may have been the reason behind a disproportionate number of women opting for suicide when threatened with arrest or capture.

Žene Srbije u NOB, a publication about women from Serbia in the People's Liberation Movement, includes biographies of 967 prominent women, of whom twenty-three (2.38 percent) committed suicide during the war.[58] Of these, ten took part in a group

[50] DAS, Zbirka dokumenata Bezbednosno-informativne agencije (BIA), 1-20.
[51] Vojni arhiv, Beograd, Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije, 1642-3/1-18. (VA, NOVJ)
[52] Dedijer 1984: 353.
[53] Dedijer 1983: 245.
[54] Đuković 1982: 261.
[55] According to sociological research, women generally commit suicide more rarely, but they attempt it more often. Jaworski 2014: 23.
[56] Batinić 2015: 127.
[57] Škodrić 2020: 457.
[58] The publication also mentions an additional five Partisan women who were reported to have committed suicide during the war, and an additional three were reported to have committed suicide after the end of the war. *Žene Srbije u NOB*, 1975.

suicide. All were members of the party organization or its Youth organization and in most cases were very young—seventeen were born between 1918 and 1924. The largest number of suicides by women in a year occurred during 1944, which can be interpreted as a consequence of years of persecution and exhaustion, both physical and psychological.

Partisan women were frequently involved in murder/suicides alongside men who often would first kill their comrades and then themselves. There are also examples when only women took part in group suicides or remained as the last ones standing in battle until the very last bullet. One woman from a regional committee of the Communist Youth committed suicide when she found herself surrounded in a house in the east of Serbia. According to the police report, she was with another woman: 'one female Partisan shot another with a revolver and then, after destroying her own documents and those of the other Partisan, committed suicide herself.'[59]

A specific case of suicide involving a woman named Živka Damnjanović demonstrates the status and position of women in Partisan units. Damnjanović was the political commissar for a Partisan unit in Serbia and a member of the KPJ's Mladenovac regional committee (located in the wider Belgrade area). In November 1942, she killed one of her comrades, who was also a member of the same forum. The other members of the regional committee suspected the motive behind the killing was their intimate relationship, and the investigation into the case was taken over by the highest Serbian party forum, the Provincial Committee of the KPJ for Serbia. During questioning, she stated that she had committed the murder in order to 'redeem her honor.' She had entered into an affair with him, not knowing that he already had a wife and children. Given the gravity of the incident, the Provincial Committee sentenced her to death but also ordered that she be interrogated again, particularly about what her emotional life had been like before the incident, which party officials she had been intimate with, 'what her motives for killing people had been during her time with the unit,' and 'whether there were hidden mental or sexual problems behind this and other killings she had committed, or if she was one of the enemy.' The Provincial Committee demanded that this case be kept strictly confidential.[60]

Knowing the party commission's verdict would be harsh, a member of the commission who was favorably disposed to her smuggled in a revolver and advised her to take action in order to 'rehabilitate herself in the eyes of the party.' That same day, Damnjanović went to Mladenovac, the nearest town, and shot at the first Germans and their collaborators she came across. She killed one collaborationist commander and wounded two German officers. Then, surrounded by the Germans, she committed suicide. This was the end of her personal story, which turned into a tragedy for the entire area: On December 27, the Germans shot fifty civilians in Mladenovac in revenge for their wounded officers. Because of the delicate circumstances, the party's position was that this incident undermined the Partisan ethic and therefore should not be written about, discussed, or mentioned in public after the war. Ultimately, Živka Damnjanović was rehabilitated, and a primary school in Serbia and a pioneer group in Slovenia were named after her.[61]

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[59] Miladinović 1972: 68.
[60] DAS, Okružni komitet KPJ Mladenovac (Đ-8), OKM-1-28.
[61] Dimitrijević 1983: 41–42.

6. Suicide Motivated by Fear of the Party's Judgment

Vladimir Dedijer hints at another motivating factor behind some of the suicides committed by Communists: suicide as a response to fear of judgment by the party. Suspicions of those who had been in prisons and camps was a direct reflection of a tacit expectation that members of the party should commit suicide to avoid arrest. In the recollections he wrote down long after the war, Mirko Tepavac left his own account of his interrogation by a party commission, during which he had to explain his conduct during his time in prison.[62] A local Communist official gave a similar account of his own pain at also having to answer the question 'Why are you still alive?' to a commission. In the strict judgments of the party, those who gave conciliatory statements following arrest were also labeled as traitors.[63]

