

***Occupation Duty In The Dysfunctional Coalition:
The Italian Second Army And Its Allies In The Balkans,
1941–43***

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The Axis in the Second World War has been dubbed a “dysfunctional coalition.”¹ Its members failed to develop unified political objectives, joint planning, or a coherent grand strategy for the conduct of the war.² As Richard DiNardo demonstrates, the lion’s share of the blame must fall on Germany’s shoulders; Hitler’s ideological ambitions left little room for others, the Germans balked at supplying their allies with much-needed technology, and German liaison officers frequently came across as arrogant.³ While historical studies of the Axis coalition tend to focus on strategy and frontline operations, the Axis partners also came into contact with one another in occupied territories throughout Europe. Here, well away from the main fighting, coalition relations were even worse.

This article will examine the Axis coalition in occupied Europe from the perspective of the Italian Second Army in Yugoslavia. Recent work on Italian

¹ R. L. DiNardo, “The Dysfunctional Coalition: The Axis Powers and the Eastern Front in World War II.” *Journal of Military History* 60, no. 4 (October 1996): pp. 711–730.

² Burkhart Mueller-Hillebrand, *Germany and its Allies in World War II: A Record of Axis Collaboration Problems* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1980), pp. 11–13.

³ Richard L. DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers: From Coalition to Collapse* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), pp. 192–197.

occupation in the Mediterranean has addressed Italy's relations with its allies in the region. Davide Rodogno has suggested that the Axis was at its most dysfunctional in the occupied territories, thanks to mutual suspicion between the Italians and Germans, and to an Italian inferiority complex. He further argues that competition with Germany coloured Italian relations with their other ally in Yugoslavia: the Independent State of Croatia.⁴ James Burgwyn agrees that Rome's policy centred on limiting German expansion into the Balkans, but he also considers Second Army's difficulties with the Croats on their own merit. In the process, he challenges Rodogno's thesis that Italian generals "worked towards the Duce," arguing that their divergence from Rome's pro-Croatian line marked a fundamental break between the *Regio Esercito* (Royal Italian Army) and the Fascist regime.⁵

Coming to grips with Italy's coalition relations in occupied Yugoslavia is made difficult by the different levels of source material available on the topic. Rodogno's approach is largely taken from above, based on correspondence between Mussolini's leadership in Rome, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Second Army's command in Yugoslavia. Burgwyn's study prompts questions regarding what inter-Axis relations were actually like for Italian generals in the field. This paper addresses these questions by focusing on documentation between Italian division, corps, and army commanders, along with directives from the general staff in Rome.⁶ For the senior officers of Second Army, distrust of the Germans was far outweighed by contempt and dislike for the Croatian regime and its functionaries. However, despite these attitudes, Italian generals displayed little evidence of an anti-Fascist bearing. On the contrary, they proved savvy representatives of the Fascist regime, working towards its ill-defined goals of Balkan expansion even at the expense of militarily effective collaboration with their allies. If, as Craig Stockings demonstrates in his article, Italian generalship in North Africa faced a number of military obstacles, in Yugoslavia these were

⁴ Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War*, trans. Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 36–37, 184.

⁵ H. James Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia, 1941–1943* (New York: Enigma, 2005), p. 280.

⁶ Most documentation for this paper was drawn from the collection of foreign records seized at the US National Archives and Record Administration (hereafter cited as NARA microfilm publication number/roll/frame) in College Park, MD. While the five hundred reels of microfilm here are insufficient for a thorough understanding of Italy's war effort, those on the Italian Second Army are particularly rich.

compounded by political ones. In terms of coalition relations, the conduct of Italian generals was informed as much by political as by military factors.

This became evident from the outset, with the establishment of the Italo-German demarcation line, which ran northwest-southeast through the middle of Yugoslavia. Rome's primary concern was to solidify its sphere of interest in the Balkans and to protect it from German encroachment. Italo-German tension over Croatia was apparent even before the capitulation of the Yugoslav armed forces on 17 April 1941, as the Italians pushed for a formal commitment on territory.⁷ Mussolini rightly feared German intentions to dominate Croatia themselves but, thanks to the esteem Hitler still held for the Italian dictator, he attained most of his territorial demands.⁸ These included the direct annexation to Italy of southern Slovenia and discontinuous portions of the Dalmatian coast as well as military jurisdiction in the western half of the newly created Independent State of Croatia.

Second Army's commander, General Vittorio Ambrosio, was given the task of negotiating how to treat the demarcation line separating Italian occupation forces in the west from the Germans in the east. Ambrosio closely followed the guidelines emanating from Rome and intended to protect Italian interests in the Balkans by keeping his zone of occupation at arm's length from the Germans. Mussolini had entered the Second World War hoping to conduct a "parallel war" separate from the Germans. While this had clearly foundered with the need for German assistance in North Africa and the Balkans, Rome still sought rigidly-defined spheres of interest protecting Italy's new *spazio vitale* (living space) from German expansion. But the Germans had their own designs for the economic penetration of the Balkans and the Danubian basin. To prevent the Italians from establishing hard-and-fast territorial boundaries, they insisted on having troops and emissaries in Italian-occupied zones and vice versa.⁹

⁷ Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 24.

⁸ Rodogno, p. 30.

⁹ Rodogno, p. 31.

Within this context, Ambrosio was forced to agree to German proposals for travel passes between each other's territory.¹⁰ However, he insisted on a system of reciprocity whereby visits by personnel of one side were not to exceed those of the other. At the same time, he ordered his commands to limit Italian travel across the demarcation line to as little as possible.¹¹ With German travel thus restricted by the agreement on reciprocity, Ambrosio intended to keep his allies out of the Italian zone so as to more easily define the area as part of an exclusively Italian sphere of influence.

Such a policy was clearly politically motivated; militarily speaking, it was detrimental to mutual assistance and joint operations between Italian and German forces, as demonstrated by events in Slovenia during December 1941. Following an incident earlier in the month when a German police unit was ambushed and completely destroyed by partisans just north of the demarcation line, the Italian commander in Slovenia, XI Corps's Mario Robotti, asked Ambrosio for clarification on his responsibilities towards the Germans should such a situation repeat itself.¹² The clarified policy was to avoid crossing the demarcation line and setting precedent for future German interference. When, on Christmas Eve, the Germans asked for urgent intervention to help a surrounded unit, the Italian response was dilatory. In part, this was due to problems deciphering and translating German messages, but the Italians were also following policy. Taddeo Orlando's *Granatieri di Sardegna* Division received the German appeals and forwarded them to Robotti, who instructed Orlando to seek a request in writing before crossing the demarcation line. In the end, Orlando contented himself with a blocking action on his side of the line.¹³

As insurgency mounted throughout Yugoslavia, the Italians were occasionally forced to grant access across the demarcation line to German units conducting anti-partisan operations along the border. Even then, such permission was given grudgingly and under the close supervision of the Italian high command. The Second Army would ask the *Comando Supremo* in Rome for authorization, which was usually granted with

¹⁰ Ambrosio memorandum, "Norme per le visite militari tedeschi e italiani in zone rispettive di occupazione," 9 May 1941, NARA T-821/52/0058-0059.

¹¹ Ambrosio memorandum, "Scambio visite militari in zona di occupazione," 4 May 1941, NARA T-821/52/0061.

¹² Robotti to Ambrosio, 14 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0671.

¹³ Orlando to Robotti, 25 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0652. Robotti to Ambrosio, 24 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0658.

the proviso that the passage of German troops across the demarcation line be temporary, limited to the duration of operations under way in Croatia at the time.¹⁴

For annexed areas, the demarcation line remained impenetrable. In April 1942, German border police offered to support their Italian colleagues in Slovenia should they come under attack by partisans, and they asked the Italians for similar assurances of their own. Robotti informed Second Army that he would maintain the stance taken in December 1941: Italian forces would not be allowed to cross the border and any German requests for such assistance must come in writing.¹⁵ Robotti sought further instruction from above; the issue went up the chain of command to Second Army's new head, Mario Roatta, and on to Ambrosio, now Chief of the Army General Staff, before reaching the desk of Ugo Cavallero at the *Comando Supremo* in Rome. With Cavallero's approval, Ambrosio told Roatta not to agree to the German proposals. Annexed Slovenia was considered Italian "national territory" where public order had to be guaranteed solely by Italian means. Ambrosio further pointed out that, given the current distribution of forces in Italian and German Slovenia, such agreements could only benefit the Germans.¹⁶

The desire to solidify its sphere of influence in the Balkans coupled with the fear of German encroachment prevented Italy from collaborating with its senior Axis partner. As a result, German and Italian occupation forces lacked unity of effort both in terms of counterinsurgency operations and of occupation policy. In June 1942, Robotti was flabbergasted by a request from German police to share the names of persons to be shot in reprisals. Confiding to Orlando that he "cannot understand what interest the German police could have with the requested information," Robotti instructed his divisions not to give German police information on Italian reprisals. At most, he allowed them to inform the Germans of the criteria XI Corps had been following since April: the execution of one or two "communists" for every Slovenian or Italian killed,

¹⁴ See, for example, *Comando Supremo* to *Supersloda*, 6 July 1942, NARA T-821/60/0457.

