

'Without a Vision the People Perish . . .' Yugoslav Women Fight and Die Beside Their Men to Keep This Vision Alive



SMILING SNIPER—This Serbian girl, a member of Tito's Partisan army, is an expert in art of killing Nazis.



REAL VETERANS are these girl soldiers of Marshal Tito's forces. They have recovered from wounds received while fighting the Germans in Yugoslavia and are training to wage further guerilla warfare against the enemy.

Yugoslavia's Heroic Women

By Helen Johnson Keyes

WHEN on April 6, 1941, German bombs poured fire upon Belgrade, capital of Yugoslavia, the last voice to be heard upon the city radio was that of a woman who stood valiantly at her post.

"Tens of thousands of Belgrade citizens," she announced, "have been killed by bombs. The scenes on which we are forced to look this Palm Sunday surpass in horror any description that can be given. Hospitals, churches, schools are demolished. But the Yugoslavs will build a capital even more beautiful than the one that is going up in flames."

The enemy invasion had, of course, been foreseen, and preparation for active revolt already had transformed the peacetime life of the people and made of the country an armed camp albeit one that was concealed in mountain fastnesses. Yugoslavia has only 16,000,000 inhabitants, but as happened in the case of certain righteous warriors of old, the strength of each loyal individual became "as the strength of ten." Throughout the land

men, women and even school children had for many months been joining guerilla bands. Without effective man-built fortifications, the defense of the nation lies in its savage terrain, its turbulent rivers, its moraines, marshes and, above all, its mountains. They are fierce mountains whose slopes bristle with cliffs, crags, jagged ledges and depths that hide chasms, ravines, gullies and caves. Even before Hitler's forces pulverized the inadequate regular army, materiel for counter-attacks had been secreted in these natural caches.

WOMEN were active in this mission. In their bodices, aprons, head-kerchiefs and baskets they carried surreptitiously up the defiles and down the gorges food, clothing and such arms and ammunition and medical supplies as could be obtained, to hide them in secretive places.

Classes in first aid were formed and many girls learned how to take care of the wounded when war should come. Mothers, daughters, aunts, sometimes grandmothers practiced shooting and throwing bombs and hand grenades.

Thus the army of the people began to take form so that on that Palm Sunday when the

Germans invaded the country an opposing force of which they knew nothing awaited the hour in which it could emerge and attack. This hour came when Hitler declared war on Russia in June, 1942, and removed from Yugoslavia, which he considered completely subjugated, his major forces. The remaining garrisons, it was decided, were not so strong but that the guerillas could strike at them and survive the stroke. Belligerent bands sprang up throughout the country, appearing suddenly out of nowhere and disappearing as quickly into the void. Among them were always women. They were excellent saboteurs, destroying German truck convoys, lines of communication, emplacements.

In Slovenia a woman working with three men and with no weapons but handmade grenades, captured a Nazi munitions cache that contained 3000 cartridges. This was rich booty for the guerillas, who had largely to depend on what they seized in such forays. In Bosnia a band of girls wearing men's suits—we do not say uniforms for of these there were few in this irregular army—re-sisted for several days a German assault and were not recognized until disarmed, when they were liquidated by firing squads.

One girl led a band of armed peasants in an attack on the city of Shabatz, occupied by Germans. Women are the minute men keeping the units in communication with one another by carrying messages by word of mouth or distributing secret printed matter. Furthermore, as men are killed or taken prisoners, women replace them in the fighting ranks.

One may wonder how homes, crops and little children are surviving this exodus of fathers, mothers and older boys and girls. The answer is that Yugoslavia is a country of many relatives and of loyal neighbors eager to assume the burden. Grandmothers, grandfathers and aunts and uncles too old to be useful as combatants take over the tasks of those who have gone. Girls of tender age are caring for babies and very young boys helping to cultivate the fields. Because the people are united in their zeal for liberty such services become instinctive and impassioned.

"You ask how we can leave our homes?" one woman is quoted as saying. "We think of what would happen to them if Hitler established his 'new order.'"

To German soldiers the guerilla method of waging war is fantastic, incredible. A letter found on the person of a Nazi officer describes the stupefaction



MARSHAL Josip Tito Broz, Partisan chief.

caused by one of their onslaughts. He relates that his company suddenly became aware of a band of men and women who had advanced unseen through a tangled mass of tall grass to within 15 feet of his position. The guerillas seized the muzzles of the German guns before these could be discharged and continued to hold onto them even when deadly fire was dismembering their bodies.

