

Boris Mlakar. *Slovensko Domobranstvo 1943–1945. Ustanovitev, organizacija, idejno ozadje.* Ljubljana: Slovenska matica. 2003. 544 pp., SIT 6,500 (\$36.00). ISBN 961-213-114-7.

Even within a reasonable “time perspective,” it is never easy to write a balanced account of a revolutionary upheaval in any society, let alone in one that—as a result of that very event—found itself in a decades-long oppressive atmosphere, just now beginning to approach its eventual dispersal.

Boris Mlakar, a historian with Slovenia’s Institute for Contemporary History, has overcome a number of clear and subtle obstacles in this area. By deciding to sweep aside the historical and ideological debris covering the issue of Slovene “anti-communist” activity during the Second World War, he presents a comprehensive picture of Slovensko Domobranstvo to coming generations of Slovenes. Slovensko Domobranstvo, or the Slovene Home Defense, was the name given to a military organization that came to life in occupied Slovenia after the collapse of Mussolini’s Italy in September 1943, during the Second World War.

After the fall of Royal Yugoslavia in April 1941, the communists (until that time a minority) did not demonstrate any undue apprehension. After all, Stalin’s Russia and Hitler’s Germany were still very much allied at that particular moment. However, things changed on 22 June 1941 when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. The communists were quick to follow Stalin’s urgent appeal (in his speech on 1 July 1941) and launched a “national liberation struggle,” although it was really a camouflaged social revolution along the lines of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Revolution, of course, means violence and plenty of it and, sooner or later, a counterrevolution and counter-violence — and plenty of it. Because all of this developed against the backdrop of the Second World War, the complexity of the situation, described by Mlakar, becomes evident if not understandable at the same time.

Mlakar tries to unravel this bloody enigma. The communists pursued two goals: to make the anticommunists ever more dependent on the occupiers, and consequently to reinforce ever more their own claim on postwar supremacy in the territory of Yugoslavia. The Allies, of course, did not take long to see through this game. However, as Churchill is said to have remarked, “I shall not live in Yugoslavia after the war,” and the Allies let it be, thus implicitly permitting a well defined localized

problem to be treated as part of the overall war situation, although it had no real connection with it.¹

Maintaining an armed group—Slovensko Domobranstvo—under such circumstances, of course, demanded a refined and skillful leadership. Despite its “localized” character, it was no secret to anyone that, in the context of world conflict, the sympathies of the group by and large lay with the Allies. The Germans realized this as quickly as the communists, and they demanded and received an oath of loyalty from Slovensko Domobranstvo. Politically, this turned out to be the “kiss of death” and was a definitive signal of the impending communist victory.

Mlakar deals with this chapter with remarkable sensibility, refraining from harsh judgment, let alone outright, venomous condemnation of the oath. Yet his analysis of the situation leads the reader to quiet agreement with his logic: Slovensko Domobranstvo was doomed. The Allies would not recognize its “local” character.

Churchill’s callousness opened the door to its final tragedy: the group left Slovenia at the end of hostilities, seeking asylum with the British troops in southern Austria. In circumstances still not fully brought to light, they were returned to Yugoslavia under a ruse and literally massacred to the last man—some ten thousand of them.

More than thirty years later, on 20 February 1978, writing about the “just discovered” matter of forcible repatriations after the war, in an editorial titled “On Britain’s Conscience” *The Times* of London wrote:

The whole episode is not just a bit of tragic history best forgotten. The facts have only recently become generally available. They are a matter of public concern because they involve the public policies of this country and the way these policies were arrived at and implemented.

In his treatise (which is an expanded version of his dissertation), Mlakar tries to bring these facts to the fore, while implicitly absolving the anticommunists of the most critical charge against them: national treason. Their “collaboration,” while open, was very specific: it was not that they offered their help to the Germans in their fight against the West, but that they pleaded with the Germans for help in their own, local,

¹ Cf. Fitzroy Maclean, *Eastern Approaches* (Alexandria: Time-Life, 1964, 412–13).

Slovene conflict: one that had no bearing on events in the rest of the world, because they never fought outside their immediate territory, nor against any Western ally.

The argument may not be fully persuasive, but Mlakar nevertheless offers enough clues and theories to start the reader on the way to exploring countless explanations, arguments, pleas, accusations, and statements. His main virtue, however, is his calm narrative: his “antiheroes” are not blood-spitting criminals, forcing themselves on hapless Slovenes. They are simple peasants protecting their families against a foreign, alien philosophy. Their actions, misguided though they may have appeared even in Mlakar’s own judgment, were not malicious maneuvers, but open, if desperate, decisions in a desperate time. Mlakar manages to analyze their motives, their methods, and their expectations, and he tells it all at a level that will allow a compassionate, realistic, professional, and balanced debate to begin taking place, leading to a final verdict.

The communists, on the other hand, insist to this day on the idea of a “national liberation war,” denying that a social revolution ever took place in Yugoslavia (and Slovenia). A short glimpse at the statistics—which show that their “national liberation war” killed four Slovenes for every single member of the occupying forces—tells another story.

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Michael Reichmayr. *Ardigata! Krucinal! Ein slowenisches Schimpfwörterbuch, basierend auf Arbeiten von Josef Matl (1897–1974) zum deutsch-slawischen Sprach- und Kulturkontakt.* Mit einem Vorwort von Paul Parin. Graz & Bad Radkersburg: Artikel-VII-Kultur-Verein für Steiermark & Pavelhaus/Pavlova hiša, 2003. [= *Wissenschaftliche Schriftenreihe des Pavelhauses, Band 1 / Znanstvena zbirka Pavlove hiše, 1 knjiga.*], 423 pp., 25.00 euros [= \$30.25] (paper). ISBN: 3-9501-5673-9.

This is a revised version of Michael Reichmayr’s 2003 University of Vienna dissertation, based in part on his research on the posthumous works of Josef Matl written between 1939 and 1947. These works focus