¹⁵ Robotti to Roatta, "Cooperazione con reparti tedeschi di frontiere in operazioni contro i ribelli," 11 April 1942, NARA T-821/60/0967.

¹⁶ Ambrosio to Roatta, "Cooperazione italo-tedesca in operazioni contro ribelli alla frontiera della Slovenia," 21 May 1942, NARA T-821/60/0960.

wounded, or kidnapped, with allowances to shoot additional hostages in reprisal for particularly heinous offences.¹⁷

Complete Italo-German unity in Slovenia was politically impossible. The region had been carved up and annexed by both countries, who implemented policies of Italianization and Germanization in their respective zones.¹⁸ However, the unwillingness of Italian generals to cooperate with the Germans on matters of security undoubtedly hampered their war against a guerrilla movement that was not necessarily restricted by political boundaries. Counterinsurgency in Slovenia was conducted as two separate battles at a time when Second Army was urging unity of action between its own district commands against the rebel enemy.¹⁹ When Robotti received reinforcements to launch a large-scale operation against partisans in the province of Ljubljana during July 1942, he met with his German counterparts three days before operations commenced. In a meeting that concluded with “mutual expressions of cordiality and friendship,” it was determined that neither side would cross the demarcation line, on the basis that it was partially mined and therefore hazardous.²⁰

The fact that Rome insisted upon a system of separate jurisdictions in occupied Yugoslavia necessarily handcuffed Italian field commanders; however, there is no evidence that Italian generals disagreed with the policy on military grounds. Instead, through their actions, they clearly agreed with the political need to keep their distance from the Germans. For a time, the Italians were quite successful in pursuing this policy. Because the Balkan theatre was of secondary importance to the Germans, they generally accommodated the Italians so long as they proved able to maintain a degree of security in their zone. Therefore, as Rodogno points out, “contacts between the troops of the two armies were less frequent than one might imagine.”²¹ Even though the policy regarding demarcation lines was motivated out of suspicion of the Germans, by limiting contacts between Italian and German personnel it prevented the possibility of open conflict or

¹⁷ Robotti to Orlando, “Fucilazioni per rappresaglia,” 24 June 1942, NARA T-821/277/0041.

¹⁸ Pavlowitch, pp. 85–87.

¹⁹ Roatta memorandum, 7 May 1942, NARA T-821/66/0686–0687.

²⁰ Robotti memorandum, “Verbale della riunione tenuta dell’Ecc. Robotti in Lubiana il giorno 12 luglio 1942.XX°,” 12 July 1942, NARA T-821/062/0708-0710.

²¹ Rodogno, p. 179.

dissent between the two allies in the field. Thus, through 1941 and much of 1942, relations with German commands were not an issue of great concern to Italian generals.

The same was not true for Second Army's relations with Croatian authorities. Croatian nationalists had declared their independence on 10 April 1941, after the German capture of Zagreb. The Independent State of Croatia was formally created by the Rome Agreements of 18 May 1941, with the new country becoming a full-fledged member of the Axis.²² The Rome Agreements formalized the Italo-Croatian border, which became the key political obstacle to successful relations between the two allies. Along with accepting a customs union with Italy and a monarch supplied by the House of Savoy, the Croats were forced to accept the Italian annexation of large tracts of land along the Dalmatian coast, including Split, Croatia's second city. This immediately formed a significant grievance for the ultra-nationalist and irredentist ruling party of Croatia, the Ustaša. Nonetheless, Mussolini believed that he had secured Ustaša loyalty by harbouring their leader, Ante Pavelić, and several hundred of his followers in Italy for over a decade.

German intervention drastically altered the circumstances under which Croatia gained its independence. The German *Bewegungskrieg* through Yugoslavia and Greece — explained in Robert Citino's article — resulted in an unanticipated German presence in the Balkans. Studies of Italian occupation tend to place Italo-Croatian relations within the context of a broader Italo-German struggle for hegemony in the region. Fascists wanted Croatia to become a protectorate on the Albanian model, so closely bound to Italy that the direct annexation of territory would be superfluous. The fact that Germany, and not Italy, ultimately secured Croatian independence prompted Mussolini to opt for the outright annexation of Dalmatia in order to secure Italian interests there against German expansionism. As Eric Gobetti explains, "from the outset the Independent State of Croatia became a political battleground between the Italians and Germans" in which Pavelić tried to play the allies off one another to gain as much autonomy as possible.²³ Mussolini was compelled to place his faith in Pavelić because

²² Croatia officially joined the Tripartite on 15 June 1941 and signed the Anti-Comintern Pact in November. Eric Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegro: Gli italiani in Jugoslavia (1941–1943)* (Rome: Carocci, 2007), p. 52.

²³ Gobetti, pp. 44–45, 52.

he was the only thing that stood in the way of German domination over Croatia; however, German influence in Croatia was made easier by the fact that the Germans had not made annexations of their own and did not engender the same resentment that was felt towards the Italians.²⁴

The generals of the Italian Second Army certainly were aware of the German threat to the Italian sphere of influence in Croatia, as made evident by their dealings with the demarcation line, but relations with the Croats were more of a daily concern. Italian forces remained on Croatian soil after the Rome Agreements and were therefore in frequent contact with the Croatian armed forces, civil authorities, and the Ustaša. Generals in the field more often viewed the Croatian regime as the problem facing Italian pacification schemes and long-term political interests than they did the Germans. With great indignation, they derided the Croatian state as anything but the puppet Mussolini intended it to be, either militarily or politically. As a result, their decisions sometimes clashed with Rome's official attitude of support for the Ustaša, but the generals never abandoned the overall goal of Italian expansion in the region.

Mussolini and his generals were in agreement when in August 1941 the Italians formally reoccupied the western half of their sphere of influence in Croatia, known according to Italian nomenclature as Zone II.²⁵ After the Rome Agreements, the Ustaša initiated a policy of ethnic cleansing against the Orthodox Serbs of Croatia. Since Serbs made up one-third of the country's population, guerrilla resistance inevitably flared up in the Croatian countryside, further fed by a resurgent communist partisan movement following the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June.²⁶ The Croatian armed forces were unable to master the situation on their own so, with the military objective of securing Dalmatia's borders and the political aim of restoring Italian prestige and pushing back German influence, the Italian Second Army took over military and civil

²⁴ Burgwyn, 50; Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 234.

²⁵ The Italians referred to their annexed territories in Slovenia and Dalmatia as Zone I. Zone II stretched along the Croatian coastline, including its immediate hinterland. Zone III comprised the Croatian interior up to the Italo-German demarcation line.

²⁶ Gobetti, pp. 69–76.

powers in Zone II at the start of September. The Croats were now treated as occupied enemies, rather than allies.²⁷

After harbouring the Ustaša and mentoring their adoption of a quasi-fascist ideology and party organization, Italian Fascists refused to turn their backs on the Pavelić regime so readily. A Fascist Party delegation had arrived in Zagreb on 3 August, headed by Eugenio Coselschi, a Fascist of the first hour and of Slavic origin.²⁸ On 21 August, Coselschi wrote Rome of his fears that his task of “constructive collaboration” with the Ustaša was greatly compromised by the recent reoccupation, which he attributed to a decidedly anti-Croatian attitude amongst the officers of the Second Army. He complained that while Italy’s political organs fraternized with the Ustaša, the army attacked it, creating a situation that he found “not only ambiguous and absurd but even paradoxical.” According to Coselschi, the army’s anti-Croatian bias was an overreaction to “isolated” events of violence committed by the Ustaša militia. While he found such attitudes understandable, “given the innate kindness and humanity of the Italian soldier,” Coselschi believed that the army should take a more balanced approach.

