Most of the history of the Peoples’ Liberation Struggle, as it came to be known in the annals of communist Yugoslavia, remains to be written. For years it was impossible to question the official account of the war as a mass rising against fascism, which contributed significantly to the victory in Europe, and swept the Party into power on a flood of popular support. This founding political myth was designed to divert attention from certain awkward facts. First, Yugoslavs slaughtered each other in greater numbers than they killed the Axis occupiers. Second, the guerrilla war in the Balkans was, from the point of view of grand strategy, a sideshow. Third, the Communist Party seized power at the war’s end by force, and thanks to Stalin’s patronage.

Even the question of how many were killed as a result of the fighting could not be asked during Tito’s lifetime. The official government figure of 1.7 million war dead, submitted in 1946 for the purpose of calculating war reparations, has been shown to be the product of political manipulation. Two recent scientific studies estimate independently that Yugoslavia’s war losses amounted to just over 1 million out of an estimated total population in March 1941 of 16 million people.1 The point is not to belittle the toll of Yugoslav lives, but that it took 40 years for honest arguments about the statistics to become public, because counting the dead raised questions about who suffered most at whose hands.

On 10 April 1941, Croatian fascists rushed to proclaim the Independent State of Croatia (NDH in its Croatian acronym), a week before the formal surrender of Yugoslavia. The NDH was administered under licence from the Axis by Ante Pavelić, formerly prominent in the
Croatian Peasant Party, who assumed the title of ‘Leader’ (Poglavnik). Pavelić’s puppet state was shorn of Dalmatia, but it included Bosnia-Hercegovina, so incorporating 1.9 million Serbs and 0.75 million Muslims, out of a total population of 6.3 million. It then remained only to dismember the rest of Yugoslavia along predictable lines. Slovenia was divided between Italy and Germany. The Italians occupied Dalmatia and Montenegro, from where they controlled a client Albania enlarged by the addition of part of western Macedonia and most of Kosovo. Bulgaria took the remaining (much larger) portion of Macedonia and the Pirot district of Serbia. The Vojvodina was split: Hungary got Baranja and Bažka, while Germany took direct control of the Banat, which was policed by the local population of Volksdeutscher. The wizened remnant of Serbia was entrusted to the collaborationist government of General Milan Nedić, in August.

By this time, Nazi armies were deep inside the territory of the USSR, which transformed the situation in Yugoslavia. With the Germans engrossed in the progress of Operation Barbarossa, a series of local risings broke out in Serbia during the autumn. The victorious Communist Party later claimed most of the credit for this, and although its part in generating resistance has been much exaggerated in official histories, individual Communists were active in placing themselves at the head of armed resistance to the occupation. The entry of the socialist fatherland into the war was greeted with huge euphoria among Party cadres, a blind faith that Nazism would be defeated. The Partizans even controlled the important town of Užice for a time, but they were too weak to hold out against the Germans. As it became clear that the Red Army would not be arriving soon, the Party leaders had to face up to an obvious problem. A successful guerrilla war could be fought only by mobilizing the peasantry, and Serb peasants found a more natural focus of loyalty in the Chetnik resistance movement, led by Colonel Draža Mihailović. Mihailović took refuge in Serbia’s Ravna Gora region, together with a handful of fellow officers who had evaded the fate of the 200 000 soldiers of the Royal Yugoslav Army transported to Axis PoW camps. Mihailović was a staff colonel of no great distinction when Yugoslavia surrendered. There were five Serbian generals in exile in London, and it was not until June 1942 that he was promoted to supreme command of the ‘Yugoslav Army in the Homeland’. His authority over the Chetnik commanders was always weak. In keeping with their name and antecedents, the Chetniks were groups of local fighters, partisans in the original meaning of the word. Mihailović was in effect appointed by the exiled government to coordinate the efforts of a number of independent