Some prominent Partisan leaders who retreated to other parts of Yugoslavia after the uprising collapsed in 1941 chose suicide out of dissatisfaction with, and in protest against, their positions in the party's hierarchy and the party's lack of trust in them. The motives for these suicides were often quietly ignored or given a different explanation. This was the fate of Milinko Kušić, a hardened Communist and one of the most senior military and political leaders from Serbia. He killed himself in Bosnia on International Workers' Day, May 1, 1943, while serving as commissar of the 4th Krajina Partisan Division. The official account of his death was that, sick with typhus, he had 'killed himself while in a state of delirium.'[64] However, there are also accounts suggesting that Kušić committed suicide due to his poor treatment by the party. Slobodan 'Krcun' Penezić seems to have contemplated the same option. He was also punished by the party, but later became chief of the Communist secret police for Serbia (*Odeljenje za zaštitu naroda*, OZNA). Due to the risk of him taking his own life, he was placed under surveillance and his every move was followed.[65]

Dedijer also counted the insufficiently explained death of Lieutenant General Petar Drapšin immediately after the war among the suicides of Communists that were motivated by fear of rulings by party commissions. He explained Drapšin's suicide as a means for him to defend his honor, and he believed he did so to avoid a new round of questioning by a party commission.[66] Unlike those that occurred during the war, this suicide was hidden and explained away as being the result of an unfortunate accident.

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62 "It was as if I were being reproached with, 'Why are you still alive!?' As if it would have been better and more useful for my party if, after being tortured by the Ustaše and condemned to death, I had been gloriously executed!' Tepavac 2012: 211. A description written by Dedijer of the interrogation of a 'sinful' member of the KPJ by the higher party organs is invaluable for understanding relations within the party: "When suspected members of the party were brought before us, we would never tell them what they were being accused of. We would let them sweat in front of us for a few minutes and stare them in the eyes in silence. After which the president of the commission would ask, 'What do you have to say to your party? What have you done wrong?'" Dedijer 1991: 41.

63 IAB, Zbirka memoarske građe (MG), 422.

64 Pantić Mešterović 1968: 195.

65 Đurić 1989: 216–217. It is interesting to note that the Partisan press, which reported Kušić's death, hid the manner of his death and linked it to enemy activities. Long after the war, in 1988, after a conflict with the party, Ljubodrag Đurić would also commit suicide. In his suicide note, he left only the initial words of the song '*Partizan sam, tim se dičim* (I'm a Partisan and proud of it).' (Ibid., 489).

66 Dedijer 1983, 249.

These cases of suicide reflect strong ideological and psychological connections between party members and the Communist organization. For the Communists, suspicions, interrogations, boycotts, and judgments by the party meant losing status and personal significance, as well as friends and spouses. The result of these meant life would lose all meaning for them, which easily led them to think of suicide.

7. The KPJ's View of Suicide

The Partisan press and propaganda at first did not promote suicide as being worthy of members of the Communist Party. Moreover, initial suicides by fighters and commanders were covered up with silence and a vague explanation was used—that they had been killed, but without any details of how or by whom. It was taken as a sign of weakness that they had been unwilling to sacrifice themselves for the party by following instructions regarding conduct in the presence of the enemy, which would have demonstrated to the party and the enemy that they were worthy of being called a Communist, even until their last breath. Yet as the war dragged on and the number of victims increased, this perception changed, and suicide was no longer seen as a sin but rather a dignified way to die.

Between 1941 and 1942, instructions were issued by local party leaderships that clearly stated that Communists must show no fear when they were arrested and should confess nothing during interrogations. Party members were made aware of the possibility of torture during an interrogation and were told that under no circumstances should they reveal anything—not even the smallest detail—about the party organization, as this would just be the beginning of further confessions and moral decline. The party instructions held that, 'Every major betrayal starts with a small confession of illegal work and sooner or later leads to a moral decline.'[67]

A pamphlet, 'Conduct in front of the class enemy,' which had been adapted to a time of war, summarized down to the smallest detail all the possible scenarios the Communists might find themselves in if they were to end up in prison or in front of a court. During the interwar period, the Communists expected to be given short-term sentences, whereas during the war, they were threatened with the death penalty after they had been arrested. This was the reason why these instructions were adapted to the current circumstances and why they encouraged them to behave heroically, be defiant, and not make any statements, even if they were threatened with much more severe penalties. The revolutionaries had to overcome their own fears ('not fear for one's own life, not fear death or suffering'), not cooperate with interrogators ('not to renounce anything or betray anything' and 'not to compromise friends and sympathizers'), or sign any statements.[68] Following these recommendations could easily lead to death from torture during interrogation or to execution, which would ultimately lead to an indirect form of suicide. Nevertheless, in the event of capture or arrest, most often all they could expect was brutal torture and death. This pamphlet was intended to give courage to captured fighters, and let them know that, even in the event of their death, the battle would not be lost because it would be carried on by their comrades.