It is very noble to be moved by the massacre of a few Serbian women and children, but to be truly just, one also needs to understand the history of Serbian tyranny which has caused Croatian women and children to perish, with the cruellest torment for decades, and which committed even greater and more ferocious massacres. [...] And he who sympathizes with the orthodox church devastated by Croats in their territory, should first know that, for Croats, Serbian orthodoxy is synonymous with tyranny, and that the persecutions against the Croats were above all of religious character, and finally, he should remember that the war against the Axis was triggered by the Serbian government, stirred up by orthodox popes.²⁹

²⁷ Burgwyn, 70; Rodogno, pp. 191–192.

²⁸ Gobetti, p. 52.

²⁹ Coselschi to the Secretary of the PNF, 21 August 1941, NARA T-821/395/0080–0083 [emphasis in original].

Insinuating that Second Army's generals were anti-fascist, Coselschi compared their hatred of the Ustaša to the belief in the 1920s among some military circles that Italian *squadristi* were "anarchic and bloodthirsty" in their battle against socialism.³⁰

However, according to the language of internal army reports, the generals' dislike for their Croatian allies was motivated more by politics and military pragmatism than by the misguided humanitarianism of which Coselschi complained. Italian officers and soldiers undoubtedly were horrified by the violence they witnessed in the summer of 1941 and many local commanders took the initiative to intervene in favour of the persecuted.³¹ But this was not the army's official reasoning behind its eventual action against the Ustaša. Prominent among the reports of Italian corps and division commanders is the opinion that the Croatian regime had failed in its role as an Axis puppet.

Militarily speaking, rather than decreasing the Italian expenditure of resources in occupied territory, the Independent State of Croatia required an augmentation of force thanks to the revolt that Italian generals unanimously blamed on the Pavelić regime. In an after-action report, Furio Monticelli of the *Sassari* Division explained the revolt of Serbs in Bosnia, Lika, and Dalmatia as "a natural reaction" to "persecutions and violence committed by the Ustaša." According to Monticelli, Serbs had fled to the mountains where they came into contact with communists directed from London and Moscow. Here, they armed themselves with former Yugoslavian stock and then descended upon centres occupied by Croatian troops. Monticelli considered his assessment that the majority of rebels merely sought safety from the Ustaša fully borne out by the subsequent Italian reoccupation, during which the rebels "desisted from any action against Italian troops and remained idle."³²

The apparent success of the Italian reoccupation of Zone II prompted Second Army to extend its occupation all the way up to the Italo-German demarcation line in October 1941, this time allowing Croatian civil authorities to operate under Italian

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Gobetti, p. 64.

³² Monticelli after-action report, "Relazione sulle operazioni contro i ribelli comunisti dal 7 al 25 settembre 1941," 31 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0329-0339.

military supervision.³³ General Ceriana-Mayneri's report of this undertaking, as conducted by his 2nd *Celere* Division, echoed Monticelli's sentiments. He wrote that everything had been tranquil until July 1941, when Italian forces began pulling out of the demilitarized zone and Croatian authorities began confiscating property and murdering Serbs. Upon its return, his division inherited a zone in rebellion and chaos, where unharvested crops stood abandoned and villages lacked electricity and water. Ceriana-Mayneri claimed success for the actions taken by his division in October and November 1941, which did not require brilliant feats of arms but merely the presence of disciplined troops "to affirm and continually raise higher the name of Italy among people basically hostile to us, who understand us badly and know little of the wonderful achievements of Fascist Italy."³⁴ For Ceriana-Mayneri, the Independent State of Croatia still had far to go to match Italy's greatness as a civilized governing power.

Italian generals adopted a hearts-and-minds approach towards the Serbian population at the end of 1941 not because of a particularly enlightened occupation policy, but because of their exasperation with Croatian incompetence. Too weak to govern on their own, but unwilling to rely on the Germans or Croats, the Italians instead catered to the Serbs. Convinced that their Croatian allies were solely to blame for causing the revolt, most Italian generals were slow to gain a thorough understanding of the resistance movement that faced them. They neglected both the existence of a widespread reaction to foreign occupation throughout the Balkans and the multitude of local factors at play within a variety of insurgent movements.³⁵ The winter of 1941–42 proved Italian commanders premature in declaring a return to normalcy in their zones of occupation. They had failed to disarm the population and many Italian garrisons came under siege. The substitution of Croatian administration with Italian authority was not enough to end the revolt.

The continuation of the rebellion did little to rally Italian generals behind their Croatian allies, who suffered heavily during the winter. General Quirino Armellini

³³ Gobetti, p. 90.

³⁴ Ceriana-Mayneri after-action report, "Relazione sull'attività svolta in Croazia dalla 2^a Divisione Celere 'E.F.T.F.' nel ciclo operative 4 ottobre–14 novembre 1941-XX," 24 January 1942, NARA T-821/60/0810–0824.

³⁵ Paul N. Hehn, *The German Struggle against Yugoslav Guerrillas in World War II: German Counter-insurgency in Yugoslavia, 1941–1943* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 141; Gobetti, p. 76.

arrived with his XVIII Corps in February 1942. After a few months in the theatre, he suggested that there were reasons beyond Ustaša violence that accounted for the rebellion in his zone of occupation. In Dalmatia, he argued, the presence of a foreign Italian regime, bent on denationalizing and fascistizing the conquered populations, had made revolt inevitable.³⁶ To the formation of a Croatian state, he therefore added the creation of the Italian Governorate of Dalmatia and the ongoing war against Great Britain and the Soviet Union as fundamental causes of rebellion.³⁷ Armellini's views were prompted largely by an ongoing dispute between himself and the Governor of Dalmatia, Giuseppe Bastianini, which would end in Armellini's recall to Rome. As a result, he represented an exception rather than the norm.

The prominent view through the winter of 1941–42 remained that of Riccardo Balocco, commanding V Corps in northwest Croatia. In a report on the political and military situation in his zone, Balocco explained that “the insurrection spawned by instinctive reaction to Ustaša persecution and afterwards exploited, fed and channelled to their ends by the communists, is fully developed.” He had nothing but contempt for the Pavelić regime, whose unpopularity he attributed not only to its policies of terror,

but also because of the absolute inability and inadequacy it has demonstrated and demonstrates in the work of reconstruction that has failed so miserably in the political field, as in the military and economic ones, due to an institutional lack of spirit, the immaturity of the ruling classes and the distrust and discredit that surround all its measures.³⁸

Balocco considered the Ustaša's efforts towards ethnic cleansing absurd, since Serbs made up one-third of the country's population: “It is not possible to think seriously of the annihilation and waste of one and a half million people.” Instead, Balocco advocated a policy of pacification whereby Croats, Serbs, and Muslims were treated equally, but he feared that the population would consider the Italians “tied to the cart of their oppressors” thanks to the alliance with Pavelić. He therefore concluded by arguing for the opposite of Coselschi's recommendations five months before,

³⁶ Armellini to Roatta, “Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia,” 2 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0953–0956.

³⁷ Armellini to Roatta, “Sistemazione future del C. d'A,” 29 May 1942, NARA T-821/51/0685–0691.

