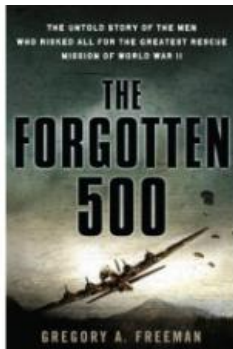


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Ex Libris — New Perspectives on World War II

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World War II continues to fascinate, and for good reason. That global cataclysm reshaped the world and its effects are still unfolding in parts of the globe. Furthermore, new stories continue to unfold, even as archives are opened in both the United States and Europe.



One of these compelling stories is recounted in *The Forgotten 500* by Gregory A. Freeman. Freeman tells the story of the amazing rescue and evacuation of hundreds of stranded American pilots and bomber crew members. The airmen were stranded when they had to abandon their battered bombers over Yugoslavia. The Allies sent hundreds of bombers over Yugoslavia on their way to bombing runs over Romanian oilfields — oilfields and refineries that were of crucial importance to the Axis powers.

Freeman tells an amazing tale of how the Yugoslavian people risked their own lives to protect the American airmen, offering what little food and shelter they had to the young Americans. The story also reveals the heroism of General Draza Mihailovich and his rebel force against the ruthless Nazi occupiers. Mihailovich and his Chetnik soldiers helped the American airmen to build an airstrip in the middle of a Yugoslavian mountain — right under the noses of the occupying Germans. Brave American pilots and crews then flew a series of C-47 cargo planes onto that crude airstrip, successfully rescuing all of the downed American pilots and crew — the largest rescue of World War II.

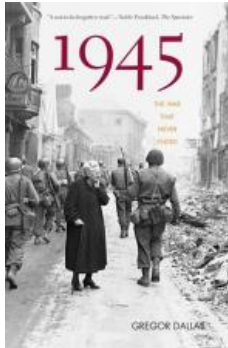
As Freeman makes clear, the story was lost for decades, mired in the convoluted and confused world of the Cold War. General Mihailovich was eventually executed by the Communist government of Marshall Josip Tito and his reputation was slandered by both American and British agents. Restoring his honor became the project of many of the American airmen he helped to rescue. Freeman tells the story of the airmen Mihailovich helped to rescue later rescued his reputation.

Along the way, readers learn a great deal about the formation of the American intelligence services and gains a feel for how little Allied military planners and leaders knew when they had to make decisions that could mean life or death for so many.

An excerpt:

As the airmen waited for help, they could at least be confident that they were relatively safe in Pranjane. Germans were garrisoned only thirty miles away, down in the valley, and Nazi patrols routinely rolled in villages all over the area. But unlike most of the countryside in the hills of Yugoslavia, this particular area was secured by almost ten thousand of Mihailovich's forces. Their job was to protect not only the American airmen but also Mihailovich's headquarters nearby. Within this area, Serb villagers could be assured that a German patrol would not cavalierly drive in and do as they pleased, but they also knew that the presence of Mihailovich and the airmen made the area a hot target if the Germans ever decided to launch a full assault. Until that day came, however, the day-to-day security was in the hands of young men like Nick Petrovich, a seventeen-year-old in Mihailovich's army. He had grown up listening to the stories of his grandfather and father who fought in the Turkish wars and in World War I, so when the Nazis invaded his country Petrovich knew he had to fight. He had revered the Serbian medieval heroes Kraljevich Marko and Milosh Obilich since

he was a child, and in 1940 when he was only fourteen he altered his birth certificate so he could enter the Yugoslav gliding school, while also putting himself through a rigorous physical development program of his own design. When the Germans showed up a few years later, Petrovich felt ready to fight.



The end of World War II was not a clean, organized, transition from global war to global peace. The final year of the war and its aftermath reshaped Europe and much of the globe's political structures. The war that threatened every corner of the planet also gave birth to the Cold War, the end of colonialism, and a host of other developments. None of this was clear as the war's final year began. Indeed, Hitler's forces may have been in retreat as the year began, but the *Wehrmacht* was far from defeated.

This story is brilliantly told by historian Gregor Dallas in *1945: The Year that Never Ended* (Yale University Press). Dallas offers readers a comprehensive view of the last year of the war in the European theater. The book is a compelling read and Dallas offers insights crucial to understanding the war's end.

Along the way, readers see an increasingly frustrated Winston Churchill attempt to influence an ailing Franklin Roosevelt. The British Prime Minister was convinced (rightly) that the American President underestimated the Soviet threat as the war came to an end. Dallas also traces the rise and eventual dominance of General Charles de Gaulle — as well as the French General's skill in playing the Allies against each other in order to gain his vision for France after the war.

Dallas also offers convincing evidence of vast Communist infiltration in the American government, including Soviet agents Alger Hiss and Henry Dexter White, among others. Just as important to the story, Dallas traces how the influence of these agents reached the highest levels of government.

At the same time, Dallas also offers a convincing argument for why the Americans and the British were in such a weak position to oppose Soviet aggression in Eastern and Central Europe. Put simply, Britain was bankrupt and Americans wanted their boys home — and fast.

Dallas's 1945 is an essential addition to any library on World War II. Among the author's achievements is to remind readers of the importance of the war and its outcome — and of the fact that such a global conflict could not end cleanly. We still live with the aftermath of this war.

An excerpt:

Hitler could not at first believe that the British and the Americans would allow the Soviets to penetrate this far into Central Europe, and to the last days of the Reich he clung to the hope that this unnatural alliance between the Soviet Union and the Anglo-Americans would break down, giving him the chance to manoeuvre. Hence the bitterness of the battle over Budapest: in a classical move of Hitlerite strategy he thought he could achieve not only a breakthrough in the Soviet line, but also the collapse of the anti-German alliance.

The RAF's 'Operation Ratweek' in early September, in aid of Tito's Partisans, should have told him otherwise. Hitler had no way of knowing of Churchill's 'percentage' accord with Stalin in October; but the movements of the Red Army northwards into Hungary show that it was observed to the letter. The effect, to the despair of both Hitler's General Staff and his closest civilian advisers, was to shift the whole emphasis of Hitler's last stand south-eastwards. In the end Hitler was ordering the holdout of two primary 'citadels', Berlin and Prague — which is where the war ended.

Soviet movements also implied a meeting somewhere to the north of Istria of Alexander's essentially British forces and the Soviet Army. With the movement in Central and Eastern Europe of so many millions of prisoners of war, of men of mixed loyalties, of families torn apart, of 'displaced persons' before and behind the lines, this impending encounter of strange 'allies' also hinted at what was to be the final tragedy of war.

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