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[67] IAB, Uprava grada Beograda, Specijalna policija (UgB SP), IV-244/1.
[68] VA, NOVJ, 1642-10-1/1.

Toward the end of 1942, the fighters from Partisan units were given instructions different from those given to party members engaged in illegal work in the towns. In their case, if the Partisans found themselves in a hopeless position in which further resistance was not possible, they were encouraged to take their own life. In November 1942, the Central Command of Serbia issued directives regarding the organization and training of Partisan units. In a section addressing the moral attributes of Partisan fighters, Partisan were clearly told they could not surrender to the enemy 'unless they no longer had the strength to kill themselves.'[69] However, this directive is an isolated case and was issued during the most bitter period of fighting. According to surviving records, it appears that not all Partisans followed these instructions, nor was there any insistence that they be consistently implemented.

Through suicide, the Communists affirmed their political exceptionalism and preserved their human dignity, making suicide in this case a kind of moral act. According to some, 'A revolutionary fights to the end, and only when it is certain there is no chance to save his own life—then he rejects surrender and commits suicide.'[70] Later, a sort of compromise was found in the interpretation: that suicide in combat, before capture, could be considered a heroic act, which it would not be if a Communist fell into the hands of the enemy and then took his own life.[71]

In socialist Yugoslavia after the Second World War, self-sacrifice and heroic death among the Partisans became one of the leading paradigms of the past and an important determinant for the politics of memory. Partisan warfare was highlighted in state politics as a bright and unique example of guerrilla warfare in occupied Europe during the Second World War, and particularly prominent figures from that struggle were awarded the Order of People's Hero. The People's Heroes were exalted as honored victors; numerous rituals such as celebrations and ceremonies were associated with their names; and cities, schools, and other institutions became their namesakes. This gave them a role in the construction of a Yugoslav identity and became part of Yugoslav culture. They were transformed into a symbol of the values of the newly created state and society and were used to strengthen and legitimize them.[72]

According to some estimates, in post-war Yugoslavia, 1,322 People's Heroes were proclaimed, and as many as 955 of them had died during the war.[73] The standing of the People's Heroes was strengthened by the beliefs that they had lost their lives as a result of a noble struggle, and that they had died following a principle that should serve as an instrument of legitimacy for the struggle and for the state that had been built on this foundation. Some researchers recognize the categories of hero defenders, hero leaders, and hero martyrs.[74] The martyr heroes did the most to strengthen the belief that victory in war was justification for their deaths. Their deaths were associated with protection from the dangers of war, and they were given an aura of untouchability and social recognition. At the same time, their voluntary consent to die further strengthened the hero cult as an expression

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69 *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu naroda Jugoslavije*, 1965: I-20, 278.
70 DAS, Ž-23, VŠ, 51.
71 IAB, UgB, SP-IV-206.
72 Perica 2011: 51–56.
73 Perica 2010: 109.
74 Lučić-Todosić 2015: 139–155.

of voluntary death for the country. The heroic martyr narrative was integrated into the post-war Yugoslav mythology of the Yugoslav peoples' joint struggle against Nazism and, together with the personality cult of Josip Broz, was one of the foundations of identity in socialist Yugoslavia.[75]

At least fifty-five Partisans from Yugoslavia,[76] including thirteen from occupied Serbia, who committed suicide were proclaimed People's Heroes. Their suffering was intended to serve as an example of dedication until death. By turning them into heroes, links were created between Communist ideology and religion, and national traditions and history. These links inoculated post-war generations with respect for societal values and norms and made it easier for older generations to accept these values and norms. The Communists took an acceptable model offered by tradition and placed it within a new institutional framework that survived until the collapse of the Yugoslav state. It was then that Milan Tepić became the last person to be named as a Yugoslav People's Hero. He committed suicide near Bjelovar in 1991 by blowing up a Yugoslav Army munitions depot that Croatian separatists were attempting to seize.

8. Conclusion

Although a seemingly deeply personal act, suicide occurs within a context and under the influence of society, culture, and current political circumstances and developments. During the interwar period, the Communists were firmly integrated and subordinated to party structures, yet also condemned and persecuted by state authorities. The Communist leadership often viewed suicide within Marxist ethics as a self-negation of life. Furthermore, the conduct expected of members of the Communist organization during arrest and then later on during combat could result in torture and death.

The motives for suicide among Partisans in Serbia were diverse: to prevent the enemy from discovering them and later torturing them after they had been captured (and thus protect the party organization from penetration), to preserve their honor and die heroically, as response to the pressure of responsibility, as well as other more personal motives which had led to despair. Many, although not all, of these suicides can be categorized as altruistic heroic suicides.