³⁸ Balocco to Roatta, “Situazione politico-militare nella zona di occupazione; contromisure opportune per migliorarla,” 3 February 1942, NARA T-821/402/0483–0486.

suggesting that the Italian government and Fascist Party withdraw their support of the Ustaša.³⁹

Balocco and many of his colleagues had long since given up on the alliance with Croatia. Besides holding Pavelić and the Ustaša party responsible for the revolt, they were not impressed by the inefficiency of the Croatian civil administration and armed forces. In January 1942, the Italian army's attaché in Zagreb, Giambattista Oxilia, reported the incident of a Croatian colonel who was found inebriated in a café when he was supposed to be conducting operations against rebels in Bosnia. Oxilia considered this a typical manifestation of the Croatian army's lack of fighting spirit.⁴⁰ The VI Corps's Renzo Dalmazzo complained of "a marked relaxation in discipline and spirit" among the Croatian forces in his zone, many of whom had deserted to the rebels placing Italian troops in danger.⁴¹ Indeed, information reached Roatta in April that the recent surrender of a Croatian garrison was the result of treachery by a Croatian lieutenant who told his men that they were bound for Russia, that Croatia was in total decay, and that it would therefore be better to join the communists.⁴²

Along with concerns over the trustworthiness of Croatian functionaries, the unpopularity of the Pavelić regime made Italian generals hesitant to lend their support to Croatian authorities. As Second Army's commander, Roatta tried harder than Ambrosio to maintain cordial relations with Zagreb while at the same time aiming to win over the Serbian population.⁴³ However, Roatta could not agree to Croatian proposals to a joint operation in the Petrova Gora area in February 1942. Although his representative to the Croatian general staff, Cesare Lomaglio, assured him that the Ustaša battalions that the Croats intended to employ in the operation were solid, Roatta believed an operation alongside Ustaša militia units could damage Italian prestige. He feared that such collaboration would convince the population that Italians were only

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Oxilia to Comando Supremo, "Morale dei quadri ufficiali dell'esercito croato," 2 January 1942, NARA T-821/52/0997-0998.

⁴¹ Dalmazzo to Oxilia, "Truppe croate nella 3^a zona," 24 January 1942, NARA T-821/52/0973-0975.

⁴² Roatta to Croatian General Staff, "Resa reparto croata B. Petrovac," 27 April 1942, NARA T-821/52/0763-0764.

⁴³ Gobetti, p. 109.

there to support the Ustaša regime and its excesses.⁴⁴ For similar reasons, Italian generals were horrified when they learned that the new uniforms of the Croatian army were the same colour as those worn by Italian troops. Dalmazzo feared that this could lead to “serious misunderstandings and inconveniences,” alluding to the possibility that undisciplined Croatian soldiers might be taken for Italians.⁴⁵

What does the attitude of the generals say about their relationship to the Fascist regime? Certainly, their viewpoints differed from those held by representatives of the Fascist Party and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Much has also been made of their preference for alliance with Serbian Četniks over the Croatian Ustaša as evidence of anti-German and anti-Fascist tendencies.⁴⁶ The Četniks were Serbian nationalist guerrillas that had risen up against the Ustaša in 1941 but had also fought against the communist partisan movement. Italian commanders had struck pacts with local Četnik bands in 1941 to collaborate against the communists and after June 1942 some bands were formally integrated into Second Army as the *Milizia Volontaria Anticomunista* (MVAC). Since the Ustaša and Četniks generally refused each other’s right to exist, Second Army’s pro-Četnik policy became a major obstacle to cordial relations with the Pavelić regime.

Second Army’s decision to side with the Četniks — who, problematically, remained anti-Axis in their long-range goals⁴⁷ — over their official Croatian allies had some logic. Since they deemed the Croatian armed forces to be impotent, Italian generals saw greater military value in winning over the Četniks and thereby splitting the guerrilla movement in half. As Roatta explained the policy, “it is hardly worthwhile to double needlessly the number of our adversaries.”⁴⁸ According to German reports, Roatta had no qualms over turning against the Četniks once the communist threat had

⁴⁴ Lomaglio to Balocco, “Azione di Petrova Gora,” 21 January 1942, NARA T-821/60/0440–0444; SMRE to Comando Supremo, “Operazioni nella zona del Petrova Gora,” 4 February 1942, NARA T-821/60/0418–0419.

⁴⁵ De Blasio to Civil Affairs Office, “Militari croati in uniforme italiana,” 5 January 1942, NARA T-821/402/0172.

⁴⁶ Burgwyn, p. 280.

⁴⁷ Matteo J. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 182.

⁴⁸ Roatta to Bader, “Trattative coi ‘cetnici’,” 31 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0324–0327.

been mastered.⁴⁹ Certainly, in his discussion with Četnik leaders, Roatta refused to make any political commitments.⁵⁰ The policy was adopted, as Burgwyn argues, out of Realpolitik, and it conflicted with Axis policy in Yugoslavia, which endorsed the Pavelić regime.⁵¹ Italian diplomat Luca Pietromarchi pointed this out to the army, claiming that the Croatian government enjoyed broad acceptance among the population and predicting that the Četniks would themselves turn sides when it suited them.⁵²

The logic of Roatta and his subordinates was not necessarily anti-Fascist. Mussolini, the final arbiter for Italy's imperialist policy, did not back Pavelić to the same degree as Coselschi and Pietromarchi did. Mussolini's support of the Ustaša through the 1930s had come in the expectation that the movement could act as a fifth column to help Italy dismantle Yugoslavia and, even here, his support was never unequivocal. For some time, Mussolini preferred the more popular Croatian Peasant Party over the Ustaša.⁵³ Eric Gobetti has shown that Mussolini nurtured doubts about the alliance with Pavelić from the beginning and that he maintained his aspirations for occupying all of Croatia, ordering Ambrosio in December 1941 to "eliminate Croatian influence in the second zone and give the impression that the Italians will not leave those areas again."⁵⁴ Despite the resources spent harbouring the Ustaša in Italy, once Yugoslavia was destroyed the Independent State of Croatia became more a hindrance than a help to long-term Fascist policies of expansion and exploitation in the region. The generals of Second Army, from their experience in the field, came to this conclusion earlier than the diplomats, but anti-Fascism had nothing to do with it.

The generals adopted their anti-Croatian stance not only for military reasons, but for political ones as well. In their view, Croatian authorities obstructed Italy's economic and imperialist aims in the country. Italy's economic exploitation of its occupied territories was a complete failure. This was due primarily to Germany's economic

⁴⁹ Hehn, p. 120.

⁵⁰ Second Army memorandum, "Sunto del colloquio col Voivoda Trifunovic del 10 settembre 42," 11 September 1942, NARA T-821/63/0690-0693.

⁵¹ Burgwyn, pp. 271-273.

⁵² Pietromarchi to Castellani, "Rapporti Italo-croati nella 2^a zona occupata," 26 April 1942, NARA T-821/402/0942-0946.

⁵³ Tomasevich, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Gobetti, p. 96.

predominance in the Balkans. The Germans controlled most of the natural resources in the region and their trade with Croatia was three times that of Italy, thanks to a secret German-Croatian protocol from May 1941.⁵⁵ On a daily basis, however, Italian generals more frequently blamed the Croats for their economic difficulties. One of the petty squabbles that developed between Italian and Croatian authorities concerned the cultivation and processing of tobacco grown on the border between Dalmatia and Croatia. The border was under dispute and, although an initial commission had ruled in favour of the Croats, the Italians demanded that tobacco farmers in the area deliver their produce to Italian rather than Croatian factories. Accusing the Croats of interfering with the Italian tobacco monopoly and threatening the livelihood of Dalmatian factory workers, Second Army ordered XVIII Corps in March 1942 not to recognize travel passes granted by Croatian authorities to local farmers, hoping to force them to use Dalmatian factories.⁵⁶

Italian commanders were conscious of Germany's economic superiority, but they tended to view this in terms of Croatian bad faith. The V Corps complained that officials from Zagreb had crossed into its zone of occupation and requisitioned all the cattle and pigs in the area in order to sell them to the Germans, naturally causing discontent among the local peasantry.⁵⁷ Of greater concern was an intercepted message from the Croatian government to Berlin, in which the Croats lauded their commercial agreements with the Germans while complaining that the Italian pursuit of economic privileges had left the Croatian economy in ruins. The Croats claimed that Second Army, on the pretext that Croatia had recognized Italy's right to acquire freely the resources of the country, had been requisitioning far more than it needed.⁵⁸

The Croatian note also questioned the legitimacy of the Italian annexation of Dalmatian territory, which the Croatian economy still had to provide for. Indeed, the extreme nationalism of the Ustaša meant that many Croatian authorities saw the Italian possessions as unredeemed lands. As early as June 1941, before the outbreak of full

⁵⁵ Czesław Madajczyk, "German-Italian Clashes of Interests in the Occupied Areas (1940–1943)," *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae* 21 (1994): p. 144; Pavlowitch, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Second Army memorandum, 17 December 1941, NARA T-821/399/0180; De Blasio to Armellini, "Coltivazione tabacchi a Suhi Dolac," 21 March 1942, NARA T-821/399/0173–0174.

⁵⁷ V Corps memorandum, "Notiziario N° 54/A.C.," 8 January 1942, NARA T-821/402/0113–0124.

