

Metod M. Milač. *Resistance, Imprisonment & Forced Labor – A Slovene Student in World War II* [= *Studies in Modern European History, Vol. 47*]. New York, Washington DC, Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002. 260 pp., \$33.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8204-5781-7.

Metod Milač refers to his book (*Resistance, Imprisonment & Forced Labor*) as memoirs. It is an autobiographical—indeed, a personal and also emotional account—of the author’s young life between 1934 and 1950. It is the story of a Slovenian student caught in the dramatic—or, rather, tragic—realities of Nazism, German occupation of Slovenia and Yugoslavia, Communist- and Catholic Church-sponsored resistance, imprisonment, the Communist regime and emigration.

We have read a number of autobiographical works by Slovenian emigrants. Some of them (e.g., by Ciril Žebot¹ and Ljubo Sirc¹), published before 1990, have shed light on new worlds, especially to Slovenian readers that had lived deprived of such literature and more or less ignorant of objective accounts of the war years 1941–45. Others had limited objectives and corresponding effects. Many have served local or private purposes, settling minor political accounts, etc. Milač’s *Resistance* represents a class of its own. This is a well-written and interesting testimony, but it is, above all, a precisely documented historiographic work and a technically accomplished book of serious social and political research.

Milač explains his preoccupation:

Official histories of World War II, or any other calamity of that nature, regardless of how many details they include, cannot describe the totality of human suffering, especially by those not directly involved in the conduct of the war The deceptions during the war years were most depressing for me. Not the planned military deceptions, which are as much part of the strategy as anything else, but deceptions in interpersonal relationships (1–2).

It took me quite a while to read *Resistance*. Not simply because I had many other obligations earlier this year, but because it is a book that one cannot rush through. The reader cannot leave any page unread: otherwise, the complexity and attractiveness of the story would perhaps be lost. The author is sensitive, emotional, passionate and even sentimental, particularly in the first part of the book. But these sentimental and nostalgic pages serve, like an overture, to prepare the reader for confrontation with more serious stuff. One enters the writer’s

world step by step, day by day, and in the end one is completely immersed in it. The beginning might look innocent and idyllic, but the end is packed with thundering horror, death, betrayal, defeat and outright tragedy.

The book is in many ways symbolic and archetypal for Slovenia and Slovenes. First, it deals with the confusing organization of political life in Ljubljana at the beginning of the war. Even Milač has problems identifying various currents, underground cells, connections and real political power. On some occasions, he is intentionally vague; on others, he has a hard time explaining the differences and antagonisms between the resistance groups. His experience with the group of Partisans led by the political commissar Fric Novak is reproduced in a realistic way, and is quite revealing.

The war seen through young Milač's eyes is a mosaic of military, political and intimate scenes. Consequently, much space is used to describe his immediate family, school events and piano lessons with Anton Ravnik. There was also a political division in the family: the author's brother joined the "Home Defenders" (the *Domobranci*, a German-sponsored anti-Communist force), while he himself was drawn to a pro-Anglo-American underground organization, an attraction that brought him to Auschwitz. He calls his political group the "Slovene National Clandestine Resistance Force." The better-known and more "popular" name for it used to be "Slovenian Chetniks."

Of course, the main and the most important part of Milač's book deals with the flight of the anti-Communist resistance members after the Communist victory in Yugoslavia to Austrian camps and their subsequent return by the British to Tito's partisans. In this terrible transaction, many thousands died, the author's brother among them.

This theme appears at the beginning and at the end of Milač's book:

The most tragic and catastrophic development, the forcible repatriations after the hostilities had already ceased in Europe on 8 May 1945, will never be sufficiently and satisfactorily explained. The question "Is the efficiency of military operations more important than thousands of human lives?" will be forever on our minds (3).

It is painfully incomprehensible and perhaps sobering for a modern Slovene that has experienced the independence of Slovenia and is now, in 2003, embracing the European Union, to read the following lines:

When the British soldiers locked the railroad freight cars and the attached passenger wagon, so cynically reserved for the officers, women, and children, and handed over the Home Defense soldiers to Tito's partisans, that cruel and brutal deception instilled in all of them the conviction that there was no place on earth to seek protection and asylum. This was the end, the very end, the Goetterdaemmerung. Those who escaped did so primarily to go back and warn their families and others what was happening. Among those who escaped were three of my high school colleagues ... (199).

Among the deepest wounds that are still bleeding were the enforced repatriations and/or deceptions after the conclusion of the hostilities that were authorized and enforced at least to a degree by representatives of the Western alliance entire nations and races were indeed targeted for annihilation (226).

Milač is most disappointed by the behavior of the British, whom he politically adored. He saw in them his heroes and saviors, but they treated the German prisoners better than the Yugoslav anti-Nazis and anti-Communists. The British somehow preferred their military (and political) enemies to their ideological allies. Milač writes:

The German troops, their enemies, had certain rights, according to international laws. These other groups—were they considered a lower class or an expendable group of people?—apparently had no rights of any kind ... (200).

Some of the information we find in Milač's book has been made known previously. Milač has more or less reproduced the materials about the Home Defense men that were taken to the execution sites and managed to stay alive (Milan Zajec, France Dejak, France Kozina).

Milač's book tells a story of disenchantment and bitterness. To many modern Slovenes and to most American and European readers, this may represent testimony about remote and unpleasant events. For serious students, the book represents intensely instructive and compelling reading. *Resistance, Imprisonment & Forced Labor* primarily demonstrates two things: (1) In World War II, many Slovenes were unable to define their historical national interests. Most of them were badly organized; and—except for the Partisans—they lacked coherent and intelligent leadership, and (2) Today, we must admit that Europeans, Slovenes included, have progressed beyond the most optimistic expectations. This is drastically evident if we compare our situation to our predecessors' during World War II. We realize how much nationalist

confrontation, fear, animosity and discrimination have disappeared from modern European life.

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