"They fought like fiends," he wrote. "They seemed hardly human. And this brutal, unearthly drama was finally heightened by the wild rallying cry of one of the women, who numbered several hundreds, till the hellish sound seemed to batter our ranks like something palpable. The battle raged for two hours and never did the voices of the women cease."

"Without a vision the people perish." In the strength of a vision, and with leadership, men and women who have hitherto seemed very average, apathetic individuals can rise to levels of intelligence, character and devotion to an ideal that are amazing. The Yugoslavs have seen a vision of democracy and found their leader in Tito, a Croatian whose real name is Josip Broz.

IN World War I, as a citizen of the Austrian Empire, he was drafted into its army. Regarding the Hapsburgs as enemies of his people, he deserted to Russia. During the Russian Revolution he became a Communist and fought with those forces, and in the Spanish Revolution joined the Republican army. Re-

turning to Yugoslavia he was imprisoned by the government, then a reactionary dictatorship, but on regaining liberty he went to work with the underground to organize his compatriots against the Fascist advance. He slowly formed what is now called the People's Army of Liberation or the Liberation Front or, more informally, the Partisans, a term signifying merely irregular military troops.

Fighting at Tito's side is his second wife, Herta Broz. Only 15 per cent of the Partisans are Communists; Tito requires solely that they shall be anti-Fascists and pledge allegiance to the Allies. The largest contingent of the army is, of course, the peasantry, for nine-tenths of Yugoslavia's population farms its own acres. Industrial workers, however, are well represented and the professional class is active.

When, in 1918, Yugoslavia was formed by the union of nine Balkan provinces, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Croatia, Dalmatia, Vojvodina, Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro, there occurred an upsurge of intellectual life among the women of the intelligentsia. Many clubs were formed, most of them branches of international organizations, and they brought their members into closer relationship with the western democracies.

After Hitler attacked Austria the clubs became channels through which were sent the liberal nations warnings of the Nazi threat. At home, women and girls went from house to house in cities, towns and villages, explaining the approaching shadow of the Axis. Boys and girls wore pins inscribed with the words, "We will defend our country." The tone of life and literature changed. An example of this is the woman poet, Desanka Maksimovich, whose verses in happy days had been lyrical, even flowery, but who began to write battle hymns. A popular one is called *The Rebels*, and it closes with these lines:

"We have been ploughed out of fields soaked in blood, We have sprouted forth in a land of rebellion and revolt, We are a proud people of Haiduks."

Haiduks were bandit mountaineers who fought against Turkish rule.

QUICKENED interest in outside nations led to the study of languages, for which Yugoslavians have a natural ability. Many women are serving with the Anglo-American military missions as interpreters. Olga Nibitch Humo is outstanding. Daughter of a reactionary politician, she nevertheless embraced the Partisan cause, for which she was thrown into prison. Through the good offices of a Czech—who was killed the next day for his deed—her escape was arranged, whereupon she became interpreter for Brit-

ish officers attached to Tito's supreme command.

The People's Army of Liberation has approximately 270,000 troops, of whom about a fourth are women. Its front extends 350 miles, the length of Yugoslavia, from the Julian Alps in Slovenia to the southern boundary of rocky Montenegro. Its organization is similar to that of other armies, developed on a smaller scale. Chaplains of Yugoslavia's three religious faiths, the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox or Greek confession, and Islam, minister to the faithful among the soldiery. Political commissars are attached to each unit from a company to a corps and in them women are active. Commissars have no military rank, but they are permitted to fight, a privilege of which they often avail themselves. After a battle any commissar may criticize the officers and their strategy, and this uniquely democratic license is accorded also to privates of both sexes.

Dr. Ivan Ribar, a Croatian and leader of the democratic party, organized a provisional government toward the end of 1943, which has its own agricultural, health and educational departments. The particular aim of the last is to promote literacy among the peasants. Also it maintains banking, postal and railroad systems and a social department that supports theaters and ballets.

To a degree that is almost incredible, these liberty-loving people have risen like the legendary phoenix into new life out of the ashes of death.



CAPTURED GUERRILLAS are searched by the Nazis after a sharp skirmish in the mountains.



STURDY PEASANT WOMEN of Yugoslavia have become excellent saboteurs, destroying German equipment, capturing vital munitions.