⁵⁸ "Nota verbale inviata a Berlino dal Governo Croato," 1 September 1942, NARA T-821/402/0781–0786.

revolt, Ambrosio noted that “Ustaše” were stirring up anti-Italian sentiment in the annexed territories. He ordered his corps commanders not to tolerate such behaviour.⁵⁹ Displays of Croatian irredentism were a particular concern for Italian generals, both in the annexed and occupied territories. Dalmazzo’s VI Corps conducted investigations into extremist Ustaše that were considered anti-Italian spies, employed by the Croatian police.⁶⁰ Although the population of Dalmatia was largely Croatian, as far as Dalmazzo was concerned Dalmatians were Italian subjects owing no loyalty “towards a [Croatian] state that has no involvement in the territory where they were born.”⁶¹

Quirino Armellini, who had his headquarters in Split, accused the Croatian government of fuelling anti-Italian dissent in Dalmatia. He referred to the Ustaša as

this extremely hostile, treacherous, underhanded people whose official friendship eases the task of working against us, setting us even more against the populations by keeping live their sentiments of irredentism and feeding their faith in the liberation from the hated invader.⁶²

Armellini attributed this widespread hatred of Italy first to the policies of his rival, Bastianini, but he also claimed that *agents provocateurs* working for the Ustaša had exacerbated the situation.⁶³ His own experience did not fill him with confidence. In the occupied Croatian territory of Zone II, Armellini had enjoyed amiable relations with the local prefect, David Sinčić, but in April 1942 his policies of collaboration with Četniks came under harsh criticism from his erstwhile ally. Armellini blamed Sinčić’s change in attitude, marked by a tone that he could “not hesitate to declare intolerable,” on a recent trip that the prefect had made to Zagreb. Apparently, the Croatian central government had turned Sinčić against the Italians. At the same time, Armellini placed the first talks between the Pavelić regime and Četniks in Herzegovina in a negative light. Although this seemed to facilitate Second Army’s pro-Četnik policy, Armellini claimed that the

⁵⁹ Ambrosio to corps commanders, “Attività di ‘ustaše’, nei territory annessi all’Italia,” 25 June 1941, NARA T-821/402/0314.

⁶⁰ VI Corps to Ambrosio, “Attività dell’ustascia Drljevic Adam di Mostar,” 22 November 1941, NARA T-821/402/0384.

⁶¹ VI Corps to Ambrosio, “Ufficiali croati native della Dalmazia,” 18 October 1941, NARA T-821/402/0327.
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⁶³ Armellini to Roatta, “Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia,” 2 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0953–0956.

Croats were merely trying to form an anti-Italian front, trying to get the Četniks to help drive the Italians out of Dalmatia after the communist threat had been dealt with.⁶⁴

The state of affairs in his occupied zone prompted Armellini to advocate the complete exclusion of the Croatian government from Italian areas of occupation and the avoidance of any shared power with Zagreb that might damage Italian prestige.⁶⁵ Italian generals, though, were not merely trying to maintain security and protect Italy's new possessions from Croatian irredentism; they also sought to expand them. With his region in full revolt thanks to Ustaša violence, and with Croatian authorities continuing to obstruct his policies, Dalmazzo wrote Roatta in March 1942 that the Croatian population no longer had faith in the Pavelić government. He concluded that the population would be favourable towards a revision of the Italo-Croatian border, including the Italian annexation of the entire Dalmatian coast "with a large hinterland."⁶⁶ Generals like Armellini and Dalmazzo, perhaps the two most outspoken in their objection to Fascist policy, still conducted their coalition relations and occupation with a set of political goals in mind. These goals — the protection and expansion of the Italian sphere in Croatia — were hardly in direct opposition to the objectives of Mussolini's regime.

The generals of Second Army turned against their Croatian allies before the Fascist Party and Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did, thanks to their experience in the field. To them, the Independent State of Croatia was anything but the ideal puppet. The Croats actively worked towards their own political ends, in direct contrast to Italian objectives of Balkan expansion. Italian generals, including Mario Roatta, considered this ungrateful.

While the Croatian authorities claim to want to collaborate with 2nd Army, they clearly do not properly appreciate the contribution of labour and blood that Italian troops give each day in Croatia to achieve public calm and the normalization of daily life.

⁶⁴ Armellini to Roatta, "Linea di condotta," 23 April 1942, NARA T-821/402/0974-0978.

⁶⁵ Armellini to Roatta, "Sistemazione futura del C. d'A," 29 May 1942, NARA T-821/51/0685-0691.

⁶⁶ Dalmazzo to Roatta, "Notiziario n° 302," 4 March 1942, NARA T-821/402/0426-0432.

The Independent State of Croatia is, as the Croatian Legation points out in its memorandum, a sovereign entity that can maintain relations with Italy based on equal rights, but one must not forget that this is thanks to Italy and Germany who, having destroyed the ex-Yugoslav army, made possible the realization of the aspirations of the Croatian people.⁶⁷

The natural extrapolation that Italy had Germany to thank for conquering the Balkans never seemed to cross Roatta's mind. As far as Italian generals were concerned, they had liberated Croatia and set up a puppet government that owed its loyalty to Italy.

Shortly after returning to Rome in January 1942, Ambrosio reported that Pavelić was, at best, a weak Italophile and that Slavko Kvaternik, at the head of the Croatian armed forces, "remained 100% Austrian."⁶⁸ Many Croatian leaders had indeed been Austrianized under Habsburg rule and some of them spoke better German than Croatian.⁶⁹ Italian commanders saw that this brought Croatia more into the German orbit than their own. Since Austria — against whom many of Second Army's generals had fought in the Great War — had been Italy's nemesis until 1918, Austrianized Croatian officials seemed more like natural enemies than allies. For a variety of reasons, Italian commanders never gave the Croatian alliance much chance of success. They blamed the Ustaša, with much justification, for the outbreak of revolt that required extensive resources from Italy to keep in check and thereafter for opposing Italian aims, both military and political. They expected the new Croatian state to behave as their puppet but were instead bombarded by complaints. Fed up with the ceaseless objections to his pro-Četnik policy, Roatta eventually castigated the Croatian general staff for writing him in "a tone that is inappropriate to relations with a high military command of a great allied power." Considering the possibility that the offence had been

⁶⁷ Roatta to Ambrosio, "Attività autorità militari italiane nella zona litoranea croata," 8 March 1942, NARA T-821/402/0206-0212.

⁶⁸ Ambrosio to Cavallero, "Politica croata nei territori della 2^a e 3^a zona," 23 January 1942, in *Diario storico del Comando Supremo*, Vol. VI, Tomo II, Doc. 11 (Rome: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 1996), pp. 36-37.

⁶⁹ Gobetti, p. 27.

the result of poor translation, he told the Croats to send further correspondence in German.⁷⁰

By spring of 1942, then, Italo-Croatian relations were irreparably damaged. From the Italian point of view, the Germans were at least respecting Italian sovereignty on the west side of the demarcation line — something the Germans were willing to do since they had already achieved economic domination in Croatia and did not want to divert military forces from Operation Barbarossa — but the Croatian allies were actively subverting Italian authority. Italian generals remained suspicious of the Germans but, since they had very little contact with them, their ire was directed almost solely against the Croatian regime and its functionaries. However, as the insurgency — attributed by Second Army to excesses committed by the Ustaša — spiralled out of control, both German and Italian commanders recognized the need for more direct military collaboration in the region. The resulting Operation Trio sums up Second Army's overall approach to coalition relations.

The discussions leading up to Trio and the conduct of operations in April and May 1942 serve to illustrate the mutual suspicion between Italian and German occupation forces, always hampered from the Italian point of view by Croatian intrigue. After initial discussions between the *Comando Supremo* and the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), Ambrosio, Roatta, and their staffs met with General Walter Kuntze, commanding the German armed forces in south-eastern Europe, and several of his subordinates in the Istrian resort town of Abbazia (Opatija) on 2 March 1942. The Italian stance at the meeting paralleled the generals' old concerns regarding demarcation lines. According to German reports, Ambrosio surprised Kuntze by proclaiming that "only Croatia will be considered" for joint operations and that Second Army would have overall command.⁷¹ By confining operations to the territory of the Independent State of Croatia, the Italian proposals avoided any possibility of German forces crossing into annexed Slovenia or Dalmatia. Since the Italians could offer three infantry divisions compared to a single German division, Kuntze was forced to agree to Ambrosio's plan. Ambrosio argued that the total force size of five and a half divisions, once Croatian

⁷⁰ Roatta to Croatian general staff, "Collaborazione con i cetnici," 11 May 1942, NARA T-821/66/0608-0609.