Heroic suicide was also seen as a duty based on loyalty and dedication to the Communist Party; but above all, it was a matter of dignity and a means of defending one's honor and personal values. It was seen as a heroic deed and a chivalrous act of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. To properly understand it, it is necessary to grasp a cultural model that includes religious, ideological, and ethnic stereotypes. Although often viewed and condemned as an act of cowardice, suicide gains a completely different meaning when committed during combat as an expression of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Glorification of heroic suicides as a factor in national integration can be found in the past of many nations. In several instances, this practice was clearly evident in the construction of the Serbian nation state and national identity. The cult of the hero who willingly sacrifices his life for the nation was supported by the state, the church, and folk traditions.

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[75] Perica 2010: 111.

[76] Ibid.: 113.

Altruistic suicides by members of the Communist Party and the Partisan movement were firmly tied to the national traditions and past of Serbia, the social status Communists enjoyed in interwar Yugoslavia, and the persecution they were subject to during the war. The Communists were considered outlaws and enemies of society and the state, yet they were also the products of them. Along with their ideology and teachings, the Communists also carried the societal norms and views of the culture in which they were raised and educated. These were in turn based on national traditions that viewed heroic suffering as the last personal act in a struggle for justice and dignity and as a means of achieving immortality. In moments of greatest hardship, this probably evoked a desire to prove themselves as worthy descendants of the nation who were also faithful to the Communist idea. The almost unbreakable connections to their origins and to the Communist organization culminated during the war when the Communists led a two-pronged struggle for the liberation of the country and for the victory of Communist ideology.

As individuals, the Partisans found themselves under the influence of the collective expectations of both the Communist Party and the national tradition, and in this struggle between the individual and the collective valuation of their own lives, they chose the latter and sacrificed their lives for the sake of loyalty to the collective. It was a statement of loyalty and consistency, as well as a response to wartime violence and suffering. In the post-war construction of a collective identity, the idea of subordinating oneself to the needs of the community and the collective maintained precedence over those of the individual, who was subordinated to their interests and will. In order to understand Partisan suicides, one can look at Dedijer's interpretation in which suicide is not viewed as being morally questionable, but rather is glorified as the highest form of personal sacrifice and the greatest contribution to the common struggle and ideals. Collective interests, low valuation, subjugation, and sacrifice of one's personal life were thus favored in order to create a moral model and prove an unreserved sense of belonging.

In Serbia, an entrenched historical consciousness and societal notions were based on a national tradition that glorified heroic suffering and viewed national heroes as being immortal. A cult of sacrifice for freedom merged with a cult of sacrifice for the revolutionary struggle, which made it much easier to articulate Communist goals in a manner that was more palatable to the local population and enabled Communist power to be consolidated and legitimized in accordance with traditional legacies. The traditional and the revolutionary were thus merged within the image of the hero who sacrifices his life for freedom and the struggle. This dual connection was also supported by the Communist organization and used after the war to strengthen its positions.

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ЉУБИНКА ШКОДРИЋ
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САМОУБИСТВО МЕЂУ ПРИПАДНИЦИМА НАРОДНООСЛОБОДИЛАЧКОГ ПОКРЕТА У ОКУПИРАНОЈ СРБИЈИ 1941–1944

Резиме

Самоубиство је крајње личан чин, али се догађа под утицајем друштва, културе и актуелних политичких околности и збивања. Комунисти су у међуратном периоду у Краљевини Југославији били снажно интегрисани и подређени партијској структури, али осуђивани и прогоњени од државних власти. Самоубиство је од стране комунистичког вођства често доживљавано као појава коју марксистичка етика негативно вреднује као самонегацију живота. Поред тога, држање које је очекивано од припадника комунистичке организације приликом хапшења, као и касније у ратним околностима, као исход могло је имати мучење и смрт. За окупирану Србију током Другог светског рата карактеристична су алтруистичка самоубистава припадника комунистичке партије и партизанског покрета. Ова самоубиства, била су чврсто повезана са народном традицијом и прошлошћу Србије као и друштвеним статусом који су комунисти имали у међуратној Југославији. Комунисти су поред свог учења и идеологије били и изданци друштва у коме су поникли и носили су друштвене норме и погледе друштва у коме су васпитани и одрасли, а који су се базирали на народној традицији која је у херојском страдању видела начин за остварење бесмртности и последњи лични чин борбе за правду и достојанство.

Кључне речи: Други светски рат, народноослободилачки покрет, Србија, партизани, НОП, комунизам, саможртвовање, самоубиство, народна традиција.

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