

Chetniks

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Summary

Chetnik is a common name for a member of the auxiliary or paramilitary units used by the Serbian army for guerrilla warfare during the Great War. The chetnik tradition dates from the time of struggle against the Ottomans; their legacy continued to be present in all subsequent conflicts.

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Origins

Chetniks is the colloquial name for members of Serbian irregular units that were active in all conflicts during the 20th century. These units originated in the period of Serbian military-political action in Ottoman Macedonia as rivals of the *comitaji*'s of the Bulgarian Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization ([IMRO](#)) that was active between 1903 and 1912. *Chetnik* means a member of a *cheta*. The term *cheta* comes from word *četovanje* which means guerrilla activities, or fighting in small units. Their leaders were known as *voivods*.

At first *chetnik* action was private enterprise. It was preceded by the formation of the Serbian Committee, which was founded in 1903 by several politicians, entrepreneurs and officers mostly from Ottoman Macedonia and the [Sanjak](#) and Kosovo regions. The idea was to send small units of *chetniks* across the border to organize inhabitants of pro-Serbian areas and villages in Ottoman Macedonia and to oppose *comitaji* bands from the rival IMRO, which were involved in similar activities on the Bulgarian side. After initial failure, this initiative gained official support from a special board of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition to those designated to go across the border, young officers and NCO's greatly contributed to military training and the preparation of *chetniks*. [University and high school](#) students, volunteers from [Austria-Hungary](#) and [Montenegro](#), members of Gendarmerie and Border troops, Macedonian [refugees](#) and seasonal workers in [Serbia](#), as well as local Macedonian peasants also

participated. In time a secret organization, Unification or Death (*Ujedinjene ili smrt*), better known as the [Black Hand](#) (*Crna ruka*) influenced *chetnik* action. The *Black Hand* greatly influenced the Serbian military, patriotic organizations, and the ruling dynasty; the leadership of the Black Hand consisted of officers responsible for the coup d'état in 1903 and officers who were active in choosing the Karadjordjević dynasty to rule. Many of the Black Hand members actively participated in *chetnik* action.¹

Chetniks in wars 1912-1918

During the [Balkan Wars](#) some 2,000 *chetniks* fought within the ranks of the Serbian army. They were grouped in ten detachments and given the task of performing reconnaissance missions or creating diversions on the enemy's back lines.² During combat activities and in their immediate aftermath some *chetnik* leaders and their detachments committed atrocities against Albanian, Muslim (Turkish), and pro-Bulgarian inhabitants of Macedonia, Kosovo, and Metohija.³ *Chetniks* were considered to be efficient tools in eliminating Bulgarian power and spreading Serbian influence in Macedonia, both by suppressing activities of rival IMRO bands and by physically liquidating prominent IMRO activists and supporters.

These same tactics were implemented during the Great War, albeit with rules of engagement. The Serbian Supreme command had organized four *chetnik* detachments with about 2,250 members. In addition to reconnaissance missions and creating diversions on the enemy's back line, they were prepared to organize uprisings in areas with Serbian majorities if the offensive was successful. In case of an enemy offensive they were supposed to stay at the enemy's rear and create diversions or form special terrorist groups to attack enemy headquarters or assassinate enemy commanding officers. Former *chetniks* as well as physically and mentally suitable volunteers were eligible for service in *chetnik* ranks.⁴

During the Serbian retreat in the winter of 1915-1916, *chetniks* were assigned military police duties such as maintaining order and preventing and punishing desertions. On the Macedonian front they were grouped into *Volunteers detachment*, which suffered huge casualties during the battle of Kajmakčalan, after which the remaining men were dispersed among regular units. The only remaining *chetnik* detachment on the Macedonian front was that under [Jovan Babunski \(1878-1920\)](#), which operated under French command.⁵ During the Toplica uprising in Serbia in 1917 insurgents used to call themselves *chetniks* and were even led and organized by several *chetnik* veterans.⁶

Legacy

Famous *chetnik* leaders (*voivods*) included: [Vojislav Tankosić \(1880-1915\)](#), [Vojin Popović \(1881-1916\)](#), [Velimir Vemić](#), Jovan Babunski, [Kosta Milovanović Pećanac \(-1944\)](#), [Kosta Vojinović \(1891-1917\)](#), Vasilije Trbić (1881-1962).⁷ After the Great War *chetnik* veterans were organized in several organizations. Some of them continued to act as members and leaders of [paramilitary units](#) fighting Bulgarian or Albanian paramilitaries.⁸ During World War II members of the Yugoslav Royal Army in the Homeland [*Jugoslovenska vojska u Otadžbini*] embraced the *chetnik* traditions in name, organization, and appearance and were commonly called *chetniks*.

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Notes

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- [Celebration of the 10th Anniversary of Toplica Rebellion in Prokuplje \(1927\), The](#)

[European Film Gateway, Jugoslovenska kinoteka, and Europeana \(Video\)](#)

- [Documentary Film of the Toplica Rebellion \(1991\), The European Film Gateway, Jugoslovenska kinoteka, and Europeana \(Video\)](#)
- [Newsreel of Vojislav Tankosić \(1880-1915\) smoking a cigarette \(1918\), The European Film Gateway, Jugoslovenska kinoteka, and Europeana \(Article\)](#)
- [Serbian Chetnik Voivodes in Old Serbia and Macedonia, Skopje \(c. 1904-1908\) \(Wikimedia Commons\) \(Image\)](#)

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