⁷¹ Hehn, p. 109.

troops were included, was only enough to tackle one area at a time, so they agreed upon eastern Bosnia, where Tito's partisans threatened Sarajevo, as the target of operations.⁷²

Conveniently, Sarajevo was on the German side of the demarcation line. Once the location for operations was agreed upon, Ambrosio suggested that the demarcation line would have to be nullified during operations, with civil authority being granted to whomever's forces happened to occupy an area.⁷³ This reversal in policy made the Germans and Croats, who were included in the following day's meeting, suspicious. The Croats feared that once the Italians marched into eastern Bosnia, they would never leave. Marshal Kvaternik expressed his concerns to Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the OKW,

based on the terrible experience which we had in the II Zone, in which nine Italian divisions not only could not carry out the pacification, but the condition there became 100 per cent worse and almost brought about the ruin of our administration and our economy.

If one wants to help the Croats, then one cannot dictate to us but must ask us where the shoe pinches, and what help we need and where. [...]

The operational troops of our allies who are committed outside of their demarcation line during operations, remain in those areas only as long as the Croats wish and no longer.⁷⁴

As already demonstrated, Italian generals did not share Kvaternik's understanding of the Italo-Croatian alliance, preferring to view the Croatian state as a puppet that ought to do their bidding. Nonetheless, the Germans were also concerned about Italian designs in eastern Bosnia. Kuntze privately concluded that "an effort should be made to limit the presence of Italian troops in the area . . . to the shortest possible period."⁷⁵

German and Croatian concern was well-placed. Shortly after the Abbazia meetings, Ambrosio wrote to Roatta, complaining that the marching orders for German

⁷² Second Army minutes, "Riunione preliminare italo-tedesca," 2 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0307-0312.

⁷³ Second Army minutes, "Riunione preliminare italo-tedesca," 2 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0307-0312.

⁷⁴ Hehn, pp. 113-114.

⁷⁵ Hehn, p. 115.

and Croatian troops drawn up by German General Bader “constitutes clear proof of their intention not to allow (or to allow it only for a small depth) our penetration into eastern Bosnia.” Since Roatta had been granted overall direction of the operation, Ambrosio urged him to use his position towards Italian ends. He asked Roatta to ensure that operational plans allowed Italian troops to cross as much Bosnian territory as possible and “to secure the presence of our units in the zones beyond the demarcation line for as long as possible.” To do this, Ambrosio wanted Roatta to establish Italian garrisons in the area of operations and to insist that Second Army have the final say whether civil powers would eventually be handed over to Croatian authorities.⁷⁶ The Italian command clearly had political motives for Operation Trio. Ambrosio and Roatta hoped to take advantage of local German military weakness — especially in the wake of the Soviet winter counteroffensive on the eastern front, which relegated the Balkans even more to a theatre of tertiary importance — not only to secure the present Italian sphere of influence, but to expand it.

Roatta hosted meetings in Ljubljana on 28 and 29 March to impart operational directives upon General Bader who, given his knowledge of the terrain in eastern Bosnia, had been granted command of the actual field operations. Upon the Germans’ request, Roatta consented also to the presence of Croatian General Laxa, Kvaternik’s chief of staff, and General Glaise-Horstenau, the *Wehrmacht*’s man in Zagreb, insisting however that the meeting not be considered “a second edition of the Abbazia conference.”⁷⁷ The Italians were pleased with the results from Abbazia, but were frustrated by the German and especially Croatian attempts to revise some of the key points previously agreed upon. Laxa sought to maintain Croatian administrative powers in eastern Bosnia, but Roatta replied that the military authorities would assume all civil powers, just as they would during a state of emergency in their own countries. When Laxa expressed concern that the passage of Italian troops through Sarajevo could cause disorder, Roatta explained that there was no other route, since the planned operation was to begin at Sarajevo. According to Italian reports, they had Bader’s

⁷⁶ Ambrosio to Roatta, “Operazione in collaborazione con i tedeschi e i croati in Croazia,” 19 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0333.

⁷⁷ Roatta to Ambrosio, 27 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0336.

agreement on these points.⁷⁸ Following through on Ambrosio's recommendations, Roatta informed Bader on the eve of operations that he would retain final say on where and for how long German and Italian garrisons would stay in operational territory.⁷⁹

Alongside jurisdictional issues and the question of how deeply Italian units would penetrate into Bosnia, the Croats also opposed Roatta's plans to make use of Četnik bands during operations. German minutes from the Abbazia discussions read that "the signatories of the treaty pledge themselves not to negotiate either with the Četniks or with the Communists."⁸⁰ The Italian version was more vague but, in the face of Croatian opposition during the 3 March meeting, they agreed to a common line not to distinguish between the two groups of rebels.⁸¹ However, when Bader met with Roatta on 28 March the Germans reported that "affairs seemed to have taken a surprising turn."⁸² Now, based on some initial contacts between the Croatian government and Četniks in Herzegovina, Roatta proposed that the Italians and Germans commence negotiations with Bosnian Četniks to achieve their allegiance or neutrality during operations so that Axis forces could concentrate against Tito's communists. Despite German concerns, Roatta believed that he had gained the support of Bader, who feared that conflict with Bosnian Četniks could worsen the German situation in neighbouring Serbia. Laxa and the Croats, whose pessimism went unabated, seemed to be the greatest obstacle in Roatta's way.⁸³ After the meeting, one of Roatta's staff officers, well-versed in the Serbo-Croatian language, reported on a conversation he overheard between Laxa and a Croatian major in which Laxa warned that "Četniks making agreements with Italians is a dangerous thing."⁸⁴

Bader's final operational directives for Trio seemed like an Italian success. Military divisions would have control over civil affairs, non-resisting Četniks would not

⁷⁸ Second Army minutes, "Riunione pomeridiana del 28 marzo 1942.XX," 28 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0433-0436.

⁷⁹ Roatta to Bader, 13 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0392.

⁸⁰ Hehn, p. 113.

⁸¹ Second Army minutes, "Riunione italo-tedesco-croata," 3 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0317-0320.

⁸² Hehn, p. 119.

⁸³ Roatta to Ambrosio, 30 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0340. Second Army minutes, "Sintesi della riunione tenuta il giorno 28 marzo 1942-XX," 28 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0427-0432. Roatta to Bader, "Trattative coi 'cetnici'," 31 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0324-0327.

⁸⁴ Second Army memorandum, 29 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0456.

be considered rebels, and the population was to be treated fairly.⁸⁵ For the Italians, the latter directive was not aimed at the Germans. Although Italian generals knew that German counterinsurgency operations frequently resulted in executions by the thousands, they never voiced concerns regarding German policies. Instead, Croatian lack of discipline was on their minds. At Abbazia, Ambrosio insisted that Croatian regulars and militia be controlled by Italian and German commands to avoid counterproductive excesses.⁸⁶ Laxa agreed, but the Italian note taker at the meeting suggested that this was merely a personal statement and that something more substantial was needed from Zagreb.⁸⁷ Having blamed Croatian authorities for the outbreak of revolt and having found them unwilling to subordinate themselves to Italian policy, Italian generals doubted their potential for Operation Trio.

By the eve of operations, everything seemed to be going how Ambrosio and Roatta desired, but then their military and political plans for eastern Bosnia began to unravel. Firstly, the operation's start date of 15 April was pushed back. Roatta explained to Bader that the three Italian divisions, which needed to be replaced with troops from Italy before transferring themselves to starting points beyond the demarcation line, could not be ready before 20 April; nor could negotiations with the Četniks be concluded before then.⁸⁸ On 8 April, Roatta informed Bader that, due to transport problems caused by British submarines in the Adriatic and high levels of snow in Herzegovina, he now had to delay operations until 25 April. The Germans naturally complained that these delays would allow Tito's forces to escape.⁸⁹

The Germans believed that the Italian delays were duplicitous. The Italians, they feared, had no interest in actual military operations: "A political aim, the occupation of Sarajevo and East Bosnia, was probably the motive of their tactics."⁹⁰ Though the Germans correctly judged Italian goals, there is no evidence that the delays on the Italian part were intentional. Ever since Abbazia, Roatta had preferred a later date for the operation, believing that the spring thaw would make his heavy forces more

⁸⁵ Italian translation of Bader's directives, 21 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0346-0357.

