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## The Collaborationist Regime of Milan Nedić

*Sabrina P. Ramet and Sladjana Lazić*

In July 2008, a group of Serbian citizens filed a brief at the District Court in Belgrade, demanding the posthumous rehabilitation of Milan Nedić, whom the plaintiffs viewed as ‘a victim of persecution and violence for political reasons’.<sup>1</sup> Coming on top of the historical revisionism in which Serbian textbooks since the fall of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000 have portrayed Nedić in a positive way,<sup>2</sup> the demand for Nedić’s rehabilitation may be seen both as the ultimate fruit of that revisionism and as a sign that Milan Nedić, head of the Axis collaborationist regime in Serbia during World War Two, remains attractive to some Serbs and, accordingly, controversial. In the pages that follow, we shall outline Nedić’s career and show both his subservience to the Germans and the limits of his authority. Nedić’s defenders are fond of comparing him to Marshal Pétain (incidentally, another Axis collaborator) and of claiming that he was striving to save Serbs from a worse fate. His fiercest detractors compare him to Ante Pavelić – a comparison which is somewhat misleading since Pavelić enjoyed more autonomous authority than Nedić did.<sup>3</sup>

### **Nedić’s life prior to 1941**

Milan Nedić was born on 7 September 1877 in Grocka, a small town on the Danube, 26 kilometres east of Belgrade, to a well-known bourgeois family. He attended high school in Kragujevac and entered the Belgrade military academy in 1895, at the age of 18, completing his studies at the higher military academy in 1903. Both of his brothers also pursued military careers and, like their brother Milan, would achieve high ranks. By 1908, Nedić was a staff officer and, during the years 1910–12, was assigned to foreign duty in France. By the time of the Balkan Wars

(1912–13) he was a lieutenant-colonel and during World War One he served on the Salonika (Thessaloniki) front. He was promoted to commander of the IV Army in Zagreb in 1919 and was subsequently transferred to the General Staff.<sup>4</sup> In 1927, he was sent to Kosovo to command the army division there, but the following year he was transferred to Ljubljana, again as division commander. During the years 1929–34 he was commander of the army in Skopje but, after the assassination of King Aleksandar in October 1934 and the rise of General Petar Živković, Nedić's career seemed to have dead-ended, and, in 1935, he was given a ceremonial post. Nedić made a comeback, however, during the second term of Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović (21 December 1938–5 February 1939) when he became minister of the army and navy.

He retained that position in the first government of Dragiša Cvetković (6 February–26 August 1939) and was confirmed in that post once again in Cvetković's second government (formed after the compromise agreement reached with the Croatian Peasant Party). During the period that he served as minister of the army and navy, Nedić became known for his pro-German views and, in a memo he sent to both the prince-regent and the prime minister, Nedić advised that neutrality in the war was unrealistic and urged that the country align itself with the Axis.<sup>5</sup> This would cost him his office, which he was compelled to resign on 7 November 1940.<sup>6</sup> At the time 63 years old, Nedić was placed under police surveillance.

Meanwhile, Prince Paul of Yugoslavia was coming under pressure to join the Axis Pact and, at a meeting with Hitler on 4 March 1941, was offered Salonika as a reward in the event that the Kingdom of Yugoslavia would become a full Axis partner. Subsequently, on 25 March 1941, the Yugoslav government signed the Pact, albeit not without making a number of stipulations (including that no Axis troops or war materiel be moved through Yugoslav territory).<sup>7</sup> On the following day, angry Serbs gathered on the streets of Belgrade shouting 'Bolje grob nego rob, bolje rat nego pakt!' (Better the grave than to be a slave, better a war than the pact!) That night, at 2:15 a.m. on 27 March, army officers led by Air Force General Bora Mirković overthrew the government, deposed Prince Paul, and declared the 17-½-year-old King Petar II to be of age. The conspirators put together a new government headed by General Dušan Simović (also of the air force) with Vladko Maček, head of the Croatian Peasant Party, joining the government as one of two deputy prime ministers.<sup>8</sup> The new government immediately offered reassurances to Hitler that it would honour Yugoslavia's commitments under the terms of the Pact.<sup>9</sup> But Hitler had been provoked by the anti-Axis protests on