⁸⁶ Second Army minutes, "Riunione preliminare italo-tedesca," 2 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0307-0312.

⁸⁷ Second Army minutes, "Riunione italo-tedesco-croata," 3 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0317-0320.

⁸⁸ Second Army minutes, "Riunione antimeridiana del 29 marza 1942/XX," 29 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0438-0442.

⁸⁹ Second Army after-action report, "Relazione B.O.," 1942, NARA T-821/70/0605-0636. Hehn, p. 123.

⁹⁰ Hehn, p. 125.

mobile.⁹¹ It was also difficult for Second Army to free up troops from Italian zones of occupation that were by no means secure. Indeed, the logistical effort required was daunting. General Giovanni Esposito initially protested the employment of his *Pusteria* Division in Operation Trio, since it would impede his programme of occupation in Montenegro, but Roatta insisted that the *Pusteria* cooperate, as planned.⁹²

Regardless of the reasons behind Second Army's delays, the Germans had surmised Italian plans for eastern Bosnia. They now sought to avoid joint operations altogether. On 9 April, in blatant disregard of Roatta and Bader's orders, an Ustaša unit advanced against rebel forces as far as Srebrenica. Kuntze opted to exploit this advance in order to "clear up the situation in East Bosnia north of the demarcation line before the beginning of the joint operation."⁹³ German and Croatian forces effectively began the first phase of Operation Trio early. Although Italian generals would undoubtedly have acted the same way in defence of their sphere of influence, they blamed the Germans and Croats for "political interference."⁹⁴

Umberto Fabbri, the chief liaison officer attached to Bader's command, reported that on 20 April the Germans and Croats began a methodical advance towards the Drina River "without taking any account of our eventual cooperation." Fabbri believed it was no coincidence that such a move came on the heels of "the sudden arrival" in Sarajevo of the Croatian foreign minister, Lorkovic, and Marshal Kvaternik's son, as well as German General Edmund Glaise-Horstenau, who was regarded as a Croatophile. He concluded that the "Germans and Croats, adhering to a clear cut political manoeuvre, advanced the start date of operations, managing to avoid an Italian contribution in Bosnian territory."⁹⁵

On 25 April, Roatta's chief of staff, Ettore De Blasio, wired Pietromarchi on the turn of events. He likewise referred to the meeting between Glaise and the Croats,

⁹¹ Second Army minutes, "Riunione preliminare italo-tedesca," 2 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0307-0312.

⁹² Esposito after-action report, "Relazione sulle operazioni svolte in Bosnia in concorso con le truppe Tedesco-croate, aprile-maggio 1942 XX," 21 May 1942, NARA T-821/70/0754-0798; Roatta to Pirzio Biroli, 30 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0379.

⁹³ Hehn, p. 123.

⁹⁴ Second Army after-action report, "Relazione B.O.," 1942, NARA T-821/70/0605-0636.

⁹⁵ Fabbri after-action report, "Relazione sulle operazioni in Bosnia Orientale," 20 May 1942, NARA T-821/70/0877-0889; Hehn, p. 6.

“whose attitude towards us is well-known.” On 21 April, Bader announced that the situation in Bosnia was so greatly improved that a large-scale operation was no longer necessary.

Such a point of view, expressed only 6 days. . .after their request to speed up the start of operations, and only 48 hours after having described the situation [of a Croatian garrison] in Rogatica as desperate, clearly reveals that the political move arranged at the Glaise-Bader-Kvaternik meeting in Sarajevo has interfered on operations of indisputable necessity.

This necessity was more political than military in nature. Roatta, “taking into account our interests of setting foot in Bosnia,” responded that without word from *Comando Supremo* or OKW the joint operation must go ahead and he accelerated orders for Italian divisions to cross the demarcation line. The Croats reacted by immediately proclaiming victory in eastern Bosnia, though De Blasio pointed out that this announcement was hardly based on reality and was clear proof of the Croatian desire to avoid Italian intervention. The gains made at Abbazia had been completely negated. De Blasio concluded that the events of 18–24 April had “compromised our political intentions of putting a solid foot in Bosnia, where civil powers are today in Croatian hands.”⁹⁶

Roatta had not yet completely given up on Operation Trio. In response to Fabbri’s news that the Croats had declared Bosnia “tranquil,” that Bader was issuing proclamations only in German and Croatian, and that public opinion was perplexed that Italian units — elements of the *Taurinense* division had already arrived in Sarajevo by train — were under German control, Roatta told Fabbri to maintain a “correct” line of conduct and assured him that Italian prestige would be safeguarded. He ordered Dalmazzo to visit Sarajevo, taking with him a large escort of motorcyclists and armoured cars displaying large Italian flags.⁹⁷ More importantly, in the face of Italian complaints, OKW was not willing to renounce joint operations. Keitel ordered Kuntze

⁹⁶ De Blasio to Pietromarchi, “Interferenze politiche sulle operazioni in Bosnia,” 25 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0328–0332.

⁹⁷ Second Army table, “Direttive ed ordini dati dal Comando 2^a Armata alle truppe dipendenti in merito alle operazioni in Bosnia,” 1942, NARA T-821/70/0592–0601.

that “operations must be continued in accord with the command of the Italian Second Army.”⁹⁸

The result was a relatively minor joint operation against Foča, which had already been evacuated by Tito. German reports do not even mention the operation, but Second Army granted it much significance. The three divisions allotted to Operation Trio were all engaged to greater or lesser degree as they tried to cut off as many fleeing rebels as they could. During this time, Roatta was convinced that Bader and his “entourage” were ignoring the principles of collective action drawn up by the Axis high commands. Through the intervention of the *Comando Supremo*, Roatta took direct command of operations on 10 May. Thereafter, he modified Bader’s operational directives to give Italian forces a larger role.⁹⁹ Between 21 April and 19 May, the Italians claimed to have killed 568 rebels, wounding another 62 and taking 1,912 prisoners at the cost of 79 dead and 192 wounded.¹⁰⁰

In a reversal of stereotypical roles, it was the Italians who complained of German ineffectiveness during the operations. Compared to the Italian alpine divisions employed in Operation Trio, the German 718th Division was considered second rate.

They advance, in fact, exclusively along the roads and bottoms of valleys, limiting themselves to a few side trips, neglecting all high points (for example, Romanja Pl.) that become breeding grounds for most of the rebels who, learning from past experience, allow advancing troops to pass by, knowing that they will be able to resume their disruptive activity soon enough. [...] The total lack of equipment suited to warfare in mountainous terrain can perhaps be the only mitigating circumstance for the German troops.¹⁰¹

In addition, Fabbri claimed that the Germans, unable to keep up with the “rapid and decisive rhythm” imposed by Roatta’s assumption of command, tried to beat Italian

⁹⁸ Roatta to Ambrosio (forwarding translated message from OKW to Kuntze), 24 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0376.

⁹⁹ Second Army after-action report, “Relazione B.O.,” 1942, NARA T-821/70/0605–0636.

¹⁰⁰ See NARA T-821/70/0904 and NARA T-821/70/0908.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

troops to Foča with an improvised motorized column, something the Italians had themselves done in April 1941 in order to be the first into Ljubljana. Despite these problems, Fabbri noted “perfect fusion and great correctness of form” between German commands and Italian liaison units.¹⁰²

Operation Trio, the first attempt at large-scale joint operations between Italian and German forces in Croatia, ended in failure. Effective collaboration between the allies had been hindered from the outset by mutual suspicion regarding each other’s political motives. The Germans and Croats feared, correctly, that the Italians intended to expand their control in the region. The Italians were indignant that their allies dared oppose these intentions in an area they deemed clearly to be within the Italian orbit. The expansionist motives behind the decisions of generals like Ambrosio and Roatta played a major role in impeding the eventual military operations. They opted to take advantage of their local superiority in fighting power to “set foot” in Bosnia. Considering such expansion to be their natural right, Italian generals held their allies responsible for the failure.

The Croats were considered at least as culpable as the Germans. From the Italian perspective, it was the Croats rather than the Germans that obstructed negotiations with the Četniks. Roatta believed that he had Bader’s support on the matter, apparently unaware that any possibility of a German-Četnik alliance had long since been rejected by Adolf Hitler himself.¹⁰³ The same can be said regarding military control over civil administration in operational areas: the Germans acquiesced but the Croats were in vocal opposition. The Italians saw the meeting in Sarajevo between the pro-Croat Glaise-Horstenau and the anti-Italian Lorkovic and Kvaternik as the turning point for their political initiative in Bosnia. The Croatian government and a local clique of Croatophile Austrians were, it seemed, to blame for thwarting Italian ambitions. Operation Trio thus further reflected the tendencies of Italian field commanders during 1941–42 to subordinate coalition relations to political objectives and to view the Independent State of Croatia as the most immediate obstacle to their success.

¹⁰² Fabbri after-action report, “Relazione sulle operazioni in Bosnia Orientale,” 20 May 1942, NARA T-821/70/0877–0889; Gobetti, p. 43–44.

¹⁰³ Hehn, p. 1.

Operation Trio marked the height of Second Army's power in Yugoslavia. Italian generals never again found themselves in such a favourable position in relation to their allies. Reinforcements from Italy dried up and Italian forces found it increasingly difficult to contain the partisan menace. On 19 June 1942, Roatta and Pavelić signed an accord in Zagreb, which called for the withdrawal of Italian troops from Zone III. Their deployment in Zone II was limited to indispensable communication routes as Second Army now focused on defending Italy's annexed territories.¹⁰⁴ In return, Pavelić sanctioned Roatta's alliance with the Četniks, agreeing to the creation of the MVAC as an official auxiliary, but Roatta was unimpressed when Croatian authorities shortly afterwards demanded the disbandment of these units.¹⁰⁵ Despite a somewhat softened attitude from Zagreb, Italian generals saw little improvement in relations with their Croatian allies. One report from September 1942 lamented that hopes for improved collaboration with the Croats "received deep blows" when Croatian units commenced operations without informing the Italians. The report complained that two battalions, armed by the Italians, left the zone altogether in order to participate in operations with the Germans, concluding that "God knows if they will return."¹⁰⁶

After the defeat of *Panzerarmee Afrika* at El Alamein, Roatta redeployed Second Army in order to free up divisions for other fronts. The new line continued to protect Slovenia and southern Herzegovina, but the centre was pulled back to the Dalmatian coast.¹⁰⁷ The Germans now lacked faith in Second Army's ability to maintain security in its zone and they began occupying formerly Italian-held territory. On 21 February 1943, the German 718th Division crossed the demarcation line and advanced towards Mostar in central Herzegovina, attacking any Četniks that interfered, and only informing the Italian command of its action on the following day.¹⁰⁸ The Italians now reported the existence of a "well-coordinated" German plan to penetrate Croatia, claiming that the Germans had taken advantage of the local situation to assume a protective character over the country. German influence was finally crossing beyond the demarcation line,

¹⁰⁴ Gobetti, p. 109.

¹⁰⁵ Gobetti, p. 112; Roatta to Cavallero, "Accordi col Poglavnik circa le formazioni M.V.A.C. 'cetniche'," 18 October 1942, NARA T-821/63/0334-0336.

¹⁰⁶ "Collaborazione Italo-croata," 13 September 1942, NARA T-821/63/1052.

¹⁰⁷ Gobetti, p. 203.

¹⁰⁸ Drechsler to Robotti, 22 February 1943, NARA T-821/296/0761.

all the way to the Adriatic.¹⁰⁹ Mussolini was ousted from power on 25 July 1943 and, although the new Badoglio government remained allied to Germany through August, Second Army had to report that the fall of Fascism had resulted in the total abandonment of Croatia to the Germans.¹¹⁰ Only at this point did Italian generals become preoccupied with their relations towards Germany, although meetings with German commanders continued to take place “in an atmosphere of mutual military camaraderie and after cordial exchanges of salutes.”¹¹¹

Despite the growing and unavoidable presence of Germany, Italian generals continued to harp on Italo-Croatian relations for the same reasons as before. They complained of “intemperate expressions of irredentism” and Croatian clamouring for Dalmatia and Istria, accusing Croatian authorities of supporting Dalmatian partisans while failing to pay tribute to Italian sacrifices.¹¹² They blamed the Croats for preventing foodstuffs from reaching the annexed territories and threatened to make requisitions directly from Croatian territory.¹¹³ They complained when Pavelić exalted Germany but failed to mention Italy in an August 1943 speech.¹¹⁴ Even at this late stage, with Italy so obviously close to collapse, Second Army’s generals operated with the same set of political objectives they had in 1941: to protect Italy’s Balkan empire and expand it if possible.

As Fortunato Minniti has argued, Italian senior officers demonstrated a fair degree of consensus with Mussolini’s regime. While not necessarily committed Fascists, Italian generals shared a set of values that had much in common with Fascist

¹⁰⁹ Second Army memorandum, 14 February 1943, NARA T-821/296/0895.

¹¹⁰ Second Army memorandum, “Situazione politico-militare (relazione),” 31 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0291–0301.

¹¹¹ VI Corps to Second Army, “Colloquio dell’Eccellenza Generale Piazzoni con il Generale Von Oberkamp, comandante la divisione alpina SS ‘Principe Eugenio’,” 15 August 1943, NARA T-821/288/0305.

¹¹² Robotti to Commissariato Generale Amministrativo dello Stato Indipendente di Croazia, “Intemperenze irredentiste,” 29 April 1943, NARA T-821/294/0480.

¹¹³ Second Army to R. Missione Militare Italiana in Croazia, “Colloqui di Makarenka del 18 e 19 luglio u.s.,” 19 August 1943, NARA T-821/294/0062–0068.

¹¹⁴ Robotti to Roatta, “Discorse del Poglavnik,” 28 August 1943, NARA T-821/294/0031.

ideology.¹¹⁵ James Burgwyn also notes that, as romantic nationalists, Italian generals “found the idea of empire congenial,” but portrays them as the least enthusiastic of Italian empire-builders, based on the military difficulties of their task.¹¹⁶ In terms of coalition relations in occupied Yugoslavia, though, Italian generals frequently demonstrated a political commitment to an Italian sphere of influence in the Balkans at the expense of military effectiveness. Italian policy avoided direct collaboration with the Germans in order to define Second Army’s zone of control as strictly Italian. The generals expected the allied Croatian state to behave as a puppet government and were quick to turn against the Pavelić regime not only as the cause of revolt but as the principal obstacle to Italian imperial aspirations. When forced to collaborate in joint operations against the ever-growing insurgency, they chose to do so in a way that would expand Italy’s political control in the region. Ambrosio and Roatta’s conduct during Operation Trio prompted justified suspicion among their allies, which in the end compromised the entire operation. It is true that the generals disagreed with the Fascist Party and Ministry of Foreign Affairs when it came to the Croatian alliance and policy towards the Četniks, but these disagreements were primarily tactical in nature and never challenged Fascism’s long-term expansionist aims.

Politics were the prime motivating factor for Second Army’s conduct of coalition relations in the field. During 1941 and 1942, Italian generals were moderately successful at imposing their will upon their German and Croatian allies. In the broader discussion of the Axis coalition, this study reveals how Germany’s lesser allies were able to work towards their own objectives in occupied Europe, where Hitler wanted to expend as few of his own military resources as possible. While forced to operate within the framework set up by the German conquest of the Balkans, Second Army was able to keep its distance from the Germans in an attempt to delineate spheres of influence. As a result, day-to-day relations with the German ally before 1943 were not altogether bad. They were much worse with the Croats, who also tried their hardest to practice an independent policy that clearly opposed Italian aims. In situations where smaller Axis partners were able to match German power, they had the capacity to obtain their own

¹¹⁵ Fortunato Minniti, “Gli ufficiali di carriera dell’Esercito nella crisi del regime,” in *Sulla crisi del regime fascista, 1938–1943: La società italiana dal consenso alla Resistenza*, ed. A. Ventura, pp. 75–123 (Venice: Marsilio, 1996).

¹¹⁶ Burgwyn, p. 255.

political ends, often in contradiction to the overall war effort. Although Germany's conduct of coalition warfare was flawed, the dysfunction within the Axis coalition was by no means a purely German phenomenon.